

DOING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK

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ONE

Qualitative Research and the Social Work Context

We open the book by inviting you to consider an example of qualitative social work research. Extending from this, we consider two general questions during the chapter. First, what is entailed in a commitment to qualitative research? Second, how does social work frame and infuse the practice of qualitative research? In response to the first question we examine how qualitative research has developed an understanding of subjective meanings and also the routines of everyday life. We introduce three areas of debate within qualitative methods: whether qualitative methods should be seen as a paradigm position; the relationship between numbers and qualities; and the kinds of knowledge claims that may be made from different methods. The *social work* character of qualitative research comes under scrutiny throughout this opening section of the book. In this chapter we take up the significance of social work contexts.

Through their personal memory people give meaning to what has happened to them. When people are involved in traumatic events, they are faced with questions regarding their identity and relation with others and the world. On the one hand, they have the need to recollect and process those memories; on the other hand, they feel a need to distance themselves and forget or detach from the pain and threat involved in such memories.

Seeking to understand these issues, several different researchers – men and women – interviewed twenty couples who had been involved in domestic violence. Guy Enosh and Eli Buchbinder say that

In the process of remembering, the interviewee might recall a sensitive event in detail, reliving it to the fullest and re-experiencing the feelings felt during the event. At other times, interviewees might narrate events at various levels of distance, taking the position of an outsider or of an observer witnessing the experience ... To describe this range of ways of reconstructing experience, from full reliving of the experience to its disowning, we use the terms 'knowledge', 'focus of awareness' and 'alienation'. (Enosh and Buchbinder, 2005: 14)

There is little knowledge regarding the processes by which such memories are constructed. They suggest an understanding of 'approaching and distancing' (remembering and forgetting) around the axes of emotional involvement and linguistic abstraction. Analysis of the data yielded four broad categories:

- 'Knowledge', defined as direct remembering and reliving, with complete details of the event.
- 'Awareness of mental processes', including awareness of emotions and of cognitive processes.
- 'Awareness of identity', including awareness of values and the construction of personal characteristics of each partner and of the couple as a unit.
- 'Alienation', characterised by a refusal to observe, reflect or remember.

Enosh and Buchbinder's article exemplifies much of what is characteristic of qualitative research. For example, we suggest in Chapter Three that more than 70 percent of qualitative social work research relies on some form of interview as its primary method of collecting data. The authors of this article were aware of one possible limitation of that approach and so modify it by focusing their attention on the reconstruction of narrative memory as a means of remedying the inconsistency of methods that rely on self-report in domestic violence.

More unusually, they carried out joint interviews with couples. In the later chapter on 'Asking Questions' we show that there is considerable diversity in forms of interviewing, and some important recent developments of the method. In the 'Telling Stories' chapter we give considerable space to narrative methods.

An obvious feature of the article is how the authors are endeavouring to understand things that we may think of as largely 'internal' – memories and how people sort and manage them. In a way that is strikingly different from, for example, a questionnaire or a measurement scale, the understanding of behaviour is mediated through a primary emphasis on what things *mean* to people, and also on how that meaning emerges from the research process – in this case by talking to two people simultaneously. Meaning is, we might say, 'co-constructed'. They talk in the article about how this influenced the analysis of the data. They searched for themes in the data, but did so in a way that inserted those themes back into their context, rather than treating them as abstract 'variables'. We unpack methods of analysing qualitative data towards the end of the book.

They are not writing *any* qualitative study, but one that is about social work. This comes over in different ways. For example, domestic violence is centrally, though not exclusively, a social work concern. In Chapter Two we analyse the range of research problems that characterise qualitative *social work* research. Interviewing couples where at least one of them has been violent towards the other is a sensitive topic. In the next chapter we ask whether social work research is especially sensitive, and what we mean when we talk about doing 'sensitive' research. Finally, although they emphasise how to *understand* memory, there is an undercurrent of concern about applications of their work. We talk during this book about how the explicitness of the applied agenda of social work research varies considerably from one study to another.

The article poses a further issue. Interviewing couples about domestic violence may be regarded as ethically complex and even controversial. Qualitative research poses ethical and political problems. We take these up in Chapter Six, and elsewhere in discussions of ‘false consciousness’ and ‘standpoints’.

To enable us to get inside the book we treat this chapter as setting out how to approach qualitative research in social work. We do this by considering two broad questions. First, what is entailed in a commitment to qualitative research? Second, how, in general terms, does ‘social work’ frame and infuse the practice of qualitative research?

Qualitative research

We have taken for granted so far that we can refer to qualitative research without undue ambiguity. However, any attempt to list the shared characteristics of qualitative research will fall short of universal agreement, and some think the effort itself is misguided. We say more about these challenges of diversity and delusion in a few paragraphs’ time. Nonetheless, most qualitative researchers would appeal to and identify with the majority of the following descriptors.

