

## CHAPTER 14

# UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE IN CONTEXT: PROFESSIONAL UNCERTAINTY

**EXEMPLAR** Roger Gomm, 'Uncertain minds or uncertain times? Uncertainty in professional discourse' (written for this volume)

<b>What you need to understand in order to understand the exemplar</b>
What strengths a naturalistic observation study has over an interview study. <i>See Chapter 16, section 3</i>
The general idea of 'grounded theory', including the terms 'grounding', 'deriving theory from data', 'theoretical sampling' and 'constant comparison' and 'deviant case analysis'. <i>See Chapter 16, section 4</i>
'The linguistic turn in qualitative research'. <i>See Chapter 16, sections 5 and 6</i>
The exemplar does not describe how the data were analysed, but this was along the lines described in <i>Chapter 16, section 6</i>
For terms which are unfamiliar, try the index.

## Introduction

The exemplar for this chapter has been written for two purposes. The first is to illustrate the use of a grounded theory approach to collecting and analysing data (Chapter 16, section 4). The second, and quite independent of the first, is to illustrate the kind of qualitative research which treats linguistic data as evidence of what people are doing with words when they utter them, rather than as evidence of 'beliefs', 'attitudes', 'interpretive frameworks', 'cognitive structures' or something similar, lying behind the words (Chapter 16, sections 5 and 6). The topic of the research is the assessment of health visitor

students, but the paper is written to be relevant to a wide range of circumstances in which people utter expressions of uncertainty.

The paper concentrates more on telling the story of the research than on justifying its findings. To correct some of this shortfall readers may like to know that the data for the study were collected with the author as a participant observer, playing roles he would have played had he been engaged in research or not. At different times and in different places this meant doing research from the position of an internal examiner, external examiner, chair of an examination board, as a colleague to other participants and as a teacher of students. Data came from six colleges and were collected over an eight-year period. This may seem a very long time, but educational assessment consists of a cycle of events, each event of which is relatively short and happens only once a year. Data were collected from both the formal events of assessment, such as examination board meetings and viva voce examinations, and from interchanges in corridors and staff rooms. The author made no secret as to his research activities, but with the large number of people involved it is doubtful if all of them were aware of this, and, of those who were, most probably forgot this for long periods of time. The context was one in which doing research on one's ordinary activities was common and well understood. Some assessment events were audio-recorded, but most of the data were collected in the form of long-hand notes in order not to have to engage in protracted negotiations to gain permission to tape record, and not to disrupt events by so doing. During the more formal events the author concentrated on accurately recording short interchanges of talk chosen as relevant according to the way his theoretical framework was developing, noting who made them (recorded by role rather than by personal name) and when they were made in the context of the event. This could be done without disruption since most such events involved people taking notes. Immediately after an event he made diary notes on its more general features. Here agendas and other tabled papers provided useful *aide-mémoires*.

These are not ideal ways of recording data for studying the use of language in context but are less problematic when a researcher has a clear idea of the kind of data he or she is looking for and where events of the same kind happen over and over again. By the time someone has observed a hundred viva voce examinations, for example, they will have a pretty clear idea about their more usual features and of the kind of things to listen out for in the hundred and first. Given the danger of selecting data to fit a theory, it is particularly important to search for disconfirming instances and, as the exemplar makes clear, in this research much was learned about the usual from events that were exceptional: from deviant case analysis.

The research also involved the analysis of documents, such as student assessment work and reports on students, some recording of



teaching events and a series of interviews with staff. The latter, however, added little to the research and are not referred to here.

