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3 Divergent analytic styles

In the previous chapter I outlined some methodological philosophies that have shaped qualitative research, and that have been a major factor in generating the diverse forms it now takes. One consequence of this diversification has been a degree of terminological confusion: there is now a plethora of terms surrounding the practice of qualitative research, and the meaning of these is contextually variable and sometimes disputed. In particular, there are many words or phrases used either as near-synonyms for 'qualitative inquiry', or to identify sub-types of it, that do not form part of a well-formed typology; in other words, their relations with one another are uncertain. These terms include: 'ethnography', 'case study', 'naturalistic inquiry', 'field research', 'participant observation', 'interpretive study', 'phenomenological inquiry', 'hermeneutic investigation', 'ethnomethodology', 'narrative inquiry', 'discourse analysis', 'virtual ethnography', 'visual anthropology', 'linguistic ethnography', and others.¹

In discussing different kinds of qualitative research, a commonly used contrast is between ethnography and discourse analysis. This can be helpful: it certainly signals an important difference in orientation. The term 'ethnography' generally refers to work that draws on a variety of data sources, with participant observation often treated as central. Thus, the ethnographer usually participates, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artifacts – indeed, gathering any available data that can illuminate the emerging focus of inquiry (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). By contrast, discourse analysis tends to employ as data various types of text, whether documents of some kind, or transcriptions of audio-or video-recordings. It usually employs relatively small amounts

¹ A useful source for clarification of the meanings of these and other terms associated with qualitative research is Schwandt (2001).

of data, compared to ethnography, and does not normally mix different kinds. Furthermore, it focuses specifically upon the functioning of particular textual features or patterns, these sometimes being analysed in relation to local or wider contexts.

Despite these differences, each of the two labels covers a heterogeneous field, involving very significant internal divergences in orientation (Hammersley 2005). Nor do they exhaust the range of work that comes under the heading of 'qualitative research'. So, instead, I will identify four relatively distinct sorts of focus that qualitative researchers have adopted: identifying causes; investigating experience; penetrating fronts; and documenting constitutive practices. These are ideal types identifying significant differences across the field of qualitative research, not just in terms of focus but also in underlying assumptions.²

Identifying causes

Causal analysis has often been regarded as central to science, and it was the focus of much discussion of scientific method in the nineteenth century. It is also central to most quantitative research today. Interestingly, though, some early advocates of qualitative method challenged the ability of 'statistical method' to identify causes, on the grounds that it can only produce probabilistic statements – whereas, they claimed, causal laws state what *always* happens when certain conditions hold. These writers argued that qualitative case study, by contrast, is uniquely capable of uncovering causal relations, for example through using 'analytic induction' (see Znaniecki 1934).

Today, under the influence of interpretivism and constructionism, many qualitative researchers would deny that they are engaged in causal analysis, or even that causal relations operate in the social world. One reason for this is that they often see the very notion of causality as denying human agency; and they regard agency as a central feature of social life, recognition of which is also an important ethical or political principle. In other words, they believe that to focus on how behaviour is socially determined dehumanizes human beings, portraying them as – indeed perhaps

2 For a similar typology, omitting the first type, see Grahame (1999). There are still kinds of work that this typology does not take into account. These include qualitative action research, such as that of Kaplan mentioned in Box 1.1, and also those forms of qualitative inquiry that have turned to 'socio-poetics', see Ellis and Bochner (1996).

inducing them to become – automaton or dopes. Furthermore, the concept of causality is sometimes taken to imply that there is no possibility of changing social arrangements for the better, and most qualitative researchers oppose this as political conservatism.

Another reason why qualitative researchers often reject the idea that causation operates in the social world is that this is taken to deny the complexity and contingency that they believe is characteristic of that world. However, this rejection is based on a very strong interpretation of the concept of causality; ironically, exactly the one that Znaniecki insisted upon. This assumes that universal laws can be discovered which state that one type of thing (X) is *always* followed by another (Y), and that what precedes a Y is *always* an X. However, there are weaker notions of causal relation, one of which claims only that an X *tends to be followed by* a Y, as a result of some force exerted by the occurrence of an X rather than by happenstance. This is the sense of the term ‘cause’ adopted by most quantitative research.

