

A Survival Kit for **Doctoral Students** and Their **Supervisors**

Traveling the Landscape of Research



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Chapter Four

Making the Most of Obstacles

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of the present chapter is to examine how one can best apply creative processes to PhD work.

Central message: Rather than considering creative processes as more or less self-generated, we argue that resources for creativity must be found in the research landscape.

Takeaways: Creativity grows from repeated routines and practices, but these have come under pressure in various contexts in modern life. The chapter challenges the reader to use “deviation” and experiments to become more creative as a researcher.

Keywords: Creative research, deviation and obstacles, inspiration, everyday life research, stumbling data, absorption and Facebook, Friday detours.

Research as a Creative Endeavor

Most of what I write is inspired by ideas that crop up when doing my morning run—in other words, ideas that come from physical and practical activities. How hard can I push myself? How much rest is the right amount and what is too long a rest period? How long can I run, reasonably speaking, and when am I just being obstinate? How much attention should I pay to my surroundings and how much should I focus on myself? To what extent

should I believe in my own abilities and when should I begin to doubt myself? (Murakami, 2008, p. 85).

Most research is, per definition, a creative endeavor. We do research to create new knowledge and/or, new techniques and technologies to ensure the survival and growth of societies and to make peoples' lives better. This is one of the grand and defining narratives of research and science in modern societies. As a researcher, it is troublesome to be short on ideas for new research projects and papers. If research is defined as being creative per se, lacking ideas, not feeling creative, or being unsure about one's own contribution can be a really difficult phase in a research journey. So how do we make the most of obstacles in our lives, and how do we learn to use difficulty as an enabler of production and creativity? What inspires our work? What attracts us to our research subjects? The Japanese writer Haruki Murakami, cited earlier, is running. Here, we will look into creativity resources in today's research landscapes.

How Can I Contribute and Do Creative Research?

In a recent paper, Robert Sternberg (2014), reflecting on his own research career, commented on the fact that he began researching creativity in a period when he was lacking ideas. Later, he began researching love in a period in his life when love was difficult for him. Writing blocks, identity crises, and insecurity can quickly become obstacles when one is unsure how to contribute to one's field. For most doctoral students, the "critical transition" from being a student to becoming a professional is defined by a need to create ideas and stay productive. During this transition, graduate students must make a crucial shift from the familiar realm of course-taker (a consumer of knowledge that is "carefully doled out in the form of courses or modules, course outlines and reading lists, lecture topics and assessment tasks" in tightly bounded and controlled environments) to that of independent scholar (Lovitts, 2005).

How to Apply Creative Processes to PhD Work

Our purpose in this chapter is to examine how best one can apply creative processes to PhD work. We will give a number of examples of others' achievements in this regard. Lovitts (2005) says that people seldom pay attention to PhD students' creative processes or the development thereof, because many tutors believe (mistakenly) that creativity is more or less self-generated. As elsewhere in this book, we would like to challenge this individualistic view of research and show how one can work to bring creative processes into the

landscapes of research. We will also argue that creativity grows from repeated routines and practice and that these have come under pressure in various contexts. We will show how one can use “deviation” and experiments in everyday work to become more creative as a researcher. Most especially, our perspective recognizes that there are large resources with a potential for research and that innumerable ideas lurk in one’s own and others’ day-to-day experience. The question of becoming more creative as a researcher is not a matter of looking elsewhere or pursuing what is new; in fact, creativity can simply be the fruit of examining what is close at hand.

Data on Deviations and Research in Everyday Life

When asked about the circumstances of their creative inspiration, people often cite unexpected places and sometimes surprising environments, such as the daily run or waking in the night with a brilliant idea (Stadil & Tanggaard, 2014). We both have found that good ideas for new research projects can arise in all manner of seemingly unhelpful milieu, such as when drinking coffee with a colleague; going into a random shop and seeing a thought-provoking advertisement; or overhearing a conversation in the bus, cinema, or supermarket. Creativity can come at any place, but it is often prompted when we begin to wonder about phenomena, when we, metaphorically speaking, “stumble onto something,” or deviate from a plan.

