# Qualitative Approaches and Methods in Social Research: An introduction

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Galant's (in preparation) analysis of interview data with medical and educational researchers suggests the possibility of two research 'attractor states'. The first places an emphasis on the techniques of sampling, data collection and analysis; the second is primarily concerned with the interpretive frame that is deployed. In each case, the principal concerns of the other are very much secondary, or even absent in the researchers' discourse. The technicians (my term) claim to be aiming to access the world as it really is and this endeavour requires the use of particular methods. The interpreters, on the other hand, are imaging the world from the perspective of their chosen interpretive frame. The rationale for the technicians' approach appears to be clear and to be concerned with discovery. That for the interpreters is less obvious: if their research presents us only with interpretations according to their selected theory—this is what the world means if you look at it from this point of view—and if the selection is at the discretion of the researcher and so might just as well have been otherwise, then what is the point of attending to, far less funding it? Well, the formation, maintenance and destabilising of meaning is precisely what human agents—people—are concerned with and this is the case in school classrooms, medical consultations, romantic liaisons, domestic arguments, parenting, parliamentary debates and in academic arguments. Furthermore, our actions are generally directed towards the institutionalising—at whatever level of analysis—of these meanings, foregrounding privileged meanings, obscuring opposing meanings, aiming at the constitution of alliances and oppositions. We saw this in the recent UK parliamentary debate—carried over into the mass media—concerning the proposal to extend air strikes into Syria. Both sides—and there are generally only two—polarised the argument: those in favour of the bombing presented it as the only alternative to their opponents' strategy of doing nothing to combat the Daesh threat; those against claimed that air strikes alone would do nothing to defeat the enemy. Of course, no one was suggesting doing nothing and nor was anyone claiming that the air strikes would win the war, but these were the straw soldiers into which the debaters plunged their bayonets.

That we engage in strategic action—and I want to claim that this is all that we do—does not entail that our strategies always or even generally have the impact that we intend or that are implied, because we inhabit a complex strategic space. The alliances and oppositions that are formed maintained and destabilised, visible in terms of their regularities of meaning generating practice are better thought of as emergent upon the totality of action. If we want a quiet

life, then best to go with visible alliances/oppositions: with cliché. If we want to do something creative, then we're asking for trouble!

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Qualitative research, then, is concerned with the generation and dissemination of interpretations. In this sense, it might be said to share something fundamental with fiction; let's say literary fiction, rather than cliché. Indeed, Michel Foucault claimed (cannot recall where) that all that he was doing was producing fiction. Fiction as such, can recruit the term in defence of what are inevitably weak claims on 'reality', though sometimes there is ironic play. This is the beginning of the title sequence for the Coen brothers classic film, *Fargo* (literary fiction in another mode):

> THIS IS A TRUE STORY
>
> The events depicted in this film
> took place in Minnesota in 1987.
>
> At the request of the survivors,
> the names have been changed.
>
> Out of respect for the dead,
> the rest has been told exactly
> as it occured.

It's some time since I saw the film, but I can't recall there being any—certainly not many—survivors and it's difficult to see how the dead told their story 'exactly as it occurred' [sic]. In any event, a movie, a novel, even a documentary report is of necessity a recontextualisation of that which it only apparently depicts: the telling of a story 'exactly as it occured' is not meaningless—nothing is—but it is an impossibility.

Research also necessarily recontextualises its object: there is, ultimately no accessing the world as it really is, unmediated by meaning-making. Nevertheless, we seem to demand stronger claims on 'reality' from research than from fiction—literary or otherwise. A part of this expectation is perhaps the explicit presentation of interpretive frames. It might be thought that the interpretive frame incorporates or determines methodology. This configuration, though, places too great a reliance on the voice of the researcher and insufficient on the voices of the actual and potential data sources. If research claims to be empirical, then the researcher and their selection of interpretive frame or frames must come under interrogation and this interrogation is provided by a methodology that has some autonomy, that owes at least some allegiance to another alliance. Interpretive frame and methodology are both essential players in research and Galant's research asks us to consider the extent to which the technicians, though strong on method are weak on theory and the interpreters are strong on theory, but weak on method, suggesting directions for research education in both camps.