While many qualitative researchers now explicitly reject causal analysis, in practice most nevertheless engage in it, tending to assume the weaker notion of causation just outlined. This is signaled by the fact that they routinely use words like ‘influence’, ‘shape’, ‘leads to’, ‘results in’, etc. (Hammersley 2008b). Thus, much qualitative research displays an interest in what leads to or influences what, and/or in what are the consequences of particular practices or institutional arrangements. Referring back to the examples of qualitative research cited in Chapter 1, this is most obviously true of Wright and Decker’s work on factors contributing to the occurrence of armed robbery and Olson *et al*’s study of suicide notes, but in one way or another it applies to almost all the other examples as well.

If we look at discussions of qualitative methodology we can sometimes find acknowledgement that causal analysis is the aim. One example is the very influential account of ‘grounded theorizing’ put forward by Glaser and Strauss (see Dey 2007: 178–9), in which the aim is to build theories through an iterative process of collecting data, generating explanatory ideas, and developing them through the systematic selection of cases for subsequent investigation. Indeed, the focus of this kind of work on causal processes has been retained implicitly even in recent attempts to exorcise ‘positivist’ aspects of it in favour of a more constructionist approach (see Charmaz 2000, 2006: 9–10; Bryant and Charmaz 2007: 36–41 and 2011).

In the field of political science in recent years a strong case has been made for the value of qualitative case study as a means of causal analysis, though this time as a complement to quantitative work rather than (as in the case of Znaniecki) a replacement for it (see Mahoney and Goertz 2006). Case study, often historical in character, has long played an influential role in Western political science. While, in the second half of the twentieth century, it was marginalized by the development of sophisticated quantitative work, in the past decade or so there has been a sustained methodological defence of the capacity of qualitative case study to identify causes, and an increasing number of qualitative studies adopting this orientation (see, for instance, Bennett and Elman 2006).

Methods used

There is little or no restriction on the methods of data collection that can be used in qualitative research aimed at causal analysis. Early work in sociology that built on Znaniecki's analytic induction tended to rely upon interviews, though often supplemented by some participant observation and the use of documents (see Lindesmith 1937, 1968; Cressey 1953; Becker 1953, 1955, 1973). Studies employing grounded theorizing have also employed a wide range of qualitative data. Meanwhile, in political science, as already noted, the main kind of data has often been historical documents of one sort or another, or secondary textual sources.

In seeking to identify causes, qualitative research typically relies, to varying degrees, upon two forms of analysis. First there is in-depth study of particular cases seeking to 'trace' patterns of causation over time within them, both through observation by researchers and/or by drawing on the reports of participants. What are involved here are inferences about causes from data about sequences and patterns of events, participants' attitudes, etc, along the lines of Alasuutari's 'riddle-solving' (see Chapter 1). In many respects, this is similar to the work of historians seeking to explain key events (see Roberts 1996).

The second method, cross-case analysis, is concerned with similarities among cases where the outcome or process being studied occurred, and/or differences *between* these cases and those where it did not occur. Such comparisons can be used as a basis for developing, and then checking, inferences about likely causal relationships; in short, building explanations or theories. This is a strategy that is shared with quantitative research, but within qualitative work the concern is usually with careful comparison of

a small number of cases rather than investigating associations across large samples or populations. Furthermore, there is often an interest in exploring the role of *combinations* of causal factors, rather than simply seeking to assess the causal contribution of each factor separately in the manner of most quantitative work. This 'configurational' approach is central to 'qualitative comparative analysis', which was first developed in the field of political science but is now being applied much more widely (Ragin 2000; Rihoux and Ragin 2009).

Criticisms

As already indicated, many qualitative researchers reject causal analysis for ethical and political reasons, and/or on the grounds that the social world is characterized by complex and contingent relations that are not causal in character, in the sense that they are very different from those operating in the physical world. There are also criticisms of qualitative causal analysis from the quantitative side. Here the main charges are that too few cases are studied for general conclusions to be reached, and that it involves inadequate control over variables, so that even findings about the cases investigated are unlikely to be reliable (King *et al.* 1994; Lieberman 1991 and 1994; but see also Brady and Collier 2004).