Examples of the creative process may include a conversation that sticks in our memory, a chance observation made at work or in school, or an advertisement that provokes or causes anger without our immediately being able to say why. When an experience constitutes an example of data, it can be because it seems so strange or awkward that we begin to reflect on and learn from it. Examples of stumbling over data from everyday life are almost endless; this shows that almost any event can provide data (Latour, 2005).

To Stumble and Learn

In the aforementioned sense, it is not bad to stumble. To stumble upon something is to be in a position to find out new things about the world we live in. It is through deviations and noteworthy events that the social world becomes evident or an object to reflect upon. Deviation often fuels the imagination, and this may lead to a break with habitual assumptions about everyday life. “Imagination” is understood here as one of the most important dimensions in the process of turning instances of stumbling into creativity. Imagination allows people and groups to think beyond the given, the here-and-now, and to envisage alternatives, to create parallel worlds,

or to travel through time, in the past or in the future. Imagination is both extremely individual—people imagine their unique futures—and deeply social, in its constituents (imagination is fed by media and other kinds of shared representations) (See Zittoun & de Saint-Laurent, 2015).

In order to conceptually understand the creative dimension of stumbling upon something, we will (again) draw on the pragmatist epistemology developed by John Dewey (1938). According to Dewey, most of one's life is based on routine and habit (also known as tacit knowledge); thinking and reflection become necessary only at the point where habitual life cannot continue unchanged. In this sense, imagining what might happen next, or thinking about what has happened, is necessary only when ordinary practices cannot continue unchanged. These instances, or thoughts, which involve imagination, may be seen as an attempt to re-establish balance after an error or to understand the nature of the apparent strangeness in order to be able to take action in response. According to the principles of pragmatism, all knowledge is connected to action, either directly (as in action research) or with respect to the development of “thinking technologies” that enable us to deal with new situations in the future (Brinkmann, 2012a).

How Can We Stumble Creatively?

As mentioned, knowledge is not something mirroring nature, or achieved by passively observing things, but something that arises when there is a disconnection between existing understandings of a phenomenon and the “here-and-now” encounter with the phenomenon we are trying to understand. To take a specific example: One day in the supermarket, you meet a friend whom you have not seen for many years. She says “hello” to you, but you do not immediately recognize her. The friend's appearance has changed; she now dresses in a more grown-up way and her hair is shorter and turning gray. You might find it difficult to recognize her as the “same” as before. As a result, even in only minor ways, you might have to change your assumptions about your friend; accordingly, new knowledge arises within the situation. You now know her as a different person, at least going by her appearance. Meeting her again, you become curious. Has she also changed her political opinions? What about sports and music, which were her favorite topics of conversation years ago? Is she still with her husband, and what about her job situation? In Dewey's sense, you now begin an enquiry, initiated by bumping into your friend by chance.

Relearning the Joy of Experimentation

If you do not stumble on a regular basis, or at least are not aware of this happening, one of the most important things you can do in order for creative deviations to occur is to relearn the joy of experimentation and *learning by doing* or *learning by failing*. A renowned Danish fashion designer, Henrik Vibskov, frequently talks about the importance of “learning through failing.” During a TV show quoted in Tanggaard (2014, p. 6), he said, “Failures are my main means of learning.” According to Vibskov, mistakes can initiate a creative process because they point toward something that could not be imagined before venturing into the experience. This is the impetus that is familiar to many of us: contact with, or resistance afforded by, the materials with which we work gives rise to new ideas. Creative imagination is fundamentally relational, arising in the space between subjects and objects—even if the immediate experience may be an impression that good ideas pop into our heads seemingly out of nowhere.

Many scientific discoveries are the result of the phenomenon we call stumbling. This approach sees errors as positive. After all, we talk about “coming across” or “stumbling across” a great offer or a good idea. Again, stumbling is a positive thing. To stumble upon things (in this figurative meaning) is a precondition for being able to see the world in interesting ways. It is when stumbling that we can break with the habitus that characterizes most of our everyday lives. To benefit from instances of stumbling upon something, we must be open to the new data we encounter whenever we happen to run into new solutions. To do this, we must keep our “antennae out” and be curious about the world, making the most of obstacles.

