

Introduction: inside qualitative research

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Recent years have seen an explosion of texts on qualitative methods. A survey of the Sage catalogue reveals the following chronological distribution of published qualitative methods textbooks:

1980–1987		10
1988–1994		33
1995–2002	more than	130

This excellent trend may hide a danger, represented by the abstraction and hyper-theorization of qualitative research. This is reflected by the tendency of many such texts to give decontextualized rules, advice and general principles.

By contrast, we believe that debates and textbooks about qualitative research are best understood by foregrounding the practical activities of researchers. Learning to do good qualitative research occurs most felicitously by seeing what researchers do in particular projects and incorporating procedures, strategies and ‘tricks’ (Becker, 1998) into one’s own research practice. A pragmatic, researcher-centred perspective is then brought to bear on generalized methodological discussions that are otherwise experienced as somewhat abstract and (wrongly in our view) irrelevant. The chapters in this book, therefore, are written by leading research practitioners who recount and reflect on their own research experience as well as that of others from whom they have learned.

If we privilege practice over principles – or at least link them together as principles-in-practice – then these principles of research methodology cannot be allowed to stand on their own, but always must be figured in relation to practice. Every term of reference (for example, sampling, concept formation, generalization, or data collection) needs to be discussed in relation to the empirical world, not any ethereal conceptual space or universe of signs. The best place to turn to for this is the actual practice of working researchers. How is ‘testing’ done in practice? What does it mean to ‘sample’ a population? And how do we obtain a sense of the ‘population’ with whom we are dealing in practice? We do not suggest the rejection of theorizing or conceptualizing in methodological discussions, but rather that principles should never be presented as standing on their own. This clearly means that research practice must be seen as principled or, put another way, that practice has its principles. One of those principles is that principles exist in a world of practice, even as textbook listings. Another one is that the world of research practice is multi-sited and multi-dimensional in its substance and that principles that are not directly tied to at least a sense of that are vacuous. Although we may attend to philosophical debates, our practice does not in the end depend on the outcome of these debates because we are researchers, not philosophers.

It is tempting, when writing generally about qualitative research, to construct a ‘progress narrative’ of different phases, stages or ‘moments’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, 2000) corresponding to a rough historical periodization. Such a story might comment on

shifts from scientific conceptions of qualitative research to more literary ones, for example. Whatever may be done in the form of caveats and qualifications to reassure readers that no disrespect is directed at 'earlier' approaches, progress narratives have the effect of making it seem that their authors prefer to locate their own research practice within the latest phase. After all, don't we all learn by improving on past practice?

This approach to understanding the vast and various enterprise of qualitative research is, we feel, mistaken. Additionally, as Alasuutari shows in the last chapter of this book, it may have the effect of focusing undue attention on the research practices that have gained popularity in particular global locations, or in particular disciplines. As our own experience in running workshops internationally and participating in international research networks attests, qualitative research is an immensely diverse set of practices, involving an increasingly large subject-disciplinary range. An inevitably incomplete list includes geographers, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, educationists, business and management analysts, health-care workers, market researchers, historians, policy analysts, cultural studies experts, communications and media studies scholars, even accountants who, from time to time, identify themselves as 'qualitative researchers'. The great diversity of theoretical approaches, practical problems and local research traditions that people within these disciplines encounter – as well as the different audiences to whom research is addressed – means that any categorization of qualitative research practice into a series of progressive stages is likely to be experienced as unhelpfully ideological. In fact, it is likely to prevent people from learning from each other.

Take the case of those positions broadly associated with postmodernism (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). These appear to be driven by an anti-methodological position that prefers the substance (research topics) to the form (methodology). Such a perspective, born partly in reaction to positivism, waved a flag of the superiority of qualitative research to surveys and experiments and considered methodological principles incapable of achieving a deeper understanding of a fragmented and dislocated culture. However, this research style has not always maintained its promise of achieving a deeper kind of research. The consequences are too often exposed to view: low quality qualitative research and research results that are quite stereotypical and close to common sense.

By contrast, we propose a perspective that places research practice at the centre. Practice involves an engagement with a variety of things and people: research materials (which some like to call 'data'), social theories, philosophical debates, values, methods texts and traditions, reports of other research studies, research participants, research audiences, funders and commissioners, publishers, conference organizers, teachers and examiners, the researcher's own past experience and present hopes. Out of this mix arise particular research inquiries. Sometimes we can learn from these, and if practising researchers are encouraged to write about their inquiries in a methodologically reflective way (though not in a purely confessional manner), we may learn a great deal.

