



Silver Market – Silver Methods?

Qualitative Methods and Research on Elderly People
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Part 1: Qualitative Methods



What are qualitative methods anyhow?

- Qualitative methods are **not**:
 - A monolithic methodology based on one single epistemology
 - That is, it is not a structural equivalent to hypothetico-deductive, predominantly quantitative research with its background in critical rationalism
- **Instead** qualitative methods is:
 - A variety of different methods and methodologies rooted in a number of vastly different epistemological assumptions and embedded in varying philosophy of science positions
 - E.g. ethnomethodology, grounded theory, objective hermeneutics, ethnography, ...
 - Based on: Phenomenology, pragmatism, constructivism, critical theory,
- However: A skeptical attitude towards hypothetico-deductive approaches is not the only common denominator among qualitative methods
- A number of methodological principles are more or less shared among these approaches. As for example:



Overview: Core principles of qualitative research

- **Openness**
 - with respect to our informants
 - to the research situation
 - to the methods employed
- **Research as communication**
 - communicative constitution of the informants world
 - active und reciprocal interaction process between researcher and informant
- **Processuality**
 - of the research act
 - but also of the subject-matter
- **Reflexivity**
 - in the constitution of meaning in everyday action
 - but also of subject-matter and analysis in the research process



The principle of openness

- Openness in the situation of generating data
 - When Aiming at the specificity and depth of social phenomena, we need open processes of generating data:
 - Rather than asking “Is it true that” we would ask: “What is going on here?”, that is,
 - **Open interviews** instead of closed questionnaires,
 - weakly structured observation or **ethnography**, instead of artificial experimental settings,...)
 - **Step-by-step development of research question(s)** in close contact with the empirical subject matter/field
 - Process-driven sampling procedures (“**theoretical sampling**”)
- Openness in analyzing the data
 - **No** ex ante hypothesis
 - **Instead:** open-ended iterative hypothesis-*building* throughout the whole project (granting the provisional character of your)
 - Theory-generation instead of theory-testing



The principle of communication

- **Researcher is part and product of his/her subject-matter**
- Contact with the field (rapport) is a matter of communication and interaction
- **Informants are** far from being suppliers of data, they are **subjects that interpret their world**
- The subject-matter of our research will be re-invented and modified throughout the whole research process
- **Researchers and informants jointly ‘construct’ the data** while doing field work
- Methodological consequences: We need to **orientate** our strategies of **data gathering at the structures of acting in everyday life**, since
 - This is the mode in which informants reveal their practical knowledge
 - Practical knowledge being both the expression of informants values and perspectives and base for further decisions (like, e.g. consummation decisions...)



The principle of processuality

- Both our **research and the subject-matter** of our research are **continually constituted**
- It is especially this constitution process that is a core issue of qualitative social research
 - How does meaning come up and is stabilized through interaction processes?
 - How comes that social order – more often than not – is continually being maintained?
 - What happens when this process gets disturbed by whatever kind of crisis?
- **Over the process of research our perspective develops**, that is, our research question(s) will become more detailed or simply move to slightly different aspects.
- Practical consequences:
 - Interview-questions will develop over the course of the data gathering
 - The **focus of observations might get widened, narrowed or shifted**
 - **Additional methods might prove to be necessary** along the course of the research



The principle of reflexivity

- No phenomena can be understood in itself.
- Constitution of meaning and its 'verstehen' (understanding) are in a positive (non-logical) sense circular: They depend on each other
- Consequence: Isolated bits of data cannot be understood and interpreted without context
- Not only the social context where the data originates from is a relevant context: Also our research questions constitutes context with severe impact on the interpretation of our data
- This impact is not taken as critical influence on otherwise 'pure data' but instead as a necessary source of inspiration, because (see above): No phenomena can be understood in itself



Requirements for qualitative research procedures

From the principles presented a number of **requirements for qualitative studies** result:

- Awareness of and openness towards the **actors perspectives** is indispensable
- **Context** needs to be taken into account
 - Processes in the field
 - As well as the process of the ongoing research
- **Theory-generation** is an indispensable process during our research
- Testing of ad-hoc hypothesis through a thorough **search of negative cases** (e.g. analytic induction)



Qualitative versus quantitative?

- One of the most obstinate controversies in the social sciences
 - Is it possible with qualitative data analysis to really explain social reality or is it mere descriptive?
 - Isn't it true that quantitative data analysis is most likely to miss the specifics of social phenomena?
- A lot of legitimate criticism, however: meanwhile this has become a less than fruitful debate (at least as long as we practice it in a wood-cutter manor...)
- For social sciences both positions have resulted in fruitful new directions.
- There is no need for us to take a general decision. It is more that the scientific problem to be solved should lead us to an informed decision about which 'measures to take' and which methods and approaches to employ.



