

Qualitative Data and the Subjectivity of 'Objective' Facts

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Research fails unless it engages with subjectivity

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Traditional research directs its attention outwards, onto individuals who are not seen as doing research. They are often assumed to be different from us 'real researchers'. When we call them our 'subjects' in research studies we are often only using a codeword to cover up the fact that we treat them as if they were objects rather than human beings. Quantitative methods which rely on organising data statistically lead us to this way of looking at individuals and their problems. This is not to say that quantitative methods necessarily make researchers dehumanise people, but there is a powerful tendency for the systematic fracturing and measurement of human experience to work in this way. That approach also fits with the surveillance and calibration of individuals in society outside the laboratory. Of course, there are researchers who use statistical approaches to combat this, and they try to empower their 'subjects' (*see*, for instance, Chapters 9 and 10), but they then, of course, have to turn around and look at what the research itself is doing.

This is where qualitative research perspectives are helpful, for they can help us tackle what quantitative researchers say about objectivity and their attempt to see statistics as simply dealing with 'objective facts'. If we do that, then we will see that what research usually takes to be a problem – subjectivity – can actually be turned into part of the research process itself. This would have to be a research practice that studied and conceptualised how the inevitable messiness of social life worked itself through in our action and experience in the world, rather than attempting the rather hopeless task of trying to screen it all out to get a crystal-clear 'objective' picture of the 'facts' that are really there underneath.

Interpretation in qualitative research

Qualitative research is essentially an interpretative endeavour. This is why researchers working in this tradition are often uneasy about including numeric data in their studies or in using computer software to analyse material (*see*, for an example, Chapter 12). This queasiness about numbers is understandable, but there

is no reason why qualitative research cannot work with figures, with records of observations or with statistics as long as it is able to keep in mind that such data do not speak directly to us about facts 'out there' that are separate from us. Every bit of 'data' in research is itself a representation of the world suffused with interpretative work, and when we read the data we produce another layer of interpretations, another web of preconceptions and theoretical assumptions. Numeric data can help us to structure a mass of otherwise incomprehensible and overwhelming material, and statistical techniques can be very useful here, but our interpretations are also part of the picture, and so these interpretations need to be attended to.

Most social research is still deeply affected by empiricism, in which it is believed that the only knowledge worth having in science is that obtained by observation through the five senses (and only the five). Laboratory-experimental models which are used to study social issues by predicting and controlling behaviour and measuring it against the behaviour of people in 'control groups', for example, is empiricist (Harré, 1981). A guiding fantasy of the researcher is that he or she is making 'neutral' observations. The conceptual apparatus of hypothesis testing and falsification in research developed by Karl Popper (1959, 1963) is often wielded by social researchers in defence of 'objective research' of this kind against any use of theory, and especially against theories they particularly dislike (such as psychoanalysis or Marxism). This is ironic because Popper actually argued for the importance of theory, not as a fixed and final form of complete knowledge but as necessary to enable us to structure our observations so that we might develop a better picture as to what the world is like.

What most quantitative research tries to forget when it pushes aside Popper's arguments about the role of theory is that there is always an *interpretative gap* between objects in the world and our representations of them, there is always a difference between things and the way we describe them (Woolgar, 1988). How we conceptualise that gap is a difficult issue, and there are a range of different positions in traditional philosophy and recent discourse theory to account for the way meaning is produced and structured, and how and where it is anchored (Bhaskar, 1989). This is not the place to go into that further now. The point is that research conventionally deals with the problem by wishing the gap away. This 'interpretative gap' returns to haunt research, though, and so we need to take it seriously rather than pretend it is not a problem. Definitions of qualitative research which have attempted to respect interpretation rather than wish it away have been cautious about providing a final finished account of what this alternative kind of research is. In one case in psychology (for another, see Chapter 8), then, three different overlapping definitions are offered, in which it is

- (i) An attempt to capture the sense that lies within, and which structures what we say about what we do; (ii) An exploration, elaboration and systematisation of the significance of an identified phenomenon; (iii) The illuminative representation of the meaning of a delimited issue or problem. (Banister *et al.*, 1994, p. 3)

When we interpret and reinterpret a social issue, we are always bringing ourselves into the picture, and so this is where reflexivity becomes a crucial aspect of the research.

