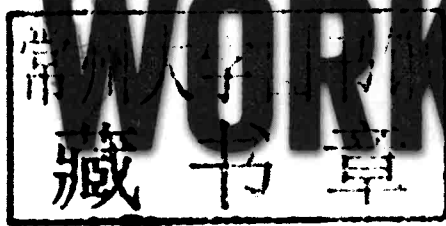DOING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK SHAW & HOLLAND

DOING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK

IAN SHAW & SALLY HOLLAND

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About the authors

Ian Shaw

I arrived in York (England) as Professor of Social Work in the Spring of 2003, following a long career in the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University (Wales). I presently hold positions at the University of York and the Department of Sociology and Social Work at Aalborg University, Denmark.

I have written and researched extensively. My next book, body and soul permitting, will be *Social Work and Science* for Columbia University Press, followed by a four-volume 'Major Work' for SAGE Publications on *Social Work Research*, with Jeanne Marsh and Mark Hardy. I am involved, alone or with others, at various stages of four research projects: an extended historical project on the relationship of sociology and social work, partly through the Special Collections at the University of Chicago; a historical study of the *British Journal of Social Work*; a study of the nature of research networks in social work; and a systematic review of practitioner research in adult social care. I hope to develop the notion of 'sociological social work' to the point where I will write a further book.

I co-founded the journal *Qualitative Social Work*. I envisioned and led to fruition in 2011 the European Conference for Social Work Research, and have worked with others to consolidate that initiative through a new European Social Work Research Association.

Sally Holland

I am a Reader in Social Work in Cardiff University's School of Social Sciences. Previously I was a social worker in the field of child and family social work, working in the voluntary and statutory sectors. I have extensive experience of conducting qualitative research projects in social work and have investigated issues related to looked after children, assessment of parenting, family group conferences, child neglect, involving fathers in child protection work, adoption and community safeguarding. I have used a range of qualitative methods to explore these topics, including participative research with children, ethnography, mobile methods, life history interviews and documentary analysis. I facilitate a research advisory group for young people who are care experienced and am deputy chair of my departmental research ethics committee. I am the author of *Child and Family Assessment in Social Work Practice* (SAGE, 2nd edition, 2011).

Introduction

Doing Qualitative Research in Social Work endeavours to provide a one-stop reference point for all the deliberations, decisions and practices that are entailed in qualitative research in social work. A scan of the contents page will demonstrate how the book covers each interwoven stage of the research process, broader methodological questions, and the fields where the social work context gives qualitative research special character. Perhaps needless to say, some readers will need to look elsewhere for more information on specialist or arcane qualitative interests, or for detailed skills advice on, for example, particular data analysis packages.

The book has faint echoes of an earlier book (Shaw and Gould, 2001) – a synergy of authored and invited exemplars. We acknowledge the generosity of Nick Gould and some of the contributors to that book in enabling us to draw here and there on some passages in that book. But *Doing Qualitative Research in Social Work* is a very different project.

As two authors we have some commonalities and some differences. A shared part of our histories is that we have both spent substantial parts of our careers in the School of Social Sciences in Cardiff University, overlapping by seven years. Cardiff's rich tradition of qualitative research methods has been a clear influence, with references to the work of current and former colleagues such as Delamont, Atkinson, Bloor, Coffey, Pithouse, Scourfield, Renold and Hall appearing throughout the book.

Ian Shaw's recent and continuing interests within social work and social science focus on several themes, including the practice/research relationship, understanding the nature of social work as an applied social science in relation to disciplines like sociology, qualitative methodology, practitioner research, developing social work research strategies, the history of social work and research, and technology and professional practice. He co-founded the journal *Qualitative Social Work* – a resource to which this book is much indebted. His general stance is perhaps best captured in an essay reflecting on his back catalogue (Shaw, 2012d).

