

Qualitative methodologies: ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory and more

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Aim of session:

- To introduce some of the applications of qualitative methodologies to research questions the philosophical basis that underlies the qualitative methodology such as ethnography, phenomenology and grounded theory
- To advance knowledge of key approaches to qualitative or descriptive research

Learning Outcomes:

By end of session students should be able to:

- Be better equipped to make discerning choices about the appropriate methodology and analytic approach to their topic of enquiry.
- Appreciate the contribution of these kinds of description to our knowledge of the social world

Qualitative methods

There are a great many of these, so I shall have to be selective. I'm sure you'll find more, but some of my favourites are:

Ethnography

'The ethnographer participates overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for extended periods of time watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions. In fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on issues with which he or she is concerned' (Hammersly & Atkinson 1983, p.2).

'The social research style that emphasises encountering alien worlds and making sense of them is called ethnography or 'folk description'. Ethnographers set out to show how social action in one world makes sense from the point of view of another' (Agar 1986, p.12).

How did it start? Various traces can be found within the history of ethnography and qualitative methodology:

- 1) Henry Mayhew – 'London Labour and the London Poor' – massive ethnographic study of low paid, unemployed, homeless etc. in Victorian London.
- 2) Mass Observation Movement in the 1930s.
- 3) Dissatisfaction with positivism in 1940s and 1950s social science in US.
- 4) Dissatisfaction with mainstream psychology in 1970s.
- 5) Dissatisfactions with quantitative enquiry in health and medicine.

Aims at: accepting the criticism that all observers are also participants who also reflect, order, interpret, give meaning to events in terms of their existing culturally available beliefs BUT endeavours to subject all data to systematic enquiry wherever doubts about explanations for events exist. The goal is understanding.

Belief: that all extensions of knowledge are extensions of existing common-sense; that we all reflect on our common-sense knowledge, work with it, recognised limitations and possible errors, and try new lines of approach/ argument.

Paradigm: common-sense knowledge refined through systematic enquiry.

Methodology: Recognise our part in the social world as reflexive social actors.

- Observe (in any way available) the phenomena we seek to understand, recognising the limitations of our observations.

- Apply hypotheses explicitly showing how they are derived from existing, culturally available understandings of the context of events.
- Test hypotheses against data. Identify gaps, problems, alternative explanations.
- Gather further data of relevance to filling gaps, resolving contrary arguments.

Knowledge: Systematic enquiry extends and develops our common-sense understanding through the reflexive examination of our existing 'world views'. Knowledge is always tentative, partial and socio-culturally generated in relation to circumstance, but is not merely relative.

E.g. Larsen's (2007) study of people undergoing treatment for psychosis. As one of his participants said:

I think that I have been guided in the right direction. Like if you imagine that I was in a black tunnel, and I then got a light to follow . . . then I have come out again. That sounds very grand [flot]!

[Laughter]

JAL: Yes, it does sound grand. What is that light you got to follow, what do you think, what was that?

This . . . this about having healthy thoughts and . . . well, and . . . also this about that there is a life after the psychosis, and things like that. Because when I was discharged [from the psychiatric ward] everything was just black for me, you see. And I was suffering from delusions and racing thoughts [tankemylder] and things like that. And OPUS has helped me to . . . to see that there was a way out. It is like OPUS has been the light to guide me towards wellness [raskheden], you see.

JAL: Can you say something about what it is in OPUS that has done this?

I think it is both SST and the case manager, and then medication, of course. But, you see . . . the medication did not do it all, because I was also medicated when I was discharged, and then I was completely flat [flad]. I could not even, I mean . . . I just felt that my life was lost [tabt pa gulvet], and couldn't manage anything . . . and, and things like that.

JAL: What is it then you have got through SST and the case manager, which . . . what has made the difference?

I have regained the belief that . . . or not 'regained', but, you see, there is also another life than the normal, what you call 'normal', you see, this about having a permanent job, and things like that.

There is a little group of Danes, who live a bit differently and, in fact, feel all right about that . . .

(Larsen, 2007: 341)

It's controversial: Some people dismiss it as inappropriate for scientific enquiry, saying it misses the point, that it's 'too subjective', 'journalistic', 'not rigorous'. Other say it's the only way to access the meanings which give form and content to social processes.

It's controversial even among ethnographers: Arguments about whether it involves (a) the elicitation of cultural knowledge (b) the detailed investigation of patterns of social interaction or (c) the holistic analysis of societies or (d) something else, e.g. analysing talk.

