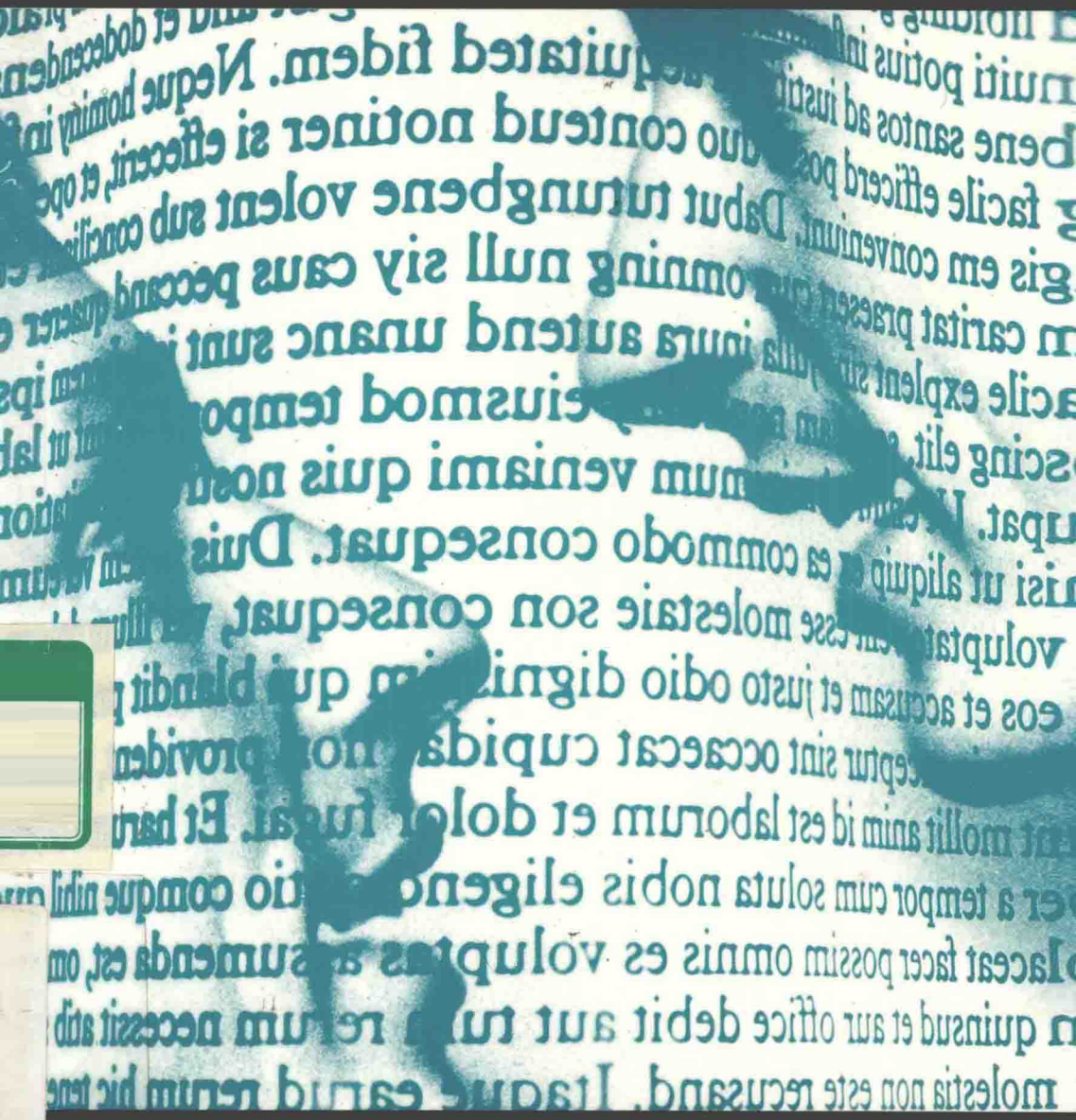
Interpreting Qualitative Data

Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction



David Silverman

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This is my second text on qualitative methodology. In 1985, when *Qualitative Methodology and Sociology* was published, I sought to address three themes:

