RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorksj.ac.uk

Playful research off cuts

An earlier draft of this chapter sought to put play and playfulness into an oppositional relationship with more academically serious attitudes of rigour, validity, and methodology. I playfully drew attention to how in the 'Guidance on Submissions', published by the United Kingdom's very serious Research Excellence Framework (2019) there are 19 mention of the word 'rigour' and zero for playful or playing.

As I played with the ideas, however, I realised that this oppositionality between playfulness and academic method might be fun, but it wasn't necessary. Moreover, it was ultimately counterproductive. Yes, I believe that research could usefully be infected with more playfulness – infected in terms of developing a playfulness in methodology, in inquiry, in ethics and in relationships with research participants – but this is not a relationship of *OR*, but of *AND*. Afterall, we all appreciate that, as well as being hard and serious, research can also be uplifting and creative and joyful and rewarding. But should it also be playful? What might be the consequences of orientating playfulness not just as a possibility, to be present on the margin and fringes of rigour, but as a focal point of an epistemology or research methodology? What would a consciously playful research ethos look like? If it was a smell, what would playful research smell like? If it was a biscuit, what kind biscuit would it be? What would our research culture be like if there were 19 references to play in a rather more playful version of the Research Excellence Framework? It is these questions that this ~~paper~~ chapter investigates, asking what would happen if we took seriously – yes, irony – the importance of playfulness in research.

To adopt a style of playfulness in research almost inevitable invites opposition or comparison with more academically serious attitudes of rigour and validity. This chapter therefore aligns itself with

history of polemical provocations that have argued – with much validity – about the dangers of overly stringent and inflexible approaches to research and method. These include books such as Feyerabend's (2010 [1975) *Against Method*, where he powerfully argues that amongst the negative impacts of an obsession with the academic virtues of rigour and method are an 'inhibiting of intuitions' (20). Feyerabend instead calls for an epistemological anarchism, which recognises that research is fundamentally an anarchic process where fixed rules or methods largely serve to get in the way of new discoveries and the development of new concepts. Or Phillips' (1973) *Abandoning Method,* which points out that one of the principle purposes of a focus on methods and rigour is to police the distinction between who is a legitimate member of the scientific community and who are 'madmen, charlatans, fakers' (154).