Grounded Theory

Essence: Grounded theory (as developed by Glaser, Strauss, Corbin and their co-workers) is an attempt to develop a set of strategies for conducting vigorous qualitative research. It uses inductive strategies for analysing data. The researcher begins with no pre-existing theory, hypothesis, or expectation of findings but rather permits a theory to emerge directly from the data – that is, the theory is grounded in the data. The aim of the approach is not only to describe well the topic of study but also to develop adequate theoretical conceptualisations of findings. The researcher begins with individual cases (chosen purposely or theoretically, rather than randomly), collects and analyses data simultaneously, conceptualises from the beginning, and allows findings and conceptualisations to grow together and cross-fertilise. One data collection episode (usually an interview) builds on the prior collections and the conceptualisations that have been developed up to that point. The

researchers gathers “thick” data and makes the meanings of the participants explicit. The researcher continues this process until reaching “saturation” (is no longer learning anything new). The researcher’s conceptualisations are guided by his or her theoretical sensitivity (based on unique skills and experiences).

Strengths: The method provides rigorous, systematic, and specific procedures (such as coding and memo writing) that help guarantee the development of theory that starts with and remains close to the qualitative data that are being collected. Researchers can check, refine, and develop their ideas and intuitions about their findings as the data are collected. The method has been used often in many disciplines and for the investigation of many topics.

Weaknesses: Most grounded theory works have stopped short of the professed aim of producing actual, substantive, formal theories from which specific hypotheses can be developed and later tested. Usually, the work stops at a prior level of creating rich, conceptual understandings of specific lived human experiences.

NB – the above section on grounded theory has been adapted slightly from Brand, W. & Anderson, R. (1999) *Transpersonal Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. Sage: London.

Discourse Analysis

‘...the study of regularities in linguistic units larger than a sentence’ (Straight 1983, p.157). Centres on studies of text understanding and the knowledge readers must bring to texts in order to understand them; the kind of cognitive processes which go on in comprehending text; the functional use of discourse and interpretive repertoires – e.g. in political and current affairs language - why do we talk of a ‘riot’ rather than a ‘disturbance’ ?

For example, consider the following extract, taken from an interviews with someone who had been arrested as a result of a fight in a nightclub:

- 1 A: ‘cos I was dancing and I was just dancing around and I was
 - 2 dancing with this girl and like I’ve just clipped this boy’s head
 - 3 (1.0) and as I as I’ve clipped him I’ve gone oh sorry mate
 - 4 B: when you say you’ve clipped by accident d’you mean?
 - 5 A: yeah, well I’m not gonna hit someone on the head on purpose am I
 - 6 B: Yeah
 - 7 A: and he’s come across all like that and I’ve gone all right there’s
 - 8 no need to be like that and he pushed me so we just started fighting
 - 9 and his mates got up and there was about four of them I think.
- (Auburn, Drake and Willig, 1995: 375)

Phenomenology

Essence: The phenomenological (cf Husserl, Heidegger) approach aims to develop a complete, accurate, clear and articulate description and understanding of a particular human experience or experiential moment. It achieves its goal through the use of a special investigator stance and approach and through specialised methods of participant selection, solicitation of information, systematic data treatment, and assembling of interview components into a final report.

Schutz (1962, p. 59) says:

‘The world of nature, as explored by the natural scientist, does not ‘mean’ anything to the molecules, atoms and electrons. But the observational field of the social scientist – social reality – has a specific meaning and reference structure for the human beings living, acting and thinking within it.’

Strengths: The phenomenological approach provides a rich and complete description of human experiences and meanings. Findings are allowed to emerge, rather than being imposed by an investigator. Careful techniques are used to keep descriptions as faithful as possible to the experiential raw data; this is accomplished by extreme care in moving step by step and in being ever

mindful not to delete from, add to, change, or distort anything originally present in the initial “meaning units” of the participant transcripts. The investigator attempts to “bracket” presuppositions and biases to hold them in consciousness through all phases of the research and minimise their influence on the findings.