## UNCERTAIN MINDS OR UNCERTAIN TIMES? EXPRESSIONS OF UNCERTAINTY IN PROFESSIONAL DISCOURSE

Roger Gomm

### Introduction

Uncertainty has been a long-standing theme in studies of professionalism and professional socialisation. At one level this idea has furnished an explanation for the existence of professional occupations as such. They are, it has been argued, the kinds of occupations which arise in society wherever there are important uncertainties: the unpredictabilities of life and death, of God's will, of engineering failure and so on. Such circumstances, it is claimed, either require highly skilled people to manage them on others' behalf (Parsons, 1950), or, alternatively, provide opportunities for charlatans to make a good living out of other people's uncertainties (Malinowski, 1935; Radin, 1935; Childe, 1959; Ilich, 1977) and who are not averse to creating uncertainties to enhance their power (Friedson, 1975; Davis, 1960). Or again, on the more benign interpretation of professionalism, it has been argued that because people are made vulnerable by uncertainties, those occupationalists who deal with them have to be bound by professional codes of conduct to prevent them from exploiting the vulnerable (Parsons, 1950), thus explaining a defining characteristic of a 'profession'. On a smaller scale the uncertainties allegedly inherent in professional practice have been cited to make sense of professional training as a process of learning to manage and otherwise cope with uncertainties (Fox, 1959, 1980 but see Atkinson, 1984), and, of course, the very idea that professionals make decisions in the face of extreme uncertainty, aggrandises such occupational groups; for only very special people could be expected to do so successfully.

The uncertainty featuring in this paper is the uncertainty expressed by staff involved in health visitor education in assessing students as to whether they should be recommended to receive a licence to practise, though it reached back into uncertainties as to whom should be given a place on the course in the first place (Gomm, 1986). As a researcher, I was struck by the fact that when staff were asked to offer an opinion about a student their responses often bordered on the incoherent:

*Tutor 1:* Jane Marshall, do you think, I mean, will she/

*Tutor 2:* Hhhh, mm well, you know with some of them, some of them like Jane, well, there are some where it is very difficult to tell.

Most student health visitors seemed to be 'like Jane', about whom it was 'difficult to tell'. Or at least they seemed to be like Jane some of the time, whereas on other

occasions staff would issue detailed, definitive and sometimes apparently dogmatic judgements about students. Again, throughout a year-long course health visitor tutors and often other academic staff would issue doubts about whether this or that student would 'make a health visitor', or whether 'a lot of them would fail this year'. In fact, so few students ever failed that one would have thought that 'making a health visitor' was a forgone conclusion, not something to be uncertain about on such a grand scale.

Uncertainty manifested itself in numerous ways, but perhaps the quickest way to convey a sense of it is to say that often people behaved as if appearances were persistently misleading where students were concerned. Thus a student's performance in a viva examination could be a true reflection of that person, or due to the stress of the situation; what a student wrote in an essay might be a reflection of that student's ability, or perhaps evidence of a helpful spouse or a lucky find in the library; a student's expressions of enthusiasm might be evidence of that student's commitment to health visiting, or of an attempt to ingratiate themselves with the tutor; apparent vocation might turn out to be an artefact of the peer group of which a student was a member; a poor performance now might be evidence of a 'slow starter', a good performance now of a someone who would peak too soon – and so on, such that every kind of evidence was treated as ambiguous. And staff had a fund of stories citing particular students who had seemed to be thus and thus, but turned out to be otherwise.

### Uncertainty as a state of mind

Given the long-standing interest in uncertainty in studies of professional socialisation this uncertainty talk intrigued me. And so, of course, did the occasions when staff seemed certainly to know about their students. For me this raised questions about when, or how or why, staff claimed certain knowledge about their students, and when they did not. Initially I framed the problem in terms of uncertainty and certainty being 'states of mind'. Thus, when people spoke uncertainly I heard this as evidence that they didn't know about students, or that what they knew was complex and confusing and didn't lead them to any definite conclusion. This was a mistake, but I ask the reader to bear with me for a while.

Something which is often associated with a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) is a policy that the researcher should not import and impose inappropriate categories from elsewhere. Where possible, analysis should be in terms of the way in which the people studied themselves classify and categorise what they experience. Among the possibilities for explaining the distribution of certainty and uncertainty, one was that staff were certain about some kinds of student and uncertain about others. Here to ground the research in local understandings meant finding out what categories staff classified students into and what criteria they used to do so.

