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**Managing Difficult Moments of Knowledge Exchange in the Social Sciences**

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### **Abstract**

Consultation is an important feature of research and, increasingly, researchers are required to work in partnership with stakeholders to increase the impact of their work. Our aim is to demonstrate what can be learned from the scholarship on, and practice of, member checking to facilitate productive knowledge exchange. Using dialogical analysis we explore three member check interactions from three different qualitative psychology projects focusing our analysis on difficult moments between researchers and participants conceptualised here as ‘sore spots’. We identify two major genres in these sequences: participant ambivalence and participant challenge. We then consider passages that allow us to explore a more theoretical understanding of these two genres in terms of the metaphor of portraits and mirrors. Overall, we outline how implicit epistemologies and theories of subjectivity (uncomplicated, blank, and complex) may be linked to the way in which stakeholders approach research. We also provide a map with regard to the theories within which member checks can be undertaken, associated research practices in terms of a range of researcher responses to stakeholder ambivalence and challenge, and implications of these moments for knowledge exchange for qualitative research but also for psychological science as a whole. We conclude that sore spots in knowledge exchange process can be productive opportunities of transformational validity.

**Keywords:** member check; knowledge exchange; research impact; dialogical analysis; participant validation

## **Mirrors, Portraits and Member Checking:**

### **Managing Difficult Moments of Knowledge Exchange in the Social Sciences**

It is recognised in the social sciences that there are complex interpersonal influences on the research process. Researcher expectancies can affect outcomes and participants react to demand characteristics, changing their behaviour in response to what they interpret to be the researcher's purpose (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1997). Moreover, the framing of activities and outcomes are likely very different for researchers and for participants to the extent that they may inhabit different knowledge communities. Researcher knowledge tends to be etic, theoretical, and addressed to research questions; participant knowledge tends to be emic, experiential, and concerned with specific context (McConnell-Henry et al., 2011). However, consultation is an important feature of research and, increasingly, researchers are required to work in partnership with stakeholders to increase the social and economic impact of their work.

Stakeholder consultation and steering groups are important features of research in applied settings and, increasingly, researchers are required to elicit and take account of the views of participants and other constituencies potentially impacted by, or having a strong interest in, the research. For example, the UK academy is obliged to demonstrate the influence, uptake, and embedding of research outcomes in the social, healthcare, and economic spheres (Cabinet Office, 2009); impact case studies are assessed in the Research Excellence Framework; and impact statements are a necessary component of research council grant applications (Research Councils UK, 2007; Sainsbury, 2007; Warry, 2006). The Australian academy is already gearing-up with regard to impact (Ferguson, 2014) and, in the United States, 'Start Metrics' to measure the impact of research spending is in continual evolution (<https://www.starmetrics.nih.gov/Star/News>).

Stakeholder engagement is a vital aspect of impact but we know little about effective knowledge transfer, exchange, and sharing techniques (Ward, House & Hamer, 2009). The Cooksey (2006) and British Academy (2008) reports called for codes of good practice for knowledge transfer and the Economic and Social Research Council National Centre for Research Methods identified training requirements and the need to recognise the complexities of partnership research (Bardsley, Wiles & Powell, 2009; Frankham, 2009). Making an impact involves knowledge exchange: “a two-way process where social scientists and individuals or organisations share learning, ideas and experiences” (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/research/impact-toolkit/knowledge-exchange/>). Gough and Madill (2012) consider how methods developed within qualitative research might be utilised more generally to leverage benefits of participant and researcher subjectivity. Potential benefits include increased opportunity to take into account different understandings of the meaning of processes and outcomes of the research. The aim of our article is to build on Gough and Madill’s call for a more reflexive scientific attitude through demonstrating what can be learned from member checking to facilitate productive knowledge exchange. Our analysis is used to create a map (Figure 1) of the ways in which theory, member checking, and knowledge exchange cohere. This form of conceptualisation has interesting and relevant parallels with intervention mapping in applied health research where stakeholders are involved in the design, pilot, analysis and evaluation of an intervention (Eldredge, Markham, Kok, Ruiter & Parcel, 2016).

Member checking was developed in qualitative research as a way of assessing validity. Procedurally it is highly flexible and can involve: consulting some or all stakeholders: at one, or many, points in the research; via interviews, diary entries, focus groups (Hallett, 2013), or even innovative techniques such as card-sorts (Harry, Sturges & Klingner, 2005) or real-time

interview transcription (Chua & Adams, 2014); with regard to research questions, recruitment, procedures, data, analysis, interpretations, reports, and/or implementation plans. Depending on research paradigm, agreements, and on-going contingencies the researcher may be obliged to incorporate fully or in negotiated form stakeholder feedback into procedures, interpretations, and/or reports or use it, perhaps more sparingly, as additional information to inform the research.

Some iterations of member checking may be very similar to, and considered a form of, triangulation in which data is collected and/or analysed in more than one way with a view, depending on paradigm, to assessing the convergence of results or of identifying divergent, analytically-interesting, understandings (Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000). Member checks may also constitute an implicit process within modes of qualitative inquiry committed to challenging the boundaries between researchers and other stakeholders (e.g., co-operative inquiry [Heron, 1996], action research [Coghlan & Brannick, 2014], and iterative co-theorisation [Harvey, 2015]). More simply, member checking is consistent with the basic follow-up interview (McConnell-Henry, Chapman & Francis, 2011), stakeholder feedback in all its variants, and participant debrief when the information is fed-back into the research. Hence, although originating in different contexts, there are close parallels between member checking and knowledge exchange and our article is novel in building upon these links.

Member checking is often considered a gold standard of quality in qualitative research (Barbour, 2001) and may appear relatively straightforward. It is, however, complicated and controversial (e.g., Goldblatt, Karnieli-Miller & Neuman, 2011). For some methodologists, stakeholder agreement is central to demonstrating validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This has some face credibility and there are contexts in which undertaking member checks for verificational purposes is appropriate (e.g., when the aim of the research is to capture the

participants' point-of-view). However, apparently good research is not always validated by stakeholders and can be difficult to identify reasons for disagreements (Bryman, 2004). It can be assumed, though, that complex social and interpersonal influences are present in member checking and other forms of stakeholder engagement (Hallett, 2013). And these processes are not well understood (Kothari, Birch & Charles, 2005).