But, it may be objected, where do we stand on the great issues that preoccupy methodologists today? If local research practice lies at the heart of this rather than universal – or at least moderately generalizable – principles, does anything go? How should research practitioners conceive of the larger enterprise of which their particular research project is just a small part? What general framework might guide it and which of the frameworks proposed at present is best? How can we formulate a justification or rationale for the kind of thing that we do when we carry out research that will legitimate it in the eyes of critics? The focus on research practice leading the way means that a thousand flowers can bloom; is this not a recipe for anarchic dissolution unless some general principles can be established?

As we have made clear, we do not reject frameworks, principles and methodological rules, only require that these are contextualized in research practice. In formulating a framework for qualitative research practice it is important that it be permissive of considerable variety. Not all of the contributors to this book would find it possible to fit their

practice within the framework that we prefer and outline in broad terms here. A framework is not helpful if it does not encourage principled choices that have consequences for research practice; it would be a series of empty platitudes without this consequence. And choices imply preferences for some things over others. Much of the rest of this Introduction will provide consideration of these matters, but we would like to be quite firm about this issue of the centrality of research practice before beginning. Anything that we write after this point ought to be considered in this light.

FOUNDATIONS

Placing research practice at the centre of methodological discussion resonates with another position that we hold dear, and this is one that goes some way towards providing a 'framework' for qualitative research practice. This consists of the view that, in doing social research, it is unwise to privilege any particular form or level of social reality over another. During one heyday of American social theory, in the 1950s and 1960s, it was popular to divide social realities into levels (for example, Parsons, 1951). The ostensibly highest level was culture. It was presented as that shared body of beliefs and values that 'surround' our actions, that come to bear on it, if not lead us to articulate who and what we are and what our worlds are composed of. Below this was social structure, which comprises relatively crystallized patterns of social roles and relationships. Beneath this was social interaction and, at the very bottom, at the deepest level of social reality, was experience, with feelings and emotions grounding these foundationally or, in the final analysis, linking us to other living creatures.

It was a neat array of Western categories, organized hierarchically so that cerebral matters were closest to being cosmic, if not divine, and bodily matters basic, if not socially chaotic or explosive. Social theory reflected existentially familiar terrain. From this, it was equally comforting to figure that social theory had many points of departure – from the cultural to the somatic – and that research practice was in principle a matter of seeking fundamental knowledge about which of the levels of social reality was most deterministic in this scheme of things. Thus, some social researchers mounted studies of the influence of culture or social structure on actions and attitudes, while other social researchers felt more comfortable with documenting the determining force of inner life and its somatic linkages on our actions, if not our overarching social worlds. Attitude researchers, for example, were extremely fond of deciphering the opinions and sentiments that they felt could predict an enormous variety of social activities and patterns.

Why should these kinds of categories be so powerful? To answer this question properly, we need to turn away from 'scientific' theorizing and look down, below our feet, as it were, to everyday life. Our world seems to bifurcate between events and structures (often beyond our control) and our personal understandings and inner feelings. Nowhere is this clearer than in media representations of events. Here news stories appear to bridge the gap between fact and emotion by providing 'authentic' accounts from ordinary people forced to confront puzzling events (wars, natural disasters, economic shifts, and so on). So the question 'How was it for you?' becomes a central way of understanding the world, extending beyond news broadcasts to chat shows and the work of the 'psy' professions.

Given this representational milieu, it is hardly surprising that many qualitative researchers, in search of foundations for their practice, buy into this vocabulary. So the media's question 'How was it for you?' has become for many their very own qualitative research instrument and unique selling proposition. For the claim to 'get closer' to 'the individual's point of view' appears to differentiate qualitative research beautifully from those benighted number-crunchers whose concern for mere 'facts' precludes a proper understanding of authentic experiences.

