Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods

THE SEARCH FOR MEANINGS

SECOND EDITION

STEVEN J. TAYLOR

ROBERT BOGDAN

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Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods

Preface

In the preface to the first edition of this book we stated that the past decade had witnessed a growing interest in the subjective side of social life—how people view themselves and their world. This interest, we wrote, required methods that are descriptive and holistic: qualitative research methods.

Since the publication of the first edition in 1975, interest in studying social meanings and perspectives through qualitative methods has remained strong. Indeed, qualitative research approaches are accepted as never before. There are now journals devoted exclusively to reporting qualitative studies. There is an ever increasing number of books and articles written on field research, photography, and other qualitative methods. In education, social work, evaluation, and applied fields, qualitative methods are demanding serious attention. Qualitative research is coming of age.

This is a book on *how to conduct* qualitative research. There are some excellent books on specific qualitative approaches, especially participant observation, insightful personal accounts of researchers in the field, and treatises on the theoretical underpinnings of qualitative research. Yet these do not provide those unfamiliar with qualitative methods with an adequate introduction, an overview of the range of different approaches, and guidance on how to actually conduct a study. This book is intended to do these things.

The book is based on our own research experience, our theoretical perspective (which informs how we think about interacting with people in our society), our cultural knowledge of how to act in everyday life, and our sense of ethics. We have also drawn extensively on the first-hand accounts of other researchers and several of the recently published writings that challenge traditional conceptions of fieldwork.

This book contains an introduction and two major parts. The Introduction deals with qualitative methods in general and the theoretical tra-

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dition underlying qualitative research. Part 1 contains a "how to do it" approach to qualitative research. Chapters 2 and 3 deal with participant observation. In Chapter 4 we discuss in-depth interviewing. Chapter 5 considers a range of creative qualitative research approaches. Chapter 6 describes data analysis in qualitative research.

In Part 2 we move to the presentation of findings in qualitative research. After a short introduction, we present a number of articles based on the methods described in Part 1. Many of the examples used in Part 1 come from the studies reported in Part 2. All of these articles were written by us. We present them because they illustrate some of the ways in which to write up findings. We also chose them to catch the interest and imagination of those new to qualitative research.

A few words of thanks are due to those who helped with this book. We want to thank the many colleagues over the years who contributed directly or indirectly to this book, especially Burton Blatt, Douglas Biklen, Blanche Geer, Betsy Edinger, Stan Searl, Janet Bogdan, Irwin Deutscher, Bill McCord, Michael Baizerman, Seymour Sarason, and our friends at the Center on Human Policy. We also thank the many people who have worked with us in conducting qualitative research. Many of them have been called students, but they have been our teachers as well. Special thanks to Sue Smith-Cunnien for permission to include excerpts from her field notes in Chapter 3. We also want to thank Dianne Ferguson for taking the time from her studies and many other activities to help in the preparation of the manuscript for this book and Helen Timmins for her general support. Finally, we thank Herb Reich of John Wiley & Sons for encouraging us to write this edition of this book.

STEVEN J. TAYLOR
ROBERT BOGDAN

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1

Introduction

GO TO THE PEOPLE

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The term *methodology* refers to the way in which we approach problems and seek answers. In the social sciences, the term applies to how one conducts research. Our assumptions, interests, and purposes shape which methodology we choose. When stripped to their essentials, debates over methodology are debates over assumptions and purposes, over theory and perspective.

Two major theoretical perspectives have dominated the social science scene (Bruyn, 1966; Deutscher, 1973). The first, *positivism,* traces its origins in the social sciences to the great theorists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and especially to August Comte (1896) and Emile Durkheim (1938, 1951). The positivist seeks the *facts* or *causes* of social phenomena apart from the subjective states of individuals. Durkheim (1938:14) told the social scientist to consider social facts, or social phenomena, as "things" that exercise an external influence on people.

The second major theoretical perspective, which, following the lead of Deutscher (1973), we describe as *phenomenological,* has a long history in philosophy and sociology (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Bruyn, 1966; Husserl, 1913; Psathas, 1973; Schutz, 1962, 1967).[1] The phenomenologist is committed to *understanding* social phenomena from the actor's own perspective. He or she examines how the world is experienced. The important reality is what people perceive it to be. Jack Douglas (1970b:ix) writes:

> The "forces" that move human beings, as human beings rather than simply as human bodies . . . are "meaningful stuff." They are internal ideas, feelings, and motives.