1 The need to avoid making a choice between many of the polarities current in theory and methodology (e.g. structure or meaning, macro or micro, quantity or quality).
2 Contrary to the impression that such eclectism may create, the need to reject the assumption that, in qualitative research, 'anything goes'. So, for instance, the issue of the 'validity' or accuracy of our descriptions is vitally important, whether our methods are qualitative or quantitative.
3 The issue of the practical applicability of research has only arisen for some more theoretically oriented researchers as a result of competition for scarce research funds. In 1985, I argued that such issues need to be taken far more seriously. However, I had little time for forms of intervention which end up by imposing social 'experts' on the population, or by 're-educating the public'. Rather than being a legislator for change, I saw the researcher as someone who facilitates changes which mobilise the innovatory capacity of people.

Eight years later, I have not changed my views on these three matters. In the 1990s, just like the 1980s, false polarities and descriptions of dubious validity are still all too common. Moreover, qualitative researchers have still had limited success in convincing policy-makers of the relevance of their findings.

Like my earlier text, this present book is not a 'cookbook': it does not discuss in detail many of the practical issues involved in the research process (e.g. how to obtain access, how to present oneself to research subjects). As then, I still believe that some of these issues can only be settled by practical experience. Others involve concealed analytic issues (e.g. about the character of observation) which are discussed in this book.

As in 1985, I also develop my presentation through many detailed examples of qualitative research studies. As then, I still believe that there is little to be gained by rote learning about the advantages and disadvantages of various approaches or methods.

Mick Bloor has put this point very clearly:

> It seems something of a commonplace among research sociologists that texts on methodology are only of very limited utility in study design, certainly they

> contain no templates which can be applied unproblematically for the resolution of particular research problems . . . the methodological writings which most sociological researchers seem to find most useful tend to be those which are grounded in particular research projects rather than general surveys of methodological techniques. (Bloor 1978, 545)

What, then, are the reasons for this new book? What does it seek to offer which is any different from what I had to say in 1985?

The first difference is structural. As I said at the time, the 1985 book was rather more concerned with strategy than with tactics. I felt that a lot of deadwood needed to be cleared away and this meant that I spent quite a bit of time on fairly abstract, theoretical issues. Although, following Bloor, I used many concrete examples from research studies, the overall approach was, I now feel, too compatible with a fairly passive learning experience.

However, there are better examples to choose from. In Ancient Greece, Socrates encouraged understanding by asking his students pointed questions. Much more recently, another philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, filled his book *Philosophical Investigations* (1968), with hundreds of provocative questions. Interestingly enough, a period teaching in an elementary school had shown him how real learning often comes by working through particular examples.

The point has not been lost in distance-learning programmes (like those at the British Open University). Learning through doing is a wonderful way of appropriating knowledge and turning it into useful skills. Thus, in the central six chapters of this book, I provide many exercises, linked to the surrounding text.

These exercises involve the reader in gathering and/or analysing data. My aim is that the users of this book will learn some basic skills in generating researchable problems and analysing qualitative data. As I have confirmed through using these materials for assessment on an undergraduate course, the exercises also give students an ability to show the skills of their craft in a way that is not usually possible in the confines of a usual examination method.

However, although this structural feature is the most noticeable departure of the present book, it also has another aspect that I should remark on.

Any textbook writer has two options. The first option is to write a general survey of the field, covering the territory in a fairly dispassionate manner. This has the advantage of conveying to the student many competing positions without imposing the author's own view.

The second option is to structure the book around a central argument. This is likely to produce a more lively and integrated text – but at the cost of fairness and range.

On the whole, I have chosen the second option. The book has, I hope, a clear argument. However, as I trust will become clear, this argument is advanced without succumbing to two vices:

- assuming that there are particular 'right' or 'wrong' models of society or methodologies

– taking sides on the many spurious polarities which still bedevil much of social science (e.g. quality vs. quantity, structure vs. meaning, macro vs. micro).