This prevailing position is argued in a recent authoritative work:

Both qualitative and quantitative researchers are concerned with the individual's point of view. However, qualitative investigators think they can get closer to the actor's perspective through detailed interviewing and observation. They argue that quantitative researchers are seldom able to capture their subjects' perspectives because they have to rely on more remote, inferential empirical methods and materials. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000: 10)

Denzin and Lincoln's portrayal of what qualitative researchers 'think they can [do]' in the above quotation is a deadly accurate characterization of much contemporary qualitative research practice. Following this approach, it appears that we can combine the concerns for authentic experience of the 'human interest' reporter and the in-depth interview methods of the skilled counsellor. In this way, we are tempted to feel that we may trump the spurious claims of our quantitative colleagues by showing how people 'really' think and feel and, by implication, put others in their place as purveyors of mere facts. But this orients us away from practice, as well as perpetuating unhelpful stereotypes about research that uses numbers.

The pragmatic alternative

With their feet firmly planted in the ground, pragmatists have been at considerable odds with these conventionalized theoretical and procedural perspectives. From the start, the pragmatist point of departure has been that the social world – whatever its levels or dimensions – is a matter of practice. Culture and social structure are not just 'there', so to speak, to be documented for the power of their influence on our thoughts, feelings and identities. Rather, while there is no question that they figure significantly as categories of everyday life, they enter into our lives as practical anchors for ordering them in some way or other. The same goes for our inner thoughts and our ostensibly deepest feelings. For pragmatists, these are not so much foundational to experience as they are used – quite effectively at times – to assemble a sense of our everyday lives as grounded, say, in our deepest feelings.

As such, pragmatists would be loath to seek ultimate knowledge of the social world from any of these conventionalized realities, whether these be a theoretical construct such as 'social structure' or the seemingly authentic inner world of the individual. It would behove a social researcher focused on the practice of everyday life not to valorize the emotions, for example, but to investigate the ways that emotions are brought to bear on our understandings of who and what we are, both in relation to what we apparently are within and to what we believe we share as members of particular social situations. Pragmatist sensibilities, in short, are centred in a persistent procedural doubt about what members of the social world take for granted. Grandly designated conceptual systems, such as the system of ostensible linkages that embrace our lives from culture and social structure, at one level, to inner thoughts and feelings, on the other, are topics for investigations, not resources for explaining them.

The real is never abandoned by the pragmatist, but rather sensibly put to the test of everyday life. When the early American pragmatists William James, George Herbert Mead and Charles Sanders Peirce urged their scholarly compatriots to turn to the world of everyday life, to the lives of whose lived them, to gain understanding of human nature and the social order (see Charles Horton Cooley's 1922 book by the same title), they were not urging us to abandon the task of understanding the real world, so much as they urged us to document how reality entered into and figured in our daily lives.

Ludwig Wittgenstein was well aware of this difference and, as a latter-day pragmatist, turned our attention to the many and varied ways that language related forms of life. For instance, in his inquiry into the grounds of certainty, Wittgenstein tried to avoid answers that were purely philosophical or just common sense. Neither grand theory nor everyday

understandings were appropriate for him, recognizing how difficult it was to find a path that was neither too theoretical nor too concrete. As he wrote: 'It is so difficult to find the *beginning*. Or, better: it is difficult to begin at the beginning. And not to try to go further back' (1972: 62).

As Wittgenstein shows in this book, one way 'to begin at the beginning' is to assemble reminders of when, where and how we say 'I am certain'. Freed from its metaphysical baggage (described by Wittgenstein as a milieu where language 'goes on holiday'), 'certainty' turns out to be a particular kind of 'language game' used (and avoided) in various contexts. For instance, it is difficult to visualize a context in which (without anybody raising any doubt about the matter) I might say 'I am certain that I am in pain'. In our world, pain seems to be part of our personal experience and questions of 'certainty' or 'doubt' about its presence may occur only to third parties (for example, insurance assessors wondering whether we are trying to con them about the effects of an injury).

The neo-pragmatists, such as the ethnomethodologists (e.g. Garfinkel, 1967), put Wittgenstein's invented examples to systematic investigation. Theirs was the task of investigating social practice in relation to the apparently real, with no intention at all of abandoning or dismissing its importance in our lives.

The pragmatist position is anything but an 'anything goes' perspective. It does not throw methodological caution to the winds so much as begin by being cautious about the very things method is assumed to be about. To focus on social practice is not to be unsystematic about methods of procedure but, instead, to put into place self-conscious and systematic methods for addressing the very things that the social and behavioural sciences are presumably about. Rather than being chaotic, pragmatism is, therefore, expressly concerned with investigating the first principle of social worlds, namely, that they are composed of things, parts, linkages and wholes. From this point of departure follows the many and varied methods and procedure that many of the social researchers represented in this book apply in their investigations. It is rigorous from the start – rigorously putting to question the very things that those who lose sight of practice assume to figure significantly in our understanding of social order.