A central issue is managing multiple views (Morse, 1998) and the critical literature on member checking challenges researchers to understand and work with stakeholder perspectives in a sophisticated manner (Bloor, 1978; Mays & Pope, 2000). Specifically, in relation to partnership research, Frankham (2009) argues that we need research on the negotiation between researchers and other stakeholders, recognising that these parties are likely to inhabit worlds premised on different beliefs, values, and practices (Waddell, Lomas, Offord, & Giacomini, 2001). A similar call for more nuanced understanding of member checking is articulated by Bygstad and Munkvold (2007) who suggest that, despite being common practice in qualitative research, it is often not adequately documented in reports (see also Goldblatt et al., 2011).

Several articles explore researchers' experience of member-check-type activities. For example, Emerson and Pollner (1988) provide a commentary on their research feedback encounter with psychiatric emergency teams, and Bygstad and Munkvold (2007) offer analytical reflections on their longitudinal case study with an airline company. Although this literature often includes direct quotes from member check interactions, few provide detailed analysis of these interactions. Empirically-grounded reflections on member checking tend also to be intensive case studies by the, often relatively novice, researcher involved in the original work. Hence, our article is unique in that our examples consist of three member checks from different

projects conducted by experienced researchers and we provide detailed consideration of verbatim quotes.

### **Method**

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Ethics Committee of School in which the first author is employed. All participants and researchers gave informed consent for their material to be analysed by the authors.

### **Data**

We collected three member check interactions from three different qualitative psychology projects. The first is a video-recorded discussion between a male researcher and a male participant about an (at the time) soon-to-be-published case study. The case study was produced through a psychoanalytically-informed analysis of two linked research interviews with the participant on the topic of masculinity (from now on, 'Masculinity/Psychoanalysis'). The second is an audio-recorded discussion between a male researcher and two of the original participants (one male, one female) about a draft paper on the topic of medical training. The draft paper was a dialogical analysis of two research interviews with each of 11 medical students (from now on, 'Medical students/Dialogical analysis'). The third is an video-recorded discussion, mid-analysis, between a female researcher and an English husband and wife who had contributed video-recorded, ordinary-everyday domestic chat to a conversation analytic study comparing English and Polish family data (from now on, 'Domestic chat/Conversation analysis').

### **Analytical Procedures**

We analysed the three interactions using dialogical analysis (Madill & Sullivan, 2010; Sullivan, 2012). Dialogical analysis is a qualitative method which explicates verbal negotiation between speakers conceived of as a collective search for truth (Zappen, 2004). It offers a store of



theoretical concepts which we found useful in understanding our data (see also Harvey, 2015), in particular the idea of the ‘sore spot’. Sore spots are interactions which have the quality of exaggeration tangled-up with a fear of being wrong, can involve a strong reaction to other’s words, and a sense of suspicion between interlocutors. We decided that these difficult moments would be particularly illuminating in terms of managing the complexities of knowledge exchange (Bygstad & Munkvold, 2007). Sore spots were identified and inspected for the ways in which the participants engaged with the researcher.

The procedure of dialogical analysis is top-down like critical discourse analysis (e.g., Fairclough, 2013) as opposed to the more bottom-up style of conversation analysis (e.g., Ten Have, 2007). In top-down analysis, the researcher’s theoretical concerns shape the analysis. Here our theoretical concern with sore spots as a unit-of-analysis for clarifying processes of knowledge exchange directed what we looked for in the text. Yet in common with conversation analysis and some forms of discourse analysis (e.g., Potter & Wetherell, 1987), discursive features of the text are interpreted in terms of the work done, or function served, in an interactional context. Hence, dialogical analysis does more than import theoretical concerns into the data. It draws connections between the interactional context and theory. However, because context is conceived of as dialogical, talk is considered to be addressed to oneself as much as to any interlocutor. Hence, sore spots may be viewed as encompassing, for example, extreme case formulations or disclaimers addressed to the other (as in discourse or conversation analysis) but also as well as an act of rhetorical defense to the self against one’s own suspected vulnerabilities.

After reading and re-reading the transcripts, listening to the audio-recordings, and where available, watching the video-recordings, we identified two major genres in the sequences we considered to be sore spots: participant ambivalence and participant challenge. In contrast to the

more commonly used terminology of ‘theme’, the dialogical concept ‘genre’ emphasises the emotional accentuation of patterns of language (Sullivan, 2012). We then selected a particularly dense and/or illuminating example of each pattern from each interaction for presentation here. Our commentary at the end of each section makes links to the literature and expands on the implications for knowledge exchange. In the third section, portraits and mirrors, we consider passages from the interactions that allow us to explore a more theoretical understanding of the two genres. Portraits and mirrors are used here as metaphors for our participants (and our own) understanding of the purpose of knowledge exchange.

### **Analysis**

#### **Participant Ambivalence**

In all three interactions, participants were ambivalent about aspects of the research. In particular, often they did not recognise themselves fully in the analysis. For example, Tom (pseudonyms throughout) had reservations about the research and the picture of him it offered.

#### Extract 1 (Masculinity/Psychoanalysis)

Tom: That’s another thing you know that the criticism is you know we don’t have a psychoanalytic analysand-analyst relationship.

Male researcher 1: Over time yeah.

Tom: Exactly. It’s you know one session that you produce that very well-written paper on and you know a second session to clarify points I suppose as much as anything. But yeah to stick it just straight um you know it’s- I do wonder whether there is that sense of reading too much into- whether you really have got it- the unconscious or whether it’s still sort of lurking in the back of there and what we have really is me presenting you know purely the ego to you.

Male researcher 1: Um how do you feel about this paper being published?

Tom: Um (.) probably ambivalent again is the key word ((laughs)). I love the idea that it will be published that I’ve kind of if you like contributed to something which it- it is interesting. So I think it’s nice to be involved in something that in-depth. On the other hand you know it is as I say issues I’ve always had issues with the father-son relationship masculinity whatever the hell that is. So to see it laid bare in front of people is yeah it’s uncomfortable on the other side of it.

Tom's sense of whether he agrees or not with the analysis evolves as he talks with the interviewer and consults his own emotions and feelings. "I do wonder" is key as it prefaces an extended question to himself and to the interviewer. At the heart of the issue is that, although it is good to be part of something "interesting" and "in-depth", he is "uncomfortable" to see his issues "laid bare". So, Tom feels both proud of, and made vulnerable by, his involvement. In articulating these ambivalences, Tom draws on a romantic account of subjectivity. He presents the possibility that he remains mysterious, "still sort of lurking in the back", to the extent that the researcher's material and interpretation has been inadequate: a criticism to which the researcher responds by asking a topic-changing question. On the other hand, a romantic subject is also one whose truth is open to revelation and, through the research, Tom feels that some of his issues have been exposed, "laid bare in front of other people". In discussing the research, Tom has been placed in an adventurous predicament of self-understanding and we can observe him attempting to work out a position in situ. Tom is both with and against the research, disputing that he might be captured so easily yet affected, possibly moved, by the understanding it offers.