Investigating experience

In this second orientation, research is aimed at exploring in depth the experience and perspectives of some group or type of people, perhaps even just one person. Examples mentioned in Chapter 1 include Bogdan's life history of Jane Fry and Lewis's study of people's experiences of irritable bowel syndrome. This second orientation is often strongly influenced by interpretivism, including phenomenology.

A central assumption here is that people's experiences and perspectives are more diverse, complex and interesting than is generally recognized; and that documenting them is therefore intrinsically worthwhile, this point of view sometimes being labeled 'critical humanism' (see Plummer 2001). There is often a particular emphasis on the need to study the experiences and perspectives of people who are marginalized, ignored, or oppressed within a society, for example minority ethnic or religious groups, mental patients and prisoners, the poor and the homeless, gays and lesbians, etc. Indeed, sometimes the analytic task is seen as 'giving voice' to such people,

or gaining voice oneself as such a person, as with much feminist research and queer theory. At the very least, a primary aim may be to overcome what is viewed as misrepresentation of these groups in official accounts, established theories, popular stereotypes, and current ideologies.

It is also sometimes argued that documenting people's experience and perspectives *in detail* is essential if we are to understand their actions. To take just one example, it has long been recognized that the behaviour of many patients, particularly older people, who have been prescribed drugs fails to conform with instructions about how these should be used. However, simply labeling them 'non-compliant with prescribed regimens' provides us with little insight, indeed it leads in the direction of blame and/or dismissal of their behaviour as irrational. Instead, it is argued, we need to investigate people's attitudes towards their medical condition, and towards themselves, and their views about the character and effectiveness of particular drugs and their side-effects. Unless we understand their perspectives on these matters, it is insisted, we will not be able to understand their behaviour.³

Investigating experience may, therefore, be prompted by, or lead to, a concern with *explaining* people's behaviour. This is often seen as a matter of documenting the *reasons* why they behave as they do – in other words the focus is on their intentions and expressed motives. Indeed, there is often an assumption that people are 'experts' on themselves, and that no purely external account in terms of situational adaptation or background factors can be adequate. It is argued that people have more information about themselves and what they do than any researcher could ever hope to gain, or it may be assumed that through self-analysis they are uniquely placed to grasp the complexity of the motivations behind their actions.

Generally speaking, those adopting this orientation assume that understanding other people's perspectives is a challenging task, not to be taken on lightly in either methodological or ethical terms, and one that is by no means assured of success. For example, in relation to life history work, the study of people's biographies, Plummer writes:

In a way, I am simply advocating getting close to living human beings, accurately yet imaginatively picking up the way they express their understandings of the world around them, perhaps providing

³ See Pound *et al.* (2005) for a synthesis of findings from qualitative studies on this topic.

an analysis of such expressions, presenting them in interesting ways, and being self-critically aware of the immense difficulties such tasks bring. (Plummer 2001: 2)

The difficulties involved take a variety of forms. For one thing, it is not always straightforward to get people to talk: they may not be interested in research, they may not understand why the researcher would be interested in what they have to say, or what they could say that would be of interest; they may fear that what they reveal will be embarrassing – putting themselves or others in a bad light – or damaging; and/or there may be secrets they do not wish to disclose.

Aside from this, researchers themselves must overcome the effects of, or at least try to suspend, many of their personal and cultural assumptions, and perhaps especially their routine attitudes and evaluations. This is necessary if they are to ask questions and make responses that encourage candid accounts of people's experiences and points of view. It is also crucial if they are to be able to *understand* these experiences and perspectives, so as to document them accurately and in detail. Very often this will require a process of learning – one that is informal in character and necessarily open-ended – in which the influence of the researcher's initial ideas must be minimized to prevent their operating as a source of blindness or bias.

We can illustrate the difficulties here by considering the case of adult researchers seeking to understand the experience and perspectives of children. It has been argued that this is a very difficult task because children are alien or 'other' in relation to adults: children operate at distinctive stages of psychological development, have not yet been fully socialized, and they have distinctive conditions of life. This means that in order to understand them adults must work hard to put aside what seems normal and obvious, and attempt to learn to see and feel things differently. And there are those who raise doubts about whether, or about the extent to which, this can ever be possible. For example, Jones (2001: 177) has argued:

Once childhood is superseded by adult stocks of knowledge, those adult filters can never be removed to get back to earlier states. Adult constructions and memories of what it is/was to be a child are inevitably processed through adulthood.