Sally Holland has a background in child and family social work and much of her methods expertise is practical, arising from experience of conducting qualitative and mixed methods projects using approaches such as ethnography, case studies, life history and participative research. Despite her main expertise and experience being with qualitative research, she is perhaps less critical of other

positions and approaches than Ian, and this has led to constructive debates as the book has progressed, particularly when from time to time we make statements such as 'our position is ... '. Our way of managing this mutual trust and difference has been that all of the chapters were first fully drafted by one of the authors, then critically responded to by the other, before further re-drafting. Just as peer reviewing of journal articles probably leads to a better final product, we hope that this critical collaboration has produced a sounder, more thoughtful and comprehensive book than each of us might have produced individually.

We have tried to sustain a, sometimes delicate, fusion of audiences. We were asked to write a 'textbook'. While acute readers may detect somewhat fluctuating ways in which each of us understands that requirement, we have gone to some lengths, through many exemplifications of research practice and 'Taking it further' tasks, to make a strong reality of that aim. However, we also have tried throughout to interest those van Maanen calls 'collegial readers' (2011: 26), yet without the use of unexplained collegial language. We have steered clear of heavily digested, pre-packaged textbook writing forms, although that *genre* is itself in flux, as well as varying significantly between, for example, the USA and Europe. While one expectation the reader will reasonably bring is for clarity, we have tried to write with a modest degree of literary quality. We have also sought to balance abstraction and concrete example – to 'be empirical enough to be credible and analytical enough to be interesting', and artfully evocative in addition to being factual and truthful (van Maanen, 2011: 29, 34).

Contents of the book

The book is in three parts.

In **Part I** we ask **What is distinctive about qualitative social work research?** The first chapter begins with an exploration of what characterises qualitative research, then places this in the context of qualitative research in social work. In Chapter Two we review the connections between social work and research, examining the people, problems and domains that are the foci of both fields. In Chapter Three we continue to map qualitative social work research with a historical and contemporary review of methods and innovations, ending this section with a query as to what is good social work research, and who decides the answer to that question?

Part II is devoted more explicitly to the ***Doing*** **of qualitative social work research**. This is the largest part of the book with nine chapters devoted to research methods and processes. In sequencing the chapters in this section we do not necessarily claim that they represent an order for doing research. Literature reviewing, for example, will take place at several points, and in particular before and after key decisions are made about research design. Analysis is a process that is embedded in qualitative research from the start. Nonetheless, the format of a book requires sequencing and we start this section with Chapter Four on reviewing research – a process that may be an end in itself or as part of

a primary research project. Chapter Five is a relatively pragmatic chapter on qualitative research design, where major designs are critically reviewed and the process of designing a qualitative project is outlined. Chapter Six explores research ethics, situating debates about ethics particularly within qualitative social work research. We then include four chapters devoted to data generation methods. In these we have chosen those we think are particularly pertinent to social work research and we include long established methods alongside newer forms. The chapter titles are deliberate, in that, rather than refer directly to a method, we consider research practice at a more abstract level in terms of the underlying form of inquiry that is involved. Chapters Seven and Eight introduce, compare and contrast various forms of asking questions and telling stories in qualitative social work research. Chapter Nine examines ways of researching written texts, while Chapter Ten is about researching social work contexts, through ethnography, and through the lenses of place, time, sounds and smells. Part II ends with two chapters on qualitative analysis – how analysis is anticipated and prepared for (Chapter Eleven) and how it is conducted (Chapter Twelve).

Part III contains the final four chapters and covers the outworking of **the purposes and consequences of qualitative social work research.** We sustain a focus on the doing of research in the first two chapters. In Chapter Thirteen we explore evidence for practice, through the qualitative evaluation of interventions and outcomes. Chapter Fourteen considers social justice in social work research, and we review the concept of standpoints and designs and methods associated with research that has aims of furthering social justice. The final two chapters are concerned with the relationships between research and what we may call 'outer-science' influences and concerns. Chapter Fifteen is about research and practice, and in it we particularly challenge the notion that there is a linear, unidirectional relationship of research informing practice. In Chapter Sixteen we look at the consequences of social work research – impact and research utilisation. We also open up one of the most interesting developments, that of forms of writing research.

Table of Contents

PART I
What is Distinctive about Qualitative Social Work Research?