Yet this only tells you what I am *not* doing. What, then, is my argument?

What I have to say stems from my discomfort with a fairly large proportion of the 'qualitative' research to be found in the leading contemporary academic journals. This discomfort arises from four related tendencies which, in the context of this Preface, I can only list without giving any evidence (more detail is provided in Silverman: 1989a):

1 A failure of analytic nerve in that the issues of theory-building are, at best, addressed only in the first few lines of an article, while the remainder reads like Mills' 'abstracted empiricism'. This is often allied to a stress on the 'exploratory' nature of the research undertaken as opposed to the attempt to test hypotheses deriving from the increasing body of empirical knowledge and analytical approaches.
2 The attempt to identify qualitative research with 'open-ended', 'informal' interviews. Unlike quantitative researchers, it sometimes seems, our aim is to 'empathise' with people and to turn ourselves into mirrors of other people's 'experiences'.
3 The use of data-extracts which support the researcher's argument, without any proof that contrary evidence has been reviewed. Alternatively, the attempt to downplay such issues of validity and reliability in research (as either inappropriate or politically incorrect) and to replace them with other criteria like the 'authenticity' with which we have reproduced 'experience'.
4 A belief that a particular, partisan moral or political position determines how we analyse data and what constitutes a 'good' piece of research.

As opposed to each of these arguments, I propose the following. First, social theory is not an 'add-on' extra but is the animating basis of social research. Second, while 'open-ended' interviews can be useful, we need to justify departing from the naturally occurring data that surrounds us and to be cautious about the 'romantic' impulse which identifies 'experience' with 'authenticity' (see Silverman: 1989b and Chapter 1, below).

Third, I insist on the relevance of issues of validity and reliability to field research: we cannot be satisfied merely with what I have called elsewhere (Silverman: 1989a) 'telling convincing stories'. Contrary to the assumption of many social scientists, as well as funding bodies, generalisability need not be a problem in qualitative research.

Finally, I follow Max Weber (1946) in recognising the value positions that can arise in the choice of research topics and in discussion of the relevance of research findings. Nonetheless, I totally reject 'partisanship' as a basis for assessing research findings or even as a standard for determining for others what are the most appropriate topics for investi-

gation. Unfortunately, I am not convinced that 'political correctness' (either of the radical left or the managerial right) does not enter into the decisions of some funding bodies and editorial boards.

None of this means that the reader should expect to find that this book contains a polemic. My central aim is to show the value of a range of methodologies in social research and to equip the reader with some of the skills necessary to apply these methodologies.

It is the *craft* of social research that this book sets to convey rather than the passive ability to regurgitate appropriate answers in methodology examinations. To take textbooks too seriously or, still worse, to cluster together in 'schools' of sociology advances neither our own thought nor its contribution to the community.

In this context, we would do well to recall the words of Wittgenstein, who in closing his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* tells us:

> My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognises them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them (he must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it). He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright. (Wittgenstein: 1971, 6.54)

It is my hope that, for many beginning researchers, this book may serve as something like Wittgenstein's ladder, providing an initial footing for readers to go off to do their own research – charting new territories rather than restating comfortable orthodoxies.

A number of friends have contributed to this book. Among those who have helped are: Carolyn Baker, Mick Bloor, Robert Dingwall, Barry Glassner, Jay Gubrium, Sally Hunt, David Lazar, Georgia Lepper, Anssi Peräkylä and Lindsay Prior. Grateful thanks are also due to my editor at Sage, Stephen Barr, and to Greer Rafferty at Goldsmiths'. Naturally, I alone am responsible for any errors or omissions contained in this book.

Contents

PART ONE

THEORY AND METHOD IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

1

Beginning Research

This is a text on qualitative methodology. However, any methodology only makes sense if we understand what the research process is all about. We will, therefore, begin this chapter by exploring the nature of social research.