- It involves immersion in situations of *everyday life*. ‘These situations are typically “banal” or normal ones, reflective of the everyday life of individuals, groups, societies and organizations’ (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 6). It involves ‘looking at the ordinary in places where it takes unaccustomed forms’, so that ‘understanding a people’s culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity’ (Geertz, 1973: 14).
- The researcher’s role is to gain an overview of the *whole* of the culture and context under study.
- Holism is pursued through inquiry into the *particular*. This contrasts with methods where ‘[t]he uniqueness of the particular is considered “noise” in the search for general tendencies and main effects’ (Eisner, 1988: 139). Grand realities of Power, Faith, Prestige, Love, etc. are confronted ‘in contexts obscure enough ... to take the capital letters off’ (Geertz, 1973: 21). Qualitative research studies ‘make the case palpable’ (Eisner, 1991: 39).
- The whole and the particular are held in tension. ‘Small facts speak to large issues’ (Geertz, 1973: 23), and ‘in the particular is located a general theme’ (Eisner, 1991: 39). Patrick Kavanagh, the Irish poet, wrote ‘parochialism is universal. It deals with the fundamentals’.

All great civilisations are based on parochialism. To know fully even one field or one land is a lifetime’s experience. In the world of poetic experience it is depth that counts, not width. A gap in a hedge, a smooth rock surfacing a narrow lane, a view of woody meadows, the stream at the junction of four small fields – these are as much as a man can fully experience.

Robert Macfarlane, from whose essay we have taken this quotation,¹ says that for Kavanagh, ‘the parish was not the perimeter, but an aperture: a space through which the world could be seen’.

¹In an essay in *The Guardian* newspaper, 30 July 2005.

- ‘The researcher attempts to capture data on the perceptions of local actors “from the inside”, through a process of deep attentiveness, of empathic understanding (*verstehen*), and of suspending or “bracketing” preconceptions about the topics under discussion’ (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 6). Stanley Witkin talks in this context about the need for us to have ‘a theory of noticing’, and to look for rich points (Witkin, 2000a).
- This stance is sometimes referred to as one of ‘ethnomethodological indifference’ (after Garfinkel). However, ‘bracketing’ preconceptions, even if it is possible, need not preclude taking a normative position – ‘you do not have to be neutral to try to be objective’ (Wolcott, 1990: 145). ‘Appreciation does not necessarily mean liking something ... Appreciation ... means an awareness and an understanding of what one has experienced. Such an awareness provides the basis for judgement’ (Eisner, 1988: 142). Indeed, qualitative approaches ‘can effectively give voice to the normally silenced and can poignantly illuminate what is typically masked’ (Greene, 1994: 541).
- Respondent or *member categories* are kept to the foreground throughout the research. This is linked to a strong inductive tradition in qualitative research – a commitment to the imaginative production of new concepts, through the cultivation of openness on the part of the researcher. One of the most difficult challenges for the qualitative researcher is how to develop a convincing account of the relationship between the language, accounts and everyday science of those to whom she has spoken and her own analytic categories.
- When it comes to those analytic categories, qualitative research is characteristically *interpretive*. ‘A main task is to explicate the ways people in particular settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situations’ (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 7). For qualitative researchers, subjectivity is *created* by culture, and does not simply *display* it. This is partly what is meant when the word ‘constructivist’ is used.
- The researcher is essentially the main instrument in the study, rather than standardised data collection devices. It is here that the word ‘reflexive’ often occurs – referring to the central part played by the subjectivities of the researcher and of those being studied. Qualitative fieldwork is not straightforward. ‘The features that count in a setting do not wear their labels on their sleeve’ (Eisner, 1991: 33). The part played by the self in qualitative research also raises the special significance of questions of ethics in qualitative research, and renders the relationship between researcher and researched central to the activity.
- Finally, most analysis is done in words. This is true – perhaps even more so – with the advent of increasingly sophisticated software for analysing qualitative data. There are frequent references in this connection to ‘texts’. Judgement and persuasion by reason are deeply involved, and in qualitative research the facts never speak for themselves.

Is there a central organising idea behind this characterisation of qualitative research? Maybe not, and anyway the question is not very interesting. But we like, for example, Elliot Eisner’s comment that qualitative research slows down the perception and invites exploration, and releases us from the stupor of the familiar, thus contributing to a state of wide-awakeness (Eisner, 1991). He compares this to what happens when we look at a painting. If there is a core – a qualitative eye – it has been expressed in different ways. For Riessman, it is ‘Scepticism about universalising generalisations; respect for particularity and context; appreciation of reflexivity and standpoint; and the need for empirical evidence’ (Riessman, 1994: xv).

Qualitative research is not a unified tradition. The term qualitative ‘refers to a family of approaches with a very loose and extended kinship, even divorces’

(Riessman, 1994: xii). These differences of research *practice* stem from diverse *theoretical* positions. While there have been numerous cross-currents that muddy the waters of these differences, it is helpful to think of them as following two general lines.