In the second extract, Jane also articulates ambivalence about the research in which she participated, but draws on a different understanding of subjectivity to suggest that she may not have been captured accurately.

Extract 2 (Medical students/Dialogical analysis)

Jane: ...obviously words express a lot and you can perceive a lot from (R: Yeah) the words but sometimes I think maybe after the interviews I might have gone home and thought I didn't say something in the right way or maybe I didn't come across- what I was trying to say taped doesn't come across well. But that happens to everybody (R: Yes). Sometimes you say something- you're not sure it came across in the right way or someone got the wrong end of the stick. So I mean you can get a lot from what people say but at the same time you can't always get a hundred per cent. But that's that's ((laughs)) that comes of talking.

Male researcher 2: I agree (J: Yeah) I agree with you there. (J: Yeah) I think you know there's that tension between presenting an analysis (J: Yeah) as a kind of a finished product (J: Yeah) and the potential of the person who's speaking (J: Mm) and the different ways that they might have of experiencing something.

Jane: Yeah (.) and also like say if we would have seen the questions in advance that before we were being interviewed we might have like reflected a lot more on it (R: Yeah) and have kind of more to say like this was just a kind of a knee jerk reaction to the questions (R: Yes) and then when you go home you're like 'Oh I could have said this I could have said that' like do you know what I mean? You like you think of lots more things that have happened or yeah.

Both Tom (extract 1) and Jane (extract 2) are ambivalent about the adequacy of the research data. Because Tom is a mystery to be solved, this rests on the number of meetings and depth of relationship on which the researcher's interpretations are based. On the other hand, Jane is a subject who is more-or-less transparent to herself, hindered by accuracy of expression which is presented as a potentially solvable methodological problem. Because "words express a lot", she has been captured partially by the research. However, in this account, better – that is fuller and more accurate data – would have been generated by allowing participants to prepare answers to the interview questions in advance in order to mitigate poor expression, "knee jerk" unconsidered answers, and memory lapses. Like Tom, she has been affected by her participation in the research in that she re-enacts her experiences after the event: "I could have said this I could have said that". However, her ambivalence is about what she could have added to the data as opposed to Tom's struggle for self-understanding. Moreover, Jane and the researcher work together to excuse the weakness of the research which just "comes from talking" and agreed by the researcher to be the "tensions" between "analysis" and "experiencing".

Extract 3 is an example of how participants in a study may differ in their appraisal of the researcher's analysis, here with the added dimension that the disagreement is relevant to disputed aspects of the participants' relationship with each other. The sequence starts with the researcher

testing an analytic interpretation of a videoed interaction between the participants which they have just been shown.

Extract 3 (Domestic chat/Conversation analysis)

- Female researcher: What we thought about this (V: Yeah) is that this is the kitchen and this is the- well basically your [Val's] domain. (V: Yes) (Bill nods affirmatively). Whatever Bill does for you it's like he he comes in as the helper ((Bill moves head slowly from side to side)) but it's your responsibility. So you encourage him on the one hand saying "thank you" and then if he doesn't do it the way you wanted you might like ((tails off)).
- Val: Tell him differently.
- Female researcher: Yeah.
- Bill: I don't think- no I don't think it's as clear-cut as that.
- Val: Yeah but for then- I think looking after the child and the kitchen is my domain (B: Yeah well) and and at that time [son's name] was my domain- not so much now it's obviously different now but then I think I looked after the baby and the foods so you're helping me out yes.
- Bill: She she definitely looks after the the the children primarily and looks after the food but the you know the clearing up (V: I do the) and the washing up (V: No the yeah the) is primarily me.
- Val: But it's different for me though ((laughs)).
- Bill: Well I suppose- not really.
- Val: I agree with yeah basically.

Val recognises her husband in the characterisation offered by the researcher, agreeing with her interpretation, co-constructing and completing her account: "you might like" "tell him differently". On the other hand, although Bill agrees (non-verbally) that the kitchen is Val's "domain" he begins to dispute (again, non-verbally) the suggestion that he is her "helper". Bill's role in, and contribution to, the household is at stake in this potentially demeaning characterisation produced by the two women, and he goes on to defend himself saying "I don't think it's as clear-cut' and that "the clearing up [...] and the washing up [...] is primarily me". His wife does not readily accept his position, for example arguing that "it's different for me", although the couple eventually come to a compromising, uneasy agreement: "Well I suppose", "I agree with you yeah basically". So, in testing out an analytic interpretation, the researcher sparks

a dispute between the participants. While who does what in the kitchen appears mundane, it may represent a microcosm of their relationship and, as such, is highly charged. They have a stake, not only in how they are understood in the research, but in how they understand each other as a couple. However, they are not a mystery, like Tom, or potentially transparent, like Jane: they are subjects whose truth can change in interaction with each other.

**Commentary on participant ambivalence.** Engaging with researcher interpretations can catalyse for participants an emotionally-charged mix of ambivalent feelings about the value of, and gaps in, the analysis, particularly as it touches on their sense of self. Participants can feel invaded and exposed (Goldblatt et al., 2011), and merely sharing interview transcripts with participants can evoke shame (Forbat & Henderson, 2005). Tom's vulnerability raises issues of consent as a process that requires checking throughout the trajectory of research and publication with clear recognition that full anonymity cannot be guaranteed. Likewise, Jane's discomfort reminds us that, otherwise adequate, consent processes may still leave participants unprepared for the reality of analytical interpretations. Stakeholders may have investments in the research that differ from each other as well as from those of the researcher, as we saw with Val and Bill. Bill wants his domestic contribution to be recognised and, in institutional research, participants may fear for their jobs (Emerson & Pollner, 1988). Our examples also demonstrate how participants can draw on variable, implicit models of subjectivity in expressing their reservations. Tom is a 'complex' subject with hidden depth; Jane is an 'uncomplicated' subject who is relatively self-transparent; Bill and Val are, in some respects, 'blank' subjects who constitute their interwoven selves in conversation with each other (see Parker, 1994).

