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What Counts as Qualitative Research? Some Cautionary Comments

Abstract   Many PhD students begin as unconscious Naturalists or Emotionalists using interview studies to report people's "experience" of an unquestioned social "problem." An analysis of articles in one journal shows that this naïve use of interview data has become the common currency of qualitative research. In a critique of one such article, I show how interview studies may simply reproduce interviewees' own accounts, glossed over by a few social science categories. By "mining" interviews for apposite extracts, such researchers lose sight of how *sequence* is consequential for what we say and do. Much more needs to be done if qualitative research is not to be just a set of techniques but an analytic project, different from journalism.

Keywords   Qualitative Research; Interviews; Data Analysis; Social Theory

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This paper has an unusual genesis for a journal article. It began life as a presentation at a Meet the Author session at a conference. In this paper, I link an account of what I say in a new edition of one of my books (Silverman 2011) to a more general discussion of the present state of qualitative research. The comments made by colleagues in other plenaries (published in this volume) make me optimistic about our field. However, as I show in a critique of a recent journal article, all may not be so well.

I will begin by briefly explaining just what is different about the fourth edition of *Interpreting Qualitative Data* (IQD). It is intended as an undergraduate introductory qualitative methods text which complements the postgraduate focus of *Doing Qualitative Research* (Silverman 2013). IQD is not simply an undergraduate research project book but an introduction to the theory, methods, and practice of qualitative research. This is reflected in three chapters new to this edition.

A chapter on research design seeks to demonstrate the challenges faced by the students in carrying out a small research project and to offer some simple solutions. This is complemented by a chapter on data analysis which deals with the nitty-gritty issues of confronting data for the first time and contains sections on contemporary approaches to data analysis, including grounded theory and narrative analysis. Finally, a new chapter on focus groups offers detailed discussion about how to analyze focus group data.

The underlying philosophy of the book is, however, unchanged. It can be summed up in the following way:

- Qualitative research is not simply a set of techniques to be slotted in to any given research problem;

- This means that it is important to concentrate on data analysis rather than simply data gathering;

- In particular, at the very start of qualitative research, analytic issues should be to the fore. Contrary to the common tendency simply to select any given social problem as one's focus,

I try to demonstrate that research problems, at any level, need to be analytically defined;

- However, this does not mean that we should unthinkingly follow the quantitative model of prior hypotheses, based on pre-defined variables. In qualitative research, it is often best to gradually work towards a topic by confronting data with questions about the "whats" and "hows" of interaction;

- My position throughout derives from a *constructionist* stance informed by a refusal to accept taken-for-granted versions of how the world is put together and an attempt to reveal what is extraordinary about the ordinary features of everyday life.

Other plenary talks (published in this volume) show that I am not alone in making these claims. In their discussion of research on "emotions," Margarethe Kusenbach and Donileen Loseke document a movement away from figuring out the states of individuals' psyches towards a concern with how "emotions" are constructed in naturalistic environments. This is complemented by Holstein and Gubrium's (2011) refusal to treat interview data as simple reflections of states of mind and their insistence on the study of the social organization of interview talk in the context of its "scenic" resources. As Thomas Luckmann demonstrates, such an anti-psychologistic perspective derives from the turn towards mundane language originating in the work of Alfred Schütz. This turn is evidenced in Paul Atkinson's suggestion that we reconceive apparently "small" happenings as extraordinary events with complex choreographies.

It will at once be apparent that these positions are in some respects antithetical to many traditional conceptions of good research practice. Sticking to any given research design, while standard good practice for our quantitative colleagues, usually is insufficient if we are seeking to pursue answers to the question "What is going on here?" To document properly the choreography and scenic resources of any milieu, it is usually necessary to look out for new cases and new sources of data while we are in the field. This is why Malin Åkerström emphasizes how good qualitative research projects regularly twist and turn, reconceptualizing their research question and appropriate data.

Despite the consensus I have described, it would be wrong to suggest that qualitative researchers agree about their craft. Our field is undoubtedly "pre-paradigmatic" in Thomas Kuhn's sense. The Constructionist position recommended here is routinely contested by Naturalists and psychologically-oriented Emotionalists who appear uninfluenced by the linguistic turn or even unaware of it (see Gubrium and Holstein 1997).

