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Abstract

This chapter explores the rationale for qualitative methods, the origins of qualitative research, and a number of important issues relating to the conduct of qualitative research. The chapter is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to qualitative methods in socio-spatial research. Rather its intention is stimulate the reader's interest in qualitative methods and encourage their pursuit in a rigorous effective manner. Comprehensive guides and key references to qualitative methods can be found in Crang (2003), Hay (2010) and Herbert et al (2009). Qualitative methods were developed in the 1980s and 1990s as an alternative way to make observations, collect and analyse data, and create new knowledge. The impetus for the development of qualitative methods arose from widespread dissatisfaction with positive empiricism as the dominant form of research inquiry in the social sciences. It also arose from the desire of many researchers that their work make more direct connections with projects seeking to enhance both distributive and non-distributive forms of justice and the empowerment of marginalised groups.

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This chapter explores the rationale for qualitative methods, the origins of qualitative research, and a number of important issues relating to the conduct of qualitative research. The chapter is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to qualitative methods in socio-spatial research. Rather its intention is stimulate the reader's interest in qualitative methods and encourage their pursuit in a rigorous effective manner. Comprehensive guides and key references to qualitative methods can be found in Crang (2003), Hay (2010) and Herbert et al (2009).

Qualitative methods were developed in the 1980s and 1990s as an alternative way to make observations, collect and analyse data, and create new knowledge. The impetus for the development of qualitative methods arose from widespread dissatisfaction with positive empiricism as the dominant form of research inquiry in the social sciences. It also arose from the desire of many researchers that their work make more direct connections with projects seeking to enhance both distributive and non-distributive forms of justice and the empowerment of marginalised groups.

The rationale for qualitative methods

Positivist empiricism takes as a starting point a belief that the world has fixed knowable properties which can be converted to true knowledge by incremental processes of discovery. In positivist research, then, the research task involves at a basic level the assembly of jigsaw pieces of evidence seen as contributing to a larger picture; or the construction of evidence-based arguments so as to see what the larger picture actually looks like. Positivist empiricism in the social sciences thus draws unproblematically from the methods of the physical sciences especially their reliance on hypothesis testing using data from experimentation or controlled observations. The key belief underpinning positive empiricism is that there is a world that has characteristics, or truths, which can be revealed in an objective way independent of the researcher, the participants in the research, the social and physical contexts in which the research is conducted, or the purpose of the research act. In contrast, according to Dyck (2001),

> "Rather than accepting the possibility of a unitary, objective explanation of observed phenomena, qualitative research approaches acknowledge and seek the multiple and partial versions of reality that are constituted in the course of social life." (p. 12618)

The conscious departure from positive empiricism's search for solid truth requires a belief that the descriptions of reality gleaned through the research process and the concepts which organise and explain these descriptions are dependent on the perspectives and participations of all those involved in the research act, not just the researchers themselves. In other words, qualitative methods acknowledge that all acts of observation and description are responsible, more or less, for the representation of the ordering and explanation of life, and that these observations and descriptions must be sourced direct from those involved in a research study, not just from academic researchers themselves.

The origins of qualitative methods

The account of qualitative methods that follows is largely from a geographers' perspective. But the links between geography and the broader socio-spatial academic disciplines are strong, so hopefully the account translates readily for the non-geography reader.

Geographers have long been sensitive to the ways context and the subjectivities of those being observed influence their work. This comes from the way geographers move readily between the field and their offices and laboratories. Although not a geographer, writer Eudora Welty reflects this sensitivity, urging us to accept the power of context – in her case of 'place' – in shaping what we discover and know,

> "Being shown how to locate, to place, any account is what does most toward *making* us believe it, not merely allowing us to..." (Welty 1990, orig. 1956, p.119, emphasis in orig.)

Thus, qualitative methods have always been central to the work of geographers (Winchester and Rofe 2010) and to the social sciences more generally. Hall (2001) identifies a number of major methodological developments that underpinned the historic development of qualitative approaches from the period of the enlightenment onwards. Early accounts of 'new worlds' discovered by European colonialism and its associated explorations and expeditions, for instance, were based on textual accounts, and evidence drawn from drawings, photographs and artefacts including representations and samples of flora and fauna as well as of humans and their societies. Later, explains Hall, the practice of ethnographic study, centred on qualitative methods, was developed for the study of non-European societies by anthropologists, including Bronislas Malinowski and Margaret Mead, in order to value the search for knowledge about distinctive practices rather than a singular attention to the development of general theory as the primary objective of social science praxis. Such works, says Hall,

"...consolidated the modern ethnographic role as expert offering an authoritative account aimed at an emic [sic] understanding of the 'other's' point of view." (Hall 2001 p. 12614)

Such an authoritative position was to be questioned in now contemporary developments in qualitative methods, but for the times the development of ethnography as a deliberate, thorough, field-based data collection technique designed to match a particular ontological approach was a major methodological advance. In a sense, the notion of 'thick description' was born, being the idea that detailed accounts of events in a place, with an eye to analytical interpretation and generalisation in conceptual and processual terms (for example, about power, sexual relations and divisions of labour), were capable of contributing to a general body of transferrable social sciences knowledge.