Absorption and Deadlines

In many ways, creativity is a core ingredient of research. But is it possible to be creative when one is required to operate under a short deadline and demonstrate efficiency? When even PhD students are now expected to publish their work at the earliest possible opportunity and conclude their studies without delay?

In *Notebooks of the Mind*, Vera John-Steiner (1997) lays down a series of preconditions for creativity. One of these is absorption and deep concentration on the area one is hoping to contribute new ideas to. She has come to this conclusion by studying the biographies of known authors and artists. One such figure is the French physicist Pierre Curie, who together with his

wife, Marie Curie, received the Nobel Prize for the discovery of radium. Marie Curie explains in her book on her husband's work: "It seems to me, that already from his early youth, it was necessary for him to concentrate his thought with great intensity upon a certain definite object in order to obtain precise results, and in that it was possible for him to interrupt or modify the course of his reflections to suit exterior circumstances" (p. 47).

Undisturbed Concentration

Deep, constant, and undisturbed concentration was one of Pierre Curie's tools. This is also shown in the writing of Howard Gardner in the 1997 book titled *Extraordinary Minds*, where it is said that Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, often isolated himself in his room and preferred solitude. But what are the conditions for such absorption in a researcher's life today? If we turn our attention to our own research landscapes, we see that it has become harder to be alone. We are asked to be available and preferably work together, in collaboration with other institutions and faculties. E-mails keep flowing in; Facebook demands to be checked; and we may feel the need to update LinkedIn and Twitter, too. There is no shortage of interruptions and offers to join networks, relevant or not. We can access our work e-mails at all times, whether grocery shopping or talking to a good friend we have not seen for some time. Some of us regularly get a kick out of checking news sites, e-mails, and Facebook or posting sometimes casual news about ourselves on various Internet sites. One day, Lene came up against this problem of concentration so frequently that she decided to write about it:

Lene's Constant Distractions

It could be any day whatsoever. I have decided to tackle a new article. The children have gone off to school. I have five hours. At 13.00 hours I must leave for a lecture and workshop I have promised to give to a group of teachers and school leaders about creativity in school. I have turned on the computer. I have made coffee and opened Word, and the cursor sits there flashing. I write a couple of words. I notice that the computer has automatically selected the Calibri font. That annoys me. I would rather write in Times New Roman. I quickly change the font. Write a few more words. Whilst writing, I suddenly think about the clothes in the tumble dryer. Should I perhaps just take them out and fold them? I will be late home and I know that my sons will need their football kit for the afternoon

game. It would be better to do the folding now so that it's all ready for the boys. They soon ought to be doing it for themselves, I think. I go down to the cellar to see to it. Fifteen minutes later I am back at the computer. I sit for a while. I think about how hard it is to begin something new. It's much easier to continue working on something that one has already started. The thought enters my head that I must pay the handball club subscription. Take out my iPhone. I often use the notepad function. The older I get and the more I have to do, the harder it is for me to remember things. It's better to make a quick reminder to pay the subscription. It is too bad if you don't pay on time. I also manage to send an e-mail to a colleague about a promised personal development meeting and answer an e-mail from a special student with a question on her section on methods. I catch myself starting to answer the other waiting e-mails. Meanwhile I notice a growing frustration at how I am letting myself be distracted by all these things. Neither the laundry nor the subscription are important right now—they can be done another time. And students often find their own answers if I wait a little before answering. Why can I not discipline myself to write for at least two hours and do the other chores during a break? I make an effort not to look at the vase of faded flowers in the living room and force myself to concentrate on the text. Gathering myself, I begin to write. I decide to write at least a couple of pages and send a draft to my colleague. Meanwhile, I can continue to think about the text, and hopefully my colleague will write back about it. The piece is about the things that promote or hinder creativity. Perhaps it's not just me who is constantly distracted. Perhaps distraction is one of our time's greatest obstacles to creativity?