Since positivists and phenomenologists take on different kinds of problems and seek different kinds of answers, their research demands different methodologies. Adopting a natural science model of research, the positivist searches for causes through methods such as questionnaires, inventories, and demography that produce data amenable to statistical analysis. The phenomenologist seeks understanding through qualitative methods such as participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and others that yield descriptive data. In contrast to a natural science approach, the phenomenologist strives for what Max Weber (1968) called *verstehen,* understanding on a personal level the motives and beliefs behind people's actions.

This book is about qualitative methodology: how to collect descriptive data, people's own words and behavior. It is a book on how to study social life phenomenologically.

We are not saying that positivists cannot use qualitative methods to address their own research interests. Thus Durkheim (1915) used rich descriptive data collected by anthropologists as the basis for his treatise *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life.* We are saying that the search for social causes is neither what this book is about nor where our own research interests lie.

We return to the phenomenological perspective later in this chapter, for it is at the heart of this work. It is the perspective that guides our research.

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A NOTE ON THE HISTORY OF QUALITATIVE METHODS

Descriptive observation, interviewing, and other qualitative methods are as old as recorded history (Wax, 1971). Wax points out that the origins of fieldwork can be traced to historians, travelers, and writers ranging from the Greek Herodotus to Marco Polo. It was not until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, that what we now call qualitative methods were consciously employed in social research.

Frederick LePlay's 1855 study of European families and communities stands as one of the first genuine pieces of participant observation research (Bruyn, 1966). Robert Nisbet (1966) writes that LePlay's research represents the first "scientific" sociological research:

> But *The European Working Classes* is a work squarely in the field of sociology, the first genuinely scientific sociological work in the century. . . . Durkheim's *Suicide* is commonly regarded as the first "scientific" work in sociology, but it takes nothing away from Durkheim's achievement to observe that it was in LePlay's studies of kinship and community types in Europe that a much earlier effort is to be found in European sociology to combine empirical observation with the drawing of crucial inference—and to do this acknowledgedly within the criteria of science.

In anthropology, field research came into its own around the turn of the century. Boas (1911) and Malinowski (1932) can be credited with establishing fieldwork as a legitimate anthropological endeavor. As Wax (1971:35–36) notes, Malinowski was the first professional anthropologist to provide a description of his research approach and a picture of what fieldwork was like. Perhaps due to the influence of Boaz and Malinowski, in academic circles field research or participant observation has continued to be associated with anthropology.

One can only speculate on the reasons why qualitative methods have been so readily accepted by anthropologists and so easily ignored by sociologists. Durkheim's *Suicide,* which equated statistical analysis with scientific sociology, has been extremely influential and has provided a model of research for several generations of sociologists. It would have been difficult for anthropologists to employ the research techniques such as survey questionnaires and demographics that Durkheim and his predecessors developed. One obviously cannot enter a tribal culture and ask

to see the police blotter or administer a questionnaire. Further, whereas anthropologists have been unfamiliar with and hence deeply concerned with everyday life in the cultures they have studied, sociologists probably have taken it for granted that they already know enough about the daily lives of people in their own society to decide what to look at and which questions to ask.

Yet qualitative methods have a rich history in American sociology, even if they have not yet received widespread acceptance. The use of qualitative methods first became popular in the studies of the "Chicago School" in the period from approximately 1910 to 1940. During this period, researchers associated with the University of Chicago produced detailed participant observation studies of urban life (Anderson, *The Hobo,* 1923; Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall,* 1932; Thrasher, *The Gang,* 1927; Wirth, *The Ghetto,* 1928; Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum,* 1929); rich life histories of juvenile delinquents and criminals (Shaw, *The Jack-Roller,* 1966; Shaw, *The Natural History of a Delinquent Career,* 1931; Shaw et al., *Brothers in Crime,* 1938; Sutherland, *The Professional Thief,* 1937), and a classic study of the life of immigrants and their families in Poland and America based on personal documents (Thomas and Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America,* 1918–20). Up until the 1940s, people who called themselves students of society were familiar with participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and personal documents.