Ideally, research of any kind will involve a transaction between theoretical and empirical fields and this transaction will be mediated by methodology. Elsewhere (Dowling & Brown, 2010) I have termed the particular region of the empirical field that is active in any given project the 'problematic', that region of

general claims and debates that is closely associated with the empirical research interest of the project. Here I want to make a distinction between the theoretical and the methodological, so I am going to refer to the specifically theoretical dispositions that are to be brought to bear on the research as the theoretical sensitivity—a recontextualisation of Glaser (1978, see also Dowling, 2012). Suppose, then, that we are interested in language acquisition and development. There is a range of literature that conceptualises language in different ways and that might appropriately sensitise our research. Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, for example, theorise language as constitutive of thought: there can be no thought as such without language. The relationship between language and thought is conceptualises differently by Lev Vygotsky (1986, see also Daniels, 2012, Dowling, 2014) for whom language—or rather speech—is a tool to be recruited in the structuring of thought. Vygotsky distinguishes between spontaneous and scientific concepts and the dynamic space between these states might be thought of in terms of another of his categories, the zone of proximal development. Alexander Luria (1976)—a colleague of Vygotsky—investigated and conceptualised the relationship between social, cultural and cognitive development and this work was picked up and developed by Basil Bernstein (1971) in his sociolinguistic theory of speech codes and their role in social and cultural reproduction. Shirley Brice Heath (1986) was also interested in the role of language in social and cultural reproduction, here concentrating on language use rather than on speech codes. William Labov (2001) proposes that the reproduction of dialect is achieved primarily through maternal activity and that the bottom-up—in terms of socioeconomic status—dynamic of language development is largely down to upwardly mobile low ses women. Edward Hall distinguishes between high and low context languages. M.A.K. Halliday (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) has introduced functional linguistics that understands language in terms of its modes of social and cultural deployment. The twentieth century (post)structuralist dynamic interprets the value of linguistic elements in terms of their systemic relationality within more or less closed (Saussure, 1972 edn) or open (Baudrillard, 1993; Derrida, 1978) systems and I have described Michel Foucault's (1970, 1972) 'archaeology' as constituting 'discourse' as an operation upon language (Dowling, 1998). Theoretical sensitivities constituted as recontextualisings of one or more of these or other conceptualisings of language will bias—an inevitability—research in language acquisition and development in different ways and will suggest differently to us the kinds of relations, events and processes to look for, but will not determine how to generate or, in any substantial way, to analyse data; that is the task of methodology and it is methodology that facilitates the dialogue between the empirical and the theoretical and, ultimately, it is methodology that warrants (Toulmin, 2003) our arguments.

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So what is methodology? Well, it is the field of academic knowledge that is concerned with, centrally, issues and problems relating to gaining access to empirical settings, sampling strategies, data collection techniques, approaches to data analysis, dealing with contingencies, and research ethics. I want to say just a little about three of these areas: sampling, data collection, and data analysis. In

