

Once upon a time, four research pixies, Reggie RCT, Patti Phenomenology, Connie Cohort and Clive Case-Control went for a walk in the woods. On the way, they collected their friends; Edward Ethnography, Gillie Grounded-Theory and Leonard Longitudinal. They decided to explore a part of the woods they hadn't been to before, and walked through the trees, talking about the different perspectives they brought to generating knowledge. Each had always thought that their own perspective was the best, and they had long debates about which was the most useful way to find things out.

"Of course phenomenology is best!", Patti said. "I get much deeper than some of you, who only look at numbers. I can see way beyond the numbers to find out what people really think and feel."

"Which is all very well", snorted Reggie, "if you want to know how a few people think, but what about when you need to see if something you think is true really is true for whole populations? Then you need an RCT!"

"Or a cohort study", shouted Connie, "especially if it's not fair to force people to take the option that you choose for them, Reggie".

And so they continued, bickering about who was best, as they had done every day for all the years they had known each other.

Soon, they came upon a clearing. In the middle of a clearing, there was a circle of happy fairies, and in the middle of the circle sat the most beautiful woman they had ever seen. They stopped in their tracks, awed by the sight. The woman beckoned them into the circle, explaining that she was Cerridwyn, the knowledge fairy, and wanted to tell them that their approaches were all of great value. As she spoke, the pixies looked at each other: as if by magic, each pixie intuitively realised that their perspective to research brought advantages and challenges, and that the ideal way forward was to work together.

The pixies talked with the knowledge fairy until dusk began to fall. Reluctantly, they left the lovely fairy and carried on through the woods, trying to find a short cut home so they could talk about their new-found friend and her words of wisdom.

As they walked, the woods became very dark and, suddenly, they saw two yellow eyes peering out of the trees. Scared, the pixies huddled together, as a man stepped out of the trees, holding several banners in his hands.

The man laughed. "I haven't seen you here before. Have you been to see Cerridwyn?"

Some of the braver pixies nodded.

The man laughed again. "I suppose she's told you that you're all valuable, in different ways?"

The pixies nodded again and the man laughed a third time, longer and louder than before.

"Well that would be lovely if it were true, but those nice humans have been getting together and they have made their own decisions about which of you is the more valuable, and sent me with a standard for each of you to carry, so you'll know where you stand."

Some of the pixies shrunk back, as the man silently handed out the flags; pink for Gillie, Patti and Edward and varying shades of green for Connie, Clive and Leonard. The biggest and most beautiful flag of all he handed to Reggie; who looked in awe at its golden colour. The pixies were so busy looking around at the flags that they didn't realise the man had disappeared.

"Well I guess that answers it," said Reggie haughtily. "RCTs are the best. I said so all along, and now my flag proves it. I shan't be needing to hang out with you losers anymore." And, so saying, he walked off, his head held high and his flag flying behind him.

The other pixies looked rather dejected, but did not want to stay in the dark woods any longer, and began trudging home, in silence. They were too tired and sad even to argue. They had enjoyed their debates, and each had always secretly thought that they were all equal.

All of a sudden, Connie looked thoughtful. She looked at her flag, then at the others, then back in the direction from which they had come.

“You know”, she said. “I don’t think there is anything extra-special about Reggie RCT at all. He didn’t get the gold standard because his way of knowing is any better than ours. His ability to test interventions is great, but so is my way of comparing groups, and Edward’s way of finding out what really happens in people’s lives.”

“You’re right”, replied Edward, the truth suddenly dawning on him too. “He got the gold standard because those humans who want research to help them know things value interventions more than anything else. And that’s what his way tests.”

The six pixies got up again and walked in silence for a while. Then Gillie, who was lagging behind, suddenly stopped.

“I just realised something else”, she said. “One day, the nice people will realise we all have something to offer, and maybe we can work together to find things out!”

That made the other pixies very happy. They joined hands, and began skipping back home through the woods, dreaming about what they would have for their supper and knowing - in each of their different ways - that they would all live happily ever after. Even Reggie RCT.