In doing so, we will consider the following two issues:

1 How to generate a research problem.
2 The variety of qualitative methods.

At the outset, it helps to clarify our terms. In this chapter, we shall be discussing theories, hypotheses, methods and methodologies. In Table 1.1, I set out how each term will be used.

Table 1.1: *Basic Concepts in Research*

Concept	Meaning	Relevance
Theory	A set of explanatory concepts	Usefulness
Hypothesis	A testable proposition	Validity
Methodology	A general approach to studying research topics	Usefulness
Method	A specific research technique	Good fit with theory, hypothesis and methodology

As we see from Table 1.1, theories provide a set of explanatory concepts. These concepts offer ways of looking at the world which are essential in defining a research problem. As we shall see shortly, without a theory, there is nothing to research. In social research, examples of such theories are *functionalism* (which looks at the functions of social institutions), *behaviourism* (which defines all behaviour in terms of 'stimulus' and 'response') and *symbolic interactionism* (which focusses on how we attach symbolic meanings to interpersonal relations).

So theories provide the impetus for research. As living entities, they are also developed and modified by good research. However, as used here, theories are never disproved but only found more or less useful.

This last feature distinguishes theories from hypotheses. Unlike theories, hypotheses are tested in research. Examples of hypotheses, considered later in this book, are:

- that how we receive advice is linked to how advice is given
- that responses to an illegal drug depend upon what one learns from others
- that voting in union elections is related to non-work links between union members.

As we shall see, a feature of many qualitative research studies is that there is no specific hypothesis at the outset but that hypotheses are produced (or induced) during the early stages of research. In any event, unlike theories, hypotheses can, and should, be tested. Therefore, we assess a hypothesis by its validity or truth.

A methodology is a general approach to studying a research topic. It establishes how one will go about studying any phenomenon. In social research, examples of methodologies are *positivism* (which seeks to discover laws using quantitative methods) and, of course, *qualitative methodology* (which is often concerned with inducing hypotheses from field research). Like theories, methodologies cannot be true or false, only more or less useful.

Finally, methods are specific research techniques. These include quantitative techniques, like statistical correlations, as well as techniques like observation, interviewing and audio-recording. Once again, in themselves, techniques are not true or false. They are more or less useful, depending on their fit with the theories and methodologies being used, the hypothesis being tested and/or the research topic that is selected. So, for instance, positivists will favour quantitative methods and interactionists often prefer to gather their data by observation. But, depending upon the hypothesis being tested, positivists may sometimes use qualitative methods – for instance in the exploratory stage of research. Equally, interactionists may sometimes use simple quantitative methods, particularly when they want to find an overall pattern in their data.

Having set out some basic concepts, we can now turn to the first issue to be discussed in this chapter.

Using Theory to Generate a Research Problem

After long experience in supervising research, at both undergraduate and graduate levels, I find that beginning researchers tend to make two basic errors. First, they fail to distinguish sufficiently between research problems and problems that are discussed in the world around us. The latter kind of

problems, which I shall call 'social problems', are at the heart of political debates and fill the more serious newspapers. However, although social problems, like unemployment, homelessness and racism, are important, by themselves they cannot provide a researchable topic.

The second error to which I have referred is sometimes related to the first. It arises where apprentice researchers take on an impossibly large research problem. For instance, it is important to find the causes of a social problem like homelessness, but such a problem is beyond the scope of a single researcher with limited time and resources. Moreover, by defining the problem so widely, one is usually unable to say anything in great depth about it.

As I tell my students, your aim should be to say 'a lot about a little (problem)'. This means avoiding the temptation to say 'a little about a lot'. Indeed, the latter path can be something of a 'cop-out'. Precisely because the topic is so wide-ranging, one can flit from one aspect to another without being forced to refine and test each piece of analysis.

In this part of the chapter, I shall focus on the first of these errors – the tendency to choose social problems as research topics. However, in recommending solutions to this error, I shall imply how one can narrow down a research topic.

What Is a Problem?