If we return to the introductory stories about deep concentration—one of the ingredients in the recipe for winning the Nobel Prize—we have to wonder whether Pierre Curie and Sigmund Freud let their minds wander. The two scientists may not have been distracted by Facebook or the laundry or students, but by the leaves on the trees or a longing to walk to a café. We do know that they were good at creating the space in which to concentrate. These days, we have not only leaves in the wind, but also inviting offers to connect on Facebook, not to mention the many hours dedicated to teaching, administration, documentation, and monitoring—all of which are challenges in the life of the researcher. But can such distractions be useful, too? There is something to suggest that this might be the case. Rarely do such associations, or a surrender to the flow of the situation, form the subject of a written record. But here is an example wherein Charlotte, in fact, tries to grasp just such a process of useful disturbances. The reason why it is available in writing is that she and a colleague, Ninna Meier, are investigating which authors inspire their writing processes. They are

working on identifying and describing the concept of “voice” in a meeting with their writing tutor. (We will return to strategies of apprenticeship in connection with writing in Chapters 6 and 7.) Here is an example of a productive distraction:

Charlotte’s Friday Detour

This morning, I took my time with the Friday newspaper. I am going to work at home today, and I have a long to-do list. This week, I have worked a lot but I have not been able to tick off anything on the list. Yesterday, I submitted an abstract to a call for a special issue about “leisure” in which I argued that the division of work and leisure is unproductive. Leisure behavior at work can enhance both productivity and creativity, I wrote. This is my way, twisting things a bit or staking a cocky claim. So far it has turned out to be a fairly good working strategy for both being invited to write more and for keeping my mind agile. I aim at taking action immediately and not spending much time—just skip it off and see if the idea survives. It seems to be a sound working strategy in many circumstances of research life: do not wait to share until you have finished and polished every thought. If the idea perishes, it does not hurt too much. If the idea lives, then the hard work of questioning, refining, and communicating is about to begin. However, being already involved in dialogue, I have energy from sources other than myself. Ideas may be born in solitude, but they need a community to grow.

The Friday newspaper comes with a Books section, and I always plunge into it immediately. Today there is a double page written by the young Danish novelist Josefine Klougart, in which she tells the story of her rereading of the French writer Marguerite Duras. Her first encounter with Duras 10 years earlier had been determinative for her decision to write and for even getting a sense of what writing means, she says. Listen to what Klougart (2014) tells us about this encounter (translated from Danish):

Duras introduced me to a voice I could trust, a voice which made me think that literature, first of all, is borne by a voice that you simply believe in. Deceitful and affected, plain and waffling, but always in some way present and consistent, maybe in its discontinuity and or abruptness, always a voice you feel safe about because it has a kind of authority which cannot be ignored. A voice which can do everything—and the things it cannot do—become insignificant to the reader at that moment. We are engaged in the world that this voice *gestalts*.

What is authority in writing? An authoritative voice can be both deceitful (at least in fiction), affected, plain, and waffling. This is not about finding

one's own voice. This is not about expressing identity. An authoritative voice may be one that is present. How does one manage to be present in one's texts? According to Klougart, Duras does it this way:

The connections between her different scenes exist, but she does not deign a word, sometimes not even an innocent "as." At the same time, this is what shines the most—everything's relatedness. Her focus is so strong, and the scenes stand out so clearly that the connections become obvious and inherent. Things connect from the inside.

Klougart is staying at a writing refuge to do a final editing of her novel before it goes to press, but instead, she finds herself "irreverently" rereading Duras (switching between different novels, reading only parts of chapters) and writing new documents herself. She returns back home with an almost complete manuscript for a new novel. She has not ticked anything off her to-do list, but she has created something new by making Duras's texts shine on her own. What she learned may be that a voice is authoritative not because it connects everything, synthesizes, and concludes; it might be authoritative because it is generous with epistemological struggle and willing to involve with other voices, including the reader's. A voice is authoritative because it is present in the act of getting to know something.

It might be due to a Friday state of mind, but detours are apparently unavoidable today. However, if masters can be found everywhere, we need to be agile "in the moment" to actually see a master when he or she is there. Then we can only tell efficient time from idle time retrospectively.