And, if we focus on students writing ostensibly "qualitative" dissertations, the picture is often very disconcerting. For the past twenty years, I have run workshops for such students on four continents and in many social science disciplines. The overwhelming number of my students seems unaware of the theoretical basis of their approach. Most are unconscious Naturalists or Emotionalists who usually use interview studies to report back on people's "experience" of an unquestioned social "problem."

My evidence is, of course, anecdotal. But, as Barbara Czarniawska points out (2012), it fits with the gap between what established researchers can do and the limited resources of research students, and the considerable constraints upon their work. Many of the latter are registered within Departments with few staff with qualitative backgrounds and/or a model of scientific research, which demands pre-designed research questions, measures, and hypotheses.

Of course, the institutional context of student research extends beyond Departmental cultures. What do students see when they turn the pages of social science journals that specialize in qualitative research?

A few years ago, I did a quick survey of one such journal. I looked at the nine issues of *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management* appearing in 2008-2009. Of the 18 research articles published there during that period, 16 used interviews, one was based upon focus group data, and one analyzed document. Despite the relevance of naturalistic data for qualitative research (e.g., Potter and Hepburn 2007), this supports the contention that open-ended interviews are the default data of choice for most qualitative researchers.

Of course, as we all know, there are no such things as "good" data. In principle, there is no reason to reject interview data since everything depends upon your research question. However, ultimately, one looks for intelligence and critical reflection in how any data are *analyzed*.

In this respect, these sixteen interview studies were very disappointing. Fully, fifteen of this sample treated their data as a simple window on experiences. For these researchers, apparently, the linguistic turn never happened. The exception was a paper which programmatically suggested interviews might be treated as situated accounts and hence, adopted a Constructionist stance. Unfortunately, this only made me wonder why editors of an academic journal published near the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century would find such a suggestion newsworthy.

This meager evidence goes a little way to sketching some of the institutional context in which apprentice qualitative researchers are reared. However, there is a broader *cultural* context, which may shape how they view "good" research. Some years ago, Paul Atkinson and I argued that we live in an "Interview Society" (Atkinson and Silverman 1997). In contemporary societies, the interview is seen as the default mechanism through which we can understand another's thoughts and emotions. Think of how reports of crimes seem incomplete without an interview with victims or bereaved families. Think back also to the recent London Olympics. Television coverage extended far beyond the athletic performances. Indeed, many networks devoted much more time to biographic conversations with athletes and their families and pre- and post-event interviews dominated by such questions: "What were your emotions?" Even before the athlete spoke, breathless TV commentators would speculate: "What must (s)he be feeling?"

What is going on here? First, for interviews to work like this, we must think of ourselves as discrete individuals with personal experiences and goals. This emergence of the self as a proper object of narration may be a relatively modern phenomenon. For instance, in feudal or aristocratic societies, one was primarily identified through membership of a collectivity (e.g., peasant, aristocrat, etc.).

Second, the interview also demands subjects who are happy to confess their innermost thoughts and emotions to the appropriate professional. Today the professional who receives their confession is no longer usually a priest but a therapist or media interviewer.

Third, the Interview Society requires mass media technologies and myths, which give a new twist to the, no doubt, perennial polarities of the private and the public; the routine and the sensational. Judging by the bereaved family members who regularly appear on our TV screens, such technologies and myths generate subjects who are not only happy to confess but seem to feel that their once-private emotions are somehow validated when revealed to a media interviewer.

I suggest that this Interview Society may be the hidden backdrop to what generally counts as qualitative research. A few years ago, I came across an advert asking for applications for a research post on a study of "how psycho-social adversity is related to asthma morbidity and care." The text of the advert explained that this problem would be studied by means of qualitative interviews. My immediate question was: How can qualitative interviews help to address the topic at hand? The problem is not that people with asthma will be unable to answer questions about their past nor, of course, that they are likely to lie or mislead the interviewer. Rather, like all of us, when faced with an outcome (in this case, a chronic illness), they will document their past in a way which fits it, highlighting certain features and downplaying others. In other words, the interviewer will be inviting a retrospective "rewriting of history" (Garfinkel 1967) with an unknown bearing on the causal problem with which this research is concerned.

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This is not to deny that valuable material may be gathered from such a qualitative study. But, rather it suggests that data analysis should address an altogether different issue – narratives of illness in which "causes" and "associations" work as rhetorical moves.

