



QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

FOR THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

BRUCE L.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
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SOCIAL SCIENCES

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PREFACE

THIS BOOK IS intended as a handbook for anyone interested in but unfamiliar with qualitative research techniques. The research style presented in this book is chiefly sociological. The application of the various data-gathering and analysis strategies, however, are not designed exclusively for students of sociology, or sociologists. It is designed for an assortment of social scientists, including educators, criminologists, sociologists, nurses, and others who are interested in generating and testing theory.

A central purpose of this book is to instruct inexperienced researchers in ways of effectively collecting, organizing, and making sense from qualitative data. Another goal of this book is to show the reader that there is nothing mystical or impossible about the enterprise of empirical research. Related to this demystification is another objective of this book—to move readers beyond the point of collecting data without knowing what to do with it! The goal is to get fledgling researchers to collect, analyze, and present their results to the scientific community.

Traditionally, researchers have learned their craft through a combination of trial and error, and mentoring with more experienced researchers. Yet even this type of apprenticeship works more efficiently when the apprentice has a firm foundation in the basics. This book is designed especially for accomplishing this purpose.

Because of my own personal bias as a symbolic interactionist, I must admit that all of the techniques presented have been grounded in that theoretical approach. I believe, however, that the techniques and strategies offered in this book can be equally effective when grounded in other theoretical perspectives as well. Inexperienced researchers should thus take my presentation as suggestions and recommendations toward establishing a research foundation, and not as the only methodological orientation.

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This book is the result of many long hours' work often taken at the expense of my family. My thanks therefore go to my wife Jill and our two children, Kate and Alex. I must also thank my mentor and friend, Barry Glassner, who took my raw excitement about sociology and honed it into a love and appreciation for qualitative research. Barry's endless hours of tutoring, training, inspiring, and supporting me throughout our relationship greatly influenced my life and career.

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My appreciation also goes to Peter Adler, University of Colorado; Patricia Adler, University of Denver; and James Pearsol, The Ohio State University, whose thoughtful comments and reviews added considerably to the final version of this work. My acknowledgments would be incomplete without recognition of the contribution made by my editor Karen Hanson. Her support and belief in this book have been unfailing from the onset, and it has been a pleasure developing this book under her editorship.

Finally, let me thank the many fine scholars cited throughout this book. May their efforts and their faith in the strength of qualitative techniques encourage others to pursue meaningful research.

B.L.B.

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1 INTRODUCTION

MANY BOOKS DISCUSS a variety of social scientific research methods; thus one may reasonably question why anyone would bother writing another text. However, a close examination reveals that although a great many texts have been written about such abstract concerns as research designs and sophisticated statistical procedures for tabulating quantitative data, few books have concentrated on how to do qualitative research and analysis.

Several fundamental texts were in vogue during the late 1960s and 1970s, but now many of these classic qualitative texts have been permitted to go out of print (such as, Webb et al., 1966, 1981; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Becker, 1970; Filstead, 1970; Bogdan, 1972; Bogdan and Taylor, 1975; and Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979). What remains available amounts to a decided imbalance in the literature on research methods. While many statistically oriented research texts are published each year, qualitative research books have become rare indeed.

Several ethnographic research texts were published during the early 1980s, notably in the field of education (for example, Bogdan and Biklen, 1982; Dobbert, 1982; and Bredo and Feinberg, 1982). However, these books, like their sociological predecessors, often limited attention to a single technique. Anselm Strauss (1987) has recently produced a praiseworthy text on qualitative analysis, yet even it begins with the apparent assumption that data have already been collected or, at least, that the researcher knows how to go about the task of gathering data.

In contrast, this text focuses on innovative ways of collecting and analyzing qualitative data from natural settings. It is centered on mainstream strategies, even though various dynamic—perhaps even radical—

qualitative innovations have emerged during the past fifteen years. Rather than offering glossed definitions for these strategies or confusing novice researchers with simplified versions, these less commonly accepted procedures have been omitted.

