



# **TROUBLING QUALITATIVE INQUIRY: ACCOUNTS AS DATA, AND AS PRODUCTS**

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# Who am I?

- Sociologist, ethnographer, troublemaker ...
- In the late 1960s and early 1970s I was committed to the idea that qualitative research represented a 'new paradigm'.
- But, later, I slowly came to realise that the differences between 'paradigms' were neither as clear, nor the issues as simple, as I had believed.
- One stimulus for this shift in view was reading Abraham Kaplan's book *The Conduct of Inquiry* (1964), which offers an eclectic, but philosophically informed, pragmatism.

# What am I offering today?

- Doubts and problems about the current state of qualitative research.
- In particular, I will focus on some of the philosophical assumptions that are associated with it.
- While I will offer some suggestions about how to address these problems, these will not (unfortunately) amount to simple solutions: I don't think there are any.
- My message is that doing qualitative research *well* is a very difficult task that necessarily relies upon our being reflective practitioners.

# Qualitative Paradigm or Paradigms?

- The concept of paradigm
  - In Kuhn's (1970) account: exemplars and normal science, one paradigm per field
  - Methodological practices and theoretical assumptions are acquired together, and are mutually determining

Are there methodological paradigms in social research?

- Is the difference between qualitative and quantitative approaches paradigmatic? (see Hammersley 1996)

# A plethora of qualitative paradigms?

- Various summary typologies have been developed. For example, both Cresswell (2013) and Flick (2014) identify 5 approaches. They agree on three – grounded theory, narrative inquiry, and ethnography – but differ on the other two.
- However, there are problems with these typologies: they do not cover all approaches; the types overlap; and each type includes varieties that differ from one another in fundamental terms.

# Internal variation and overlap

- Ethnography: auto, critical, feminist, global, holistic, insider, interpretive, Marxist, micro-, multi-sited, narrative, postmodern, virtual, visual, vitalist.
- Discourse analysis: linguistic discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, critical discursive psychology, conversation analysis, sociolinguistics, Bakhtinian and post-structuralist discourse analysis.
- Overlap: Linguistic ethnography, and the work of ethnographers like Gubrium and Holstein (2009) and Silverman (1997).

# Some illustrations of sharply conflicting kinds of work

- Conversation analysis: concerned with explicating the means by which conversational interaction is brought off
- Qualitative surveys: concerned with the role of social class, race/ethnicity, and gender in determining outcomes of various kinds.
- Biographical research: concerned with understanding the experiences, assumptions, and feelings that have shaped a person's life, or how they formulate their lives in retrospect now.

# Terminological confusion

- What do terms like ‘case study’, ‘ethnography’, ‘phenomenology’, etc mean?
- These and other words are used in a variety of ways that only partially overlap, often with disputes about their ‘real’ meaning.
- For example, the many definitions provided of ‘ethnography’ highlight a range of only partially overlapping features, each definition tending to rule out some forms of research that are labeled ethnographic by other commentators.



# Interim summary

- Our use of the concept of paradigm to understand different approaches to research methodology is misleading.
- There is a plethora of conflicting qualitative approaches.
- The terms that we have available for understanding this variation lack the necessary clarity.

# Understanding the disagreements

- There *are* some major dimensions of difference – both practical and philosophical – separating qualitative approaches.
- However, there is no single set of dimensions that underpins all the disagreements. At best these approaches form a complex, or a constellation, that is multiply divided.
- And philosophical assumptions do not come first, with practice being derived from these. But neither are those assumptions mere rationalisations. There is mutual implication.

# Practical differences

Deriving from commitments to:

- *Addressing particular types of research question.* For example: documenting a culture or subculture; describing patterns of action; explaining outcomes; developing theories.
- *Using particular types of data:* historical or personal documents, interview responses, observational fieldnotes, elicited documents, photographs, audio- or video-recordings.

These *practical* commitments shape the forms that qualitative research takes in particular contexts.

# Philosophical differences

- *Praxiological*: to do with what is the goal and intended product of research.
- *Ontological*: to do with assumptions about the nature of the phenomena being studied.
- *Epistemological*: to do with assumptions about how these phenomena are to be understood.

Some approaches differ from one another in praxiological terms, others on ontological or epistemological grounds

# Praxiological differences

Is the goal:

- *Epistemic* – developing factual knowledge: descriptions, explanations, and/or theories?
- *Normative* – producing evaluations and/or recommendations? This is characteristic not just of what is labeled evaluation research but also of ‘critical’ research, and other work too.
- *Interventionist* – aiming to bring about an improvement in practice or outcome: for example a reduction in some inequality, an enhancement of occupational practice, etc?

# Ontological

There is often little clarity about ontological assumptions, but in practice the focus may be on:

- *Variables* and causal relations amongst them, conceived synchronically.
- *Processes* involving objects and relations of various kinds – contingent, developmental, degenerative, etc.
- *Biographically-constituted perspectives*.
- *Texts*: variation in their content, structure, and functions
- *Practices*: variation in their character and constitutive roles.

# Epistemological

Again, often little clarity in practice, but different emphases include:

- Pattern recognition across cases
- Naturalistic observation and analysis *within* a case
- Hermeneutic engagement
- Socio-historical, or even political, commentary
- Biographical explication
- Textual analysis
- Scepticism about the very possibility of knowledge.

# Are the differences among qualitative approaches legitimate?

- Should all approaches be tolerated or should some simply be ruled out?
- For me, evaluative and interventionist approaches are at odds with the unique goal of research, which is to produce knowledge.
- So too are some forms of epistemological relativism and scepticism.
- But other issues are more difficult to deal with. I will illustrate this by focusing on the role of accounts in the research process.