Subjective meanings

The first of these different traditions starts with the subjective meanings that people attribute to their actions and environments, and follows through to the work of Norman Denzin on interpretive interactionism, much of the work on the sociology of knowledge and on subjective theories, and some of the influences from feminist research and postmodernism. *Symbolic interactionism* lies behind most approaches that stress studying subjective meanings and individual ascriptions of meaning. Symbolic interactionist research is founded on the premises that

- People act towards things on the basis of the meanings such things have for them.
- The meaning is derived from interactions one has with significant members of one's social networks.
- Meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things encountered (Flick, 2006).

These processes form the starting point for empirical work. Is culture people's beliefs or material artifacts (subjective or objective)? In Geertz's much alluded to essay on thick description, he said 'Once human behavior is seen as ... symbolic action ... the question as to whether culture is patterned action or a frame of mind or even the two somehow mixed together, loses sense' (Geertz, 1973: 10). For him the meaning of culture 'is the same as that of rocks on the one hand and dreams on the other – they are things of this world. The thing to ask is what their import is ... what is being said' (ibid., p. 10).

This position developed out of American philosophical traditions of pragmatism, and the work of people in Chicago early in the twentieth century, and was given its fullest early statements in the writings of George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer. The reconstruction of such subjective viewpoints becomes the instrument for analysing social worlds. There has been a major research interest in the forms such viewpoints take. These include subjective theories about things (e.g., lay theories of health, education, counselling or social work), and narratives such as life histories, autobiographies and deviant careers.

One of the most famous encapsulations of this position was found in W.I. Thomas and Dorothy Thomas' famous aphorism that if men (*sic*) define situations as real they are real in their consequences (Thomas and Thomas, 1928). There were those with a social work identity who had as sophisticated an understanding of the issues as anyone in sociology. Ada Sheffield is a foremost example, and her 1922 book on *Case-study Possibilities* stands as a forgotten classic. She anticipated a symbolic interactionist stance when she says of the case worker that 'selection of facts amounts to an implicit interpretation of them' (Sheffield, 1922: 48). In a

remarkably strong passage, she says that ‘the traditions and training of the observer more or less condition the *nature* of the fact-items that make their appearance ... In this sense the subject-matter of much social study is unstable. Not only do two students perceive different facts, they actually in a measure make different facts to be perceived.’ Example 1.1 illustrates how a symbolic interactionist position moulded a study of social work practitioners engaged in their own research.

EXAMPLE 1.1**Practitioners Doing Research**

A British project drew on a case study evaluation of two networked cohorts of practitioner researchers in a children’s services national social work agency in Scotland. The aim of this study was to understand the meaning of practitioner research for social work professionals through an exploration of how language, ascriptions of meaning and interpretation provide a social environment through which the nature and meaning of practitioner research emerge.

The authors say

‘In doing so we pursue a moderate symbolic interactionist position, in exploring how language, ascriptions of meaning, and interpretation provide a social environment through which the nature and meaning of practitioner research emerge. To express this through a familiar statement, the distinctive character of interaction as it takes place between human beings consists in the fact that human beings interpret or ‘define’ each other’s actions instead of merely reacting to each other’s actions. Their ‘response’ is not made directly to the actions of one another but instead is based on the meaning which they attach to such actions. Thus, human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another’s actions. (Blumer, 1969: 180 quoted in Shaw and Lunt, 2012: 198)

The authors conclude that:

- Practitioner researchers engage with a language and culture that is strange yet potentially rewarding for practice and research. They find themselves located in a culture that lies between ‘practice’ and ‘research’ but is fundamentally shaped by and challenges both.
- Practitioner researchers are typically engaged in negotiating an uncertain world, which is at its heart an effort to learn what it’s about.
- The location of practitioner research as lying both within and outside of core professional work poses difficult challenges of moral accountability for their work within their practice cultures.
- Involvement in practitioner research stirs reflection on the meaning and value of professional work. For some practitioners this may be overly demanding in the context of the perceived constraints of their core work.
- Networked initiatives inevitably raise questions of ownership.
- The nature of practitioner research is something that emerges from the experience, rather than something that prescribes it in advance. It is only in the doing of practitioner research that its critical identity takes shape.

Shaw and Lunt (2012)

The routines of everyday life

The second diffuse tradition in qualitative research is concerned with how people produce social reality through interactive processes. Broader traditions of social anthropology and ethnography are often best understood in this way, but it has been most marked in the writing of Harold Garfinkel on what he called ethnomethodology. For him the 'central concern is with the study of the methods used by members to produce reality in everyday life' (Flick, 2006: 68). The focus is not the subjective meaning for the participants of an interaction and its contents but how this interaction is organised. The research topic becomes the study of the routines of everyday life. Interaction is assumed by ethnomethodologists to be structurally organised, and to be both shaped by and in turn shape the context. Hence, interaction repays detailed attention, because it is never disorderly, accidental or irrelevant.