QUANTITATIVE VERSUS QUALITATIVE SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

As Dabbs (1982) remarks, "Qualitative and quantitative are not distinct." Yet in many social sciences, quantitative orientations are often given more respect. This may reflect the tendency of the general public to regard science as related to numbers and implying precision. It is not the purpose of this text to argue against quantitative procedures. Instead, it demonstrates the fruitfulness, and often the greater depth of understanding, one can derive from qualitative procedures. Thus, the orientation of this book does not entirely either embrace or reject Kaplan's (1964:206) statement that "if you can measure it, that ain't it!"

Certainly qualitative methodologies have not predominated in the social sciences. After all, qualitative research takes much longer, requires greater clarity of goals during design stages, and cannot be analyzed by running a computer program. Qualitative research methods and analytic strategies are not associated with hi-tech society in the ways quantitative techniques may be. Nonetheless, as Bogdan (1972) makes clear, qualitative research has left its mark conceptually and theoretically on the social sciences. The lasting contributions to social understanding from qualitative research as well as the sheer number of contributing social thinkers are significant.

Even though the virtue of qualitative research is seldom questioned in the abstract, its practice is sometimes criticized for being nonscientific, and thus devoid of validity. However, these critics have lost sight of the probability factor inherent in quantitative practices and have replaced it with an assumption of certainty. Of course, qualitative research projects have been just as poorly conducted as have quantitative studies, but one need not dismiss the entire qualitative school of thought because some studies inadequately applied the paradigm and methods.

In his attempt to differentiate between quantitative and qualitative approaches, Dabbs (1982:32) indicates that the notion of quality is essential to the nature of things. On the other hand, quantity is elementally an amount of something. *Quality* refers to the what, how, when, and where of a thing—its essence and ambience. *Qualitative research* thus refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things. In contrast, *quantitative research* refers to

counts and measures of things. This distinction is illustrated in Jackson's (1968) description of classroom odors in an elementary school.

[The] odors of the classroom are fairly standardized. Schools may use different brands of wax and cleaning fluid, but they all seem to contain similar ingredients, a sort of universal smell which creates an aromatic background that permeates the entire building. Added to this, in each classroom, is the slightly acrid scent of chalk dust and the faint hint of fresh wood pencil shavings. In some rooms, especially at lunch time, there is the familiar odors of orange peels and peanut butter sandwiches, a blend that mingles in the late afternoon (following recess) with the delicate pungency of children's perspiration.

It would be impossible to capture these odors, as Jackson has, with any type of count or measure. Clearly certain experiences cannot be meaningfully expressed by numbers. Further, such things as smells can trigger memories of school days long obscured by the continuing demands of life. Qualitative research strategies provide perspectives that can prompt recall of these common or half-forgotten sights, sounds, and smells.

Some authors associate qualitative research with the single technique of participant observation. Other writers extend their understanding of qualitative research to include interviewing as well. However, popular qualitative research additionally includes such methods as observation of experimental natural settings, photographic techniques (including videotaping), historical analysis (historiography), document and textual analysis, sociometry, sociodrama and similar ethnomethodological experimentation, ethnographic research, and a number of unobtrusive techniques.

American colleges have become pragmatic places—places where students train to get jobs rather than to obtain educations. As a consequence, students and graduates of social science programs increasingly use the research of others and/or conduct research themselves. Thus, students must confront the myriad problems associated with understanding empirical results as well as the process of research itself. This book provides much-needed assistance for all researchers, including the inexperienced, through a discussion of various qualitative research strategies, design development, data organization and presentation, and analysis procedures.

Although qualitative methods are emphasized, methodology is not examined in a vacuum. Instead, the core substance of qualitative sociological practice, including method, theory, and substantive interests, is explored (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975; Denzin, 1978; and Lofland and Lofland, 1984). Data-gathering techniques are intentionally coupled with various theoretical perspectives, linking method to theory. Data

gathering is not distinct from theoretical orientations. Rather, data are intricately associated with the motivation for choosing a given subject, the conduct of the study, and ultimately the analysis.