How did the researchers manage participant ambivalence in situ and might these interactions have been used in the service of fruitful knowledge exchange? In extract 1, the

researcher changes the subject and appears to maintain his expert stance through resisting the implication that he is answerable. In this psychoanalytically-informed project on masculinity, the male researcher's apparent avoidance of a challenging question from the male participant could be interrogated reflexively for what it adds to our understanding of expertise hierarchies and intimacy boundaries within men's relationships. In extract 2, the researcher apparently capitulates, deferring to the participant. With regard to dialogical analysis, this demonstrates the rhetorical strength of her appeal to lived experience contra his theoretically-informed interpretations in their shared search for truth. In extract 3, having inadvertently catalysed a recognisably-gendered dispute between the participants, the researcher lets them sort it out. Although putatively a bystander, as a woman, the researcher could have been perceived in context as aligned - a central conversation analytic concept - with the wife vis-à-vis assessment of the husband's domestic contribution, illuminating potentially the gendered nature of the domestic chat data. Hence, participant ambivalence is an opportunity for knowledge exchange through reflexive discovery: that is, interrogating what the interaction itself reveals about the phenomenon of interest.

### **Participant Challenge**

Member checks provide stakeholders space to challenge the researcher directly, not only about the outcomes of the research, but to implicate also critique of the researcher's expertise, their relative status, and personal blind spots. Extract 4 presents an example of this as Tom posits his own re-interpretation of the researcher's analysis: an analysis which adopts a typical psychoanalytic posture.

Extract 4 (Masculinity/Psychoanalysis)

Male researcher 1: Anything else you want to say?

Tom: I don't think so no. They were the couple of bits that did interest me. That

bit that I just said there- the theoretical stuff cos obviously it's a professional thing isn't it. Did you see anything of yourself in it? And I wonder if um if maybe you're self-referencing a little in the analysis as well.

Male researcher 1: It's something I need to think more about because it seems odd to produce a psychoanalytically-informed analysis without any consideration of you know transference counter-transference that kind of reflective dimension. Again it's difficult to write about that stuff but it's something I guess is important to do. I think so yeah.

Tom: You don't have the anonymity though (R: Yeah) and you've got your own name on it ((inaudible overspeaking)) ((laughs)) um so if there's stuff that you do (R: Yeah) find tough to work through then (R: Mm) that's gonna be very hard to do that I imagine.

Male researcher 1: Not just I mean not just within psychoanalysis but there are traditions autoethnography and psychobiography that er recognise and accept that type of writing so there there are precedents um but it is it is a big ask.

Tom: Mm oh definitely.

Male researcher 1: But um it's something I'm interested in following up. It's something that other writers like [names] did to a certain extent yes.

Tom asks a personal question of the researcher in relation to the analysis: "Did you see anything of yourself in it?", and uses it as an opportunity to suggest that the researcher maybe has been "self-referencing a little in the analysis". In so doing, Tom turns the lens back on the researcher, perhaps ironically, using the researcher's own analytic framework to offer a new set of significations in that the analysis is suggested to have unexamined latent meaning. Hence, psychoanalytic theory has provided a potent negotiating tool for the participant to reconfigure, briefly, the relationship between himself and researcher. A tussle follows as the researcher resists Tom's attempt to pull him into personal territory and he responds in terms of the technologies of "transference" and "counter-transference", concluding, in general, that "it's difficult to write about that stuff". In turn, Tom amplifies and elaborates the confessional potential of this statement: "you don't have anonymity", "you've got your own name", and "if there's stuff you do find tough to work through, that's gonna be very hard to do". However, the researcher again responds in terms of the impersonal technologies involved: "autoethnography" and



“psychobiology”, assuming a pedagogical, expert stance and framing the issue in terms of an academic interest he may pursue. Hence, while the researcher appears open to a counter-authorial interpretation: “It’s something I need to think more about [...] it’s something I guess is important to do”, his reframing of the personal as pedagogical suggests also that he finds the attempted re-negotiation of the analysis, and by implication their relationship, unsettling.

In the next extract, the participants attempt to re-negotiate the relationship, again, to the consternation of the researcher. However, here, the validity of the research is not at stake as it was in the previous extract, but authorship of it.

Extract 5 (Medical students/Dialogical analysis)

- Male researcher 2: Um how would you feel about the paper being published? How do you feel about that?  
 Jane: Yeah great.  
 Henry: Go for it yeah.  
 Jane: Good luck ((laughs)).  
 Henry: Can we can we be on it?  
 Male researcher 2: As as named? ((Jane laughs)).  
 Henry: Would you be able to do that cos then we’d have a ((tails off)).  
 Jane: Have an extra point.  
 Henry: A career boost you see. ((Research laughs)) No seriously we get points for for um.  
 Jane: For publi- having pub-  
 Henry: For publications.  
 Male researcher 2: For having yourself as as an author on the paper?  
 Henry: I think so.  
 Male researcher 2: Well now this is an interesting question ((Jane laughs)).  
 Henry: ((Inaudible)) ((laughter)) you know but I mean (R: Um) but yeah do if you want to publish it well then I’d have no (J: Yeah) problem with that whatsoever.  
 Male researcher 2: Right well it would be interesting to talk to [name of other researcher] about that um my initial reaction would be that um unless you can write something on the analysis (J: Mm) then it couldn’t be ((tails off)).  
 Henry: Couldn’t be credited.  
 Male researcher 2: Yeah but at the same time you know your extracts were used and so on. I hadn’t thought about that issue.  
 Henry: I mean it would be a bit sneaky putting me on ((laughter)) because I’ve applied for jobs in sort of field (J: Yeah) so ((inaudible)) ((Researcher laughs)). You have to ask or you don’t get do you.

Jane: Yeah it's true.

Male researcher 2: Well um it's ((laughter)) it's a difficult question where the lines of authorship- yes um but as a as a participant in the study do you feel that maybe you did- you were kind of responsible for the authorship in in a way?

Henry: No not really ((Researcher laughs)). We haven't done much at all.

Jane: No.

Henry asks the researcher if they (two of the original 11 participants) can be authors on the paper: "Can we can we be on it?". The researcher is taken aback, hedging his response and indicating his surprise and flummox at the request through asking needlessly clarifying questions: "As as named?", "For having yourself as as an author on the paper?", through laughing as Henry explains that it would provide him a "career boost", and further delaying an answer by reflecting on it as "an interesting question". Henry at first pursues his request by explaining its importance: "seriously we get points". However, when the researcher eventually begins to build a refusal: "unless you can write something on the analysis (J: Mm) then it couldn't be ((tails off))", Henry demonstrates understanding of this perspective by producing a dialogical shift and, himself, completing the explanation: "Couldn't be credited". He capitulates further by adding that "it would be a bit sneaky putting me on" and reframing his action as merely strategic: "you have to ask or you don't get". Jane's role in this is interesting. Her laughter following the researcher's first response appears to validate his surprise and, hence, the potential illegitimacy of Henry's request, yet she helps substantiate its basis: "Have an extra point", "For publi- having pub-", and she supports Henry's right to ask. However, her laughter is central to establishing also a teasing atmosphere and, ultimately, she readily agrees with Henry that, in terms of being responsible for authorship, they "haven't done much at all".