One important strand of this emphasis has been through the analysis of conversation, and how something is made a certain kind of conversation, whether it be talk over coffee in a social work team room, a GP consultation, or a parent–teacher evening exchange. It is characteristically seen as constituted through turn-by-turn organisation of talk in an institutional context. Conversation is looked at as comprising 'speech acts' rather than grammatical word strings or statements. It proceeds by looking at 'turns' and treating each utterance as *displaying an interpretation* of the previous utterance, and thus looks at the understanding displayed by the participants. This line of research has often focused on studies of work in organisational contexts. Take, for example, this example of a supervision session between a team manager (TM) and a social worker (SW) (Example 1.2).

EXAMPLE 1.2

Social Work Supervision

- Social Worker (SW): ... She's got a lot of positives. She's a personable girl, pleasant, bright girl. One odd quality is an incredible neatness – her school-work is absolutely immaculate. You can't tell the difference between one page and another. Every word the same.
- Team Manager (TM): Sort of obsessional?
- SW: Erm, well tidy. Very tidy people. I don't know what she's got. She's certainly got it up there for the application of graphics – she's a bright girl. Although she's a problem in school behaviour-wise, she's likely to blow up. She does reasonably well in examinations, she's got many positives, she's not a negative girl altogether.
- TM: The criminal. It doesn't fit in with this part of Jackie does it?
- SW: Well she's a well-known shoplifter – to the extent that a note comes to the house saying "Jackie, can you pinch me a pair of trousers, will pay five pounds for them". She's well known in her circle at school as being the top shoplifter.
- TM: She's not far from becoming a labelled criminal?

(Continued)

(Continued)

- SW: She er yes. But her criminality is in (*pause*) er strange really, it's almost a mania. It has a quality about it that is almost psychologically driven. I don't know if that's the proper use of the term 'psychology' but – you know – the drive is there, er because of an abnormal psychology, there's something there all right.
- TM: Um how long has she been doing it? ...

Pithouse and Atkinson (1988)

This is part of a discussion about a 'case' where they are discussing a family where the daughter Jackie has been caught for shoplifting – not for the first time. They are discussing how the family lulls social workers into a false sense of security 'and then they blow' (Pithouse and Atkinson, 1988). The form and structure of the conversational turns communicate that this is a social work supervision session.

Two caveats are in order. First, we should not, however, assume that forms of language, discourse and conversation are predictable. The example just given illustrates *this* well. The team manager introduces a series of possible explanations, which could be seen either as efforts to bring in the lessons of experience and expertise, or possibly as efforts to bring closure to this phase of the session. But the social worker seems to resist this, as seen in her responses of 'well ...' and 'but ...', each of which points up the risks of assuming a naïve model of managerialist power. Second, not all talk takes the form of conversation. There are various forms of talk that are in the form of lectures, speeches, newscasts, media reports or monologues.

This approach – together with the wider traditions of ethnography – emphasises that 'social practices constitute real objects and subjects ... embodied know-how' and points to the priority of the study of practical activity (Packer, 2011: 11). As Packer subsequently expresses it, 'Ethnomethodology sees human activity as skilled, intelligent and improvisatory. Like good jazz, social action is artfully made up on the spot' (*ibid.*, p. 190).

Power, philosophy and paradigms

The positions we have sketched out raise three related questions. First, if qualitative research is committed to constructivist epistemology, does this entail rejecting realist understanding and explanation of the world? Second, does qualitative research entail a paradigmatic worldview, such that the philosophy and subsequent practice of research are incommensurable with mainstream quantitative research, or should these be seen as complementary perspectives? Third, do the traditions of research we have outlined culpably neglect the operation of power that operates to oppress others?

These are complex and much rehearsed questions. Our position is best conveyed through the cumulative positions we take during the book. For the moment we want to ask a deceptively simple question that immediately leads us into the first and third of these questions. What if we suspect participants *misunderstand* their form of life? To *misunderstand* implies that there is a correct and incorrect way of understanding something, and thus challenges relativist epistemology. It also leads us to acknowledge the circumstances in which such misunderstanding might occur. 'This is the troubling suggestion made most powerfully by Karl Marx' (Packer, 2011: 271). Marx had much to say about *alienation* – the process whereby workers are separated from one another, from the products of their labour, and from the activity of work itself. Alienation exerts power such that workers are unaware they are being exploited, thus producing *false consciousness*. Down through the work of the Frankfurt School, most versions of feminism, and the critical theorising of Habermas, Bourdieu and Foucault, the consequent vision for research has been an emancipatory one. Packer's conclusion to the 'what if' question is that we 'still need to take their understanding into account. We do not need to accept the understanding that participants display in an interaction, and our analysis does not need to stop there. But it does need to *start* there ... We cannot *critique* participants' understanding unless we first figure out what it is' (ibid., p. 267). For some writers this includes a more general scepticism about methodology of any kind. Once again we are in deep water, and face to face with how we see both the limits and limitations of science.

Numbers and qualities

While our position on paradigms is not cut and dried, it has four key elements, which we elaborate in this section. These are:

- A commitment to a strongly fallibilist version of realism (while things are real, our understanding or representation of them will always be incomplete and probably flawed).
- The constructed character of social reality.
- The central role of political and individual interests.
- The real but imperfect and partial relationship between paradigms and methodology.