When We Skip

The above note was written in a rush this actual Friday morning. Reading the newspaper and writing the note did not look like or feel like work. However, new ideas about voice appeared during the process. Theories on incubation (Sawyer, 2012) maintain that the brain continues to work on a problem at the very moment when there is no direct connection to the particular issue. Incubation is used as the term for the subconscious, unguided procedures that are carried out when we are in the throes of addressing an issue or are faced by a challenge. Incubation is often part of the formulation of the "Y" in the abduction process, which provides an understanding of that which is not yet understood ("X"). The most famous example of incubation is the experience of the Greek mathematician Archimedes. Sawyer provides the background in his book *Explaining Creativity*. Archimedes had been asked to solve a problem by his cousin, the King in Syracuse. The king had been given a crown of gold but suspected that it was made

of silver covered with a thin layer of gold. Archimedes was told that he may not destroy or cut into the crown. One day in the bathtub it suddenly occurred to him as he lowered himself into the water that gold is heavier than silver and that an object with greater mass moves more water. He was so excited that he ran out into the street shouting “Eureka,” which means: “I have found it.”

Forced Incubation

Since then researchers have tried to reexamine the phenomenon of incubation but none has come up with a serious answer. Wells (1996) carried out a study in which he interviewed 213 professors. He established that their creative production measured in number of publications positively correlated with a type of forced incubation. These researchers practiced a simple method of working in which they deliberately abandoned their manuscripts when they had writer’s block. They explained that it was during these periods that good ideas often came to them. Similar conclusions were reached in the book *In the Shower With Picasso: Sparking Your Creativity and Imagination* (Stadil & Tanggaard, 2014). Here Jørgen Leth, a Danish journalist, author, and Tour de France commentator, explains that he goes on a long walk every morning in order to get into his writing mode. The Danish musician Kenneth Bager takes a bath if he is faced with a particularly difficult challenge. Others sleep, run, take breaks, and look for inspiration in places other than their work. And even if folding the laundry and watering flowers sound less exotic, these diversionary tactics can be transformed into creative breaks that give new energy to work. The main point to note is, however, that systematics or the conscious use of a creative break determines to what extent the break or the distraction becomes a promoter of creativity. After all, one has to return to the manuscript and continue to write at some time before the idea of taking breaks can be shown to promote creativity. Otherwise, they are quite simply breaks.

Systematics surrounding creative breaks also point to something that some creativity researchers, as mentioned before, risk overlooking. It is routine and habit that form the background against which the break, distraction, or alternative activity becomes useful. In contrast, Facebook (whether used by researchers or students during a lesson) is a simple disturbance. Or, expressed in another way, such breaks are meaningful only against the background of a process that is without deviations. So it is important to cultivate the routines and habits that form the background for taking the

creative break. In other words, we must be able to construct a systematic procedure. It is furthermore important to cultivate the space in which immersion in a subject can take place. Lene's and Charlotte's everyday experiences with distractions proved to be quite common. The point here is that we can, in fact, find deviations in our own experiences and allow them to afford us access to reflection more generally about the problems of creativity. These examples of incubation also show that experiments in creativity research are themselves inspired by legendary events in Greece; tellingly, the legend has a mundane setting.

Apprenticeships and Quick Learning

We have seen that concentration is a central component of creativity; while distractions, with a little luck, can develop into creative breaks. But what is it that creates the conditions for concentration and sustainable work? A very simple question might be: "Where and how can one learn to engage in sustained study as a doctoral student and generally as a researcher?"

A "Fast-Food" Mentality

In Vera John-Steiner's *Notebooks of the Mind*, which investigates creativity, an entire chapter is given over to attempting an answer on this issue. The chapter gives the example of Pierre Curie, and with respect to conditions for concentration, John-Steiner says: "Such a focused attention, necessary for outstanding scientific work, has rarely been encouraged in the context of a classroom" (1997, p. 47). Classrooms are filled with breaks, the coming and going of considerable numbers of people, and changes between classes. People who like to concentrate may thus find it hard to work in a classroom. John-Steiner writes that various authors, artists, and researchers remain strangely quiet when reminiscing about their school life and the classroom; on the other hand, they often talk about the value of a more personal education, which in many ways resembles apprenticeship (see also Lave, 2011).