The next extract also incorporates laughter and includes a participant challenge to the researcher but, unlike the two extracts above, this challenge is not pursued and the negotiation

shifts to the participants themselves. Having just reviewed a video extract of the data, the sequence begins with the researcher asking Bill why he had said ‘why’ in response to his wife’s request for him to dry the dishes.

Extract 6 (Domestic chat/Conversation analysis)

- Female researcher: Why did you say ‘why?’  
 Val: ((Laughs)) Stupid question because it means he has to do more work ((R and V laugh)) so he questions it so he can get out of it ((laughs)).  
 Bill: It’s a habit ((R and V laugh)).  
 Female researcher: So is it that like you know men sometimes are said to require more explanations and you know like they want to know what they’re doing why they’re doing how it is being done before they actually do it while women just do things or ((tails off)).  
 Val: Hey [to cat].  
 Bill: That’s that’s probably part true but um also for my job I’m required to question everything (R: Ah right) so it’s a sort of habit to ask why before you do anything that anybody asks you to do.  
 Val: Because you don’t want to have to do too much stuff (B: That’s right) do you ((laughs)).  
 Bill: So if any- if if you know you say ‘why?’ and then somebody can’t give you a reasonable (R: Mm) ah-  
 Val: I suppose (B: It could be-) if you’re a woman helping a woman out you just know that’s how they like to do it (R: Mm) so you do it. Whereas a man I suppose doesn’t understand that and just thinks ‘well, I don’t want to do too much’ ((smiley voice)) I don’t know.  
 Bill: Mm.

Val, albeit laughingly, challenges the researcher’s expertise by characterising her question as “stupid”. The answer is obvious - her husband is lazy: “he questions it so he can get out of it”. The female researcher joins Val’s laughter at such direct and public denigration of the husband and the spotlight is turned on him. Bill attempts to put a positive spin on his behaviour as a way in which he has learned to be efficient at work: “for my job I’m required to question everything”. However, Val, in turn, implies this to be yet another example of his laziness: “Because you don’t want to have to do too much stuff”, an interpretation that becomes clearer as she goes on contrast how women helping out “just know that’s how they like to do it”, as

opposed to men who “just don’t want to do too much”. In this she amplifies and revises the researcher’s initial, more affectively neutral, explanation around gender differences, that “men sometimes are said to require more explanations [...] while women just do things”. Bill tries to mount a credible defense, however, in the end gives up and offers a non-committal “Mm” to his wife’s critique of men’s general lack of understanding and domestic contribution. So, not only is the researcher’s reading of the data, and by implication her status, challenged here so is Bill’s character, and the researcher’s question, seeming merely to clarify an aspect of the data, provokes a gendered dispute between husband and wife.

**Commentary on participant challenge.** Goldblatt et al. (2011) suggest that, paradoxically, member checks can reinforce the power of the researcher who is, after all, within their sphere of expertise and we see participants struggling to control the meaning of important personal issues. While interviewees have control over their level of personal revelation during data collection, in the member check this could be experienced as under the control of the researcher who is returning with analytic insights (Buchbinder, 2010). However, our analysis demonstrates how participants may also attempt to negotiate their relative status and challenge the researcher, not just as a professional but as a person. Our examples are relatively gentle, but Buchbinder goes as far as to state that “(t)he word ‘shatter’ illustrates the interviewer’s experience of the aggressive potential inherent in the validation interview” (2010, p.114). These are threshold moments of crisis (Bakhtin, 1981) in which the vying stakes of researcher and participant are brought to the fore. Where multiple parties are involved, participants can work together in their challenge to unsettle the researcher – as did Jane and Henry. On the other hand, the researcher may be offered relief as the dispute is taken up between stakeholders – as with Val and Bill. Although uncomfortable and need skilful handling, if they “can be viewed in a way

other than as a battle of interpretations” (Koelsch, 2013, p.176), stakeholder challenges are also valuable opportunities for knowledge exchange. In particular, they offer rich insights into what is important to stakeholders themselves and, possibly, into the researcher’s own blind spots.

In terms of research practice, participant challenge might be mitigated to some extent through greater clarity by researchers about their approach. For example, it might be reasonable for Tom to expect some mutuality of exchange with the researcher and for this to have been negotiated openly at the consent stage – likewise clarity on the traditions of intellectual ownership. Similarly, Val may not have been expecting the researcher to ask questions that require her to articulate seemingly commonplace explanations.

### **Mirrors and Portraits**

We now elaborate on the above two sections: participant ambivalence, and participant challenge, through exploring what we see as the analogy central to understanding these interactions: the way in which the research is conceived of by stakeholders as providing them a mirror or a portrait. When the research is conceived of as a perfect mirror, the assumption is that it aims to reflect an objective truth, albeit with the potential for some distortion as judged by the stakeholder (e.g., through ‘poor data’, extract 2). However, as will be illustrated in relation to extract 9, research can also be conceived of as a revealing mirror. Here the possibility is maintained that the research aims to reflect an objective truth but, at the same time, stakeholders may be challenged to see this truth anew. When the research is conceived of as a portrait, the assumption is that it aims to offer an impression of reality filtered through the researcher’s subjectivity and his or her analytic lens. For example, in suggesting that the researcher himself is very present in the analysis (extract 4), Tom has implied a conception of the research-as-portrait infused with the researcher’s own meanings.

In the following extract, Tom goes on to critique this portrait as incomplete, himself using the metaphor of the photograph or “snapshot”.

Extract 7 (Masculinity/Psychoanalysis)

Male researcher 1: So has this interview been what you expected?

Tom: I didn't really have any expectation ((laughs)) of what it was gonna be um you know maybe I'm putting defenses up again in saying this sort of intellectualization but no honestly I don't think- I don't know what I expected from this interview. You know maybe I'd thought a little bit you know I'll be a bit more critical in this one so it um so it shows there's more than that one dimension that's captured in that paper. That's another strange thing. It's like a snapshot of you frozen in time- (R: Yes) the analysis in that way however subtle you are however good you are at using concepts that go beyond language into something else there's always there's always something more to a person than what appears in one analysis. Maybe I'm being idealistic.

Male researcher 1: Oh I agree. I think the idea would be several interviews over (T: Yeah) a course of time- I'm not asking you to sign up to that (T: Yeah) but ((tails off)).