In an attempt to investigate this I used Kelly's repertory grid technique (Kelly, 1955; Norris, 1983). To elicit local categories of student this entailed interviewing staff by presenting them with the names of three students and asking what two of them had in common but where the third differed – and then asking about another three students and so on. Enthusiasts for the repertory grid claim that after ten or so rounds of the game, respondents run out of categories, and begin to cite the same criteria over again. Then the investigator has acquired a limited set of



descriptors which are important in the way in which respondents structure their own experiences, and the researcher can use the same categories to structure the analysis of the data.

In other contexts I have used Kelly's technique successfully, as have other sociological researchers (Nash, 1976 for example). In this case it failed dismally. First, staff did not run out of descriptors to indicate similarities and differences between students. Second, different staff used different descriptors. There seemed to be no common culture with stock terms or ideas about students. One premature explanation I came up with for the widespread doubt was that it derived from staff having such rich and complex schemes for classifying students on so many multiple dimensions that it was unsurprising that they never came to any definite conclusion. But that threw no light on the occasions when judgements were made with no expressions of doubt at all.

The purpose for using the repertory grid technique was to provide a foundation for the process of constant comparison in terms of locally meaningful categories. Here this would have meant looking for examples, or creating them in interviews, of interesting permutations. For example: same staff member talking about students of the same local type; same staff member talking about students of different local types; different staff talking about students of the same local type; or more elaborate permutations such as different tutors talking about different students of the same local type, in terms of different assessment-relevant topics – for example, competence in communication skills or ability to make relationships.

In processual terms, doing constant comparison meant looking out for new data according to the comparison of the moment, or re-analysing data already collected. In fact, none of this led anywhere interesting, except perhaps some data about when staff made uncertain or certain judgements, as you will see.

### Certainty as a commitment

The problem lay in conceptualising uncertainty as a state of mind. The solution came through taking the linguistic turn (Potter and Wetherell, 1994) and thinking about what people are doing with words when they make certain or uncertain utterances. What people do when they make certain utterances is to commit themselves to a position. Once committed to a position people are in jeopardy of being judged wrong, or incompetent, sometimes immoral, sometimes disputatious (Goffman, 1981: 142). This jeopardy is avoided by uncommitted speech. Uncertain utterances are one kind of uncommitted speech, but so also is 'for the sake of argument' speech, 'devil's advocate' speech and 'on the one hand, but then again on the other' speech or 'if I put this hat on' speech. And there were plenty of examples of these kinds of speech around. The subjects of the research were staff in their roles as assessors of students, employed allegedly for their particular skills in this regard. Every time assessors utter an assessment, they make themselves available for assessment by others as to their expertise in making judgements and as to their fair-mindedness.

Avoiding making definitive statements evades the problem of uttering a judgement with which others will disagree (Schiffrin, 1990) and in terms of which one might be judged adversely. But it also creates the risk of being seen to be confused, evasive and so on. However, in the culture of health visitor education it was a matter of common agreement that assessing health visitor students is a very difficult

and complex task. More blame attached to expressing a certainty with which others disagreed than in avoiding making a definitive judgement – well, most of the time.

### Certainty and uncertainty as states of play

Of course, sooner or later, usually later, definitive judgements had to be issued about students. Marks had to be assigned, reports written, distinctions, merits and credits awarded. For health visitor assessment to work, eventually uncertainty had to be put aside and certainty installed in its place. Having re-conceptualised uncertainty and doubt as speech acts the important issues became those of *when* certain and uncertain utterances were made, and *in whose hearing*. I came to think of these respectively as having to do with the *temporal* organisation of assessment, and the *social structure* of assessment events.