ONE
Qualitative Research and the Social Work Context

> We open the book by inviting you to consider an example of qualitative social work research. Extending from this, we consider two general questions during the chapter. First, what is entailed in a commitment to qualitative research? Second, how does social work frame and infuse the practice of qualitative research? In response to the first question we examine how qualitative research has developed an understanding of subjective meanings and also the routines of everyday life. We introduce three areas of debate within qualitative methods: whether qualitative methods should be seen as a paradigm position; the relationship between numbers and qualities; and the kinds of knowledge claims that may be made from different methods. The *social work* character of qualitative research comes under scrutiny throughout this opening section of the book. In this chapter we take up the significance of social work contexts.

Through their personal memory people give meaning to what has happened to them. When people are involved in traumatic events, they are faced with questions regarding their identity and relation with others and the world. On the one hand, they have the need to recollect and process those memories; on the other hand, they feel a need to distance themselves and forget or detach from the pain and threat involved in such memories.

Seeking to understand these issues, several different researchers – men and women – interviewed twenty couples who had been involved in domestic violence. Guy Enosh and Eli Buchbinder say that

> In the process of remembering, the interviewee might recall a sensitive event in detail, reliving it to the fullest and re-experiencing the feelings felt during the event. At other times, interviewees might narrate events at various levels of distance, taking the position of an outsider or of an observer witnessing the experience ... To describe this range of ways of reconstructing experience, from full reliving of the experience to its disowning, we use the terms 'knowledge', 'focus of awareness' and 'alienation'. (Enosh and Buchbinder, 2005: 14)

There is little knowledge regarding the processes by which such memories are constructed. They suggest an understanding of 'approaching and distancing' (remembering and forgetting) around the axes of emotional involvement and linguistic abstraction. Analysis of the data yielded four broad categories:

- 'Knowledge', defined as direct remembering and reliving, with complete details of the event.
- 'Awareness of mental processes', including awareness of emotions and of cognitive processes.
- 'Awareness of identity', including awareness of values and the construction of personal characteristics of each partner and of the couple as a unit.
- 'Alienation', characterised by a refusal to observe, reflect or remember.

Enosh and Buchbinder's article exemplifies much of what is characteristic of qualitative research. For example, we suggest in Chapter Three that more than 70 percent of qualitative social work research relies on some form of interview as its primary method of collecting data. The authors of this article were aware of one possible limitation of that approach and so modify it by focusing their attention on the reconstruction of narrative memory as a means of remedying the inconsistency of methods that rely on self-report in domestic violence.

More unusually, they carried out joint interviews with couples. In the later chapter on 'Asking Questions' we show that there is considerable diversity in forms of interviewing, and some important recent developments of the method. In the 'Telling Stories' chapter we give considerable space to narrative methods.

An obvious feature of the article is how the authors are endeavouring to understand things that we may think of as largely 'internal' – memories and how people sort and manage them. In a way that is strikingly different from, for example, a questionnaire or a measurement scale, the understanding of behaviour is mediated through a primary emphasis on what things *mean* to people, and also on how that meaning emerges from the research process – in this case by talking to two people simultaneously. Meaning is, we might say, 'co-constructed'. They talk in the article about how this influenced the analysis of the data. They searched for themes in the data, but did so in a way that inserted those themes back into their context, rather than treating them as abstract 'variables'. We unpack methods of analysing qualitative data towards the end of the book.

They are not writing *any* qualitative study, but one that is about social work. This comes over in different ways. For example, domestic violence is centrally, though not exclusively, a social work concern. In Chapter Two we analyse the range of research problems that characterise qualitative *social work* research. Interviewing couples where at least one of them has been violent towards the other is a sensitive topic. In the next chapter we ask whether social work research is especially sensitive, and what we mean when we talk about doing 'sensitive' research. Finally, although they emphasise how to *understand* memory, there is an undercurrent of concern about applications of their work. We talk during this book about how the explicitness of the applied agenda of social work research varies considerably from one study to another.