Advocates of such particular methodological styles of research as participant observation are frequently more concerned with asserting or defending their techniques than with indicating alternative ways of approaching the study subject. In contrast, this book describes in detail three primary ways to collect qualitative data, namely, interviewing, ethnography, and unobtrusive measures. These descriptions include examinations of basic theoretical assumptions of each technique, how to start each procedure, how each research strategy operates, how to handle the data, and how to resolve various problems that may arise. In addition, the technique of content analysis is related to grounded theory and the use of narrative ethnographies. Finally, this book considers the ethical dimensions of conducting research on humans.

TRIANGULATION IN RESEARCH

Most researchers have at least one methodological technique they feel most comfortable using, which often becomes their favorite or only approach to research. This might be why many previous qualitative research texts presented only a single research technology (participant observation, or interviewing, or unobtrusive measures). Further, many researchers perceive their research method as an atheoretical tool (Denzin, 1978). Because of this, they fail to recognize that methods impose certain perspectives on reality. For example, when researchers canvass a neighborhood and arrange interviews with residents to discuss their views of some social problem, a theoretical assumption has already been made, specifically, that reality is fairly constant and stable. Similarly, when they make direct observations of events, researchers assume reality is deeply affected by the actions of all participants including their own. Each method thus reveals slightly different facets of the same symbolic reality. Every method is a different line of sight directed toward the same point, observing social and symbolic reality. By combining several lines of sight, researchers obtain a better, more substantive picture of reality; a richer, more complete array of symbols and theoretical concepts; and a means of verifying many of these elements. The use of multiple lines of sight is frequently called *triangulation*.

For many researchers, triangulation is restricted to the use of multiple data-gathering techniques (usually three) to investigate the same phenomenon. Denzin (1978) insists that the multiple-methods approach is the generic form of this approach. But triangulation additionally rep-

resents varieties of data, investigators, and theories as well as methods. Denzin (1978:295) outlines these four categories as follows:

(1) Data triangulation has three subtypes: (a) time, (b) space, and (c) person. Person analysis, in turn, has three levels: (a) aggregate, (b) interactive, and (c) collectivity. (2) Investigator triangulation consists of using multiple rather than single observers of the same object. (3) Theory triangulation consists of using multiple rather than single perspectives in relation to the same set of objects. (4) Methodological triangulation can entail within-method triangulation and between-method triangulation.

The research literature continues to support Denzin's (1970; 1978) recommendation to triangulate during research. For example, Goetz and Le Compte (1984) describe its use as a means of refining, broadening, and strengthening conceptual linkages. Borman, LeCompte, and Goetz (1986) similarly stress that triangulation allows researchers to offer perspectives other than their own. Unfortunately, the practice of triangulation often does not move much beyond a single theoretical explanation or an alternative hypothesis (Hammersley, 1984; Fielding and Fielding, 1986). This cursory use of the triangulation strategy fails to capture the essence of what Denzin (1978:28) describes as the "logic of triangulation":

I conclude that no single method will ever meet the requirements of interaction theory. While participant observation permits the careful recording of situations and selves, it does not offer direct data on the wider spheres of influence acting on those observed. Because each method reveals different aspects of empirical reality multiple methods of observations must be employed. This is termed triangulation.

In a manner similar to Denzin (1978) and Webb et al. (1981), this book stresses several discrete yet intertwined strategies and techniques involved in each of the three primary research schemes. In fact, the decision to discuss field research strategies under the broad umbrella of ethnography assures the inclusion of a wide combination of elements such as direct observation, various types of interviewing (informal, formal, semiformal), listening, document analysis (for instance, letters or newspaper clippings), and ethnomethodological experimentation. Spradley (1979) calls this creating "an ethnographic record." Novice researchers are thus instructed in the use of research strategies composed of multiple methods in a single investigation. Denzin (1978:101) also suggests that triangulation includes multiple data-collection procedures, multiple theoretical perspectives, and/or analysis techniques as well. The use of multiple research strategies and theories increases the depth of

understanding an investigation can yield (see also Miles and Huberman, 1983).