From this point, the theoretical sampling for constant comparison took a different slant. Previously it had been about types of staff, types of student and types of criteria for judging students. Now it was about different occasions in the sequence of assessment on the one hand, and different audiences for judgements about students on the other. Readers can imagine how this proceeded from the earlier discussion, but two examples will illustrate the importance of the temporal order of assessment and its social structure.

The first example concerns the marking of written papers. Students sat examinations which were then marked by an internal examiner – a member of staff at the institution to which the students were attached. The marks were regarded as provisional until scrutinised by an external examiner and then ratified by an examination board. Externals did sometimes query the marks. They usually did this with great delicacy, off-stage, informally with the examiner concerned. Encounters of this kind were often prefaced with long sequences of talk by the external about how difficult it was to mark students, about how he or she couldn't be sure but . . . , and responded to with agreements by the internal examiner. A shared agreement as to the inherent difficulty of assessing students constituted a facility through which agreement to change the marks could be reached without externals pulling rank on the one hand, or internals losing face on the other. Usually the marks were adjusted. However, when the marks were presented formally to the examination board they were almost never subject to any query. The idea that there might have been, or remain any doubt about them was nearly always banished from such occasions. Even on two occasions where an internal examiner had refused to amend marks in line with the externals' judgements, the externals made no comment about this in the examination board or in their reports.

A second example comes from the viva voce examinations to which students were subjected as the last act of assessment. Students were given viva voce examinations by an external and an internal examiner. Each student was then discussed. Examiners found it very difficult to begin these discussions. They typically began with sequences like this:

*External:* Well, hmm I don't know, you know I always think its very difficult to get a rounded impression in a half-hour viva

*Internal:* Yup, but I don't know about you but she hmm sort of kept her end up fairly well.

and then proceeded rather awkwardly towards a consensus as to why the student deserved to be granted a licence to practise. Or the interchanges might begin with



a joke, the person taking the first turn with a joke angling the other into the position of being the first person to issue a judgement: though often the response was a joke capping the first. There was a great deal of humour at the beginning of these discussions.

It is worth remembering here that the number of students who were failed at viva was so small that uncertainties as to whether a student should pass or fail in a real sense were minimal. But, of course, for each examiner what was uncertain was the opinion of the other as to the particular strengths and weaknesses of the candidate. They played their cards close to their chests until each had disclosed enough to the other to allow for a prediction as to the kind of judgement to which both would agree. By contrast with these discussions marked by uncertainty, at the following examination board, both or one of the examiners would usually make very 'certain' statements about the quality of each student they had seen: judgements from which doubt was entirely banished. Though on several occasions examiners disagreed with each other in their post viva discussion, only on three occasions (out of 540 possibilities) was such a disagreement aired in the examination board.

In terms of its temporal organisation, the assessment system could be seen as a set of stages where uncertain utterances about students were preferred, followed by episodes where a definite judgement was made. After this, it was not only unusual, but could be objectionable, for someone to query the judgement by making remarks indicating that they were uncertain about the grounds for or the adequacy of the decision. After decisions ratified by the examination board, even in informal situations colleagues were inclined to censure each other for suggesting that such and such student shouldn't have gained a merit, or had 'pulled the wool over the examiners' eyes'. Informal settings allowed more latitude than the formal occasions of examination board meetings, but even here people were likely to signal the deviance of doubt by prefacing their own expressions of doubt with phrases such as: 'I know it's naughty of me to say so but . . .' In passing, it is perhaps worth noting that it took some effort for me not to lapse into the naive assumption that what people said in more informal and friendly settings was closer to what they 'really' believed, than what they said in the more formal and public situations. For one thing, how could it be known whether this were true or not, when all that can be heard are words and not beliefs? For another, there is no evidence available that we are less likely to adjust our speech to please our friends, than we are to do so for strangers or superiors.