Similar arguments can be found in other cases – men in relation to women, or people from one social class, culture, or generation seeking to understand those from others. Indeed, here the problem could be even more challenging than in the case of understanding children, since all adults have at some time actually *been* children.

Of course, while researchers will always differ in some respects from the people they study, there will usually be much that they also share. This suggests that there is normally at least some scope for learning to understand others' perspectives, even if there are also barriers that create potential misunderstandings. Equally important is the other side of this point: that even when a researcher shares a key identity with the people being studied, understanding cannot be guaranteed, since there will always be other ways in which he or she differs from them. For example, Reinhartz (1997), in her research on elderly kibbutzim members in Israel, came to realize both the value of being an Ashkenazi Jew, like the people she was studying, but also the significance of her differences from them, especially the fact that she was only a temporary member of the kibbutz.

Methods used

Researchers adopting this second orientation frequently rely primarily upon in-depth interviews as the best means of eliciting accounts of people's experience and perspectives. These interviews will generally be relatively unstructured in character, and often carried out in contexts where interviewees feel relaxed, with the aim of allowing them to speak at length in their own terms. As part of this, the interviewer will often engage in considerable efforts to build and sustain rapport, while at the same time trying to minimize her or his influence. Of course, it may be necessary for the interviewer to intervene to stimulate people to talk about topics that they have glossed over, or to prompt them to provide more detail about examples that they have only mentioned, but this will usually be done in ways that go along with the flow of what the informant is saying rather than disrupting it. In short, the usual interviewing style adopted is responsive in character, aiming to facilitate the elicitation of data relevant to understanding people's experiences and perspectives. This sort of

approach is characteristic, for example, of the kinds of interview used in much life-history and biographical work.⁴

Within this orientation, interviews may sometimes be supplemented by observation of people in the contexts that they normally inhabit, on the grounds that this can facilitate the researcher's understanding of what they believe and why, as well as of what they do. For example, in their study of first-time mothers, Thomson *et al.* (2011) combined repeated interviews with 'day in the life' observations.

Of course, there are occasions when neither interview nor observation will be possible, and here reliance may be placed entirely upon documents. Indeed, it may be argued that what is provided through the written word is superior in some respects, for instance because it involves more forethought and careful formulation. Various kinds of documents can be used through which the researcher attempts to understand people's beliefs and actions. These include, most obviously, personal diaries or blogs, but there are other kinds too. As we saw in Chapter 1, in their study of suicide Olson *et al.* (2011) used suicide notes; and in her study of friendship among teenage girls in school Valerie Hey (1997) made considerable use of the notes that they passed to one another in lessons. Researchers may also *elicit* documents, for example by asking people to keep diaries or to take photographs or make videos of significant places or events in their lives. In his research on irritable bowel syndrome, cited in Chapter 1, Lewis (2006) used an open-ended on-line questionnaire to gain information about people's experiences.

As we have seen, it is often recognized that any understanding that researchers obtain of others' perspectives will necessarily be filtered through their own distinctive view of the world, their attitudes, feelings, and so on; though it might reasonably be argued that these are not simply a source of potential blindness or bias but are also essential in facilitating understanding. Nevertheless, it follows from this that what is produced reflects a transaction between the two perspectives, rather than a simple representation by researchers of other people's viewpoints and experiences. This often motivates a requirement that the researcher explicate her or his own perspective before providing an account of the perspectives of others, so that readers of research reports can understand the

4 See, for example, the Timescapes projects (accessed 24.4.12): <http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/research-projects/>

interplay between the two (although, of course, readers' understandings of this interplay will, in turn, be filtered through their own perspectives). Some have pressed this requirement for 'reflexivity' further, for example coming to argue that autoethnography (see Ellis 2004) is superior to studying others directly, given that no-one can get beyond her or his own experience.⁵