QUALITATIVE STRATEGIES: DEFINING AN ORIENTATION

A simplistic explanation of qualitative techniques might lead one to believe in the adequacy of any procedure resulting in nominal rather than numerical sorts of data. However, such an assessment fails to appreciate both the theoretical implications of qualitative research and the basic purpose of scientific research in general. One does not conduct research only to amass data. The purpose of research is to discover answers to questions through the application of systematic procedures.

Qualitative research properly seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings. Qualitative researchers, then, are most interested in how humans arrange themselves and their settings and how inhabitants of these settings make sense of their surroundings through symbols, rituals, social structures, social roles, and so forth.

Research methods on human beings affect how these persons will be viewed (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975). If humans are studied in a symbolically reduced, statistically aggregated fashion, there is danger that conclusions—although arithmetically precise—may fail to fit reality (Mills, 1959). Qualitative procedures provide a means of accessing unquantifiable facts about the actual people researchers observe and talk to, or people represented by their personal traces (such as letters, photographs, newspaper accounts, diaries, and so on). As a result, qualitative techniques allow the researchers to share in the understandings and perceptions of others and to explore how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives. Researchers using qualitative techniques examine how people learn about and make sense of themselves and others.

As Douglas (1976:12) suggests, the methods used by social scientists fall along a continuum from totally uncontrolled (and perhaps uncontrollable) techniques arising in natural settings, to totally controlled techniques of observation. It remains, then, for researchers to choose their procedures keeping in mind the actual problems that may arise in a specific research setting, among certain research groups, and in unique research circumstances. The analysis of qualitative data allows researchers to discuss in detail the various social contours and processes human beings use to create and maintain their social realities.

Theoretically, this explanation of the general purpose of qualitative research derives from a symbolic interactionist perspective which is central to the conception of qualitative methodology presented herein.

Symbolic interaction is an umbrella concept under which one may place a variety of related theoretical orientations. The theme that unites the diverse elements of symbolic interaction is the focus on subjective understandings, as well as perceptions of and about people, symbols, and objects.

FROM A SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

Symbolic interactionism is one of several theoretical schools of thought in the social sciences. It involves a set of related propositions that describe and explain certain aspects of human behavior. Human beings are unique animals. What humans say and do are the results of how they interpret their social world. In other words, human behavior depends on learning, rather than biological instinct. Human beings communicate what they learn through symbols, the most common system of symbols being language. Linguistic symbols amount to arbitrary sounds or physical gestures to which people, by mutual agreement over time, have attached significance or meaning. The core task of symbolic interactionists as researchers, then, is to capture the essence of this process for interpreting (or attaching) meaning to various symbols.

The substantive basis for symbolic interaction as a theory is frequently attributed to the social behavioral work of Dewey (1930), Cooley (1902), Parks (1915), Mead (1934, 1938), and several other early theorists, but Blumer is considered the father of symbolic interactionism. In fact, he coined the term *symbolic interaction*. In articulating his view of what symbolic interaction is, Blumer (1969) first establishes that human beings account for *meaning* in two basic ways. First, meaning may be seen as intrinsically attached to an object, event, phenomenon, and so on. Second, meaning may be understood as a "psychical accretion" imposed on objects, events, and the like by people. Blumer (1969:5) next explains:

Symbolic interactionism . . . does not regard meaning as emanating from the intrinsic makeup of the thing, nor does it see meaning as arising through psychological elements between people. The meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing. Their actions operate to define the thing for the person; thus, symbolic interactionism sees meanings as social products formed through activities of people interacting.

Blumer thereby suggests that meanings derive from the social process of people or groups of people interacting. Meanings allow people to produce various realities that constitute the sensory world (the so-called real world); but because these realities are related to how people create

meanings, reality becomes an interpretation of various definitional options. Consequently, as W. I. Thomas states: "It is not important whether or not the interpretation is correct—if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Swaine, 1928:572).