# Interim summary

- Differences in qualitative approaches arise from practical as well as from philosophical commitments.
- The philosophical differences involve variation on multiple sets of dimensions.
- It is important to be aware of the *range* of variation in ontological and epistemological assumptions on the part of qualitative researchers.
- Whether all extant forms of qualitative research are legitimate is an open question.

# Factual Accounts

- ‘Account’ = a word with limited semantic baggage, compared with ‘narrative’, ‘story’, ‘representation’, ‘explanation’, etc. But it overlaps with them considerably in meaning.
- Accounts are always situated/contexted, but they nevertheless involve reference to reality.
- What I mean by ‘*factual* accounts’ is accounts that are designed to document phenomena existing in the world: i.e. make epistemic claims
- In these terms, data are factual accounts, and so too are research reports.

# Disputes about data

- Whether data are given or constructed.
- Structured versus unstructured data.
- Reactive versus non-reactive data.
- Interview versus observational data (see Hammersley 2008:ch5 and 2013:ch4).
- Focus on action or voice, and if the latter what ontological status can be given to voices?
- Fieldnotes versus audio- or video-recording, and problems surrounding transcription.
- Re-use of qualitative data: context and re-contextualisation (Hammersley 2010a).

# Comments on these disputes

- Despite rejection of empiricism and of ‘the myth of the given’ we cannot abandon the assumption that we work with what is given, even while constructing it (Hammersley 2010).
- Structure and reactivity are matters of degree that must be dealt with pragmatically.
- There are some more intractable philosophical issues underpinning the debate about interviews, fieldnotes, and the re-use of data:
  - Mental phenomena as private or public
  - Methodological scepticism
  - The problem of context

# Research reports as accounts

- We cannot abandon the assumption that our accounts seek to represent reality, despite the problems involved in this.
- The tension between description and theory, eg CA versus GT. An ambivalence that is nicely captured in the notion of 'thick description'.
- Equally important, representation is always *representation for an audience*. What are the implications of this?
- In other words, all accounts are rhetorical. But what are and are not appropriate rhetorical strategies for researchers?

# Variation in qualitative accounts

- Following a standard pattern (research focus, methods used, findings, discussion) *versus* adopting story forms, *versus* poetry or drama.
- Formulations of data: generalised descriptions; specific event descriptions; frequencies and measurements; quotations from participants' accounts to document their perspectives; quotations from participants' accounts as descriptions, specific or generalised.

# The case of Shostak's Nisa

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(Shostak 1981)

# Introduction

I lay there and felt the pains as they came, over and over again. Then I felt something wet, the beginning of the childbirth. I thought, “Eh hey, maybe it is the child.” I got up, took a blanket and covered Tashay with it; he was still sleeping. Then I took another blanket and my smaller duiker skin covering and I left. Was I not the only one? The only other woman was Tashay’s grandmother, and she was asleep in her hut. So, just as I was, I left.

I walked a short distance from the village and sat down beside a tree. I sat there and waited; she wasn’t ready to be born. I lay down, but she still didn’t come out. I sat up again. I leaned against the tree

(Shostack 1981:1)



Although the !Kung say that children need to be disciplined, their efforts to do so are minimal. Adult attitudes toward discipline are not always clearly understood by a child, however—especially an older child, who may feel stronger pressure to conform. One young girl was convinced that a woman’s lack of response to the verbal assault of her young son was just as “senseless” as the boy’s behavior: “His mother didn’t do anything to him. She didn’t even yell at him. That’s how adults are—without sense. When a child insults them, they just sit there and laugh.”

Still, these early years are often remembered as times of intense conflict between parents and children. Beating and threats of beating are almost universal in the childhood memories of !Kung adults; yet observational research has shown that !Kung parents are highly indulgent with children of all ages, and physical punishment is almost never witnessed. It is probable that rare instances of physical punishment become exaggerated and vivid in the child’s memory. So, too, the much  
(Shostack 1981:45)

When the new baby is born the older child also has to give up the coveted sleeping place immediately beside the mother. Although she may sleep between her parents for a while, an older child is eventually expected to sleep on the far side of her younger sibling. No surprise, then, that resentments and anger are frequently expressed toward the parents and sometimes even toward the new infant. This was clearly the case of a four-year-old who kept asking to hold her newborn brother. The mother finally took the baby from her sling and placed him gently in his sister's arms. The girl sat and rocked the baby, singing to him and praising him, while her mother stood nearby. The next moment, however, hearing the shouts of other children playing, the girl suddenly stood up and dropped her tiny brother in the sand. Without a glance, she ran off, followed by her brother's cries and her mother's admonishments. (Shostack 1981:43)

# Summary

- It is important to recognise the different types of 'accounting' to be found in qualitative research reports.
- We need to be aware of how each type of account is produced and what it involves.
- It is important to assess their strengths and weaknesses, and to make judgments about which type of account is best for particular purposes.
- This is necessary when reading qualitative research reports as well as when writing one's own.

# Conclusion

There are many qualitative approaches but it is misleading to treat these as valid paradigms.

There are fundamental disagreements among qualitative researchers, but these cannot all be dealt with in the same way.

Some relate to deep philosophical problems, and as researchers we must find pragmatic means for dealing with them.

This demands philosophically-informed reflection on the experience of doing research, so as to determine which assumptions do, and do not, help in producing worthwhile knowledge.

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