Tom: Ethical questions and all that.

Male researcher 1: But that would be the ideal. Yeah so as an exercise in participant validation you seem to be saying that you're endorsing the analysis broadly speaking.

Tom: Broadly speaking yeah yeah.

Tom has wanted to be “more critical” in this meeting with the researcher in order to show that he consists of “more than that one dimension that's captured in that paper”. Not only does he feel more complex than the way in which he has been portrayed, he experiences himself as a subject in flux, unlike the research which is “like a snapshot of you frozen in time”. The power of the original psychoanalytic interpretation, however, is still very strong and Tom dialogues with an undermining interpretation of his critique as “putting defenses up again in saying this, sort of intellectualization”. The researcher, however, implies a potential methodological solution “several interviews over (T: Yeah) a course of time”. For Tom the issue is, rather, that “there's always something more to a person” and his agreement with the researcher's gloss that he is “endorsing the analysis broadly speaking” remains ambivalent: “broadly speaking yeah yeah”.

In contrast, in suggesting that participants should be prepared better in advance in order to provide fuller and more accurate data (extract 2), Jane implied a conception of the research-as-perfect-mirror: that is, as having the potential to reflect the truth. Hence, in the following extract, she is keen to correct a distorted image of medical students that she sees in the analysis.

Extract 8 (Medical students/Dialogical analysis)

- Male researcher 2: Is there anything- just to kind of finish this part of the interview is there anything that you might want to- if not dispute nothing you want to clarify (.) nothing in the analysis that ((tails off)).
- Jane: Er I think it had- like when I was reading one bit- I can't remember the words that were used. I had kind of a reaction to it cos it was talking about- I think it was the first one. A girl was describing being in her mum's general practice and (R: That's right) they were like calling her in when there was a rash or something to see and then afterwards it was analyzing and it said something about how it could be perceived as er I don't know like not not very nice for the patients because you're not looking at the patients (R: Yeah) you're just looking at the signs (R: Yes) but then I thought 'Well that's how we do it' and like you can't if you don't know the signs if you don't know the symptoms then you can be the nicest doctor ever but you're not going to heal anybody (R: Yes) you know like that was like 'Well that's the way it is' ((laughs)). You've got to see the signs you've got to see the symptoms. If you don't see it then (.) Yeah so if a good patient comes in (R: Yeah) with a rash (R: Yes) then all the doctors are going to say 'Go and see that person'. So next time you see it then you'll be able to help ((laughs)) them the next patient. So I was- when I read that I was a bit like (.) I was a bit (.) yeah ((laughs)).

In response to the researcher's invitation, Jane describes a "reaction" she had to a part of the analysis which said "you're not looking at the patients (R: Yeah) you're just looking at the signs". This is an image of medical students that Jane finds troubling and she re-enacts her thoughts: "Well that's how we do it", and explicates the practical importance of prioritizing signs "So next time you see it then you'll be able to help". Although other doctors are brought into the dialogue: "all the doctors are going to say", and she is commenting on analysis of a quote from another participant's interview, it is also personal. The ellipse at the end suggests that the affect, and her disagreement with the analysis, was too difficult to articulate: "I was a bit like

(.) I was a bit (.) yeah ((laughs))” and she softens her disagreement with bursts of laughter.

However, Jane wishes to correct what she sees as a negatively distorted image of her profession, one which “could be perceived as er I don’t know like not not very nice for the patients”.

In the final extract, Val has an epiphany as she and her husband review the video data and discuss its meaning with the researcher. Rather than try to correct a distorted image, it is as if she has looked in the mirror and seen something new and unsettling reflected back at her. The extract begins with Bill explaining to the researcher what Val meant about going for a walk.

Extract 9 (Domestic chat/Conversation analysis)

- Bill: Um but she said ‘It’s not that nice’ and that means ‘Oh’- that that could be interpreted as ‘I don’t really want to. I don’t really fancy it’.
- Female researcher: Have the parents in the morning?
- Bill: I don’t really want to go for the walk.
- Female researcher: Okay.
- Bill: I think ‘I don’t really want to go for the walk’. That’s probably-
- Val: No that’s not it that’s-
- Bill: -why I just reacted as I did.
- Val: No I’d say you- that’s probably what you thought (B: Yes) but I said that because I was uncertain whether it was a good idea going. I wanted you either to go ‘Yes that is a good idea to go for a walk’ ((laughs)) ‘No it’s not a good idea’ ((laughs)) but you didn’t- oh dear- but you just don’t really (.) So maybe we don’t like communicate (.) I’ll communicate something and you’re assuming something else. I don’t know. Or you’re just- I’m trying- I’m not saying- cos I’m not I’m saying that because-
- Bill: I think (V: Well) that must have been-
- Val: Not sure from what I think of what to do. So I want his approval and he’s just being a pain ((smiley voice)).
- Bill: I think I must have said something like that it was your idea meaning it’s your idea to go for a walk.
- Val: In the morning yes.
- Female researcher: We can play that back actually.

Val’s insight is embedded in a wider discussion of what she meant about the walk when she said “It’s not that nice”. Bill suggests that Val probably means “I don’t really want to go”: a clarification which satisfies the researcher. However, Val offers strenuously a different interpretation, contrasting her husband’s assumptions: “that’s probably what you thought”, with



her own frustrated desire for him to make the decision: “I wanted you either to go ‘Yes that is a good idea to go for a walk’ ((laughs)) ‘No it’s not a good idea’ ((laughs)) but you didn’t”. It is at this point that she has the revelation that “maybe we don’t like communicate” and, although it is expressed cheerfully, her expanded explanation is plaintive in articulating unmet needs and bitter disappointment: “I want his approval and he’s just being a pain ((smiley voice))”. Val works this out for herself, having been faced with the video data and the researcher’s request for clarification. However, it is not dwelt upon as Bill and the researcher continue the project of working out who said what.

**Commentary on mirrors and portraits.** Jane expects the research to be a perfect mirror of her experience and sees in it a distorted reflection, but one that might be corrected. Tom, too, is searching for the truth in the research, but critiques his image as a portrait produced through the subjectivity of another and, unlike he feels himself to be, limited in space and time. The female researcher’s aim of seeking clarification from Val and Bill, and her appeal to the record of the data, implies a search for the truth in these places: that they need to look more carefully in the mirror. However, Val and Bill provide different interpretations of what they see and Val has a revelation with regard to her relationship with her husband – the ‘mirror’ reveals something she did not see before - through the act of reviewing the video. Inviting stakeholders to comment on research outcomes, or to clarify aspects of the data and its meaning, suggests the value of their opinion and, possibly, their right to correct or at least influence the research. So what are we to make of in situ changes of mind, uncertainties, and conflicts in the meaning attributed by participants?