Reflexivity

An attention to reflexivity is sometimes the most difficult aspect of research to tackle because it seems to strike at the heart of the researcher's scientific self-image. That scientific image is often supported by appealing to a 'positivist' account of what real science is (Harré, 1981). Positivism is the dominant approach in much research, and this insists that what we must do is 'discover' things about the world, and treat these things as 'facts' that are independent of us. We are told that empirical observations will identify them and statistical techniques will arrange them in the right order. Positivists often seem to believe that one day we will have set all the facts in their place. This view of science is challenged by philosophers of science and many scientists themselves (Harré and Secord, 1972), but the positivist search for little hard bits of the 'real' still goes on in much mainstream research. Statisticians can too easily be recruited to this endeavour if they do not reflect on what they are doing (see Chapter 13).

Once again, Popper is recruited to this positivist image of research to defend it against what is often scornfully called 'speculation'. This too is ironic because Popper was himself hostile to positivism, and argued instead that although theoretical frameworks could approximate to the real, they could never finally arrive there. He challenged the idea of total knowledge as arising either from steady fact-gathering or from an all-encompassing theory. There is something very valuable in his account of theory generation and rational discussion. Good statistical research is a part of that process, and this should be at the heart of how we understand ourselves and how we develop a reflexive critical consciousness of our place in the world. This brings us to a concern with subjectivity and social change.

Subjectivity

Researchers coming across qualitative methods for the first time usually respond to the argument that subjectivity is important in research by saying that they would like to be 'subjective' in their research but that they still have, at the end of the day, to produce an 'objective' report. We need to take care, though, for this kind of response falls straight into the trap set by positivist research. The discourse of positivist research positions the researcher such that he or she experiences the issue as if it must entail an opposition between being 'objective' and being 'subjective'. Instead, we should insist that the contrast which concerns us is between '*objectivity*' and '*subjectivity*'. There is something specific about the nature of subjectivity which differentiates it from the 'merely subjective'. And to put subjectivity at the heart of research may actually, paradoxically, bring us closer to objectivity than most traditional research which prizes itself on being objective.

It is worth stopping for a moment to reflect on the way in which the discourse of positivist research stretches subjectivity and objectivity apart and polices the opposition to devalue interpretation and reflexivity (Parker, 1994). Let us look at two ways in which the opposition is policed.

Zero sums and 'neutral' positions

First of all, the opposition is treated as if it were a zero-sum game, as if the more you have of one the less you can have of the other. The more objective you want to be, so the story goes, the less intuition should be used, the less strongly you should allow yourself to feel about the material. Likewise, if you are making use of your subjective responses to the material, then it seems as if you must necessarily have lost some of the objective value of the research in the process. We are made to play some peculiar rhetorical tricks along the way here, and we call the objects of our research 'subjects' at the very same time as we operate as if we ourselves were objects with no feelings about what we are doing to others. What this process of splitting in research does is to cover over the way in which *our* position enters into research investigation whenever and wherever we do it. If you think about the effort and anxiety that being 'objective' involves, you will quickly realize that you are always doing a lot of emotional *subjective* work.

The very difficulty that some researchers have in maintaining a distance from their objects of study is testimony to the experiential entanglement that starts the minute a research question is posed. Distance and neutrality are themselves aspects of a particular, and often bizarre, subjective engagement with the material. This problem here is made all the worse when that engagement is denied, when we pretend that we think we must have no feelings about the issue we are researching. There is no escape from this, but it is possible to address it by turning around and reflecting upon the subjective position of the researcher. We could think of the paradox here in this way: that the more we strive towards objectivity the further away we drive ourselves, but when we go in the opposite direction and reflect upon our sense of distance we travel towards a more complete inclusive account. In this way objectivity, or, rather, something more closely approximating to it, is approached *through subjectivity* rather than by going against it. This way of addressing subjectivity might seem a little too much like an individual meditative answer to the problem, as if it were a weird paradox from Zen Buddhism. Let us turn to the second aspect of discursive policing that research engages in to keep subjectivity out. Then we can show how that attention to subjectivity is not simply a kind of delving into the individual self for some mysterious inner truth.