A stance such as this combines elements of relativity of meaning, realism and power. One possible way of seeing paradigms is to view them as including 'regulative ideals' (Phillips, 1990: 43), entailing normative rather than always achievable standards (McKay, 1988), and as more akin to Weber's concept of ideal types, where we should expect few studies to reflect 'pure' versions of paradigm-led research. We should take an empirical interest in paradigms as much as a philosophical interest. For example, 'study of notions of bias, error, mistakes and truth as used in ordinary practice might be a profitable way to gain a sense of the actual epistemologies used by social workers' (Reid, 1994: 469). We should also note the relevance of these debates for social work practice.

Debates surrounding values and philosophical positions in social work are often conducted in similar ways to debates about paradigms and pragmatism in research. This should not be surprising. At their philosophical and moral roots they are more or less the same problems.

Like the qualitative health researchers, Miller and Crabtree, we are prepared to 'hold quantitative objectivisms in one hand and qualitative revelations in the other' (Miller and Crabtree, 2005: 613) – 'hold' not as something to possess but as better enabling a close inspection and understanding. Critical understanding of the merits of this or that research methodology requires being insider and outsider, member and stranger, white coat thought and purple coat experience and action.² It demands the cultivation of 'anthropological strangeness' (Lofland and Lofland, 2006), and the avoidance of sentimentality, which we are guilty of

when we refuse, for whatever reason, to investigate some matter that should properly be regarded as problematic. We are sentimental, especially, when our reason is that we would prefer not to know what is going on, if to know would be to violate some sympathy whose existence we may not even be aware of. (Becker, 1970c: 132–3)

Yet the ways in which such debates have been conducted are in large part unhelpful. Not that there is nothing to debate, or that we stand as neutral bystanders (e.g., Shaw 2012a, 2012b), but our concern is that social workers have tended to adopt entrenched positions which make it difficult to get fully inside or outside the arguments. Hence positivism, for example, becomes 'a swearword by which no-one is swearing' (Williams, 1976),³ or we are sometimes left with the impression that if only we were courageous enough to 'deconstruct' a problem or take a 'postmodern' position, we would be more than half way to its solution. For both positivists and committed advocates of humanist alternatives the comment often attributed to Augustine is apposite – 'total abstinence is easier than perfect moderation'.

'Paradigm' is a thorny word. Indeed, it has become a 'bucket word' (Popper, 1989) to hold diverse meanings. If we take it in a general sense of 'a basic set of beliefs that guides action' (Guba, 1990: 17) we are only a little further forward. It would give even a mildly tendentious philosopher a heyday with each of the five key words in this definition! How many such 'basic sets of beliefs' are there?

For example, Hammersley, while discussing ways in which quantitative and qualitative methods have been distinguished in paradigmatic terms, convincingly argues that characteristics of each paradigm element in every case can be identified in examples of research conducted under the alternative paradigm (Hammersley, 1992: Chapter 10). Perhaps the most well-known ethnographic voice on this issue is that of Howard Becker. Writing of epistemological issues, he says, 'I think it is

²The reference is to the Welsh doctor–poet Dannie Abse's poem 'Song for Pythagoras', which can be found in his *New and Collected Poems* published by Hutchinson.

³Not quite 'no-one' of course.

fruitless to try to settle them ... These are simply the commonplaces, in the rhetorical sense, of scientific talk in the social sciences, the framework in which the debate goes on. So be it ... There's nothing tragic about it' (Becker, 1993: 219). We should take an empirical perspective on such matters, treating them as 'a topic rather than an aggravation' (ibid., p. 222). But we should beware the paralysing effect of too much methodological discussion. 'We still have to do theoretical work, but we needn't think we are being especially virtuous when we do' (ibid., p. 221). Rather than regard such theoretical work as the responsibility of all qualitative researchers, he is content to view it as a specialism – the profession of 'philosophical and methodological worry' (ibid., p. 226)!

Yet we should not underestimate the relationship between epistemology, values and methods. People's actions, in research as much as in any other activity, *are* shaped by values and worldviews, and paradigm positions do *not* inevitably tend to intolerance of others. We agree with Greene when she dissents from the methodological pragmatism that avers epistemological purity does not get research done. Rather, 'epistemological integrity does get meaningful research done right' (Greene, 1990: 229).

Knowledge claims and mixing qualitative methods

A helpful way of laying out one's own preconceptions for scrutiny is to think what claims to knowledge can plausibly be drawn from different methods. Figure 1.1 illustrates in simple terms how there is a range of questions that surfaces through comparisons of qualitative and quantitative methods. Yet we think it will prove more helpful in the context of this book to look at differences *within* the general portfolio of qualitative methods.