As important as these early studies were, interest in qualitative methodology waned toward the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s with the growth in prominence of *grand theories* (e.g., Parsons, 1951) and quantitative methods. Even today it is possible for students to receive an advanced degree in sociology without ever hearing the phrase *personal documents.*

Since the 1960s, there has been a reemergence in the use of qualitative methods. So many powerful and insightful studies have been published based on these methods (e.g., Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1961) that they have been impossible to discount. What was once an oral tradition of qualitative research has been recorded in monographs (Lofland, 1971, 1976; Schatzman and Strauss, 1973; Van Maanen et al., 1982) and edited volumes (Emerson, 1983; Filstead, 1970; Glazer, 1972; McCall and Simmons, 1969; Shaffir et al., 1982). There also have been books published that

examine the philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research (Bruyn, 1966), relate qualitative methods to theory development (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and contain personal accounts of researchers' experiences in the field (Douglas, 1976; Johnson, 1975; Wax, 1971). There are even journals devoted to publishing qualitative studies (*Urban Life, Qualitative Sociology*).

The approaches of sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and others involved in qualitative research today are strikingly similar (Emerson, 1983). Indeed, it is difficult, if not impossible, at times to distinguish between cultural anthropology and qualitative sociology. Thus sociologists use terms such as *ethnography* and *culture,* terms with a distinct anthropological ring; anthropologists like Spradley (1979, 1980) adopt symbolic interactionism, a sociological perspective, as a theoretical framework. Liebow's (1967) "anthropological" study, *Tally's Corner,* is not unlike the "sociological" studies of Whyte (1955), *Street Corner Society,* and Suttles (1968), *The Social Order of the Slum.* Similarly, Coles (1964, 1971) and Cottle (1972, 1973), both psychologists, could be considered sociologists or anthropologists. Our description of qualitative research reflects the sociological tradition; most of the works we cite and examples we use come from sociology. However, the points we make in the following chapters apply generally to qualitative research, regardless of the discipline of the researcher.

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

The phrase *qualitative methodology* refers in the broadest sense to *research that produces descriptive data: people's own written or spoken words and observable behavior.* As Ray Rist (1977) points out, qualitative methodology, like quantitative methodology, is more than a set of data gathering techniques. It is a way of approaching the empirical world:

1. *Qualitative research is inductive.* Researchers develop concepts, insights, and understanding from patterns in the data, rather than collecting data to assess preconceived models, hypotheses, or theories. In qualitative studies researchers follow a flexible research design. They begin their studies with only vaguely formulated research questions.

2. *In qualitative methodology the researcher looks at settings and people holistically; people, settings, or groups are not reduced to variables, but are viewed as a whole.* The qualitative researcher studies people in the context of their past and the situations in which they find themselves.

3. *Qualitative researchers are sensitive to their effects on the people they study.* Qualitative research has been described as naturalistic. That is, researchers interact with informants in a natural and unobtrusive manner. In participant observation they try to "blend into the woodwork," at least until they have grasped an understanding of a setting. In in-depth interviewing they model their interviews after a normal conversation, rather than a formal question and answer exchange. Although qualitative researchers cannot eliminate their effects on the people they study, they attempt to minimize or control those effects or at least understand them when they interpret their data (Emerson, 1983).

4. *Qualitative researchers try to understand people from their own frame of reference.* Central to the phenomenological perspective and hence qualitative research, is experiencing reality as others experience it. Qualitative researchers empathize and identify with the people they study in order to understand how they see things. Herbert Blumer (1969:86) explains it this way:

> To try to catch the interpretive process by remaining aloof as a so-called "objective" observer and refusing to take the role of the acting unit is to risk the worst kind of subjectivism—the objective observer is likely to fill in the process of interpretation with his own surmises in place of catching the process as it occurs in the experience of the acting unit which uses it.

5. *The qualitative researcher suspends, or sets aside, his or her own beliefs, perspectives, and predispositions.* As Bruyn (1966) notes, the qualitative researcher views things as though they were happening for the first time. Nothing is taken for granted. Everything is a subject matter of inquiry.