ANTI-FOUNDATIONALISM IS FOUNDATIONALIST

Some recently influential perspectives urge anti-foundationalist principles to be placed at the heart of social research practice. It is important to distinguish such views from our vision, since they may appear at first to be similarly pragmatic, starting as they do from the view that all research knowledge is a matter of local agreement. Paradoxically, this has led to a new form of foundationalism in some circles that we believe to be as unhelpful as the earlier focus on etnotions or theoretical constructs.

The position starts from the perception that empiricism is an inadequate basis for research evidence. Facts are never theory- or value-free, so this argument goes. There is, then, no ultimate foundation for research practice. Knowledge claims are no more than 'partial truths' (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). Additionally, language and other kinds of sign are regarded as deriving their meaning from their relation to other signs, rather than from any correspondence with features of the world to which they might refer. Ultimately, this position can be applied to research texts themselves, so that the distinction between fact and fiction breaks down.

Further, the human sciences have an unfortunate history in so far as objectivity, universal truth and science have masked forms of political oppression, achieved in part through systems of knowledge, or discourse, that silence certain voices and privilege others. A considerable degree of introspection on the part of social researchers has been prompted by these views. This has led to a host of confessional narratives in which earlier conceptions of 'reflexivity' (e.g. Gouldner, 1970) have been taken to extremes, or

experimental forms of writing that are designed to make aesthetic rather than scientific appeals to audiences. According to this view, if social research has a role, it is to facilitate polyvocality, assist voices that have hitherto been unheard to find an appropriate volume, generate 'catalytic authenticity' (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 114) and thereby facilitate social change.

Clearly, these perspectives raise important issues about the role of values in the production of knowledge. It is clear that naive empiricism or crude realism cannot serve as a foundation for a sophisticated qualitative research practice. Yet serious problems arise if we move from some philosophical doubts about the nature of evidence to a wholesale rejection, especially if this involves importing some alternative set of value-driven foundations that are similarly philosophically suspect. This elevation of epistemological debate and political considerations to the status of deterministic law, to be regarded as a foundational framework for research practice, is to mistake the role of philosophical and political discussion in informing research practice. To put it bluntly, philosophers are able to show that we cannot prove that the sun will rise tomorrow just because it has always done so in the past. In our everyday lives, though, as Wittgenstein shows, we would be unwise to put much energy into this problem; there are the more pressing practical concerns of everyday life to worry about. And social research is a practical concern.

Take, for example, the objection that all 'facts' are constituted by our perceptions. Howard Becker has a relevant point to make here, and it is significant that the force of it is achieved through an example:

Recognizing the conceptual shaping of our perceptions, it is still true that not everything our concepts would, in principle, let us see actually turns up in what we look at. So we can only 'see' men and women in the Census, because, providing only those two gender categories, it prevents us from seeing the variety of other gender types a different conceptualization would show us. The Census doesn't recognize such complicating categories as 'transgender'. But if we said that the population of the United States, counted the way the Census counts, consisted of fifty percent men and fifty percent women, the Census report could certainly tell us that that story is wrong. We don't accept stories that are not borne out by the facts we have available. (Becker, 1998: 18)

The great conversation that, in practice, is carried out in the world (what some researchers like to call 'common sense'), assumes that facts are 'out there' and can be 'collected' and therefore can constitute 'evidence'. A social research practice that does not go along with this view will, on the whole, fail to enter the world's conversation. This failure to relate in a convincing way to the great issues and concerns of the day is, we feel, increasingly evident in social research texts that take anti-foundationalism to be foundational.

Additionally, the rejection of a correspondence theory of language is also a move against 'common sense' and disables the capacity of such researchers to communicate – even with each other at times. For example, holding on to a view that it is possible to use words in a way that refers to things outside language, we might investigate the ways in which people deploy linguistic skills. This would avoid the mistake made if we refuse to turn rigorously to the investigation of everyday practice and instead jump precipitously into the attempt to explain this. Everyday practice, of course, is the very thing that a pragmatist puts to the test.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH METHODOLOGY?