Criticisms

This second orientation has by no means escaped criticism. Aside from doubts about the very possibility of understanding others' experience and perspectives, there have also been arguments that it relies upon a defective psychology. The charge is that it fails to recognize that inner experience is always socio-culturally constituted; for instance, that the kinds of talk elicited through in-depth interviews about people's experiences will reflect the particular genres concerned with thoughts, feelings, etc. that are available within the culture concerned, and how these have been mobilized on the particular occasion – rather than simply displaying individual forms of inner experience and belief in themselves. Moreover, these genres will differ across societies and social groups. Also challenged sometimes is the idea that people truly understand themselves and their behaviour. Drawing on Marxism or psychoanalysis, for example, it may be argued that there are psychological or social forces that lead people systematically to misunderstand themselves and their world.

In addition, there are some ethical and political arguments against this orientation. Most obviously, it may be seen as invading privacy, and there are associated arguments that it reflects the prevalence of an individualizing discourse through which people's very selves are opened up to public surveillance; or that it transforms what should be public issues into a preoccupation with personalities (see Atkinson and Silverman 1997; Gubrium and Holstein 2001; Bauman 2000).

Penetrating fronts

The third orientation or style I will discuss is concerned with finding out *what actually happens* in some situation as against what official accounts

⁵ For an important debate about autoethnography, see the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Vol 35, Issue 4, August 2006.

say happens, or discovering what people *actually* do rather than what they say they do, or documenting what they *really* believe or feel as against what they claim to believe or feel. Mitchell's (2001) study of 'survivalists', outlined in Box 1.1 provides an example of this sort of approach. Underlying it is the idea that people, groups, and organizations put up 'fronts', whether consciously or unconsciously, whether routinely or on particular occasions, and whether for the protection of themselves and others or to promote sectional interests (Goffman 1959; Douglas 1976). Whatever the motive, it is assumed that these fronts obscure or misrepresent people's real intentions, attitudes, beliefs, goals, and practices, so that the task of the researcher is to get behind them to discover the truth.

This is clearly very different from the second orientation, which treats people as reliable experts on themselves and their own behaviour. Instead, what seems to be required here is what has been referred to as a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Gadamer 1984; Leiter 2005); in which the 'principle of charity', whereby we assume that people are honest and know what they claim to know, is suspended.

It is sometimes argued that the creation of fronts is especially common among those in powerful positions, and that it is the responsibility of social scientists to investigate the attitudes and actions of such people and publicize what they find – in the interests of openness, accountability and democracy. In other words, this orientation may be seen as performing an important political function, analogous to that of the investigative journalist (Rainwater and Pittman 1967; Christie 1976; Douglas 1976; Lundman and McFarlane 1976). In some respects, this focus is influenced by the 'critical' methodological philosophy we discussed in the previous chapter, but it is not restricted to that tradition. At the very least, what is assumed is that society is characterized by conflicting interests and endemic deception, at least in certain quarters.

Of course, research aimed at penetrating fronts need not be directed at the most powerful groups in a society. It can be argued that most of us use fronts of one sort or another, so that there are many areas of life where what really goes on is not publicly known, even when it is widely suspected. Examples that have been researched include what goes on in massage parlours (Douglas 1976), what happens in gay bath houses (Styles 1979), and the services (including the supply of drugs) provided by some 'bouncers' on the doors of night clubs (Calvey 2000).

Methods used

Researchers employing this orientation often stress the importance of carrying out observations in natural settings, going to 'where the action is' often 'behind closed doors', and studying everyday behaviour that is unaffected, or only minimally affected, by the research process. As in the case of Douglas's and Calvey's work, this may frequently involve the use of covert strategies: taking on some role in order to get access to a setting secretly, or infiltrating a scene by 'passing' as a member. After all, it is unlikely that people will agree to give access to a researcher who they know is going to expose what is really happening, and thereby undercut their carefully constructed and assiduously maintained fronts.