6. *For the qualitative researcher, all perspectives are valuable.* The researcher seeks not "truth" or "morality," but rather a detailed understanding of other people's perspectives. All people are viewed as equals. Thus the juvenile delinquent's perspective is just as important as the judge's or counselor's; the "paranoid's" just as important as the psychiatrist's.

In qualitative studies, those whom society ignores, the poor and the

"deviant," often receive a forum for their views (Becker, 1967). Oscar Lewis (1965:xii), famous for his studies of the poor in Latin America, writes, "I have tried to give a voice to a people who are rarely heard."

7. *Qualitative methods are humanistic.* The methods by which we study people of necessity affect how we view them. When we reduce people's words and acts to statistical equations, we lose sight of the human side of social life. When we study people qualitatively, we get to know them personally and experience what they experience in their daily struggles in society. We learn about concepts such as beauty, pain, faith, suffering, frustration, and love whose essence is lost through other research approaches. We learn about ". . . the inner life of the person, his moral struggles, his successes and failures in securing his destiny in a world too often at variance with his hopes and ideals" (Burgess, as quoted by Shaw, 1966:4).

8. *Qualitative researchers emphasize validity in their research.* Qualitative methods allow us to stay close to the empirical world (Blumer, 1969). They are designed to ensure a close fit between the data and what people actually say and do. By observing people in their everyday lives, listening to them talk about what is on their minds, and looking at the documents they produce, the qualitative researcher obtains first-hand knowledge of social life unfiltered through concepts, operational definitions, and rating scales.

Whereas qualitative researchers emphasize validity, quantitative researchers emphasize reliability and replicability in research (Rist, 1977). As Deutscher (1973:41) writes, reliability has been overemphasized in social research:

> We concentrate on consistency without much concern about whether we are right or wrong. As a consequence we may have been learning a great deal about how to pursue an incorrect course with a maximum of precision.

This is not to say that qualitative researchers are unconcerned about the accuracy of their data. A qualitative study is not an impressionistic, off-the-cuff analysis based on a superficial look at a setting or people. It is a piece of systematic research conducted with demanding, though not necessarily standardized, procedures. In the chapters that follow we discuss some of the checks researchers can place on the accuracy of their data recording. However, it is not possible to achieve perfect reliability if we are to produce valid studies of the real world. LaPiere (quoted in Deutscher, 1973:21) writes:

> The study of human behavior is time consuming, intellectually fatiguing, and depends for its success upon the ability of the investigator. . . . Quantitative measurements are quantitatively accurate; qualitative evaluations are always subject to the errors of human judgment. Yet it would seem far more worthwhile to make a shrewd guess regarding that which is essential than to accurately measure that which is likely to prove irrelevant.

9. *For the qualitative researcher, all settings and people are worthy of study.* No aspect of social life is too mundane or trivial to be studied. All settings and people are at once similar and unique. They are similar in the sense that some general social processes may be found in any setting or among any group of people. They are unique in that some aspect of social life can best be studied in each setting or through each informant because there it is best illuminated (Hughes, 1958:49). Some social processes that appear in bold relief under some circumstances appear only faintly under others.

10. *Qualitative research is a craft.* Qualitative methods have not been as refined and standardized as other research approaches. This is in part an historical artifact which is changing with the publication of books such as this one and first-hand accounts of field researchers, and in part a reflection of the nature of the methods themselves. Qualitative researchers are flexible in how they go about conducting their studies. The researcher is a craftsperson. The qualitative social scientist is encouraged to be his or her own methodologist (Mills, 1959). There are guidelines to be followed, but never rules. The methods serve the researcher; never is the researcher a slave to procedure and technique:

> If a choice were possible, I would naturally prefer simple, rapid, and infallible methods. If I could find such methods, I would avoid the time-consuming, difficult and suspect variants of "participant observation" with which I have become associated (Dalton, 1964:60).

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

The phenomenological perspective is central to our conception of qualitative methodology. What qualitative methodologists study, how they study it, and how they interpret it: all of these depend upon their theoretical perspective.

The phenomenologist views human behavior, what people say and

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