By contrast, a quantitative study would seem to be much more appropriate to the research question proposed. Quantitative surveys can be used on much larger samples than qualitative interviews, allowing inferences to be made to wider populations. Moreover, such surveys have standardized, reliable measures to ascertain the "facts" with which this study is concerned. Indeed, why should a large-scale quantitative study be restricted to surveys or interviews? If I wanted reliable, generalizable knowledge about the relation between these two variables (psycho-social adversity and asthma morbidity), I would start by looking at hospital records.

This asthma study seems to have been designed in terms of a very limited, if common, conception of the division of labor between qualitative and quantitative research. While the latter concentrates on data which shows people's behavior, qualitative research is seen as the realm where we study in-depth people's experiences through a small number of relatively unstructured interviews. This had led to what I perceive to be two blunders in the design of qualitative research. First, a failure to recognize that some research questions might be better studied using largely quantitative data. Surely, the causal question posed here can be better addressed via a questionnaire administered to a large sample of asthma patients or by a survey of hospital records to see if there is any correlation between an asthma

diagnosis and referrals to social workers and/or mental health professionals.

The second blunder is that the research design as stated appears to misunderstand the wide potential of qualitative research to study such things as the careers of asthma patients. Why can't qualitative research study behavior? For instance, why not conduct an ethnographic study which observes whether (and, if so, how) doctors in hospitals and primary care facilities elicit histories from their patients relating to psycho-social problems? Why not study social work and hospital case conferences to see if such problems are recognized and, if so, what action is demanded? In short, why assume that qualitative research involves only researchers asking questions of respondents?

Moreover, the research design elects to present the main research question to respondents themselves. This causes two problems. First, as is well known in quantitative surveys, if respondents are made aware of your interests, this can affect their responses. Second, it can lead to lazy research in which careful data analysis is simply replaced by reporting back what people have told you.

As Clive Seale has pointed out:

[t]his is a very common problem in all kinds of studies, but particularly ones where people mistakenly use a qualitative design to answer a question better suited to an experiment or quasi-experimental design. People decide, say, that they are going to see if TV violence encourages violent behavior. Instead of doing a survey of what people watch on TV and a parallel survey of their tendency to violence, and then seeing whether there is a correlation (hoping that there are no spurious reasons for such a correlation of course), they just select a group of people and ask them (more or less) "do you think TV watching causes violence?" (personal correspondence)

One further example of an interview study will make my point. Laura Sheard (2011) was interested in the much discussed topic of female drinking and the dangers to which women were exposed when they went out to drink at night. She interviewed 40 women in the north of England about how they used spaces in the night-time economy and consumed alcohol.

This raises the issue of why one should prefer interview data. Sheard responds in this way:

[q]ualitative research places importance on understanding the social world through the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of individuals. In-depth interviews represent one of the best possible ways in which to access the experiences, thoughts, and opinions of women on the sensitive topic of personal safety through the medium of a "conversation with a purpose" ... This method was chosen instead of other qualitative methods, such as focus groups or participant observation, as it was felt to be the greatest way of "mining" the richness and depth needed for a topic of this contextual, sensitive, and individualistic nature. (2011:623)

We might note how Sheard identifies qualitative research with individuals' "perceptions, attitudes, and experiences" and consider how this common view neglects social organization. More relevant right now is Sheard's version of interviewing as "mining." What does mining look like in practice?

We can answer this question by looking at Sheard's report. Here is an extract:

[b]eing alone and in alcohol-centered spaces was discussed by many women. Some would never go into a pub by themselves, even if they were meeting others. One woman would intentionally arrive 15 minutes late when meeting friends to avoid having to be in a pub or bar by herself. (2011:624)

Now consider the similarities between what Sheard says here and what a journalist might write about such interviews. In both cases, I suggest, you simply describe what people tell you that bears on the topic in which you are interested. For both journalists and many qualitative interviewers, what people tell you is treated as a (more or less accurate) report on people's perceptions of your topic. And instances of what they say can be offered in support of your interpretation.

Here is one example. Sheard observes that: "[a] few of the older women interviewed believed their dislike or avoidance of being alone in a pub was related to age and generational differences" (2011:624). She cites the following interview extract in support of her observation:

Extract 1.

Interviewer: Would you ever tend to use spaces like pubs or bars or alcohol-centered spaces?