Interviews may also be used, either as the main source of data or as an important supplement to observation. They can supply evidence about the fronts to be penetrated, but also perhaps provide access to inside information about what goes on behind them. While in this latter role interviews are sometimes treated as second-best to direct observation, in many cases they will be the only source of data available. It is often argued that the selection of informants is crucial here: that it is necessary to target those who both know 'what really goes on' *and* have a motive for revealing it. This might include, for instance, people central to a group or organization who bear a grudge against others within it, those who are in subordinate positions but who witness key decisions (such as advisers or secretaries), and old-timers who may feel they have little to lose; as well as people who have recently left the group or organization, who may feel freer and more motivated to talk about what goes on within it – though like the others they may have axes to grind.

Interviews in this kind of research will often be rather different in character from those used for 'investigating experience'. While gaining inside information may require the researcher to build trust with interviewees, and to provide a context in which they can relax, at other times interview tactics will need to be challenging and even aggressive – aimed at forcing people to 'come clean', to face up to contradictions and explain themselves fully rather than offering superficial justifications or making excuses (see Douglas 1976).

Research concerned with 'penetrating fronts' may also sometimes use documents. These can certainly provide data about official accounts, but they can also sometimes be used to get behind these to find out what really

goes on, especially when they have been produced for private purposes. Internal memos or emails, secret files, etc., generated within organizations for internal consumption may become available as a consequence of legal prosecution or unofficial leaks. And they may well contradict the official line presented in publicly available documents, where the aim is usually to portray the organization in the best public light and to promote its interests. However, even official documents intended for publication can sometimes be inadvertently revealing.

In the case of individuals, private diaries or letters may of course display much more about their actual attitudes and behaviour than what they say in more public forums. An example, from within qualitative research itself, is provided by the founding father of modern anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), whose published account of field-work practice highlighted the need for sympathetic understanding of ‘the native point of view’. This account was taken as a kind of mission statement by many anthropologists. However, after his death, his personal diaries dating from the time of his first piece of fieldwork were published, and these revealed rather unsympathetic, perhaps even racist, attitudes towards the people he was studying (see Malinowski, 1967; Wax, 1972).

Criticisms

The commitment to penetrating fronts is probably less common among qualitative researchers in most fields today than it was in the past, though it has by no means entirely disappeared. The decline probably reflects concerns about the ethics of this kind of work, these no doubt compounded by the rise of ethical regulation (see Hammersley and Traianou 2012: ch.1). It may also stem from uncertainty about whether research can ever ‘get behind’ appearances to what ‘actually occurred’ or to what people ‘truly believe’. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter 2, there can be doubts – fuelled by constructionism – about whether these phrases have any meaning at all.

Documenting constitutive practices

This fourth orientation within qualitative research is strongly influenced by constructionism, of one sort or another. Here, the focus is on the constitutive practices that generate social phenomena. These practices can be conceptualized in a variety of ways. While, most commonly, they relate to

discourse, there has also been much research of this kind concerned with images, from early work on semiotics to more recent 'visual' anthropology or sociology (Ball and Smith 1992; Bignell 1997; Banks 2001; Pink 2007). Furthermore, some researchers argue that the whole of human behaviour is designed to be 'accountable' in the sense of being intelligible to others (Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1984). Examples of this fourth orientation cited in Chapter 1 would be the studies by MacLure and Walker, Wetherell and Edley, and Levitas, all of them focusing on discourse, but employing rather different strategies and types of data from one another.

Central to much discourse analysis, as noted earlier, is the argument that linguistic accounts do not simply re-present the objects to which they refer but rather *constitute* those objects. In addition, some discourse analysts emphasize that language-use is not simply a means of communication, it is a medium through which actions and activities are performed. Thus, discursive strategies are always aimed at particular audiences, and are usually designed to produce particular effects. Equally important, it is emphasized that discursive strategies can lead us to believe things without question: to 'see' the world as having some essential character, ruling out other possibilities as effectively unthinkable. For this reason, some approaches under this heading, notably those influenced by the work of Foucault, emphasise the close relationship between discourse and the exercise of power.