For these reasons, we believe that any general framework to guide research practice can only be regarded as provisional. Indeed, to sail quite close to the (postmodern) wind, we could even say that any framework can contain only a 'partial truth'. The framework we have outlined should be treated like this. Though some of the contributors to this book would agree with what we have said about an orientation to everyday practices being a potential foundation for qualitative research, not all would go for this. Other frameworks, for example,

that of 'subtle realism' (Hammersley, 1992), should be similarly regarded. The best of them (and Hammersley's suggestions come into this category) are *permissive* rather than restrictive.

In order to understand this issue better, we need to distinguish analytically the political (or external) role of methodology from the procedural (or internal) one. In the former case, methodology helps to legitimate and elevate a discipline or practice among other enterprises and social practices. Metaphorically it is the armed wing of science. In the past, experimental methodology and its strict rules had this function. In its procedural role, though, methodology helps to frame a research topic and to guide researchers in concrete terms during the whole process of producing knowledge, especially when they are in trouble.

These two roles or aspects of methodology have often been separated and treated as antithetical. This emerges clearly if we look at the history of 'hard' sciences. For example, on the one hand Galileo (with Bacon) is considered the inventor of experimental method. However, Galileo's rejection of Aristotle's law of gravity was based on conceptual arguments only, because he never did the associated experiment on the tower of Pisa (see Cooper, 1935; Feyerabend, 1915). This experiment is simply a myth. On this matter Galileo was a fudge-maker or liar, because he never did many of the experiments he described accurately in his books. In the same way, Newton, Einstein, Bohr and many others rely many times on experiments that never occurred (see Westfall, 1980). They also manipulate their data to prove their theories. The history of the 'hard' sciences is a continuous, incessant and recursive display of this schizophrenic behaviour: stating strongly overt methodological rules and then secretly disrupting them because, for a number of organizational reasons, it is impractical to apply generalized methodological rules to particular problems.

Traditional methodology is an outcome of a rationalistic view (of which Popper was a leading example), which considers research activities as driven by a set of norms, rules and transparent procedures. In his classic description of Galileo and the telescope, Feyerabend (1975) shows that if methodology and its rationality was the dominant criterion in the acceptance of theory, Galileo should have failed and been considered a bad scientist. Indeed he constructs the telescope but did not know very well how to use it; the public exhibitions where people were invited to look through the telescope were not successful because people 'watched' but did not 'see' what Galileo pointed out; he drew the moon but the drawing was not correct, and so on. The lesson we can learn is that it would be dangerous to give only to methodology and its inner rationality the task of evaluating a theory.

A situated methodology

The perspective we propose therefore tries to solve this schizophrenic attitude and contradictory behaviour by, on the one hand, suggesting a researcher-centred view of the place of methodological rules in guiding research behaviour and, on the other hand, encouraging methodologists to adapt methodology to the research situation. In other words, instead of forcibly applying abstract methodological rules to contingent situations, the research situation is placed in a position of dialogue with methodological rules.

Barry Hindess (1973) stated that methodological perspectives are internally inconsistent and contradictory, bearing only a tenuous connection with what researchers do in practice. This divergence between methodology as professed (or preached) and research as practised alerts us to the social and political functions of methodological claims. To understand this position better, let us see how ethical issues are treated in research.

Professional associations commonly craft ethical codes and guidelines when conducting research. However, such codes 'deal with predictable and planned research, conditions which are not present in fieldwork' (Holdaway, 1982: 66). Consequently a balance must be reached in each research situation. If we consider ethical issues only in the standardized way embraced by codes of professional ethics, there are a number of researcher behaviours

that could be considered, in a strict sense, unethical (Gobo, 2001). Among them, covert observation is the best known. To the standardized and rigid conception of research ethics has been opposed the concept of 'situation ethics (Fletcher, 1966). The latter asserts that, in deciding if a course of research action is morally right or wrong, we need to evaluate several contextual features, such as the aims of the study, the type of social actors observed, the consequences of the researcher's actions, and so on.