The temporal organisation of assessment intertwined with its social structure. The most important point at which doubting became objectionable was *after* an external examiner had issued a definite and public judgement, or had nodded in agreement at a definitive judgement issued by someone else. External examiners' last words made it objectionable to raise doubts any further. Similarly, when staff issued judgements in a sequence that would end with the external's 'last words' they typically provisionalised and raised caveats and allowed room for the external to issue a contrary judgement: doubt before an external's last words – certainty afterwards.

When sociologists write of social structure they are usually referring to grand structures of social class, ethnicity, gender, age and such like. But in looking at the use of language in context the important social structure is the one that manifests itself through the way in which people take turns, by what topics can be raised by one kind of person and not by another, by who can interrupt whom, who can speak

longest without interruption, and whose utterances close a topic off from further discussion. In health visitor assessment, external examiners had superior speaking rights compared with others, but there were other interesting features of the immediate social structure as well. For example, many of the important events of assessment were chaired meetings, where chairs managed the taking of turns and the length of turns taken. The most usual resource for this was subject expertise. Through the way in which the chair managed turn-taking the structure of the curriculum manifested itself as a social structure of speaking rights. Thus when the issue was a 'sociological' one, the chair nominated a sociologist to speak, when a 'health visiting one', a health visitor tutor. Doctors, though having a superior status outside the context of assessment, only had superior speaking rights with regard to 'medical' issues within it, and here still deferred to chairs in meetings and to externals even on medical topics, even though externals were not doctors. People would often signal their down-status position at a particular point in time, as in 'I know I'm not a psychologist, and this might be a silly question but . . .' as a preface to some comment querying the judgement of a psychology examiner. Subject experts would also disclaim the relevance of their own expertise:

*Sociologist:* Sociologically speaking that is a bit dodgy, but this is an assessment for health visiting, so I'm not inclined to be precious about this.

Signalling a willingness to be overruled allowed externals free play to have 'the last word' without seriously contradicting anyone.

In the local social structure of health visitor assessment, gender, ethnic and age differences between staff seemed largely irrelevant. What was important was, on the one hand, who someone was in terms of the curriculum – which gave them primacy in issuing judgements about some topics and not others according to what was relevant at the time – and who someone was in the hierarchy running from externals downwards, externals having the right to make the final judgement about something, chairs of board exercising the right to determine who had a say about it at a particular point in time.

### Deviant cases

This picture was pieced together through the process of constant comparison, constantly asking the question 'who says what about what or about whom to what audience and when in the sequences of assessment?' Valuable data came from unusual events. Deviant cases are particularly useful for testing grounded theory. It is often very difficult to see what rules of conduct people are following, until someone breaks the rules and this is signalled by an objection, a complaint, a raised eyebrow, or back-stage gossip. Thus my views on the importance of occasions for putting an end to doubt were greatly strengthened by observing people's reactions to one external who wouldn't commit herself to definitive views when recommending that students should pass. She said things such as:

Given it's such an uncertain business, I suppose we had better say that is a pass, but I sometimes wonder.

This kind of utterance would have passed without notice outside the examination board meeting, but her performance in the examination board at a time when



certainty was required eventually led to unpleasant scenes with the chair of the board, and a request by the college for her removal as an examiner.

Again there were examples of staff being given disciplinary interviews for arguing with the external, severe reactions to people who tried to revisit decisions already made and recorded, and an unpopular external who instead of hovering about the quality of viva candidates immediately announced her views and imposed them on the internal examiner. Deviant cases then test a general hypothesis such that 'if such and such is the rule then there should be an observable reaction when someone breaks it'.

### Generalisations

One of the generalisations which might be drawn from this study is an epistemological one to the effect that hearing people expressing uncertainty is not necessarily to be taken as evidence of their uncertainty of mind about the topic concerned. Indeed, I observed people moving from one context in which they disclaimed any clear idea about a student, quickly to another in which they issued judgements about the same student without caveat. More generally still, I would claim that hearing people say anything about anything is not necessarily a good guide to what they generally think, but may be a good guide to what they think is sayable in the current context.