One has only to open a newspaper or to watch the television news to be confronted by a host of social problems. As I write, the British news media are full of references to a 'wave' of crimes committed by children – from the theft of cars to the murder of old people and other children. There are also several stories about how doctors infected by HIV have continued to work and, by implication, have endangered their patients.

The stories have this in common: both assume some sort of moral decline in which families or schools fail to discipline children and in which physicians fail to take seriously their professional responsibilities. In turn, the way each story is told implies a solution: tightening up 'discipline' in order to combat the 'moral decline'.

However, before we can consider such a 'cure', we need to consider carefully the 'diagnosis'. Has juvenile crime increased or is the apparent increase a reflection of what counts as a 'good' story? Alternatively, might the increase be an artifact of what crimes get reported?

Again, how many health care professionals have actually infected their patients with HIV? I know of only one (disputed) case – a Florida dentist. Conversely, there is considerable evidence of patients infecting the medical staff who treat them. Moreover, why focus on HIV when other conditions like hepatitis B are far more infectious? Could it be that we hear so much about HIV because it is associated with 'stigmatised' groups?

However, apparent 'social' problems are not the only problems that may clamour for the attention of the researcher. Administrators and managers

point to 'problems' in their organisations and may turn to social scientists for solutions.

It is tempting to allow such people to define a research problem – particularly as there is usually a fat research grant attached to it! However, we must first look at the terms which are being used to define the problem. For instance, many managers will define problems in their organisation as problems of 'communication'. The role of the researcher is then to work out how people can communicate 'better'.

Unfortunately, talking about 'communication problems' raises many difficulties. For instance, it may deflect attention from the communication 'skills' inevitably used in interaction. It may also tend to assume that the solution to any problem is more careful listening, while ignoring power relations present inside and outside patterns of communication. Such relations may also make the characterisation of 'organisational efficiency' very problematic. Thus 'administrative' problems give no more secure basis for social research than do 'social' problems.

Of course, this is not to deny that there are any real problems in society. However, even if we agree about what these problems are, it is not clear that they provide a researchable topic, particularly for the apprentice researcher.

Take the case of the problems of people infected with HIV. Some of these problems are, quite rightly, brought to the attention of the public by the organised activities of groups of people who carry the infection. What social researchers can contribute are the particular theoretical and methodological skills of their discipline. So economists can research how limited health care resources can be used most effectively in coping with the epidemic in the West and in the Third World. Among sociologists, survey researchers can investigate patterns of sexual behaviour in order to try to promote effective health education, while qualitative methods may be used to study what is involved in the 'negotiation' of safer sex or in counselling people about HIV and AIDS.

The Trap of Absolutism

At last, by showing what social research *can* do, we seem to be hitting a positive note. However, there is one further trap which lies in our path when we are trying to define a research problem. What I call the 'absolutist' trap arises in the temptation to accept uncritically the conventional wisdoms of our day. Let me list the four such 'wisdoms' I will be considering:

- 'scientism'
- 'progress'
- 'tourism'
- 'romanticism'.

The first two issues mainly relate to quantitative social scientists; the last two are more of a problem for qualitative researchers.

Scientism: This involves uncritically accepting that 'science' is both highly distinct from, and superior to, 'common sense'. For instance, the quantitative researcher might study the relationship between the 'efficiency' of an organisation and its management 'structure'. The aim might be to get a more reliable and valid picture than we might get from 'common sense'.

However, what is 'efficient' and what is the management 'structure' cannot be separated from what the participants in the organisation do themselves. So, 'efficiency' and 'structure' are not stable realities but are defined and redefined in different organisational contexts (e.g. internal meetings, labour–management negotiations, press releases, etc.). Moreover, the researchers themselves will, inevitably, use their common-sense knowledge of how organisations operate in order to define and measure these 'variables' (see Cicourel: 1968, Silverman: 1975a).

This is *not* to say that there is no difference between 'science' and 'common sense'. Of course, social science needs to study how 'common sense' works in a way which 'common sense' would not and could not follow for itself. In doing so, however, it will inevitably draw upon common-sense knowledge. Scientism's mistake is to position itself entirely apart from, and superior to, 'common sense'.