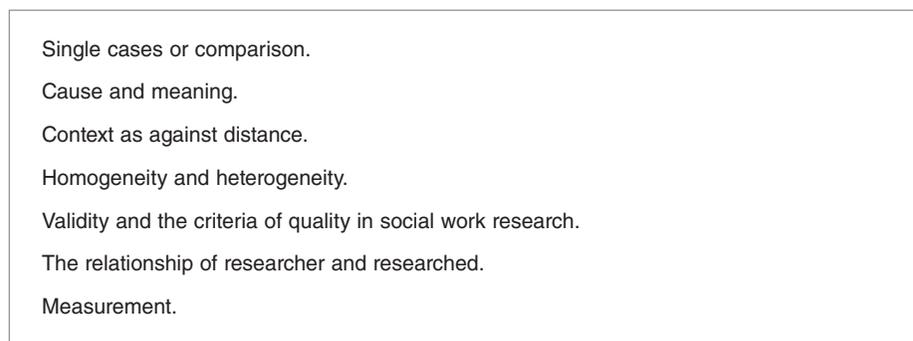


Figure 1.1 Qualitative and quantitative methodology: A range of questions

We refer in a later chapter to the work of Bornat and Bytheway (2012) on archival materials. They helpfully distinguish 'recorded time' (time as part of the record of the course of life), 'formatted time' (time as present in datasets) and

'told time' (how time is represented in the development and telling of stories). They then compare two different qualitative methods and suggest how each lends itself to different potential knowledge claims.

EXAMPLE 1.3**Comparing Datasets in Terms of Temporality**

	LIFE HISTORY INTERVIEWS	DIARIES
RECORDED TIME	Retrospective. A focus back over the whole life, dating events and sequences	The 'here and now'. A focus on the events of successive days
FORMATTED TIME	Oral. A comparatively brief interaction between researcher and subject; including a sequential exchange of questions, answers and comments	Written. A sequence of dated entries produced over an extended period of time by a lone individual
TOLD TIME	Autobiographical. The interviewee's story of the life as lived and remembered	Biographical. Stories of unfolding, often collective experiences, told in the words of the diarist.

Source: Bornat and Bytheway (2012).

Analogous conclusions can be drawn from an earlier study of professional decision making, in which the authors set out the different qualities of interviewing and observation methods as part of a study of professional decision making when people are to be offered a place in a home for the elderly. Their interests were in aspects of the micro-processes of decision making, and to understand discretion and variations in such decisions (McKeganey et al., 1988).

As part of a comprehensive comparison, extracted in Example 1.4, they concluded that it was difficult to use observation to focus on individual decisions because decisions occur across several contexts. Interviews, by contrast, can cover every decision point. Interviewing was also judged stronger as a means of triangulating accounts by different professionals. However '[t]here may be a tendency for interviewers and interviewees to concentrate on only the formal components of the decision making process', whereas 'one of the benefits of observational work is precisely the capacity to focus attention upon the informal aspects of professionals' decision making' (ibid., p. 16). This formal/informal aspect was also reflected in their judgement that taken-for-granted dimensions of decisions may be harder for people to articulate in interviews, and better accessed via observation. Interviews may tend to recreate past decisions as if they were more rational than in fact they were. McKeganey and colleagues conclude that observational work can tap the more chaotic character of present decisions. Finally, they believe that professionals

may use private decision categories that include moral or pejorative aspects – perhaps especially when the demand for a service outstrips the supply and they are obliged to ration. They concluded that interviews would be less likely to disclose these elements, and that observation would at least problematise the grounds of decision making.

EXAMPLE 1.4

Interviewing or Observation for Evaluating Professional Decision Making

	INTERVIEWS	OBSERVATION
DATA LEVEL	Individuals	Processes
DECISION POINTS	Multiple	Few
TRIANGULATION OF ACCOUNTS	Strong	Less strong
COMPONENTS OF DECISIONS	Formal	Informal
ROUTINE DECISIONS	Less strong	Strong
NON-DECISIONS	Weak	Weak
RATIONALITY/NON-RATIONALITY OF DECISIONS	Overstate rationality	Strong on non-rationality
DISCLOSURE OF PRIVATE ACCOUNTS	Less strong	Adequate

Based on McKeganey et al. (1988).

However, Schwandt plausibly reasons that ‘it is not readily apparent what “mixing” so-called paradigms or philosophies means or how that might be accomplished.’ Mixing ethnomethodology’s concern with the accomplishment of routines with symbolic interactionists’ focus on the meaning of social life can go so far in that they share some concerns, but otherwise they are not compatible and employ ‘different means to generate and analyse different kinds of data’ (Schwandt, 2007: 165). We remain hesitant about the naïve pragmatic position that mixed methods – and especially those that bridge quantitative and qualitative strategies – will almost always yield optimum results. The position that is likely to prove most creative for social work research is that described by Greene and Caracelli as *dialectical*. This position accepts that philosophical differences are real and cannot be ignored or easily reconciled. We should work for a principled synthesis where feasible, but should not assume that a synthesis will be possible in any given instance. This represents,

a balanced, reciprocal relationship between the philosophy and methodology, between paradigms and practice. This ... honours both the integrity of the paradigm construct and the legitimacy of contextual demands, and seeks a respectful, dialogical interaction between the two in guiding and shaping evaluation decisions in the field. (Greene and Caracelli, 1997: 12; c.f. Mertens and Hesse-Biber, 2013)