The emergence of this kind of approach can be illustrated by a significant change that has taken place amongst sociologists studying the family. For most of the twentieth century, the focus in this field was typically on how and why family structures have changed over the course of Western history, for example from predominantly extended family forms to nuclear families, on how such structures vary across different types of society, and on the implications of this for gender roles, care of children, etc. However, many sociologists now focus instead on 'family practices' (Morgan 1996, 2011a and b), this term referring to the various kinds of activity through which people seek to establish and maintain what they see as their family, or at least some form of family life. In some cases, this has resulted in a preoccupation with how 'family' is constituted in and through the discursive practices in which people engage, including in research interviews (see Gubrium and Holstein 1990). For example, Gubrium and Holstein (1993: 663) declare that: 'Family is enacted wherever it is talked about, described, challenged, praised, or explicitly dismissed.' Another focus has

been on the role of artifacts, such as photographs, used to display 'family' (Finch 2007).

With this fourth orientation, then, researchers are interested in how the accounts that people give (whether in interviews, in ordinary talk, in documents, or visually through photographs) are constructed, thereby representing the world in one way rather than another, and/or on how they function to bring off, or bring about, particular forms of action or institutional pattern. One aspect of this is exploring how stories are structured and the way that this shapes how they are read. Such *narrative analysis* draws many of its techniques from earlier investigations of imaginative literature, and the capacity of this to create believable worlds (Atkinson 1997; Andrews *et al.* 2000; Atkinson and Delamont 2004; Riessman 2008). A major focus has been on the narratives that people construct about themselves, and how these formulate their identities in some ways rather than others.

There is also discourse analysis concerned with conversational and other kinds of social interaction, focusing on the discursive resources and strategies employed (ten Have 2004 and 2007). Here, very often, it is argued that particular practices *generate their own contexts*. In other words, these strategies are seen as reflexively constituting the world in which they occur. In line with this, there is sometimes an insistence that there must be minimal reliance by the analyst, and by readers, upon any information about external 'context': it is insisted that what is relevant to understanding any piece of discourse is restricted to what is actually displayed as contextually relevant *in the data*.

By contrast, other research on discursive practices seeks to locate these within a context defined by the researcher, either through some theoretical account of the nature of the wider society or via evidence from other kinds of research. An example of this kind of work would be critical discourse analysis (Caldas-Coulthard and Coulthard 1996; Fairclough 2003). Here it is argued, for example, that if we are to understand why members of ethnic minorities are described in negative ways in tabloid newspapers then we need to understand the ideological roles that such minorities play within capitalist societies, as well as studying the discursive strategies employed by the mass media and the social functions they perform (van Dijk 1991).

So, research following this fourth orientation can range from studies of how stories are told or how particular kinds of social interaction are collaboratively realized, through to investigations of how textual strategies

in the media reproduce capitalism or racism, or Foucault-inspired analysis of the discourses operating in particular institutional fields within particular historical periods.

Methods used

Given the diverse range of work and ideas included under this heading, it is perhaps not surprising that there are conflicting views about what sort of data should be employed. Fieldnotes produced by the researcher are generally ruled out by discourse analysts, of whatever stripe, because they depend so heavily upon what the researcher has looked out for, noticed and recorded. Instead, it is usually argued that observational data must be recorded electronically, in audio- or video-form, and then transcribed, perhaps in such a way as to capture not just the words but the details of language-use – such as hesitation, repetition, overlap, pauses, and non-verbal contributions. Some of those engaging in this kind of work also reject the use of data from research interviews: because what informants say in those contexts is heavily shaped by the researcher. They insist, instead, on the exclusive use of ‘naturally occurring’ talk, or of available documents of one kind or another.

So, those adopting this orientation are interested in studying interactional, discursive, narrative, representational, or communicative strategies or processes. By comparison with the third orientation (‘penetrating fronts’), it could be said that much of the research under this fourth heading is exclusively interested in how fronts are constructed and maintained. The important difference, however, is that, generally speaking, this fourth orientation does not assume – indeed, it may specifically deny – that there is any ‘reality’ behind the fronts to be disguised or obscured. Many discourse analysts (critical discourse analysis is an exception here) insist that there are simply different versions of the world produced through discursive strategies – all that there can be behind a front, from this point of view, are the practices that generated it.