The article poses a further issue. Interviewing couples about domestic violence may be regarded as ethically complex and even controversial. Qualitative research poses ethical and political problems. We take these up in Chapter Six, and elsewhere in discussions of 'false consciousness' and 'standpoints'.

To enable us to get inside the book we treat this chapter as setting out how to approach qualitative research in social work. We do this by considering two broad questions. First, what is entailed in a commitment to qualitative research? Second, how, in general terms, does 'social work' frame and infuse the practice of qualitative research?

Qualitative research

We have taken for granted so far that we can refer to qualitative research without undue ambiguity. However, any attempt to list the shared characteristics of qualitative research will fall short of universal agreement, and some think the effort itself is misguided. We say more about these challenges of diversity and delusion in a few paragraphs' time. Nonetheless, most qualitative researchers would appeal to and identify with the majority of the following descriptors.

- It involves immersion in situations of *everyday life*. 'These situations are typically "banal" or normal ones, reflective of the everyday life of individuals, groups, societies and organizations' (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 6). It involves 'looking at the ordinary in places where it takes unaccustomed forms', so that 'understanding a people's culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity' (Geertz, 1973: 14).
- The researcher's role is to gain an overview of the *whole* of the culture and context under study.
- Holism is pursued through inquiry into the *particular*. This contrasts with methods where '[t]he uniqueness of the particular is considered "noise" in the search for general tendencies and main effects' (Eisner, 1988: 139). Grand realities of Power, Faith, Prestige, Love, etc. are confronted 'in contexts obscure enough ... to take the capital letters off' (Geertz, 1973: 21). Qualitative research studies 'make the case palpable' (Eisner, 1991: 39).
- The whole and the particular are held in tension. 'Small facts speak to large issues' (Geertz, 1973: 23), and 'in the particular is located a general theme' (Eisner, 1991: 39). Patrick Kavanagh, the Irish poet, wrote 'parochialism is universal. It deals with the fundamentals'.

> All great civilisations are based on parochialism. To know fully even one field or one land is a lifetime's experience. In the world of poetic experience it is depth that counts, not width. A gap in a hedge, a smooth rock surfacing a narrow lane, a view of woody meadows, the stream at the junction of four small fields — these are as much as a man can fully experience.

Robert Macfarlane, from whose essay we have taken this quotation,[1] says that for Kavanagh, 'the parish was not the perimeter, but an aperture: a space through which the world could be seen'.

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[1] In an essay in *The Guardian* newspaper, 30 July 2005.

- 'The researcher attempts to capture data on the perceptions of local actors "from the inside", through a process of deep attentiveness, of empathic understanding (*verstehen*), and of suspending or "bracketing" preconceptions about the topics under discussion' (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 6). Stanley Witkin talks in this context about the need for us to have 'a theory of noticing', and to look for rich points (Witkin, 2000a).
- This stance is sometimes referred to as one of 'ethnomethodological indifference' (after Garfinkel). However, 'bracketing' preconceptions, even if it is possible, need not preclude taking a normative position – 'you do not have to be neutral to try to be objective' (Wolcott, 1990: 145). 'Appreciation does not necessarily mean liking something … Appreciation … means an awareness and an understanding of what one has experienced. Such an awareness provides the basis for judgement' (Eisner, 1988: 142). Indeed, qualitative approaches 'can effectively give voice to the normally silenced and can poignantly illuminate what is typically masked' (Greene, 1994: 541).
- Respondent or *member categories* are kept to the foreground throughout the research. This is linked to a strong inductive tradition in qualitative research – a commitment to the imaginative production of new concepts, through the cultivation of openness on the part of the researcher. One of the most difficult challenges for the qualitative researcher is how to develop a convincing account of the relationship between the language, accounts and everyday science of those to whom she has spoken and her own analytic categories.
- When it comes to those analytic categories, qualitative research is characteristically *interpretive*. 'A main task is to explicate the ways people in particular settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situations' (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 7). For qualitative researchers, subjectivity is *created* by culture, and does not simply *display* it. This is partly what is meant when the word 'constructivist' is used.
- The researcher is essentially the main instrument in the study, rather than standardised data collection devices. It is here that the word 'reflexive' often occurs – referring to the central part played by the subjectivities of the researcher and of those being studied. Qualitative fieldwork is not straightforward. 'The features that count in a setting do not wear their labels on their sleeve' (Eisner, 1991: 33). The part played by the self in qualitative research also raises the special significance of questions of ethics in qualitative research, and renders the relationship between researcher and researched central to the activity.
- Finally, most analysis is done in words. This is true – perhaps even more so – with the advent of increasingly sophisticated software for analysing qualitative data. There are frequent references in this connection to 'texts'. Judgement and persuasion by reason are deeply involved, and in qualitative research the facts never speak for themselves.