For instance, the first day of each semester students walk into their classrooms and see someone who appears to be the professor. This supposed professor may begin to lecture, distribute syllabi, discuss course requirements, or conduct various other traditional first-day activities. Seldom, if ever, do students ask to see the professor's credentials. Yet the students will, within certain limits, perform their roles as students so long as this professor continues to perform the role of instructor. Several weeks into the semester, however, the class is notified that the one they assumed to be a professor was really a local dog catcher with no academic credentials. The question, then, becomes whether the reality of the classroom experience during the previous weeks is void merely because the dog catcher was incorrectly interpreted as a professor.

Although it would remain to be seen whether any information conveyed by the dog catcher was accurate, certainly the classroom remained a classroom, and as suggested, students continued to perform their expected roles. From W. I. Thomas's perspective, these youths had defined the reality as a class, and it became one for them.

Symbolic interactionists tend to differ slightly among themselves regarding the relative significance of various aspects of an interactionist perspective. Several basic elements, however, tend to bind together even the most diverse symbolic interactionists. First, all interactionists agree that human interactions form the central source of data. Second, there is a general consensus that participants' perspectives and their ability to take the role of the other (empathy) are key issues in any formulation of a theory of symbolic interaction. Third, they agree with Thomas (Thomas and Swaine, 1928) concerning "definitions of a situation"—how inhabitants of a setting define their situation determines the nature and meaning of their actions as well as the setting itself.

Although social roles, institutional structures, rules, norms, goals, and the like may provide the raw material with which individuals create their definitions, these elements do not by themselves determine what the definitions will be nor how individuals will act. In essence, symbolic interactionism emphasizes social interactions (action with symbolic meaning), negotiation of definitions, and empathic role-taking between humans (Turner, 1978; Gecas, 1981).

WHY USE QUALITATIVE METHODS?

Many researchers believe that the social sciences have overly depended on sterile survey techniques, whether or not the technology is

appropriate for the problem. For instance, nurses, when encouraged to do research at all, are strongly urged to utilize scientific strategies of quantification over more sociologically or anthropologically oriented ones considered less scientific. Unfortunately, clinical settings in which nurses are likely to conduct their research fail to meet most quantitative requirements for representativeness and sufficiency of sample size to allow statistically meaningful results.

For instance, let us say the average number of beds in a critical care unit varies between eight and twelve. Even when there are multiple units (such as in a medical intensive care unit or a cardiac intensive care unit) typically fewer than forty cases are available at any given time. With regard to a research strategy, such a situation should preclude most quantitative investigations. On the other hand, forty cases would prove ample for a number of qualitative strategies. In fact, as Chapter 4 describes, a setting such as a hospital would provide researchers with numerous opportunities to implement unobtrusive measures.

It is also important to examine the reasons for the charge that qualitative methods are nonscientific. As Schwartz and Jacobs (1979:4) point out, "There are many, in both qualitative and quantitative sociology, who advocate and bask in the value of science." Further, Borman, LeCompte, and Goetz (1986:51) have argued that criticism of qualitative approaches arises out of an "erroneous equation of the term 'empirical' with quantification, rather than with any real defect in the qualitative paradigm itself." Although various technologies may be used by different researchers, it turns out that everyone is doing science, provided that science is defined as a specific and systematic way of discovering and understanding how social realities arise, operate, and impact on individuals and organizations of individuals.

Scientific researchers may thus emphasize a more positivist view or may be primarily interested in individuals and their so-called life-worlds. In the case of the former, positivists utilize empirical methodologies borrowed from the natural sciences to investigate phenomena. Quantitative strategies serve this positive-science ideal by providing rigorous, reliable, verifiable, large aggregates of data and the statistical testing of empirical hypotheses.

In the case of life-worlds, researchers focus on naturally emerging languages and the meanings individuals assign to experience. Life-worlds include emotions, motivations, symbols and their meanings, empathy, and other subjective aspects associated with naturally evolving lives of individuals and groups. These elements may also represent their behavioral routines, experiences, and various conditions affecting these usual routines or natural settings. As Schwartz and Jacobs (1979) suggest, many of these elements are directly observable and as such may be viewed as objective. Nonetheless, certain elements of symbolism, mean-