Hall (2001) notes that significant theoretical advances in the social sciences in the twentieth century drew heavily on qualitative methods noting in particular Robert Park's and the Chicago School's use of that city as an urban laboratory in the 1920s, the rise of phenomenological sociology alongside Peter Berger's constructivism in the 1960s, and the work of critical theorists such as Jürgen Habermas, all of whom rejected the idea of the social sciences as an empirical, hypothesis-testing search for foundational truths.

Qualitative methods in Geography

Specifically within geography, Dyck (2001) identifies four key influences on the discipline's adoption of research based on qualitative methods. These are humanism, post-modernism, feminist scholarship and cultural studies.

In brief, developments in humanism involved,

"Interest in human agency, the inclusion of people's intentionality, a focus on lived experience, and the quest of understanding how meanings were produced in the context of interacting social and geographical worlds..." (Dyck 2001 p. 12618)

This interest generated substantial changes in geographers' methodologies. Notable new approaches included participant observation studies, detailed ethnographies, the inclusion of visual and other sensory data especially though attempts to 'read the landscape', and new approaches to the conduct of interviews which involved a search as much for the meanings surrounding events as the actual events themselves. Reviews of the interview process in geography can be found in McDowell (1998), Clark (1998) and Parry (1998).

The rise of feminism and gender studies as legitimate academic pursuits were also key drivers of the development and adoption of qualitative methods. Feminism pushed socio-spatial research in three important ways. First, it argued for the inclusion of women and of the concerns of women as frontline research issues. Matters of discrimination and unfair practices in the home, for instance, were argued to be as significant for research as the political economies and divisions of labour within capitalism in general. Second, feminism demanded attention to the roles played by women in research, pointing to the need for gender equity in researcher roles and in research decision making forums including grants committees and the composition of journal editorial teams. Third, feminism showed that the research process yielded knowledge outcomes which varied significantly according to its gendered make-up. In other words, research knowledge creation was shown to be inseparable from the gendered processes involved in its creation (see Harding 1986).

Post-modernism's influence on socio-spatial methodologies was probably as profound as the influence of feminism, although the two political and philosophical movements were often complimentary in their influences. Because of their direct methodological attachments to people and places, it is not surprising that geographers have been generally sympathetic to the progression within the broader philosophical movements loosely called post-modernism—but probably more accurately called post-structuralism—to incorporate social context, social change and the subjectivities of all those involved into research methods and knowledge production processes. Post-modernism is a catchall term that describes the overturning of a hegemonic project of modernism that drove the western world's scientific, industrial, urban and secular morals and ethics behaviours from around the middle of the eighteenth century. Post-modernism as a project is an attempt to inculcate notions of difference, disorder and the presence of the non-human into human awareness and aspiration. Perhaps the most obvious arrival of post-modernism as a movement involved new approaches within the visual arts, architecture and literature during the 1920s. For the social sciences more broadly, post-modernism appeared as a counter-force to modernism via the post-structuralist philosophies of the French Marxists especially Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida. In geography, the influence of postmodernism as much later than in the humanities and the visual arts with major influence of the French post-structuralists in particular not becoming evident until the late 1980s. Useful guides to post-structuralism in geography are contained in Gibson-Graham 2000 and Murdoch 2006.

Briefly, post-structuralism involves an acknowledgement that the world itself is incapable of being known outside of the representation of the world. Such understanding means that language, foremost among all the devices used by humans to discover, describe and understand the world, is

the technology that overwhelmingly constructs our knowledge of the world. Not surprisingly, such a view of the role of language, and therefore of the unknowability of an objective world, continues to challenge (and in many cases disturb) advocates of scientific, positivist empiricism, including those who practice in the socio-spatial sciences. Irrespective, an enthusiastic interest in and take-up of the practices of post-structuralism propelled the development of qualitative methods right across the social sciences in general, including in geography. In a technical sense, the specific impact of post-structuralism on geography has been in the development of language analysis techniques. Here the works of Norma Fairclough (esp. Fairclough 1992, 2003) are exemplary. In a philosophical sense, post-structuralism has strengthened the drive for an inclusive approach to knowledge creation and deployment that incorporates difference and disorder as normal occurrences, events that refuse to comply with essentialist or general process-driven constructions of social behaviour and outcome.

