

# Dangerous Liaisons in the Wasteland? A Found Document

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Qualitative Inquiry

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## Keywords

diversity in qualitative research, the purpose of social science, productive and unproductive research, waste in qualitative inquiry

(With apologies to Pierre Choderlos de Laclos and Thomas Stearns Eliot)

### *Warning note*

Readers are advised that, despite the author's claim in the preface to the "document" he presents, there are good reasons to believe it is a fiction. To protect the too credulous reader from any mistake in the matter, we point out that the preposterous research proposals listed can only be mere discursive constructions.

## Preface

As a weary traveler on a train to the city of Coventry, I was awakened from reverie by my phone pinging: something had popped into the inbox. It turned out to be the document printed below. I know not how or from whence it came. There were a group of what I took to be business people further down the carriage engaging in intense conversations. I suspected it might have come from them but they denied it. There was also an elderly woman across the aisle who smiled at me when I looked at her, was this a signal? Reading the document, I wondered whether it was a scam or a hoax, and whether or not I was the intended recipient. However, given its interest, I thought it should be published. So, here it is:

### *THE WASTELAND OF SOCIAL RESEARCH: UNREAL SCIENCE?*

"What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish?" (Eliot)

I want to share with you a strange experience. As you know, our charity is concerned with encouraging people to save resources by avoiding waste. We invited bids to carry out research that would help us with this mission. We got a lot of

proposals from the local university, but I was very puzzled—in fact, astounded—by them. Not knowing much about social research, I had expected relatively simple investigations designed to document people's attitudes and current practices, or perhaps to evaluate the effectiveness of our projects. But that's not what we got.

One proposal insisted that the starting point must be a comprehensive theoretical framework identifying capitalism as the source of all waste. And the researchers offered to provide us with this, no empirical investigation required, apparently. The implication seemed to be that we should transform ourselves into a revolutionary group aimed at overturning capitalism. Unfortunately, our resources don't stretch that far, and any effort in this direction would almost certainly cost us our charity status; such is the cunning of capitalism.

Another proposal seemed more promising, offering a qualitative study that would document the mundane lived experience of people using various resources in their homes, seeking to understand this experience in its own terms. A lengthy rationale was provided appealing to Heidegger's phenomenological philosophy. This study might have provided us with some information about why waste occurs, or why there is resistance to cutting it, but we were not convinced that what was proposed would add anything to what we already knew from our own experience, and from our work with people who are committed to cutting waste. We also thought Heidegger excessive.

Yet another interesting proposal offered to investigate the role of structural racism in the production of waste, which was not something we had anticipated. We were told that this was because we are too "white" an organisation, though the researchers apparently know nothing about our racial composition—this was

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not necessary, they said. The suggestion seemed to be that we should be tackling racism rather than waste. While undoubtedly very important, this is not our distinctive task, and there are organisations already doing this (albeit, perhaps, not very successfully).

A very different proposal offered to document the everyday practices through which notions of waste are “ongoingly constituted.” This was to involve detailed examination of the “discursive practices around notions of waste.” Here again, though, it was unclear how this could assist us in our work. Indeed, given that we are already full participants in the practices mentioned, we concluded that we must already know about them, tacitly at least.

Like some other proposals this one seemed to be suggesting that we should abandon our current activities in favour of an alternative, but one whose nature is unclear and whose value is very uncertain. Indeed, a further proposal claimed that what was needed was a detailed investigation of how waste had come to be identified as a social issue and promoted up the public agenda (though, in truth, it barely registers there). The implication seemed to be that we had simply made up the problem ourselves, acting as “moral entrepreneurs” creating a new “imaginary.”

The most obscure proposal recommended that we understand waste as a product of “intra-action” within “temporary assemblages” made up of humans, animals and physical objects. In support of this a lengthy account was provided of the philosophies of Alfred North Whitehead, Bruno Latour, and Karen Barad, but the meaning and significance of these for any practical purposes were hard to understand. Indeed, they seemed to imply that we had no more agency than a potato about to be peeled.

Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly of all, one proposal recommended exploring the issue of waste through a series of events in which participants constructed dramas, art works, and dances on the topic. While we find these activities appealing, indeed we use some of them in promoting our work, what was being offered was patently not research. And it was unclear why we needed these researchers’ assistance to do this: we already have good links with local creative networks.

I was so surprised, indeed shocked, by the responses to our call for research that I discussed them with a number of colleagues in other local charities. They were as bewildered as I was; they had assumed that most academic social research is similar to the work of polling agencies—relying either on large-scale

surveys or on more detailed interviews and focus groups—or perhaps employing observational studies to document people’s practices, and the causes and consequences of these. Yet none of the proposals we received took this form.

The question that kept coming up in these conversations was about the value of the “research” proposed. Not a few of my interlocutors raised the question of whether public funds were being squandered. This made me think about notions of productive and unproductive labour, and how we tell the difference between the two. In consequence, we are proposing to extend our activities to investigate the issue of waste in social science: How can an enterprise which expends its resources on such disparate, and questionable, activities be anything but wasteful? I am in contact with a couple of people in the Department who seem interested in this. They have their eye on a considerable saving of public funds: an announcement is imminent. So, now, besides doing research on waste, we are also carrying out research on waste in research.

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