The purpose of grounded theorising is to produce a theory from the data gathered in one place which will explicate situations in other settings. When the grounded theory takes a linguistic turn the generalisations are about what people accomplish with language in situations that arise quite commonly. One very broad generalisation along these lines is that uncertainty of utterance can facilitate consensus (Schiffrin, 1990). Serious dissensus only arises when people commit themselves to positions and invest themselves in a particular version of the truth. While people remain uncommitted by their speech acts there is room for the development of a consensus position without anyone 'backing down' or 'being overruled'. Externals, for example, almost never had to say anything publicly which could be regarded as 'overruling' other examiners, and a fiction that the views of all examiners were of equal weight could be maintained. Again, in diverse settings it is not uncommon to find situations where what the truth will be will emerge as a consensus, where there is some embarrassment or other penalty for individuals 'getting it wrong' but where no one can predict what the others will say. Uncertainty talk is characteristic of such situations. Silverman demonstrates this for interviewer talk following job interviews (1973), Myers (1991) for maintaining cohesion in scientific teams, and social psychology has provided much evidence of this, though usually expressed in terms of 'group pressure' following the tradition laid down by Asch (1940).

The research reported here also draws attention to organisational devices for producing 'certain' judgements and committing people to them. The legal system provides the premier example, where once a verdict has been reached it can result in severe penalties for people to behave as if the truth were otherwise (Atkinson and Drew, 1979). My own earlier study of the use of poison oracles to settle disputes in East Africa is another example (Gomm, 1974).

Among these devices is the time-tabling of doubt and certainty such that there comes a point when a definite judgement must be made and people committed to