Today, the classroom is more than ever filled with people and interruptions. Yes, we live in times where a "fast-food" mentality is encouraged, and this even extends to methods of fast learning rather than the traditional apprenticeship. Again, we may apply some data on deviation. In the faculty of psychology at Aalborg University, students are regularly asked to evaluate

the teaching. Often taking the form of a customer satisfaction survey, the results can make for quite interesting reading. It's not unusual for students to complain about long lectures. As one of them comments: "I do not comprehend how experts in teaching theory manage to lecture for two hours at a stretch when research has shown that our concentration is limited to 20 minute periods." The student did not manage to provide the reference to the research in question; but the 20-minute rule does seem to have become an accepted fact. We can reflect on this by linking it with data on deviation. In connection with the preparation for a conference workshop, Lene was sent guidance on how to create so-called activating workshops. This contained the following sentences: "If your message is to have any impact on the everyday life of participants as well as their work, it is important that you formulate it in a brief and precise way. Choose between two and four points that can be demonstrated on one or two slides. Ensure that this covers a maximum of 15 to 20 minutes." It is possibly correct that we now find it difficult to concentrate for more than 20 minutes at a time; but are we sure that content is of value for participants' lives only if it comes in packages of less than 20 minutes? It is as if an unchallenged ideology of the quick fix has come to mean that what is delivered quickly is good, and what is slow should be disregarded. Speed equals power.

Creativity Cannot Be Hurried

Numerous researchers have, however, concluded and documented the fact that creativity cannot be hurried. Teresa Amabile (1996) discusses this issue in connection with her research into the relationship between motivation and creativity. Various courses that offer a quick fix are seldom as effective in boosting creativity as simply being preoccupied with something—for its own sake. Deadlines or slight pressure can indeed make us up the pace and work harder; but where there is constant pressure, felt as an external controlling force, this hinders creativity. John-Steiner (1997) cites the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson: "The potential of every human of becoming an artist remains unfulfilled without the individual's acquaintanceship and immersion into the artistic traditions of the past, and the distinctiveness of his culture." John-Steiner further illustrates this question with an example relating to Mozart and apprenticeship: "It is known that the elder Mozart devoted himself totally to his son's musical education, and the father's expectations were enormous" (p. 40). A master can be either a parent, teacher, or another devoted person; here, no one talks of the quick fix. Thus, John-Steiner concludes: "Intellectual and artistic development is slow and it does not take place as a straight and continuous process" (p. 51).

Craftsman

Similarly, Sennett writes in *The Craftsman* in 2010 about apprenticeship as the way to achieve good results in a piece of work. For the same reason, he is not enthusiastic about creativity, which he relates to a romantic and idealistic research tradition wherein the values of hard work, practice, routines, and tradition are often ignored in favor of a preoccupation with imagination and what is novel (innovation) or easy. Yet no one is saying that the concept of creativity must always be linked to such traditions, especially if they hinder people's opportunities for creativity. We have advocated in several books and articles the value of apprenticeship for creativity—for example, in connection with the fact that you can identify the new if you know about the old: it is easier to improvise if you know the score. Several descriptions of the lives of creative people (by which is meant people who have contributed works and meaningful production to their environments) identify apprenticeship as a vital ingredient (Gardner, 1997; John-Steiner, 1997; Hasse, 2001; Sennett, 2010; Tanggaard, 2008; Tanggaard & Brinkmann, 2009). And apprenticeship is by definition a long-term thing. According to Sennett (2008), it takes 10 years to become good at something and another five years to arrive at the moment where you can help to contribute something new and creative to a given field. Andreas Goldet, a Russian-born artist living in Germany, tells in the book *In the Shower With Picasso* (2014) that it took him nine years to learn to paint like the old masters, from which point he began to develop his own style. Creating something new can often involve the re-creation and reworking of the old. Jørgen Leth explains that he makes a virtue out of this by working with “ready-mades,” using his own text, material, or scenes from existing films. Only those well-versed in art and text discern this play with existing material; generally a thorough knowledge of what has gone before is required. Perhaps it is creative to experiment with passages in one's lectures and writings when teaching. But it is doubtful to what extent this promotes creativity in the audience.