Weaknesses: The method depends on the articulate skills of the participants who provide the information; logistical and generalisation issues are connected with this. The language and terms employed in existential-phenomenological philosophy and phenomenological inquiry are usually obtuse or difficult. Conclusions depend on the particular participants chosen for the study. In its orientation toward a particular time frame or moment, the method may miss information about broader periods or about the development (time course) of an experience. In focusing on a rich description of an experience, the method may miss information about what led up to that experience, what its outcomes or consequences might be, and what the concomitants and other factors associated with the experience are. There is little interest in conceptualising the experience or in “explaining” it.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

IPA is concerned with trying to understand lived experience and with how participants themselves make sense of their experiences. Therefore it is concerned with the meanings which those experiences hold for the participants. IPA is phenomenological in that it wishes to explore an individual’s personal perception or account of an event or state as opposed to attempting to produce an objective record of the event or state itself. At the same time, while trying to get close to the participant’s personal world, IPA considers that one cannot do this directly or completely. Access is dependant on the researcher’s own conceptions which are required to make sense of that other personal world through a process of interpretative activity. IPA is also a strongly idiographic approach concerned with detailed analysis of the case either as an end in itself or before moving to similarly detailed analyses of other cases. IPA is described as ‘exploring the lived experience’ (Reid *et al.*, 2005, p. 20). This type of research utilizes the participants themselves as experts in the chosen phenomenon being analyzed. In its entirety, IPA is inductive in nature, with no pre-existing hypothesis, ‘IPA aims to capture and explore the meanings that participants assign to their experiences’ (Reid *et al.*, 2005, p. 20). Reid *et al.* (2005) also state that IPA is: ‘Interpretive [thus subjective; transparent (grounded in example from the data)] and plausible (to participants, co-analysts, supervisors and the general reader)’ (p. 20).

For example here are some quotations from Hefferon et al’s (2007: 150-151) study of dancers

Respondent A:

It’s a big empty. Whatever happened during the day, whatever is happening before is GONE. It’s totally the music, the steps, myself. It’s like being in your own bubble. You see the people in front and all those people, but you are in your own bubble, you are doing whatever you want to do...what you have been taught to do, what you are supposed to do and you are having a blast with it. You are in your totally secure world of freedom...totally free...when it’s right, your guts are spilling out...all the jitters and the worries...everything is there...but it’s good...the bubble is your world...when you are in it, you are great, you don’t think about it.

Respondent B:

Mentally I don’t really know; I just get carried away. I don’t realize what I’m doing. I’m doing it but I’m so in the moment, but I don’t have any consciousness around me, of anyone else.

Respondent D:

Ummm, just pure enjoyment really; like expressing how you feel right at that moment. I couldn’t say that I am conscious of my thoughts. I am just enjoying the purity of the movement and how it felt for me. That’s how I am sensitive towards that; you are completely comfortable with yourself and relaxed and open to your body and how you approach the movement, then I find that I get to that place.

Symbolic Interactionism

Originated with Mead, Blumer. Involves the view that human interaction is set in a symbolic, largely linguistic world rather than one of causes and effects. In order to understand human interaction it is

necessary to know how the symbols are used. E.g. roses mean different things from daffodils. Concerned with the socially transmitted meanings contingent on role following and self-presentations.

Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology was developed by Garfinkel (1967) and is concerned with the methods people use to carry out everyday activities. An important notion in ethnomethodology is that of 'reflexivity' whereby social activities not only represent the everyday social world but also create it.

"Ethnomethodology extends the phenomenological perspective to the study of everyday social interaction. It is concerned with the methods which people use to accomplish a reasonable account of what is happening in social interaction and to provide a structure for the interaction itself. Unlike symbolic interactionists, ethnomethodologists do not assume that people actually share common symbolic meanings. What they do share is a ceaseless body of interpretive work which enables them to convince themselves and others that they share common meanings" (Pfohl, 1985: 292-293). George Psathas (1995) identified five types of ethnomethodological study can be identified. These may be characterised as

1. The organization of practical actions and practical reasoning. Including the earliest studies, such as those in Garfinkel's seminal *Studies in Ethnomethodology*.(1984, originally published 1967)

2. The organization of talk-in-interaction. More recently known as conversation analysis, Harvey Sacks established this approach in collaboration with his colleagues Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson.

3. Talk-in-interaction within institutional or organizational settings. While early studies focused on talk abstracted from the context in which it was produced (usually using tape recordings of telephone conversations) this approach seeks to identify interactional structures that are specific to particular settings.

4. The study of work. 'Work' is used here to refer to any social activity. The analytic interest is in how that work is accomplished within the setting in which it is performed.

5. The haecceity of work. Just what makes an activity what it is? E.g. what makes a test a test, a competition a competition, or a definition a definition?

Conversation analysis

Conversation Analysis (CA), a research tradition that grew out of ethnomethodology, has some unique methodological features. It studies the social organization of 'conversation', or 'talk-in-interaction', by a detailed inspection of tape recordings and transcriptions made from such recordings. The idea is that conversations are orderly, not only for observing analysts, but in the first place for participating members (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973: 290; Sacks, 1984: 22). This orderliness is seen as the product of the systematic deployment of specifiable interactional methods - 'devices', 'systems', an 'apparatus' - that are used by members as solutions to specifiable organizational problems in social interaction.