The problem of dualisms

It is wrong to divide socio-spatial methods into two neat categories: quantitative and qualitative; though this is done commonly. Certainly there are researchers whose work relies heavily on quantitative methods and who see that the purpose of their work is to discover social processes and causal relationships that recur and reproduce through space and time. There are, too, researchers who identify as being reliant on qualitative methods and who reject quantitative methodology as being driven by scientism and a pursuit of essential truths.

A more common view in recent years – a pragmatic one for some, but based on stern belief in many cases – is that both quantitative and qualitative methods each have legitimacy as approaches to data collection and analysis. That said, it is unusual to find a diligent user of qualitative methods with a belief that the human world operates according to general social processes and logics. This is because the reasons why researchers choose qualitative methods draw on a view of the world that rejects notions of universal logics and essentialisms.

There are four reasons why a qualitative methods user might take this view. The first is a worry that an object of study in a research situation might not actually have an existence as a single independent entity outside the research process. The questionable use of racial categories once seen as hard dividers of human character and behaviour is an example. So is the unproblematic assignment of class characteristics to groups of people based on their work and home status. Even the simple ascription of the tags 'man' and 'woman' cannot be seen as a simple, objective act in many circumstances such as when they are used to explain variations in, say, income, when in fact lower average incomes for women are explainable by the way work and distributional flows are distorted by the characteristics that are ascribed to each gender category rather than because of any innate qualities found in either a man or a woman in general.

The second reason why qualitative researchers are wary of universal generalisations and essentialisms relates to an understanding of the position of the researchers in the research process, and therefore of reflexivity. Contrary to the authoritative observational position of the mid-twentieth century ethnographer or anthropologist, there is now an understanding that the position of a researcher has a profound effect on the research process. 'Position' here is a complex thing. Position has at least four dimensions. One is the world view of the researcher where, obviously, the ideology and beliefs of the researcher will affect the purpose, conduct and outcomes of the research. A revolutionary Marxist, for example, would undertake significantly different research

activity to, say, a neoliberalist economist if confronted by the need to explain food shortages among, say, Vietnamese hill tribes. Then there is the effect of the researcher on the research subjects. In everything from a one-on-one interview to a participant observation exercise, the person(s) or object(s) studied are affected by the presence of the researcher. And then there is the technology involved in the research task. Bruno Latour's work, in particular, led an understanding that the instruments, laboratories, technical languages and so on, had profound influences on the rationale, design, conduct and output of research activity (see Latour 2005). Latour's observations are particularly relevant to the way GIS technologies lead research into particular directions. Finally, a researcher's position is affected by his or her social position. Invariably, research activity is a group exercise, either directly as a result of the composition of the research team, or because of the institutional and funding circumstances in which the research is conducted. In any of these circumstances, the behaviour of an individual researcher is always subject to social pressures, mores and expectations.

The third reason for wariness comes from the influence of post-structuralism, a philosophical movement which we have discussed briefly above. While a comprehensive discussion is beyond the dimensions of this chapter, post-structuralism is acknowledged as having had a key influence on the uptake of qualitative methods and therefore requires in-depth understanding.

The fourth stems directly from the influences of post-structuralism and is the commitment by users of qualitative methods to the importance of diversity and difference, not just to the search for commonality and the general. There are two issues here. One is that diversity and difference are seen by many social scientists as undervalued by statistical and other quantitative methods. These methods are typically designed to test whether a particular event or association of events can be expected to occur under a range of circumstances. This type of inquiry is valuable when the research question is focussed on the consistent strength of relationships among selected variables; in other words, where the researcher is interested in the search for common or general patterns or order. On the other hand, qualitative methods are expressly designed to seek out explanations and meanings within events without the need to cast aside variation and differences in favour of a concentration on pre-selected variables. The use of qualitative methods in the study of impediments to the growth of Arabic and Lebanese businesses in the westerns suburbs of Sydney, for example, enables the research question to be framed and revised in the course of fieldwork investigations as the researcher hears the stories of local entrepreneurs and the ways socio-cultural, political and economic events impact on their businesses. These influences could not be uncovered via pre-existing census or other secondary data, nor could they be categorised or presented adequately for a successful questionnaire survey. Finally, it may well be the case that there are numerous reasons why Arabic and Lebanese businesses succeed or fail, and uncovering these requires an understanding of unique circumstances and discrete processes rather than acceptance of an assumption that general or common relationships are involved and that these can be verifiable by statistical testing.