Some of these phenomena might be accounted for as post-hoc rationalisation (Bygstad & Munkvold, 2007). However, all the extracts may be viewed as illustrating Josselson’s (2011)

argument that participants are additional interpreters, not owners, of the research narrative. More specifically, just as Tom alludes to his sense of subjectivity in flux, participants sometimes note during member checks how much they have changed from when the data was collected (Goldblatt et al., 2011) and so see things differently (McConnell-Henry et al., 2011). Similarly, Cho and Trent (2006) propose that member checking, indeed, is problematic in relation of transactional validity, which maintains an interest in truth, but that it may have strength as a form of transformative validity, which is judged by the way in which research promotes change. And, we saw in Val's insight how a member check can have a transformative effect on participants (Koelsch, 2013). Depending on the aims of the research, multiple interactions – as utilised in member checking – could useful track transformative effects. However, this is unlikely to mitigate more fundamental differences in assumption, if they exist, between participants and researcher.

### **Discussion**

Our framing of the member check within the context of knowledge exchange helps identify productive use of stakeholder ambivalence and challenge. In particular, the dialogical concept of the sore spot allows us to see these as threshold moments ripe with potential (Bakhtin, 1981), and Cho and Trent's (2006) concept of transformative validity allows us to value member checks for their capacity to promote change. Hence, whatever the outcome, member checks provide the opportunity for researchers to reflect on the interaction and, potentially, to transform their understanding of what is important to stakeholders and/or to gain insight into their own blind spots. If this reflective process occurs with stakeholders, it provides an additional opportunity for them, too, to be similarly transformed. On another level, member checking may facilitate

reflexive discovery through considering what these difficult interactions, themselves, reveal about the phenomenon under investigation.

It is important to emphasise that this reflective process may occur both in the interaction and in post hoc analysis. Sore spots can be revealed through in situ hesitations, laughter, ellipses, half-hearted agreement, and direct challenges as well as in features of the researcher's own questions and response. Two overarching responses are available to researchers: to explore issues with stakeholders or to attempt an expert close. As Figure 1 illustrates, exploration may be followed by an expert close consisting, in our examples, of either a tactful side-step/passing over of the issue or a reframing in the researcher's terms. On the other hand, an attempted expert close may be unsuccessful as stakeholders demand further exploration. Our example interactions show how interactants can manage skilfully to avoid open dispute. However, the literature and our examples also document how difficult it is to have truly open discussion and we identify a variety of creative strategies to which the researchers in our examples took recourse: (token) capitulation, hedging, and deflecting the issue back onto the stakeholder(s).

In situ exploration of sore spots offers also an opportunity to manage expectations. Participants can manage the researcher's expectations with regard to the potential impact of the research on stakeholders, while researchers may have a chance to manage participants' expectations with regard to what the research can offer (e.g., a mirror or a portrait). On the other hand, post hoc reflection can provide insight into how well expectations have been managed, but also into blind spots that can be feedback into the research process. Finally, the exploration of sore spots provides a way of identifying the models of subjectivity and of truth on which the participants rely. In summary, Figure 1 provides a map with regard to the theories of subjectivity and truth within which member checks can be undertaken, associated research practices in terms

of a range of researcher responses to difficult, but potentially fruitful interactions - stakeholder ambivalence and challenge - and implications of these moments for knowledge exchange.

Stakeholders and researchers are likely to interact within the context of, often implicit, assumptions with regard to truth and the nature of the human subject. The possibility of there being objective truth, or the position that truth is always subjective, appears a key epistemological contrast. Also central are the tensions in understanding subjects as transparent to themselves (uncomplicated), constituted in interaction with others (blank), or having depths that the subject, like others, has to decipher (complex). These implicit epistemologies and theories of subjectivity may be linked to the way in which stakeholders approach the research (i.e., as a perfect mirror, revealing mirror, or portrait). Stakeholder assumptions likely vary over time and context, may not always cohere with the framework in which the researcher is working, and may catalyse ambivalence towards, and challenges of, the researcher's point-of-view. And it is this seam of fluctuating agreement/disagreement that makes transformative validity an extremely pertinent concept.

Now we consider ways in which member checking might be incorporated fruitfully into quantitative research across disciplines to enhance knowledge exchange. Kornbluh (2015) offers a useful summary of challenges associated with member checking, some of which appear particularly relevant to quantitative researchers: it can be time-consuming; there is likely a mismatch in language between participant and researcher and a gulf in their spheres of knowledge and expertise (see Bygstad & Munkvold, 2007); and lack of interest from participants in providing feedback (see Bradshaw, 2001). Moreover, reflexive use of member checks may be challenging in relation to quantitative research, however has the merit of avoiding the assumption that stakeholders always are transparent to themselves or, indeed, are always fully

informed (Bygstad & Munkvold, 2007). Indeed, manipulation checks and, as mentioned in the introduction, debriefing itself can be viewed as a form of member checking with the modest proviso that it is conducted in such a way as to gain also feedback on the study (McShane et al., 2015). Hence, practical strategies for tackling such issues can be suggested, many of which are not particularly labour-intensive.

Bradshaw (2001) recommends sharing copies of relevant publications before the research commences to make the researcher's standpoint clear and to familiarize stakeholders with the kind of outputs expected in academia. Bygstad and Munkvold (2007) advise using selective summaries of the processes and outcomes of the research written in stakeholder-friendly language, Crilly, Clarkson and Blackwell (2006) suggesting that diagrams may make conceptual relations easier to grasp. Consideration could be given to the overall benefits of training lay mentors, possibly from stakeholder groups, who can spend time explaining the research and obtaining useful feedback (Doyle, 2007). Member checks can be elicited quantitatively, for example through surveys (Kornbluh, 2015), and collected efficiently through technologies such as online platforms (Bradshaw, 2001). Moreover, researchers can collate and reflect on informal feedback, incidental events, and on-going personal insights through making detailed field notes (Kornbluh, 2015) and/or writing a research journal (Gough & Madill, 2012).

Meadmore, Hughes, Freeman, Benson, and BurrIDGE (2013) provide an excellent example of the use of participant feedback in way analogous to the member check in a quantitative feasibility trial evaluating novel stroke rehabilitation technologies. After undertaking the monitored trial sessions using the new equipment, participants completed clinical outcome measures and a short semi-structured interview to obtain their perspectives on the technology. This information provided "insight into individual differences in changes in outcome measures

that previously may have remained unexplained [and]...different perceptions of the term improvement” (2013, p.89).