Progress: In the nineteenth century, scientists believed they could detect a path leading towards 'progress' in history (e.g. Darwin on 'the origin of species', Marx on the inevitability of the demise of 'regressive' economic systems). This belief was maintained, with some modifications after the experiences of the two world wars, well into the twentieth century.

However, an uncritical belief in 'progress' is an unacceptable basis for scientific research. For instance, it is dangerous to assume that we can identify social progress when doctors listen more to their patients (Silverman: 1987, Ch. 8), when prison inmates are offered parole or when all of us feel freer to discuss our sexuality (Foucault: 1977, 1979). In each case, if we assume 'progress', then we may fail to identify the 'double-binds' of any method of communication and/or new forms of power.

Both 'scientism' and a commitment to 'progress' have had most impact on quantitative researchers. I now turn to two traps that have had a more direct influence on qualitative research.

Tourism: I have in mind the 'up-market' tourist who travels the world in search of encounters with alien cultures. Disdaining package tours and even the label of 'tourist', such a person has an insatiable thirst for the 'new' and 'different'.

The problem is that there are worrying parallels between the qualitative researcher and this kind of tourist. Such researchers often begin without a hypothesis and, like the tourist, gaze rapaciously at social scenes for signs of activities that appear to be new and different.

The danger in all this is that 'touristic' researchers may so focus on cultural and 'sub-cultural' (or group) differences that they fail to recognise

similarities between the culture to which they belong and the cultures which they study. As Moerman (1974) noted in his study of a tribe in Thailand, once you switch away from asking 'leading' questions (which assume cultural differences) to observation of what people actually are doing, then you may find certain *common* features between social patterns in the West and East (see Chapter 9, pp. 196–197).

Romanticism: Just as the nineteenth century was the age of 'progress', so it was the time in which people expected that literature, art and music would express the inner world of the artist and engage the emotions of the audience. This movement was called 'romanticism'.

As I later argue, there is a hint of this romanticism in some contemporary qualitative research (Chapter 9, pp. 197–210). This particularly applies where the researcher sets out to record faithfully the 'experiences' of some, usually disadvantaged, group (e.g. battered women, gay men, the unemployed, etc.).

As I later suggest, the romantic approach is appealing but dangerous. It may neglect how 'experience' is shaped by cultural forms of representation. For instance, what we think is most personal to us ('guilt', 'responsibility') may be simply a culturally given way of understanding the world (see my discussion of the mother of a young diabetic person in Chapter 6, pp. 121–122). So it is problematic to justify research in terms of its 'authentic' representation of 'experience' when what is 'authentic' is culturally defined.

This argument has implications for analysing interview data which I touch upon below. For the moment, I will conclude this section on generating a research problem by examining how different kinds of sensitivity can provide a solution to the twin traps of 'absolutism' and sliding into societal versions of 'social problems'.

Sensitivity and Researchable Problems

The various perspectives of social science provide a sensitivity to many issues neglected by those who define 'social' or administrative 'problems'. At the same time, it is possible to define and study any given research topic without falling into the 'absolutist' trap.

Let me distinguish four types of sensitivity:

- historical
- cultural
- political
- contextual.

I will explain and discuss each of these in turn.

Historical sensitivity: I have already implied how we can use this kind of sensitivity by looking critically at assumptions of 'progress' in society. This

means that, wherever possible, we should examine the relevant historical evidence when we are setting up a topic to research. For instance, in the 1950s and 1960s it was assumed that the 'nuclear family' (parents and children) had replaced the 'extended family' (many generations living together in the same household) of pre-industrial societies. Researchers simply seemed to have forgotten that lower life-expectancy may have made the 'extended family' pattern relatively rare in the past.