Embedded objectivity and reflexive positions

Positivist research discourse maps subjectivity and objectivity onto an opposition between the individual and the collective. This is the way the trick works. Subjectivity is assumed to be something which lies in the realm of the individual, while objectivity, in contrast, is seen fundamentally as a property of the social order. So, individuals are supposed to have intuitions and idiosyncratic beliefs about things, and they can try to bring these into order by positing hypotheses and testing them out. Meanwhile the collective, embodied in and exemplified by scientific institutions, absorbs knowledge into a statistically arranged system of truth. A fine balancing act maintains this mapping on both sides of the split between individual subjectivity and collective objectivity, and if either the individual or the collective departs from its assigned position and fails to show those expected characteristics it is quickly and efficiently pathologised. For example, if an individual is too certain about an opinion and starts to take the standpoint of someone with

objective truth, then that is seen as some kind of madness. On the other hand, if a collection of people starts to act as if it were endowed with agency and seems to be expressing a will to act in certain ways, then it too is seen as having gone mad (Reicher, 1982; Billig, 1985). In protest movements, individuals who resist too firmly – where they are operating as if they were objective – and crowds that act with too much will – as if they had a subjectivity – are pathologised. This is, in part, because the opposition between the objective and the subjective is itself starting to break down. But even without this breakdown, we can see signs that the mapping of the objective only onto the social and of the subjective only onto the individual is a mistake. Conceptions of self, for example, that are so different across different cultures are formed out of *social* resources, and they are constructed in relation to others (Shotter, 1993). Investigations of language-learning, memory and cognition in psychology have long indicated that such apparently individual processes are impossible without a network of people around the subject (Middleton and Edwards, 1990). Many of the characteristics that we attribute to individuals, then, are in fact a function of social relationships, and, in turn, social institutions are often modelled upon images of the self. There is, then, an interplay between the two sides of the equation – the individual and the social, and the subjective and objective – that is difficult to disentangle.

Now, the point is that the attempt to approach an objective standpoint through an employment of subjectivity should not be seen as a journey into the private interior of the individual researcher. Rather, reflection upon the position of the researcher is a thoroughly *social* matter and it involves the recruitment and mobilisation of networks of people. There is a progressive demystifying dynamic in this reflection which leads towards an engagement with others as part of the research process, and we always need to formulate our research goals *with* those we are researching. Our research will often involve participation and empowerment of a collection of people who are drawn in to produce a type of knowledge that will be useful because it is *connected* to them. The limits to this involvement of others are set, of course, by the institutions in which we conduct research, and the groups involved may be restricted to other researchers. This is a political problem that we need to signal here, something a researcher should reflect upon in any kind of enquiry, but we will have to leave it at that for the moment; other chapters in this book take up this issue, including Chapters 7, 12 and 13.

'Objective' facts

What we can do is dispose of some of the obstacles that bedevil traditional researchers, and we can treat their problems as opportunities rather than as threats. The activity of the researcher is treated as a problem, for example, in the literature on 'experimenter effects' (Rosenthal, 1966). The neutrality of the investigator was thrown into question by a series of studies which showed that the hypotheses and presence of the experimenter could be so powerful as to shift the data in the desired direction. Techniques which try to solve this problem by increasing the distance between researcher and researched just make it worse, and they certainly make action research, which involves people in studies of their own activity, impossible. We need to say that of course the researcher affects participants, and is affected by them too in return. Rather than trying to prevent that happening,

though, we need to look at *how* it happens and what clues that gives about the nature of the phenomenon under investigation.

We then need to address, as a matter of course, the moral position of the researcher, something that is usually set apart as a peculiar optional extra in traditional research. An ethics checklist is sometimes added onto the research plan as if it were something to be considered *after* the study had been designed. Now, rather than the researcher permitting themselves the luxury of qualms of conscience in an idle moment, as if ethical issues arise only as minor technical hitches, their subjective involvement is something that must be treated as part of the material under study as a moral question from the start.

Finally, we are able to take due account of the role of language in the research process. Empiricism, which leads the researcher to focus only on observable behaviour, and positivism, which leads the researcher to collect only small discrete chunks of data to be processed statistically, together make an engagement with language in research impossible. Many qualitative researchers would argue that since language is the stuff of human experience – that subjectivity is, in large measure, constituted in language – such empiricist and positivist assumptions lead us away from research reality. They are right, for research reality is, in many important respects, *discursive*, and the subjectivity of the researcher is implicated in the same language games as that of the researched (Parker, 1997). This is why I have referred to the work that positivist discourse plays in leading us into traps which try to make us suspicious of subjectivity. And bringing ‘I’ and ‘we’ and ‘you’ into the narrative of this chapter is an important part of the story. Qualitative research that takes subjectivity and interpretation seriously, then, also demands a new language, a different discourse and different kinds of subject position. Then facts are no longer ‘objective’ simply because they are in statistical form. Instead, they become things which we understand as embedded in a social world that we continually reproduce, and so they can be transformed as *we* and *you* reflexively connect the process of social research with the people who are represented within it.