As Harvey Sacks put it there was 'order at all points'. Moreover, as far as conversation analysts are concerned that's the only order there is. From the point of view of ethnomethodology and especially conversation analysis, '...the primordial site of social order is found in members' use of methodical practices to produce, make sense of and thereby render accountable, features of their local circumstances ... The socially structured character of ... any enterprise undertaken by members is thus not exterior or extrinsic to their everyday workings, but interior and intrinsic, residing in the local and particular detail of practical actions undertaken by members uniquely competent to do so. (Boden and Zimmerman, 1991, p. 6-7)

These methods have a double-faced characteristic: on the one hand they are quite general, while on the other they allow for a fine-tuned adaptation to local circumstances; in the terminology used by Sacks et al (1978), they are both 'context-free' and 'context-sensitive'.

Hutchby & Woofitt (1998: 1) state that the aim of conversation analysis is to:

'reveal the tacit, organized reasoning procedures which inform the production of naturally occurring talk. The way in which utterances are designed is informed by organized procedures, methods and resources that are tied to contexts in which they are produced, and which are available to participants by virtue of their membership in a natural language community. The analytic objective of CA is to explicate these procedures, on which speakers rely to produce utterances and by which they make sense of other speakers' talk'.

CA researchers insist on the use of audio- or video recordings of episodes of 'naturally occurring', that is non-experimental, interaction as their basic data. This insistence is quite unique in the social sciences and means that some of its most favoured data-sources such as: 1) interview-data as expressions of opinions and attitudes or descriptions of scenes not witnessed by the researcher, 2) observational studies relying on field notes or coding procedures, 3) idealized or invented examples based on the researcher's own native intuitions, and 4) experimental methodologies, are not used in CA. All of these kinds of data are seen as too much a product of the researcher's or informant's manipulation, selection, or reconstruction, based on preconceived notions of what is probable or important (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984: 2-3). Recorded data, instead, are indefinitely rich in empirical detail, which could never be produced by the imagination of anybody.

Strengths and weaknesses of all these approaches

What they can't do: Can't give causal explanations, can't give demographic information (70% of the population see it this way), can't easily give data susceptible to statistical analysis. These (and other reasons) are why some people don't think these are proper methods.

What they can do: Tell us about how meaning is made and used, how people describe it in their own words. Tell us about mutual, cultural nature of life and meaning in informant's lives. They invite us to take social life as an accomplishment rather than a given, whereas normally it might be taken for granted. These methods are often a pilot stage in many studies, or are used in the quest after 'depth' in market research, as a supplement to or precursor of questionnaire research. Qualitative methodology provides us with functional explanations of language uses, behaviour, action. It invites reflexivity about our way of carving up the world, how our analytic system constructs the data, a stage which quantitative analysis is inclined to skimp.

“It's all too subjective” or “Where's your empirical data?”

Getting round ambiguity:

- i) Being systematic in presentation of material – putting in those cases that don't quite fit the idea as well as those that do.
- ii) Having several field observers or coders – do they agree? But there's more to it than that – why do they disagree?
- iii) Pragmatic validation – is it outlandish, does it correspond to what other writers on the same subject have done? Does it make other accounts look impoverished? Why does it diverge from what we know from other research?
- iv) Build the ambiguity in. Ask why the thing is ambiguous in the first place and make that a topic of enquiry.

As Thorne (2000) notes, it used to be a tradition among qualitative researchers to claim that such issues as reliability and validity were irrelevant to the qualitative enterprise. Instead, they might say that the proof of the quality of the work rested entirely on the reader's acceptance or rejection of the claims that were made. If the findings "rang true" to the intended audience, then the qualitative study was considered successful. More recently, nurse researchers have taken a lead among their colleagues in other disciplines in trying to work out more formally how the quality of a piece of qualitative research might be judged. Many of these researchers have concluded that systematic, rigorous, and auditable analytical processes are among the most significant factors distinguishing

good from poor quality research (Thorne, 1997). Researchers are therefore encouraged to articulate their findings in such a manner that the logical processes by which they were developed are accessible to a critical reader, the relation between the actual data and the conclusions about data is explicit, and the claims made in relation to the data set are rendered credible and believable. Through this short description of analytical approaches, readers will be in a better position to critically evaluate individual qualitative studies, and decide whether and when to apply the findings of such studies to their nursing practice.

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