Using qualitative methods

Table 1 lists some common techniques that can be grouped under the general heading of qualitative methods. It should be noted that some of these methods are not exclusively qualitative, a definitional issue which we return to below. Table 2 provides a checklist of challenges involved in

qualitative data collection. The tables are summaries and in many cases readers may need to explore the many available texts and journal articles on qualitative methods for more complete explanations.

The tables should also alert the researcher to the complexities and difficulties that are involved in qualitative research. Qualitative methods are by no means an easy research option. Here we would like to draw attention to three particular issues to be conscious of when using qualitative methods in research. The first is the danger of typecasting and stereotyping research subjects, either in a positive or a negative way. A willingness to categorise and generalise is important in any field of research. Indeed these may well be the most consistently useful things that happen in any research, since categorisation and generalisation underpin all knowledge especially in allowing knowledge to be talked about and transferred into new settings. Often, though, creating categories and making generalisations about groups of people lead to the unfair assignment of behavioural characteristics or life-chance probabilities unfairly or indiscriminately; or they may romantically idealise particular characteristics as desirable because they have been found to be novel, and perhaps quite enchanting in a particular environmental or social setting. Distinguishing the knowledge benefits of categorisation and generalisation from typecasting and stereotyping, therefore, is not done easily. Two questions can be sued as a guide here. One asks, does this category or generalisation relate to a social process or performance or is it an attribute that has been assigned to the research subject? If it is the latter, then care should be taken that typecasting or stereotyping is not involved. Another question to be posed asks if the category or generalisation is useful in a policy sense, as a useful insight for the research subjects involved, as knowledge for other groups, or as guide to further research? If it is difficult to answer yes to one or more of these options then, again, it is wise to ask whether typecasting or stereotyping is involved.

A second issue concerns the processing and use of the often vast amounts of text that is collected when using qualitative methods. Certainly, there are clever software packages that enable simple searches for key words as well as more complex searches for associational patterns. These software packages should be used with caution, however. Problem often arise when textual material is processed as if it were written material in its entirety when in fact it is more often sourced from direct speech. Transcribing speech and analysing it using software packages often strips away important expressions, meanings and emphases that are carried by non-textual language effects, such as voice tone and volume. In the analysis of audio-recordings of interviews and discussions, then, it is important to listen closely to the actual recordings with a view to becoming a listener to the conversation or interview rather than simply a reader of the transcribed text. A final word of warning here: the researcher should resist mining collected text for enticing quotations (see Pratt 2007). Certainly, a quotation builds effectiveness into written work and conference presentations. It is important, though, that the researcher ensure such quotations are genuine representations of the subject's views or arguments.

A third issue relates to the difficulty often encountered in communicating the findings of qualitative methods to a non-expert audience. Unfortunately, many in the policy making and practitioner communities maintain a belief in the singular power of quantitative methods to uncover or prove the existence of social facts and truths (see Poovey 1998). Hence, a report or article based on qualitative methods may encounter a sceptical audience (Pratt 2007). Our advice is not for the researcher to retreat from qualitative-based research when faced with scepticism. Rather such

confrontation demands that the researcher commit to the enactment of the research with utmost rigour, and that resulting outputs include accounts and justifications of the methods used so as to assist the readership understand the research process and appreciate the research's quality. Backing away from the use of qualitative methods in the face of thin criticism is not a marker of rigorous research.

In this respect, there is an increasing trend to combine qualitative methods and quantitative methods especially in applied research. Here, the use of statistics can be interpreted as yet another form of interpretative data, just like textual and image-based data. In such an approach, therefore any binary between qualitative methods and quantitative methods dissolves, with each data source—statistics, text, images, and so on—treated on its merits as a contributor to the research question under consideration. Table 3 presents some of the considerations for the researcher when combining qualitative and quantitative methods.

Conclusions

We make three concluding comments. First, we emphasise the core understanding which underpins the use of qualitative methods, that is, that all knowledge and all knowledge construction processes are situated, and, therefore are partial and contested. The understanding is that it is not possible for a researcher to have a discovery position that is detached from the complexities of the world that is being researched. The researcher can make allowances for this immersion; or proceed blindly believing it were otherwise. Qualitative methods thus are a response to a need for social sciences research by people who are social beings in a world that is socially constructed; in ways that that are discernible, for sure, but only in part, for the world is overfilled with contingencies beyond the powers of any data collection and analysis methodologies to unravel.