Is there a central organising idea behind this characterisation of qualitative research? Maybe not, and anyway the question is not very interesting. But we like, for example, Elliot Eisner's comment that qualitative research slows down the perception and invites exploration, and releases us from the stupor of the familiar, thus contributing to a state of wide-awakeness (Eisner, 1991). He compares this to what happens when we look at a painting. If there is a core – a qualitative eye – it has been expressed in different ways. For Riessman, it is 'Scepticism about universalising generalisations; respect for particularity and context; appreciation of reflexivity and standpoint; and the need for empirical evidence' (Riessman, 1994: xv).

Qualitative research is not a unified tradition. The term qualitative 'refers to a family of approaches with a very loose and extended kinship, even divorces'

(Riessman, 1994: xii). These differences of research *practice* stem from diverse *theoretical* positions. While there have been numerous cross-currents that muddy the waters of these differences, it is helpful to think of them as following two general lines.

Subjective meanings

The first of these different traditions starts with the subjective meanings that people attribute to their actions and environments, and follows through to the work of Norman Denzin on interpretive interactionism, much of the work on the sociology of knowledge and on subjective theories, and some of the influences from feminist research and postmodernism. *Symbolic interactionism* lies behind most approaches that stress studying subjective meanings and individual ascriptions of meaning. Symbolic interactionist research is founded on the premises that

- People act towards things on the basis of the meanings such things have for them.
- The meaning is derived from interactions one has with significant members of one's social networks.
- Meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things encountered (Flick, 2006).

These processes form the starting point for empirical work. Is culture people's beliefs or material artifacts (subjective or objective)? In Geertz's much alluded to essay on thick description, he said 'Once human behavior is seen as ... symbolic action ... the question as to whether culture is patterned action or a frame of mind or even the two somehow mixed together, loses sense' (Geertz, 1973: 10). For him the meaning of culture 'is the same as that of rocks on the one hand and dreams on the other – they are things of this world. The thing to ask is what their import is ... what is being said' (ibid., p. 10).

This position developed out of American philosophical traditions of pragmatism, and the work of people in Chicago early in the twentieth century, and was given its fullest early statements in the writings of George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer. The reconstruction of such subjective viewpoints becomes the instrument for analysing social worlds. There has been a major research interest in the forms such viewpoints take. These include subjective theories about things (e.g., lay theories of health, education, counselling or social work), and narratives such as life histories, autobiographies and deviant careers.

One of the most famous encapsulations of this position was found in W.I. Thomas and Dorothy Thomas' famous aphorism that if men (*sic*) define situations as real they are real in their consequences (Thomas and Thomas, 1928). There were those with a social work identity who had as sophisticated an understanding of the issues as anyone in sociology. Ada Sheffield is a foremost example, and her 1922 book on *Case-study Possibilities* stands as a forgotten classic. She anticipated a symbolic interactionist stance when she says of the case worker that 'selection of facts amounts to an implicit interpretation of them' (Sheffield, 1922: 48). In a

remarkably strong passage, she says that 'the traditions and training of the observer more or less condition the *nature* of the fact-items that make their appearance ... In this sense the subject-matter of much social study is unstable. Not only do two students perceive different facts, they actually in a measure make different facts to be perceived.' Example 1.1 illustrates how a symbolic interactionist position moulded a study of social work practitioners engaged in their own research.