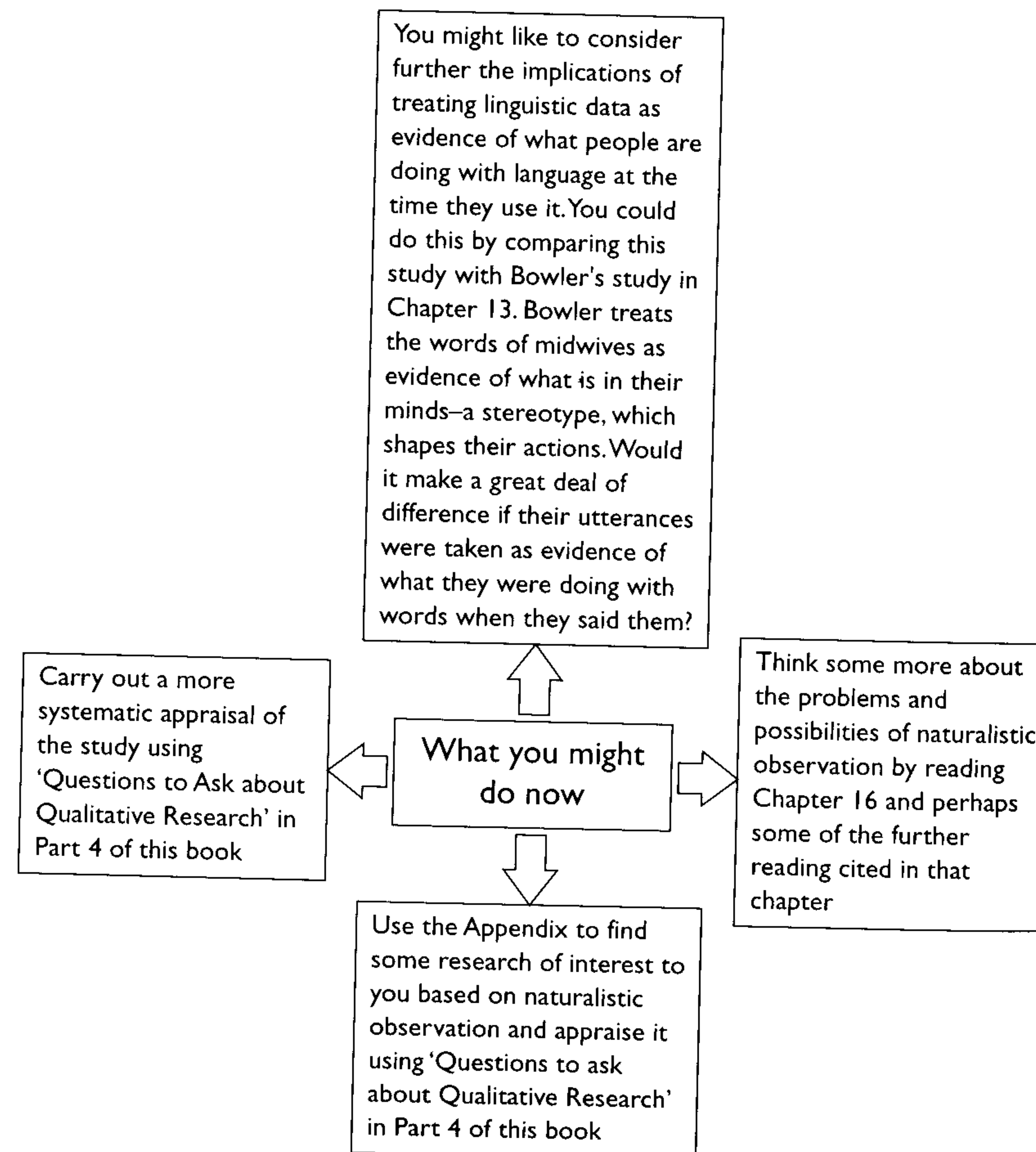
it, sometimes irrespective of the quality of the evidence on which the judgement is based. Indeed, social life as we know it would be impossible if all decisions had to wait until there was evidence which convinced all those party to the decision (Dennett, 1988). Another device is the allocation to some functionary of the right and the duty to 'have the last word': judge, referee, consultant, team leader, boss, external examiner. In the case of poison oracles, the 'last word' goes to the chicken, who dies or survives. The research which led to Glaser and Strauss developing grounded theory also had elements of this (1964). They were investigating the situation of patients who might, or might not have a terminal prognosis, who were trying to discover what their prognosis was. One of the factors impeding their search for information was the reluctance of nurses or junior doctors to answer patients' questions without knowing what the consultant had told or would tell the patient (see also McIntosh, 1978). In this regard investigating the distribution of utterances of certainty and uncertainty provides insight into the social production of truth: or rather, into the social production of what it is that all good members of the organisation should treat as true in the situation concerned, and who has the right to say what this is. Whether people believe this or not is something of a side-issue, because even if research could produce certain knowledge of what people believe, knowing this would be an inadequate basis for understanding what they do.

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### What you might do now



## CHAPTER 15

# ACTION RESEARCH: APPLIED QUALITATIVE METHODS IN THE FAMILY CENTRE

Winter, Celia (1996) 'Creating quality care for children in the family centre', *Educational Action Research*, 4 (1): 49-57

EXEMPLAR

What you need to understand in order to understand the exemplar
The general idea of 'action research'. <i>See Chapter 16, section 9</i>
Where claims are made about cause-effect relationships, the importance of having clear characterisations of the situation before and after the intervention. <i>See Chapter 5, section 10</i>
The difficulty of demonstrating cause-effect relationships convincingly without experimental control. <i>See Chapter 5, sections 1 and 3</i>
The importance of providing readers with information as to how the data were collected and analysed so that they can be evaluated. <i>See Chapter 16, section 7</i>
Insofar as the action research is presented as a model to follow, the importance of specifying very clearly exactly what actions were taken. <i>See Chapter 5, section 7</i>

### Introduction

The major purpose of 'action research' is to effect some worthwhile change. In that sense its major objectives are those of practice rather than research. The research aspects of action research have to do with recording and analysing what happened in order to explain why, and perhaps to provide a clear model for others to follow in order to produce similar results. Thus it is possible for a piece of action