Murphey and Falout (2010) offer a sophisticated development of member checking for use in both quantitative and qualitative research called ‘critical participatory looping’ (CPL). CPL was developed through taking seriously participants’ concern over the validity of rankings from an open-ended survey of their experience of language-learning at school. Further investigation revealed that, rather than being intrinsically interested in grammar (as suggested by the survey), students valued this aspect of language learning as a way of doing well on college entrance exams. The researchers then developed a method in which they elicited participant feedback at multiple points in their research. In this way a survey study became a ‘post-positivist dialectical activity’, with Murphey and Falout (2010) concluding that CPL has potential for calibrating research instruments and for situating descriptive statistics and data tables within the participants’ reality.

This, though, raises the conundrum as to the use of member checks with stakeholders when key phenomena may be outside their awareness. Turner and Coen (2008) address this directly in their study of the impact on law students of firm-sponsored events. They interpreted these events as functioning to induct students into the wealthy lifestyle of the successful corporate lawyer and tested this out in member check interviews. Although accepted by first and third years, the idea was rejected by second year law students. The researchers concluded that it was during this second year that the process of identity change were strongest and therefore also the most difficult to acknowledge. Another excellent example is the way in which St Pierre (1999) transformed her frustration with participants’ acquiescence to her ethnographic interpretations into the insight that agreeableness was part their culture. Hence, conceptualised in

a sophisticated manner as a reflexive tool and incorporating sensitivity to context, the member check was interpreted in these studies as providing indirect evidence of the processes proposed.

In conclusion, there is evidence that processes and procedures associated with member checking, as it has been implemented and debated within qualitative research for many years, have utility for informing knowledge exchange throughout the social sciences and, importantly, can be adapted for use with quantitative research including though building on mechanisms already familiar within these methods. It may be that a particularly fruitful area for such developments is applied health research in which the need for stakeholder engagement and translation of research into practice is widely emphasised. As indicated in the introduction, a useful parallel with our approach is that of intervention mapping in the field of health promotion. Illustrative here is Eldridge et al.'s (2016) iterative six stage model spanning the creating of a logical model of the problem, logical model of change, programme design, programme production, implementation plan, through to evaluation plan. Given that this process is agnostic to research framework and necessarily involves multiple stakeholders, a fruitful potential impact of Figure 1 is to complement models such as these in anticipating difficult moments of ambivalent and challenge, for managing and making sense of such interactions, and where possible, transforming them into catalysts of insight and knowledge exchange.

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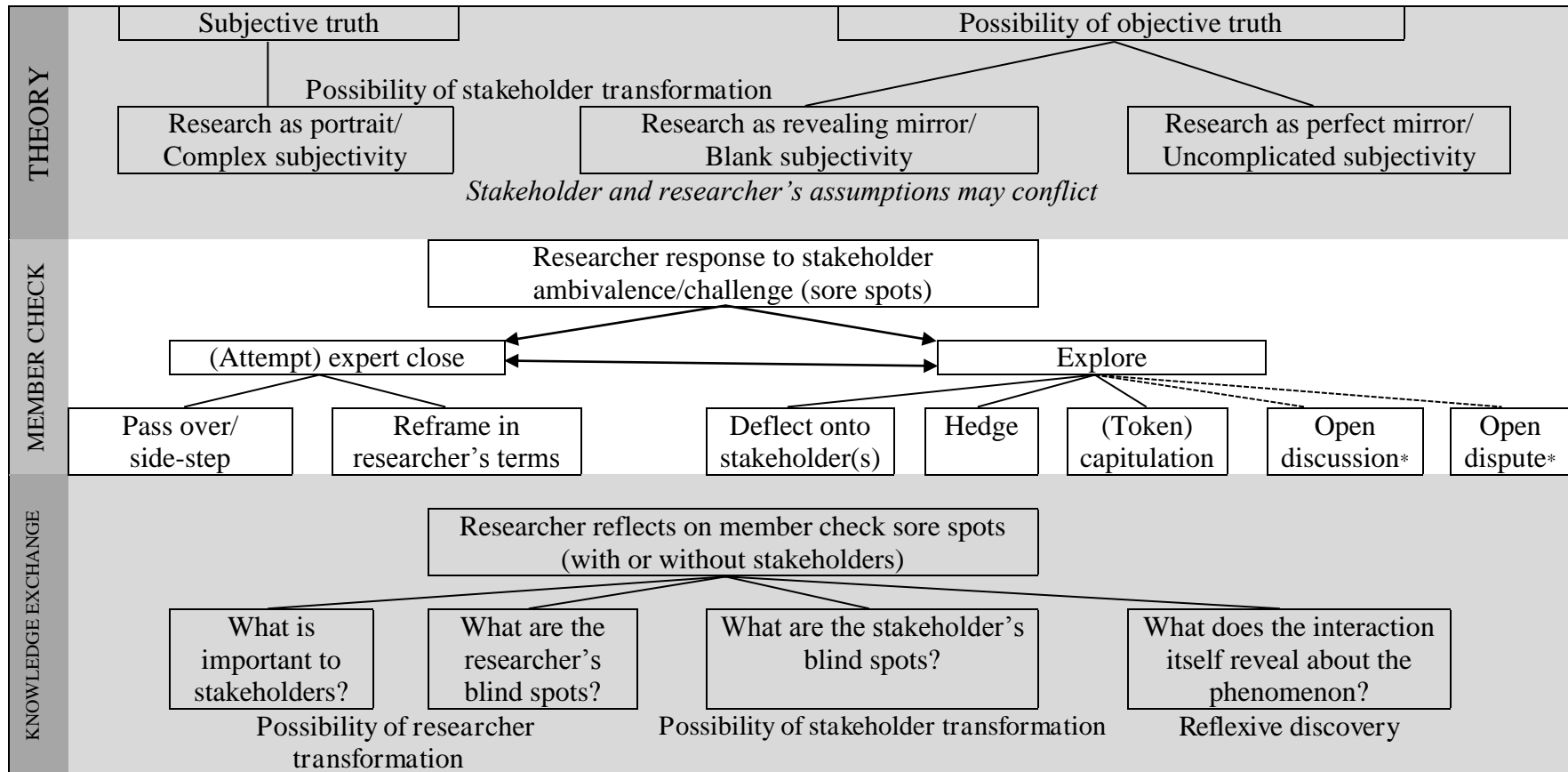
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**Figure 1.**

Theory, Member Check, Knowledge Exchange.



Note: \* possibilities not explored in our examples