The McDonaldization of Research

Our last example comes from the day-to-day work of a researcher. We are both concerned with qualitative research and read many research articles referring to a qualitative approach. Lately we have been struck by the standardization apparent in many articles. As mentioned above, much of today's research appears to be performed under a feeling of obligation: there is significant pressure on researchers to publish. It is therefore becoming harder

to spend years completely immersing oneself in new and undefined areas that are perceived as risky, even if it is here that the most significant breakthroughs can be made. This tendency can be seen in most research disciplines, since funds for free research are dwindling; most funds are channeled through pools that are subject to the political interests of the day. It can be nearly impossible to obtain financing for research that does not lead directly to practice. Even if the research does obtain funding, this can appear to be a waste of energy if it fails to yield dividends in the form of (copious) publications. Instead, there is a tendency to play it safe and use well-known and tested models. We would apply the label “McDonaldization” of research to this development, which we believe is a threat to creativity.

The sociologist George Ritzer (2008) has been particularly preoccupied with the concept of the McDonaldization of society in a way that has inspired others to analyze more specific fields in the light of this metaphor. Nancarrow, Vir, and Barker (2005) thus analyzed qualitative market research as a McDonaldizing practice, and Brinkmann (2012b) expanded the perspective to apply to qualitative research as such. Here we will outline four aspects of McDonaldization and show how it risks suppressing the opportunity for exciting and creative research. Our focus is primarily on qualitative research in the human and social science disciplines, since this area is most familiar to us from our work. However, we assume that similar analyses could be made for other types of research.

Efficiency

Efficiency is the first aspect of McDonaldization. This is a matter of choosing the quickest and most economic path from A to B. Today, the talk is of LEAN and optimization. Within the research world, there is widespread discussion of *methods* that promote efficiency. The word *method* comes from the Greek language and originally meant “the path to a goal.” But a one-sided focus on method alone leads to an excessive concern, with the need to avoid iteration, slowness, or flexibility with respect to the premises in one’s field because one believes that only by following a method can a swift and efficient result be guaranteed. Thorough, creative research, of course, requires time and patience. Sometimes it is necessary to reject existing methods and develop others, or work more freely with a variety of methods. Among other things, methods are developed with the aim of minimizing time spent—so that you don’t have to reinvent the wheel every time—but in fact, it is impossible to be properly immersed in a subject if everything in the research process has to be geared to the minimal use of time and resources. Fieldwork—which is difficult to characterize

as a method, since it is a life practice and type of investigation—can, for example, take months or years. We suspect that the qualitative research interview has become the most widespread method in that field today, not just because it is an important method, which it is, but also because it offers a quick and efficient means of obtaining data. Unfortunately, it is sometimes forgotten that not all questions can be answered using this method; certainly some questions do not lend themselves to this type of “snapshot” approach, which is the way of much research conducted by interview. A mere 60 minutes might be spent on each research participant before moving on. This is a type of qualitative tourism: it cannot provide insight or the type of results achieved through in-depth study.

Calculability

Calculability is the next aspect. Calculability is part of “New Public Management” and its attendant culture of documentation, evidence-based practice, and evaluation. Everything must be calculated and determined on the basis of clear objectives laid down in advance. This is apparent in qualitative research, with project descriptions prescribing interview requirements such as “40 interviewees, 20 men and 20 women.” It is often left unexplained why precisely 40 (and not four, or 400) should be the relevant number. There seems to be an attempt to imitate an ideal concept of calculated rationality. This does not suit the emergent, processual character of qualitative research.

Predictability

Predictability is the third aspect. This has to do with uniformity across contexts, among other things. At McDonald’s, you have to know what a Big Mac is and how quickly it can be produced, irrespective of your location in Beijing or Baltimore. The basic thought is “Avoid surprises!”, but this is contrary to the *raison d’être* of research, which after all *seeks* the surprising (which we have earlier described as the “breakdown”). Many guides and manuals published over recent years contribute to the drive for predictability by dictating the approach, irrespective of the population and subject being investigated.

Control

Control is the final aspect of McDonaldization and is discussed by Ritzer (2008). Control is about de-skilling—that is, one removes skills from people

from the point of view of control, for example by allocating or externalizing skills to technologies (which, naturally, are intended to optimize, streamline, and standardize). Within our branch of research, this happens typically by means of CAQDAS—computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. It is not uncommon for a research article to cite a computer program as a method of analysis in its own right. We believe this is extremely detrimental to creativity in research: The creative abduction process cannot be carried out by a computer program. There is nothing wrong with the software itself; but if one believes that it can replace a thorough, intensive, patient, and creative reading of the material, then one is mistaken. Furthermore, programs are primarily developed for coding, as for example practiced within Grounded Theory; they are less suited to other forms of reading and analysis.