Our second point, then, is that as researchers we need to be open to the need to create affinities between our ontological, epistemological and methodological positions. This starts with a consciousness about what these positions are. What follows in our research is a deliberate and purposeful selection of the beliefs, purposes, strategies and techniques that guide and enact the research. As Cloke et al write,

> "...certain theoretical materials—certain philosophical assumptions and certain methodological packages—will be appropriate for conducting certain tasks and answering certain questions, whereas certain other theories will be more important in certain other contexts." (Cloke et al 1991, 203).

Our third concluding comment concerns the problem of uncertainties that invariably arise from an approach to research that embraces self consciousness and reflexivity. Inevitably, a self-conscious, reflexive approach means that self-doubt and uncertainty will always be present in the research process. In one sense this is an uncomfortable thing. It would be wonderful if a researcher were able to stride confidently through the field knowing what is to be done and how it will be achieved. Yet, as we have discussed, such an approach will inevitably produce distortions and perhaps deceptions in research outcomes. In contrast, a consciousness of the reflexive position of the researcher has the power to advance the quality of the research and the power of its findings. Research that produces better social outcomes—such as improved social and cultural equity, justice and empowerment— needs such power.

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Table 1 Types of qualitative methods

Types of qualitative methods
Direct observation
The interview
Textual analysis
Ethnography
Participant observation
Participatory action research
Thick description
Grounded theory
Case study
Comparative study
Reading the landscape
Image analysis
Triangulation

Table 2 Challenges of qualitative data collection

1. **Subject selection and negotiating access**
What theory is guiding the research and its selection of research subjects?
Is a case study approach appropriate?
Is formal ethics approval required?
Who are the gatekeepers?
What power relations are identifiable?
What strategies are suitable for negotiating access?
What information flows should be established?
How should research questions be recomposed during the inquiry?
How should the project's progress and finalisation be evaluated?
2. **Designing the inquiry**
What is the purpose of the inquiry?
What methods are appropriate for the data collection?
What methods of analysis are appropriate?
What are the logistical and ethical risks in the project design?
Is there a need to factor in flexibility and improvisation?
3. **Understanding inter-subjectivity**
a. Co-constitution of research
To what extent should the research subjects be involved in the research design process?
How will the research be affected by interview and observation processes?
What plans are needed to address as yet unknowable research issues?
Is there an intention to establish short and/or longer term connections between the researcher and the research subjects?
Will the research process be influenced by third parties?
b. Inter-subjectivity
How will the research be influenced by direct contact (including considerations of gender, rapport, dress-code, language style, body language)
To what extent will discussions and interviews elicit rehearsed or pre-formed, stylised narratives, or will interviews attempt to recognize the dialogic nature of text production?
How will observations and data collection be controlled for power relations
How will the researcher remain productive yet allow ongoing critical reflexivity?
4. **Ethics**
What ethical principles are relevant?
Is there a need to pay special attention to ensuring informed consent, privacy provisions, harm minimisation, and the absence of exploitation?
What institutional domains and jurisdictions are relevant?
How will ethical practices be seen as on-going involving unpredictable negotiations?
5. **Validity in data collection and analysis**
How is the 'god's-eye' view of social reality to be avoided?
What is the effect on the research of acknowledging the researcher as a social being?
What is the effect on the research of the researcher's pre-existing values and beliefs?
How are issues of data validity and replicability to be problematised?
What is the influence of the researcher's and the researcher's social worlds?
How will the researcher cut through the complexity of the observations to produce a

coherent and illuminating account of the situation observed?
What steps have been devised to management of the analytical movement between the data gathering (fieldwork) and the project's theoretical development exercises?
To what extent is a claim to uniqueness being developed?
To what extent will general claims be made?
Will the researcher be making claims relating to certainty and replicability of research outputs?

Table 3 Rationale for combining quantitative and qualitative methods

Rationale for combining quantitative and qualitative methods
To address weaknesses in data including data gaps in existing resources
To provide breadth of understanding
To gain the confidence of a particular audience
To provide general descriptive overview from which case studies are identified
To provide broader context in which to situate case study findings
To supplement and confirm research findings with evidence derived from alternative sources
To tease out inconsistencies
To address different aspects of the same research question

Source: Adapted from (McKendrick, 1999)