In the context of organization studies, another perspective maintains that covert research is ethical when the social actor observed plays a public/civil function or service for users, customers and clients. Policemen, civil servants, doctors, nurses and so on play a public role and are expected to adopt a client-oriented or customer-oriented approach. From this perspective, Rosenhan's (1973) well-known study in psychiatric clinics has some justification. Professional ethical codes for researchers are too often constituted as armchair criticism, distanced from the needs of the research practice. In addition, even if ethical codes aim to be universal, they are a product of a local culture and, as Ryen shows in Chapter 15 (in this volume) about research in Tanzania, are not easily exported outside the original culture.

So we do not neglect the usefulness of methodological rules; instead, we reject top-down rules and prefer bottom-up, user-centred and context-dependent methodological routines and agreements.

SOME PRACTICAL GUIDELINES

It has become popular in recent years to construct guidelines for the evaluation of the quality of qualitative research studies. These often have an educational role, teaching journal editors or research funding bodies, who may have little knowledge of qualitative research, what to look for when assessing a proposal or a report. They may also be designed to help students learning to do qualitative research and they may be useful devices for practising researchers formulating proposals or reports. Used judiciously and with due regard to the local context of the particular research study to which they are applied, they can be helpful devices. In this spirit, then, we offer the following guidelines that may be applied to a variety of qualitative research enterprises in order to enhance their quality. While one might expect all of these to be discussed in a final research report, they could also be things that researchers simply asked of themselves as they proceed about their business. They are organized in two levels and would assist the practical implementation of some of the framework principles we have discussed.

A good qualitative research study is likely to exhibit the following general features:

Level 1:

- 1 Its aim and purpose should be explained and set in the context (e.g. historical, political, disciplinary) in which these arose.
- 2 The rationale for the design of the inquiry should be explained.
- 3 The researcher should demonstrate openness to emergent issues.
- 4 The researcher should seek to be transparent and reflexive about conduct, theoretical perspective and values.
- 5 The study should provide understanding of context.
- 6 The study should re-present data or evidence faithfully.
- 7 A qualitative research study is likely to convey depth, diversity, subtlety and complexity.
- 8 Data or evidence should be actively and critically interrogated.
- 9 Claims should be supported by evidence for those claims.
- 10 Some (but not all) studies may be judged according to their utility or relevance for particular groups of people and particular power relations.

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- 11 Some (but not all) studies may be judged according to whether they provide understanding of subjective meanings (see our comments earlier about the limitations of romantic interpretations that seek for 'authentic' human experience).
- 12 The study should provide new insights.

Level 2:

- 1 The relationship of the study to existing knowledge should be explained.
- 2 The rationale for a qualitative rather than a quantitative study should be understood.
- 3 A rationale for sampling should be present and the implications of different approaches to this, and of failures to gain access to certain sources, understood.
- 4 Negotiations to gain access to sources of evidence and the implications of these for the evidence gathered should be described and assessed.
- 5 The particular contributions made by different methods for collecting and recording evidence should be understood, and the rationale of the methods chosen be given in the light of this.
- 6 The rationale for the choice of analytic strategy should be clear, with awareness of the potential of other analytic strategies.
- 7 Attention should be paid to negative or deviant cases and to alternative explanations.
- 8 There should be a comprehensive rather than selective examination of data/evidence.
- 9 There should be a clear separation between evidence and interpretation of evidence.
- 10 The language of final reports should be accessible and clear to the intended audiences.
- 11 The implications of the investigation for broader areas of knowledge and practice (for example, theory, policy, practice) should be explored, and be of significance.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK: A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO METHOD

Just as a focus on people's everyday practices is likely to reward qualitative researchers exploring the social world, so, we feel, an exposition of research practice is likely to reward those who seek methodological guidance. As we hope we have made clear, we believe that methodological principles, while useful, should always be contextualized in the history and outcomes of particular research studies.

Thus most (though not all) of the contributors to this book have adopted a somewhat autobiographical approach to writing that distinguishes this book from generalized methods texts. Many authors told us that they enjoyed writing in this way; it brought what would otherwise be a dry account to life, showing the details of personal involvement and local context that, in research practice, always affect a researcher's capacity to apply generalized methodological principles. In our view, this also makes these chapters both more enjoyable to read and far more 'realistic' than generalized methods texts that may impose an artificial model of the research process. (For example, how many methods primers start with a chapter on how to do a literature review that will lead to the specification of research questions? How many research projects begin, instead, with a bit of interesting 'data'?) At the same time, we have not encouraged a purely autobiographical, personalized mode of writing in the manner of a confession. This is the flip side of the context-free, dry methods text, and can result in a great deal of material that is irrelevant to anyone's research practice. By striking this middle way we hope to have maximized the potential of this text to help its readers learn lessons that can be judiciously applied to their own qualitative research practice. Each part of the book (with the exception of Part 7) is preceded by a short introduction explaining its rationale and its contents in brief, but a short summary is appropriate here.