respect of the former, it is important to appreciate that qualitative research generally is not aiming to generalise from a sample to a population, but rather to identify and describe, perhaps to explain, processes and structures relating to the empirical setting that is being studied. It is, of course, appropriate to do one's best to ensure that the setting is explored as fully and as appropriately as is possible given the resources available and the strategies of theoretical sampling (originally from grounded theory) and purposive sampling are useful in this respect. However, a good deal of qualitative research deploys opportunistic sampling, because that is what the research situation allows. The processes and structures that are identified following data collection and analysis do not predict the outcomes of subsequent research on related themes and in related settings, but they do form part of the theoretical sensitivity in these subsequent pursuits and so can legitimately claim to contribute to knowledge. Because qualitative research is not seeking to generalise from a sample to a population, then the issue of representativeness has to be thought about differently. Certainly, we are not attempting to generate a sample that exhibits the same structure as the setting from which it is drawn. That is not to say that the membership of the sample may be arbitrary; rather, our theoretical sensitivity and the preliminary analysis of data collected early on may suggest directions that sampling might take: if one's preliminary reading suggests that gender may well be an important variable in one's research, then it may be important to include a range of gender identities in one's sample; after having interviewed three or four members of a community in an ethnographic study, it makes sense to reflect on preliminary analysis in considering who to speak with or what to observe next. Similarly, in engaging in an interpretive phenomenological analysis or a narrative analysis of the experience of undergraduate studies undertaken in a language that is not one's first, then it will clearly be important that subjects having had appropriate experiences are selected. In general, though, there is no reason to attempt to ensure that, for example, there are equal numbers of males and females in one's sample. Similarly, there is generally no reason for deploying random sampling, this being a strategy designed to maximise the probability of generating a representative sample.

Data collection in qualitative research generally follows a different pattern than is common in quantitative work. Interviewing, for example, is generally more responsive in qualitative research. The researcher will not, for the most part, prepare a list of interview questions or attempt to ensure that each interviewee receives the same questions. Rather, the questions that are asked will depend on interviewee responses to previous questions. This being the case, the interviewer may prepare only an initial question to get started and proceed by making use of probes in order to access more information. The researcher may have an idea of the general areas that they wish to cover and may make a short list in advance. These areas, however, will often arise naturally in what should feel, to the interviewee, like a conversation. It is often going to be the case that each interview in a series will be unique in terms of both questions and responses. Similarly, observation in qualitative research generally will not involve an observation schedule. The researcher may have a clear idea of what they are looking to observe, but may also want to be open to the unexpected. A useful technique in making observation fieldnotes is to use a page divided into two columns. The researcher records a chronicle of events on the left (say) and

uses the righthand side for comments and preliminary analytic remarks etc. There is a very wide range of data collection techniques that have been used in qualitative research including the use of group interviews (sometimes particularly appropriate when interviewing young children) and focus groups. The latter strategy differs from the group interview in that the researcher presents a stimulus at the start—a short reading or movie clip or a series of photographs or audio recordings, etc—in order to encourage discussion amongst the group rather than themself taking the central role of questioner. The use of video recording in group interviews and focus group discussions can make it far easier to identify contributors for the purposes of transcription. Other data collection strategies include photo-elicitation—asking for responses to visual images (not only photographs)—or asking subjects to photograph or otherwise record aspects of their lives and experiences. Harry Daniels (1995) asked school students to consider how their maths teacher and then how their art teacher would want them to describe a picture that they were shown in order to access the students' principles of recognition relating to the two subjects.

Finally, a brief word on data analysis. I am entirely with the grounded theorists—and in particular, Barney Glaser (see Martin & Gynnild, 2011)—in insisting on letting the data speak. This is not to say that it speaks for itself, analysis is always a transaction and the details of that transaction must be revealed in the presentation of the research findings. Analysis, however, should be an educational process, educational, that is, for the researcher. It should not be simply the projection of what is already 'known' onto a data set. One way to assist the data to speak is to begin analysis with open coding, which is to say, working through the data, line-by-line (or any appropriate segmentation) and assigning codes on the basis of what is suggested by the reading. A masters student of mine performed this process on a handful of interview transcripts and ended up with about 150 codes. Making use of constant comparison, however, she reduced this initially unmanageable set to, as I recall, about six, which formed the basis for her very distinguished dissertation. In terms of the codes that are generated, my own preference is for binary oppositions. It is often suggested that continua would be more appropriate. Strictly qualitative analysis, however, does not involve enumeration, which is necessary if the level of measurement is to go beyond the nominal level: continua and spectra and even ordinal measurement depend upon there being a metric, which will be absent in qualitative research. I generally offer a simple set of questions to deploy in qualitative data analysis, whatever the nature of the data:

- What is put together in the data?
- What is kept apart?
- What hierarchies can be identified?
- What trajectories can be identified?