Quality and Quantity

Nancarrow et al. (2005) come to the following (rather depressing) conclusion with respect to the recent McDonaldization of research:

Just as McWorld creates “a common world taste around common logos, advertising slogans, stars, songs, brand names, jingles, and trademarks” [. . .], the qualitative research world also seems to be moving towards a common world taste for an instantly recognisable and acceptable research method that can be deployed fast. (Nancarrow et al., 2005, p. 297).

Irrespective of what one might think about McDonald’s and the streamlining and standardization that “McDonaldization” expresses, it can hardly be called creative if a researcher simply follows a universal direction. The unfortunate thing is that it is not only researchers who are lemmings running in the same direction, using sensible arguments; preprogrammed systems and incitement structures invite such behavior. Paradoxically enough, these systems and structures have been designed to increase the quantity of research *and* improve its quality (world-class research, more Nobel Prizes, etc.). Yet the opposite effect will most likely result, going by what we know about creativity research. According to the most recent Danish Nobel prize winner, Jens C. Skou, the way in which subsidies and reward systems function in today’s research world would have stopped him from doing the creative research in chemistry that led to the award. Another Nobel Prize winner, the physicist Ben Mottelson, also had this to say to the Danish paper *Information*: “If H. C. Ørsted, who discovered electromagnetism in 1820, had lived at the time of the strategic research council, he would instead have been responsible for an improvement in paraffin wax candles”

(Sterling, 2008). The new departure in research in the direction of creativity, whether we are talking about the most empirical natural sciences or the qualitative human and social sciences, requires time, patience, knowledge, courage, and the freedom to linger. These are all factors that run counter to the McDonaldization philosophy, as we have shown.

The counterpoint to McDonaldization of research is, as we wish to emphasize here, to see research as a craft. As previously mentioned, Mills's (1959) classical work on social research spoke of the "intellectual craft," for which no manuals or standardized procedures can be laid down. Instead, the researcher is a type of learn-as-you-go worker creatively forging research with the materials he or she has at hand (empirical analysis, life experience, theoretical concepts, etc.). Every researcher must, like every craftsman, develop their own personal style; not much is said about this in today's books on methods.

Good Advice for the PhD Student

- Accept that getting to know something can be a long and arduous process, and look out for strategies to enjoy it.
- Try to deviate, or "stumble across" things more and be aware of the deviations that you have already made.
- Use your experience and strive to develop your own style as a researcher.
- Seek immersion and surround yourself with things and materials that inspire you.
- Ensure you have space in which to work.
- Accept the tenaciousness of research work and move forward as and when you can.

Good Advice for the Supervisor

- Learn from your experiences and do not believe that your students can appropriate this knowledge entirely.
- Consider carefully which research experiences can be useful for students.
- Take your students with you into the research workshop to show them what it means to be a researcher.
- Think about how you can guide your students, not only in research methods but also in the way of life of a researcher.
- Lead by example and show how you yourself have learned from your mistakes.
- Give examples of good practice that can inspire your students.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have sought to investigate the conditions of creativity in today's research landscapes. It has been our aim to examine our own everyday experiences to find answers to the creativity challenges that many agree face us today. Creativity is no longer a luxury for the few; but how can we make more people creative? If we proceed from our own experience, it is pressure of time, problems in being allowed to linger on something for a certain amount of time, and the McDonaldization of life and research that emerge as the main barriers to creativity. In investigating this, we examined other researchers' ideas and found that the counterparts of the above barriers were a quiet environment, the inversion of diversionary tactics into useful creative breaks, apprenticeship, and craftsmanship. Some may say there is nothing new here, since these are tried and tested techniques, thousands of years old. Nonetheless, we maintain that they are new, and in any event it is valuable to keep in mind that routines, habits, stability, systematics, and continuity are the background against which new things can grow. Creativity requires openness toward the unexpected and the spontaneous; it is very rare to find room for these elements in our strictly controlled and pressurized modern world.

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