We avoid a partisan position on traditions and schools within qualitative social science. Nonetheless, we believe that social work researchers have been unduly selective in their awareness of developments in qualitative methodology. For example, in the next section we argue that qualitative social work research should be more strongly grounded in an understanding of and puzzling about issues of context. We also think that the concentration of qualitative research on the local, the small scale and the immediate has sometimes mistakenly been taken to justify an individualising approach to practice and research. This may follow from a misreading of what is entailed in a commitment to understanding matters from the actor's perspective. Wolcott, for instance, is cautious about saying he wants to understand things from the actor's perspective. 'It is system qualities I seek to describe and understand. To attempt to understand a system is not to claim to understand or be able to predict the actions of particular individuals within it, oneself included' (Wolcott, 1990: 146).

Qualitative *social work* research

We usually think of 'research' and 'practice' in precisely that order. Social workers and those with and for whom they work are regarded as the beneficiaries, often reluctant, of the outcomes of research. Researchers are taken to be the experts, while social workers are expected to dutifully 'apply' the results of expert inquiry to their practice. 'Findings' – data, practice prescriptions, evidence-based outcomes, assessment and prediction tools, generalisations and occasionally theories – are presented for implementation, often in the form of 'key lessons from research'. It is small wonder if practitioners quail at the very thought of the latest dose of expert knowledge. We explore the practice–research relationship fully in Chapter Fifteen.

We are persuaded that social work practice, human services and service users, and social work management, create and sustain rich and diverse agenda for the practice of qualitative research. These agenda commence from the problems and practices of social work rather than those of research methodology. In turn, the diverse, inter-related cluster of methodologies that makes up qualitative research challenges and recasts the conventional image of the relationship between knowledge, skills and values in social work. 'Knowing' and 'doing', research and practice, are not two wholly distinct areas that need mechanisms to connect them, but are to a significant degree part and parcel of one another.

Research in context

Qualitative research is largely bare of meaning when stripped from its context. At its most general, research occurs in time and place. More specifically, it frequently occurs in a context of social work *practice*, a point we develop in the next chapter. Yet practice is not homogenous. There are different organisational contexts *between* and *within* social work agencies.

Research also springs from and in large part is enacted within the *academy*. The university standing of qualitative research varies considerably between countries. It has been relatively dominant, for example, in parts of Europe and less so in much of the USA. It is not easy or even advisable to separate the context of the academy from that of the city. Chicago offers a good example of this. Chicago University was founded in 1890 as a Baptist institution by William Harper, its first president. He wanted the university to be marked by fundamental research, training and the improvement of society. The city of Chicago was central to much of this development. 'All of social life was here and being investigated by sociologists' (Plummer, 1997: 8). Plummer expresses it nicely as a place where 'a world of strangers and danger merges with a world of diversity and innovation. Here was the pathos of modernity' (Plummer, 1997: 7). The image of the city is writ large on the research of the time. This story has been told amply from sociology's orientation, but similar stories can be told for social work. An almost lost major project on Chicago housing was undertaken in the 1930s by Edith Abbott and associates (Abbott, 1936). In ironic counterpoint to Abbott's life-long teaching and advocacy of statistical strategies, her research accounts reveal a rich sense of ethnographic purpose, via graphic, novelistic descriptions of different neighbourhoods. In the final chapter, Example 16.4 exemplifies such realist writing.

Finally there are contexts of *politics* and also of *race*. Social work's links to mainstream political parties have been part of a submerged agenda in the history of social work. A social work colleague expressed the political context of British academic social work as follows:

My take on this ... is that Labour Party membership is part of a pragmatic political engagement and I would see a connection here to social work research. In social work and in the critical social sciences as a whole I come across a lot of people who talk a radical talk and see themselves as very much on the left, but they aren't politically active – aren't involved in any local or national political organisation but channel their supposed radicalism solely into academic work ... I prefer the idea of mundane pragmatic political involvement to try and improve a few things in small ways. The same would go for social work research. I think the rhetoric of radicalism has its place but is usually less effective than getting your hands dirty – doing research commissioned by government for example, commissioned evaluations and so on. There's a common position here, I think, of pragmatic ameliorative politics.⁴

Contexts, however, are more – much more – than the collaborative endeavour of peers. One weakness of some interpretive sociology has been 'a failure to examine social norms in relation to the asymmetries of power and divisions of interest in society' (Giddens, 1993: 164). Giddens argues 'that the creation of frames of meaning occurs ... in terms of the differentials of power which actors are able to bring to bear ... *The reflexive elaboration of frames of meaning is characteristically*

⁴Personal communication.

imbalanced in relation to the possession of power ... What passes for social reality stands in immediate relation to the distribution of power (Giddens, 1993: 120, emphasis in original). This underlines the central importance of both language and structure in grasping the significance of social work contexts.