Again, historical sensitivity helps us to understand how we are governed. For instance, until the eighteenth century, the majority of the population were treated as a threatening 'mob' to be controlled, where necessary, by the use of force. Today, we are seen as individuals with 'needs' and 'rights' which must be understood and protected by society (see Foucault: 1977). But, although oppressive force may be used only rarely, we may be controlled in more subtle ways. Think of the knowledge about each of us contained in computerised data-banks and the pervasive video-cameras which record movements in many city streets. Historical sensitivity thus offers us multiple research topics which evade the 'absolutist' trap.

Cultural sensitivity: This form of sensitivity is a healthy antidote to the 'romantic' impulse. The latter impulse directs our attention to the unique experiences of individuals. Cultural sensitivity reveals how such experiences are shaped by given forms of representation.

For instance, in a study to which I shall return in greater detail (Chapter 4, pp. 73–75), Propp (1968) shows how all narratives may have a common structure deriving from the fairy story. Equally, Baruch (1982) reveals how mothers of handicapped children tell stories which appeal to their 'responsibility' in the face of adversity (Chapter 5, pp. 108–114). In both cases, we are provided with a way of turning our studies of texts or interviews into highly researchable topics.

Political sensitivity: Allowing the current media 'scares' to determine our research topics is just as fallible as designing research in accordance with administrative or managerial interests. In neither case do we use political sensitivity to detect the vested interests behind this way of formulating a problem. The media, after all, need to attract an audience. Administrators need to be seen to be working efficiently.

So political sensitivity seeks to grasp the politics behind defining topics in particular ways. In turn, it helps in suggesting that we research how 'social problems' arise. For instance, Barbara Nelson (1984) looked at how 'child abuse' became defined as a recognisable problem in the late 1960s. She shows how the findings of a doctor about 'the battered baby syndrome' were adopted by the conservative Nixon administration through linking social problems to parental 'maladjustment' rather than to the failures of social programmes.

Political sensitivity does not mean that social scientists argue that there are no 'real' problems in society. Instead, it suggests that social science can

make an important contribution to society by querying how 'official' definitions of problems arise. To be truthful, however, we should also recognise how social scientists often need to accept tacitly such definitions in order to attract research grants.

Contextual sensitivity: This is the least self-explanatory and most contentious category in the present list. By 'contextual' sensitivity, I mean two things: (a) the recognition that apparently uniform institutions like 'the family', 'a tribe' or 'science' take on a variety of meanings in different contexts; (b) the understanding that participants in social life actively produce a context for what they do and that social researchers should not simply import their own assumptions about what context is relevant in any situation.

Point (a) above is reflected most obviously in Gubrium's (1992) work on the family and Gilbert and Mulkay's (1983) study of scientists (see Chapter 3, pp. 56–58, and Chapter 9, pp. 200–202). In both cases, fruitful research topics are suggested in regard to how apparently unitary institutions assume a variable meaning according to the participants' practical purposes (e.g. social workers or lawyers discussing 'family life'; scientists discussing science in published papers or in casual conversation).

Point (b) implies that we must carefully inspect what people do and say to see how, if at all, participants organise their activities in terms of particular categories or institutions (see Schegloff: 1991). Once again, it is highly suggestive in generating possible research topics. For instance, it suggests that we reformulate questions about the *impact* of context on behaviour into questions about how participants actively produce contexts for what they are doing together.

Both points are contentious because so much social science, like common sense, takes for granted the existence of stable institutions ('the family') and identities (gender, ethnicity etc.). This is most clearly seen in quantitative studies which correlate identity-based variables (e.g. the relationship between gender and occupation). However, it is also present in qualitative studies that demand that we interpret their observations in terms of assumed social contexts.

One final point in this section. The four kinds of sensitivity we have been considering offer different, sometimes contradictory, ways of generating research topics. I am not suggesting that all should be used at the beginning of any research study. However, if we are not sensitive to *any* of these issues, then we run the danger of lapsing into a 'social-problem'-based way of defining our research topics.

The Variety of Qualitative Methods

There are four major methods used by qualitative researchers:

Observation
Analysing texts and documents