Part 1 of the book, 'Encountering Method', features researchers using their own experience of particular approaches on particular research projects describing their practice in the context of more general accounts of their preferred methods. Interviewing is perhaps the most widely used method in qualitative research, and it is therefore appropriate to begin with three chapters on different aspects of qualitative interviewing. Chapters on focus groups and grounded theory, also approaches that have captured the imaginations of many qualitative social researchers, are followed by an absorbing account of the application of ethnographic method to the study of performance.

Part 2 turns to analysis. Until recently, there were few methodological guidelines to qualitative data analysis, with the majority of texts focusing on field relations and data collection. With the 'linguistic turn' in human science disciplines, though, there has been a growing awareness that almost anything can be constituted as 'data' and the problem lies not so much in gathering data, but in managing and interrogating it in original ways. A variety of strategies – narrative, feminist, Foucaultian, ethnomethodological, conversational and discourse analytic – are covered. All of these approaches draw on areas of social theory, assisting researchers in seeking ways of seeing that go beyond the taken-for-granted.

Yet field relations remain important for much qualitative research practice, and Part 3 of the book contains chapters that consider various aspects of the relations that commonly preoccupy ethnographers as well as other researchers. Ethical and political issues as well as those concerning the personal safety of the researcher may loom large when researchers 'enter', or perhaps 'constitute', the various fields that they study. Additionally, relations with other researchers, where the context is that of team researcher, may prove crucial in the progress of a project.

Part 4, 'Context and Method', contains chapters that foreground the role of context in the conduct of research, focusing in particular on the uses of a variety of data sources that may not first occur to qualitative researchers oriented largely towards interviewing and ethnography. Visual images, the analysis of documents and Internet resources, the uses of data collected by other researchers or by oneself in the past, and the important role of numerical data in qualitative research are all considered, together with a chapter about shifting analytic contexts.

The authors in Part 5 all consider different aspects of quality and credibility, an issue that has been a particular preoccupation for qualitative researchers seeking to justify their practices to sceptical, more quantitatively or scientifically oriented audiences, but which is also a general concern of those producing research work. Issues concerning sampling and representativeness are of particular concern to those involved in case-study work, but the issue of quality is far larger than this alone, as the chapters make clear. Many issues of quality are not to be solved by abstract philosophical or methodological debate, but by detailed consideration of particular research practices and decisions on specific research projects.

Without wishing to take on the postmodern or relativist position that judgement depends solely on the perspective of the observer, it is nevertheless true that observers, or 'audiences', of qualitative research vary. Researchers are wise when they notice and take account of this fact. Researchers write proposals so that others can decide whether to fund their work, or they may write in a market research context, where audience expectations are likely to be very different from those of the academic community. Others are concerned with audiences of policy-makers and practitioners, who seek to evaluate their programmes through research studies. Action researchers seek to enter into and change their relationship with an 'audience' too often ignored by social researchers: the 'researched', or the 'participants'. Writing and publishing bring a variety of demands to bear on the capacity of researchers to stimulate audiences, and the teacher–student relationship is also one of audience relations, with qualitative researchers often seeking to pass on their skills to generations of new researchers. All of these aspects are addressed in the chapters in this part of the book.

The book ends with a 'part' that is really a chapter on its own, concerning the globalization of qualitative research by Pertti Alasuutari. We wanted to highlight the importance of this chapter in some way, and debated among ourselves a variety of ways of signalling this, in the end deciding to place it at the end. You might like to read it first, though! In a sense, it deepens understanding of one of the most important rationales for this book: that it should reflect a genuinely international flavour. We wanted this book to involve authors outside the usual Anglo-American 'cartel' (if that is not too strong a word) that tends to dominate the field of qualitative methodology texts. Although all the chapters are written in English, and many by authors in the Anglophone world, we were keen also to represent the rich traditions of qualitative research practice going on in non-English-speaking locations. Pertti's chapter will help tell you why this is an important thing to do.

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