Giddens summarises his argument as follows. Language is a *condition* of the generation of speech acts, and also the unintended *consequence* of speech and dialogue. Language is *changed* by speech and dialogue. He sees this as being at the heart of the process of what he calls 'structuration' and as reflecting the 'duality of structure' – 'as both condition and consequence of the production of interaction' (Giddens, 1993: 165). Hence 'structure must not be conceptualised as simply placing constraints upon human agency but as enabling' (ibid., p. 169), and structures are neither stable nor changing. 'Every act which contributes to the reproduction of structure is also an act of production, a novel enterprise' (ibid., p. 134). We explore in Chapter Nine how corresponding arguments apply to the importance of *written texts* in social work contexts. Texts can only be understood in context (Scheff, 1997: 4.4). As with settings and structures they are not fixed entities. Qualitative research and analysis can counter these tendencies by emphasising the spatial, temporal and practical contingencies associated with the texts. These contingencies entail the same interplay of intention and structure that we have already noted.

If the centrality of context pushes us uncompromisingly to explore intentions, structures, language, power and written texts, it also presents us with the problem of what we mean when we talk about 'cases'. The term 'case' is still part and parcel of the everyday language of social workers when talking about those who willingly or reluctantly use their services. Practitioner researchers also commonly use it if they describe their research as a 'case study'. In both instances an awareness of 'context' is vital. Suppose a social worker is asked to describe what makes a 'good client'. In the following extracts two social workers are identifying the grounds they draw on when supporting their belief that work had gone well in particular 'cases' (Shaw and Shaw, 2012).

'The client was positive and wanted to find other things to do instead of offending, so there was more of a rapport ... There were goals that were set by both of us ... he was the one who was coming up with them ... He was motivated to improve ... he was part of the working agreement ... he was the one who was keen to assess what was happening.'

'She was coping with the bereavement, trying to contemplate being a single parent ... She was able to talk about the kind of support she would have ... she was beginning to plan ... she was talking about her deceased husband in quite a healthy way. She was clearly projecting into the future rather than dwelling in the past. So really she was measuring herself in a way which I would have looked at as well.' (Shaw and Shaw, 2012: 328)

'Measuring herself in a way which I would have looked at as well' seems to be the key phrase. Here is someone who in effect approaches problem solving with

the same set of assumptions as the professional – where partnership is possible, but perhaps on the social worker's terms.

We should not assume that practitioners will always view 'good clients' in this way. It is possible, for example, that good clients will be seen as those who clearly fit the 'gate-keeping' criteria for an agency as a clear-cut child protection case. They may also be 'good clients' in the sense of 'presenting' an interesting problem that matches the professional interests and agenda of the practitioner. In every instance the definition of a 'case' is context-dependent. Once again, the inference emerges. Cases are not fixed empirical entities of a general category – objects waiting to be found. It is more often true that they are waiting to be 'made' (Atkinson and Delamont, 1993).

It is precisely at this point that qualitative inquiry has something to offer to both practice and research. It is *contextualised* usefulness that social workers and managers need, and not 'decontextualised statistical power' (Braithwaite, quoted in Smith, 2005). This is because it is context that provides meaning rather than the 'universalised generalisations' that Riessman eschews. Smith concludes that context matters, and 'it makes little sense to try to understand a special project without reference to the local environment which sustains it (or fails to do so) (Smith 2005: 116).

In the next chapter we explore further questions that arise when we consider qualitative *social work* research.

Taking it further

Task one

Read the two pieces referenced below. Consider – either as a solo exercise or in small groups – the differences in the kind of questions they ask and the approach to the research. How well do they correspond to the characteristics of symbolic interactionist and ethnomethodological research as outlined in this chapter?

Hall, Tom (2001) 'Caught not taught: Ethnographic research at a young people's accommodation project', in I. Shaw and N. Gould (eds), *Qualitative Research in Social Work*. London: SAGE Publications. pp. 49–59.

Forsberg, Hannele and Vagli, Åse (2006) 'The social construction of emotions in child protection case-talk', *Qualitative Social Work*, 5(1): 9–31.

Task two

Turn to Chapter Sixteen and read Example 16.4 about Edith Abbott on Chicago tenements. If you can locate this long-ago book, find the chapter quoted from here and read it. Then find and read the article by Martin (2007). Megan Martin reports on findings from a research project that took place in

2006 on the border between two neighbourhoods on the east side of Detroit. The project addresses the stark racial, economic and physical divides between two adjacent communities. Alter Road serves as the real and rarely crossed border between the communities. Martin walked again and again across this boundary making notes as she did so.

Martin, Megan (2007) 'Crossing the line: Observations from East Detroit, Michigan USA', *Qualitative Social Work*, 6(4): 465–75.

How does the urban context for Abbott's and Martin's projects shed light on how we should think about 'context' when undertaking qualitative social work research? Can you find echoes of these questions in neighbourhoods and urban areas known first hand to you?