EXAMPLE 1.1 — **Practitioners Doing Research**

A British project drew on a case study evaluation of two networked cohorts of practitioner researchers in a children's services national social work agency in Scotland. The aim of this study was to understand the meaning of practitioner research for social work professionals through an exploration of how language, ascriptions of meaning and interpretation provide a social environment through which the nature and meaning of practitioner research emerge.

The authors say

> 'In doing so we pursue a moderate symbolic interactionist position, in exploring how language, ascriptions of meaning, and interpretation provide a social environment through which the nature and meaning of practitioner research emerge. To express this through a familiar statement, the distinctive character of interaction as it takes place between human beings consists in the fact that human beings interpret or 'define' each other's actions instead of merely reacting to each other's actions. Their 'response' is not made directly to the actions of one another but instead is based on the meaning which they attach to such actions. Thus, human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another's actions. (Blumer, 1969: 180 quoted in Shaw and Lunt, 2012: 198)

The authors conclude that:

- Practitioner researchers engage with a language and culture that is strange yet potentially rewarding for practice and research. They find themselves located in a culture that lies between 'practice' and 'research' but is fundamentally shaped by and challenges both.
- Practitioner researchers are typically engaged in negotiating an uncertain world, which is at its heart an effort to learn what it's about.
- The location of practitioner research as lying both within and outside of core professional work poses difficult challenges of moral accountability for their work within their practice cultures.
- Involvement in practitioner research stirs reflection on the meaning and value of professional work. For some practitioners this may be overly demanding in the context of the perceived constraints of their core work.
- Networked initiatives inevitably raise questions of ownership.
- The nature of practitioner research is something that emerges from the experience, rather than something that prescribes it in advance. It is only in the doing of practitioner research that its critical identity takes shape.

Shaw and Lunt (2012)

The routines of everyday life

The second diffuse tradition in qualitative research is concerned with how people produce social reality through interactive processes. Broader traditions of social anthropology and ethnography are often best understood in this way, but it has been most marked in the writing of Harold Garfinkel on what he called ethnomethodology. For him the 'central concern is with the study of the methods used by members to produce reality in everyday life' (Flick, 2006: 68). The focus is not the subjective meaning for the participants of an interaction and its contents but how this interaction is organised. The research topic becomes the study of the routines of everyday life. Interaction is assumed by ethnomethodologists to be structurally organised, and to be both shaped by and in turn shape the context. Hence, interaction repays detailed attention, because it is never disorderly, accidental or irrelevant.

One important strand of this emphasis has been through the analysis of conversation, and how something is made a certain kind of conversation, whether it be talk over coffee in a social work team room, a GP consultation, or a parent–teacher evening exchange. It is characteristically seen as constituted through turn-by-turn organisation of talk in an institutional context. Conversation is looked at as comprising 'speech acts' rather than grammatical word strings or statements. It proceeds by looking at 'turns' and treating each utterance as *displaying an interpretation* of the previous utterance, and thus looks at the understanding displayed by the participants. This line of research has often focused on studies of work in organisational contexts. Take, for example, this example of a supervision session between a team manager (TM) and a social worker (SW) (Example 1.2).

EXAMPLE 1.2 — **Social Work Supervision**

Social Worker (SW):	... She's got a lot of positives. She's a personable girl, pleasant, bright girl. One odd quality is an incredible neatness − her school-work is absolutely immaculate. You can't tell the difference between one page and another. Every word the same.
Team Manager (TM):	Sort of obsessional?
SW:	Erm, well tidy. Very tidy people. I don't know what she's got. She's certainly got it up there for the application of graphics − she's a bright girl. Although she's a problem in school behaviour-wise, she's likely to blow up. She does reasonably well in examinations, she's got many positives, she's not a negative girl altogether.
TM:	The criminal. It doesn't fit in with this part of Jackie does it?
SW:	Well she's a well-known shoplifter − to the extent that a note comes to the house saying "Jackie, can you pinch me a pair of trousers, will pay five pounds for them". She's well known in her circle at school as being the top shoplifter.
TM:	She's not far from becoming a labelled criminal?

(Continued)