Sometimes, in this kind of work, there is a reluctance to ascribe motives to those employing the discursive strategies documented, or to see these strategies as being consciously selected and deployed by human beings. Instead, the focus is solely on the strategies and how they function. After all, to ascribe motives would require researchers engaging in reality-construction themselves, rather than simply describing the processes, procedures or strategies through which particular social realities are

created and sustained, particular activities 'brought off', or particular forms of life constituted. It would also assume the operation of agency on the part of those using the strategies, and this is challenged by some, notably those influenced by post-structuralism.

Criticisms

This fourth approach has also been subjected to considerable criticism. To one degree or another, it amounts to a major re-specification, indeed a transformation, of the focus of social research – in effect, ruling out many topics and methods as inappropriate, including those that are central to the first three orientations we have discussed.⁶ There has often been criticism of work concerned with the details of particular discursive practices, such as conversation analysis, on the grounds that it is trivial and pointless; in other words, that it does not address issues that have social and political significance. By contrast, those approaches that seek to locate discursive practices within a wider analytic context supplied by the researcher have often been challenged for the speculative character of the framework they deploy. Finally, it may be argued that these kinds of work rely upon constructionism but do not recognize its radical implications for any treatment of material as 'data', or for any claim to have documented practices operating in the world (Ashmore and Reed 2000; Ashmore *et al.* 2004).

Relationships among the four orientations

To varying degrees, and in different ways, these four styles of qualitative work offer a sharp contrast with quantitative research, with its aim of producing reliable measurement of manipulated variables from which widely generalizable conclusions can be derived through hypothesis-testing. At the same time, it is not hard to see that the four orientations are also in conflict with one another in important respects.

The first orientation, 'identifying causes', is perhaps the closest to quantitative research: it is concerned with the same sort of task – developing and testing explanatory hypotheses – even if it approaches this in a

⁶ It is sometimes argued that discourse and narrative analysis can be applied to any social topic, but this is disingenuous since the application transforms the topic, as normally understood, into one that is amenable to this form of analysis.

different way. It displays minimal signs of the influence of interpretivism, and virtually none of constructionism, though it is compatible with some versions of 'critical' philosophy, and with a commitment to penetrating fronts; and it does not rule out an interest in explaining the perspectives of individual actors.

The second orientation, 'investigating experience', treats what people say as a window into distinctive personal or cultural worlds, ones that, it is assumed, will make sense in their own terms. By contrast, the third approach, 'penetrating fronts', adopts a more critical attitude: the researcher is concerned with the reality behind the fronts that people present, which may only be detectable by ignoring what they say, or at least treating it with great suspicion, and observing what they *actually do* or what they say in unguarded moments. Whereas the second orientation requires the researcher to accept individuals' own accounts on trust, even where these do not initially make much sense, in the expectation that it is in principle possible to understand them, the prevailing stance in this third orientation is to be suspicious of what people say even if it apparently makes good sense, since it may simply be highly effective rationalization.

The fourth approach, 'documenting constitutive practices', is, in its purer forms, significantly at odds with all the others. It may deny both the existence of causal relations and the possibility of accessing the 'subjective realities' of other people – how they truly see and feel about the world – as well as denying that these are the well-springs of their actions. It may also question the existence of any objective reality behind the 'fronts' that people put up. Instead, the focus is primarily upon how social phenomena are constituted in and through various practices, the use of particular cultural resources, and so on.

Despite the tensions among the four orientations, many qualitative researchers in fact draw on several of them, though one or other is usually given primary emphasis. As we saw, the second may be used to discover causal processes, and the focus on what goes on behind fronts may also be concerned with this. The second and third may be combined, sometimes even in the same study, one being applied to those people with whom the researcher has some sympathy, political or personal, the other to those with whom he or she has none (see Hammersley 1998). There is also a tendency for researchers to apply the fourth orientation to accounts that they assume to be spurious, on the (mistaken) assumption that because an account can be shown to be a construction it must therefore be false.

Furthermore, as we noted, there are less pure forms of discourse analysis and semiotic analysis that seek to locate the study of constitutive practices within broader accounts of the world, which might be supplied by research carried out under one or more of the other orientations.

In the next chapter we will look at a couple of controversies among qualitative researchers that have specifically revolved around tensions between these approaches, and the methodological philosophies that underpin them.

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