Participant: I do go out to the pub, but only with my husband. I've never been in a pub without somebody with us. I've never walked in on my own. I've never had a reason to. If I was meeting somebody it was always outside and then we would all go in.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Participant: I don't know. Maybe it's my age and thinking that women shouldn't go in the pub by themselves … Like I said, I've been in with my husband and my daughter, but not on my own. A lot of lasses do now though, don't they? [Marie, 47 years, cleaner]

Source: Sheard (2011:624).

There are two points of note about Extract 1. First, this transcript lacks indicators of the pauses, overlaps, and stressed sounds that are part of everyday speech. So, we lose some degree of contact with how the participants made sense of each other's talk.

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Second, the information that Sheard provides in parentheses is deeply problematic. People can identify themselves by many more characteristics than name, age, and occupation, for example, marital status, sexual preference, leisure tastes, et cetera. So, in choosing the set of identifiers used here, Sheard is guiding her readers to a particular set of interpretations. This deflects attention from the actual categories that speakers themselves use.

Moreover, like so many qualitative interviewers, Sheard simply restates part of what her interviewee says using the participant's own terms (e.g., "age") mixed with social science categories (e.g., "generational differences"). She simply does not attend to the way in which we shape our answers in terms of the question asked and in relation to how the questioner has been identified (in this case, as a researcher).

Indeed, there may be something even more subtle going on in this extract. Notice how the Interviewer's first question can be heard as asking for a "description." When this answer is finished, she might have asked for another description. But instead she asks "Why is that?"

In everyday conversation, unlike courts of law, assessments of insurance claims or classrooms, descriptions often routinely suffice and are not challenged. To ask, as here, "why is that?" can, thus, be heard as a *challenge* to account for your behavior. And, interestingly enough, her interviewee responds *defensively* in the following ways:

- beginning with "I don't know" and then "maybe,"
- appealing to her age as a warrant for her account,
- implying that her behavior may be old-fashioned ("A lot of lasses do now though, don't they?"),
- inviting agreement to this assertion ("don't they?").

So, by "mining" her interviews for apposite extracts, Sheard, like so many interviewers, loses sight of how *sequence* is consequential for what we say and do. But, to her credit, in Extract 1, she has at least provided her readers with a relatively long extract which includes the interviewer's questions.

Elsewhere, unfortunately, Sheard reverts to simply providing answers without questions and using these answers in a purely illustrative way to support her claims about the data. This is shown in Extract 2.

Extract 2.

> *Sheard's claim*: Press coverage and media reports of women being "drug-raped" were at the forefront of the minds of the women interviewed. Significant caution was practiced around consumption of alcoholic drinks in order to avoid becoming a victim of drink spiking.
>
> *Her evidence*, as this woman explains:
>
> I'm very cautious about my drink and where it is and not leaving it and it's the same thing if there are girls in the bar [when she is at work as a bartender] then I will say to them "don't leave your drinks on that pool table" 'cause it takes seconds, doesn't it? You can't one hundred percent protect yourself 'cause in the one second that you turn your back from the bar and turn back round then something could have gone into it. But, I think you just have to be very aware of who is around you and where your drink is. [Zoe, 22 years, bar worker]

Source: Sheard (2011:627).

Although we are given a fairly long extract of Zoe's talk in Extract 2, we simply do not know how Zoe's response is positioned in the flow of prior talk and, therefore, can only speculate about how she is shaping her answer accordingly. Moreover, as with Extract 1, I would argue that there is a problem in the information about interviewees provided after each extract. As already noted, there are endless ways in which we can describe our identity. When

researchers choose particular identity-characteristics (in these cases age and occupation), they neglect others (e.g., marital status, number of friends, siblings, etc). In doing so, they favor particular ways of interpreting what people are saying.

Ultimately, however, Sheard fails to answer the question about why, if she is interested in gender and the night-time economy, she did not use naturalistic data, for example, go out on the street and/or study what women write about their behavior on social media? The unanswered question she leaves me with is: What's so wrong with ethnography?

Conclusions

Understandably, my arguments are sometimes interpreted as taking an anti-interview stance and recommending one narrow version of Constructionism implied by ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (CA). Let me respond in this way.

First, to recognize the importance of the sequential organization of actions (including conversation) does NOT mean that qualitative research can only properly follow CA.

Second, however, it does mean that, if you want to work with interviews or other kinds of manufactured data, you need to analyze sequences of talk and attend to narrative construction. Ultimately, qualitative research is not just a set of techniques but an analytic project different from journalism.

Acknowledgements

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