What qualitative research aims at

Qualitative Research both poses and answers to questions that are different from those quantitative research most often deals with:

- „What the hell is going on here?“ (Clifford Geertz, 1973)
- Reconstructing perspectives of various actors and their contribution to processes like
 - Decision-making
 - Problem-solving
 - Structure-building (e.g. producer-consumer relations, markets, milieus, ...)
- While in applied research qualitative studies are sometimes descriptive – as it is true for larger parts of applied quantitative research – qualitative research aims basically at providing at least substantive theories about selected issues that might orientate the problem-solving of professionals in the field.



Part 1: Biography Research



Epistemic perspective of biography research

What is the **purpose of narrative interviewing**?

- Not collecting objective information about a persons biography
- Instead: **Grasping the informants perspective** about how
 - he or she became what he/she currently is
 - he or she experiences certain events in the life course.
- It is about the **piling-up of experiences a person has gone through** and the traces this left in their self-image
- Might contradict objective historical dates: The way actors experience history is different from how science accounts for history.



Narrative Interviews

- One **single but extended initial narrative stimulus** instead of continual questioning
- Precondition: Trust
- Triggers **extended narratives** by the informants (often up to 3 hrs of narrations)
- During main narrative no further input by the researcher (only 'hm')
- Only after this narration: 2 types of questions posed by researcher:
 - Phase 1: **Clearing up inconsistent passages** by triggering additional narratives
 - Phase 2: Evaluative questions triggering the **informants 'theory'** about his/her life
- Aims mainly at
 - situated **reconstructions** of the life history from the **informants point of view**
 - Analysis of **status passages** (e.g. retiring) and other process structures
 - Analysis of the **impact certain historical events** (wars, economic crisis, revolutions) **had on biographies.**
- Originator: Fritz Schütze (Germany)



Biography analysis

While the generation of qualitative data for purposes of biography analysis is nearly exclusively conducted by this type of narrative interviews there is some more variation with respect to the data analysis procedures

- **Narration analysis** by Fritz Schuetze (narration theory based)
- Narration analysis as **sequential analysis** by Rosenthal and Fischer (following procedures of 'Objective Hermeneutics')



Narration analysis (Schütze)

- Basic assumption: When engaged in an undisturbed narration, informants are subconsciously following **implicit rules of narration**.
- The analysts draw especially on three of these implicit rules
 - A **narrative figure needs a certain amount of details** in order to be understood. The more crucial the story, the more detail is needed
 - Once opened, a **narrative figure needs to be closed**
 - („After graduation I went to America. So finally I returned with a bunch of strange experiences.“)
 - In the narrative situation time is too scarce to narrate every aspect of a life story in detail, thus the **narrator is urged to select and condense** his story.
- The way how the narrative follows these rules or how it deviates from them, can be utilized as a means of analysis.



Narration analysis stepwise

According to Schütze narration analysis proceeds in 6 steps:

- **Formal Text analysis:**
 - Separating narrative from non-narrative material (like argumentations, descriptions, anectotes)
- **Defining** and describing **text segments** by both formal and substantial criteria
 - Results in a structural description of the course of the narrative
- **Analytical Abstraction**
 - With respect to trajectories, institutional patterns of biographies, patterns of biographical action, ...
- **Interpretative knowledge analysis**
 - By focusing on how argumentations are related to the narratives, researchers reconstruct the actors/narrators theory of his or her life course
- **Contrasting** analysis of different interviews/**cases**
- Constructing a **theoretical model**
- **The last two steps usually draw on Grounded Theory procedures**



Why narration analysis?

- Schütze: Among all communicative forms, **narration** is the mode that **comes closest to the real experience** of social activity in the perspective the informant lived through it. (Schütze 1987: 14)
 - Different from communicative modes like argumentation, explanation or telling anecdotes, narration conveys a dense texture of references to time, locale and motivation of acting as well as a picture of the actors/narrators frames of orientation
 - While both quantitative and qualitative interviews tend to draw on the rational and reflective layers consciousness, narration has the potential to go beyond these layers
- Lived experience is the key to **understand** actors **patterns of behavior** (including their patterns of consumption)
- Caveat: The way how people deal with **narratives** is **cultur-dependent** , thus for each culture we need to make sure how the practice of narrations is:
 - Do elderly people in Japan organize their narratives the same way as North Americans or Middle European do it?



Part 1: Research *with* elderly people



Doing being old

How to conceptualize elderliness for qualitative and interpretative studies?

- Being old might best be seen as a **social construction**: The **social meaning of biological age is not pre-given**, but constantly negotiated:
 - In vis-à-vis situations
 - In public discourses and media events
 - In rules and regulations
 - In organizational settings
 - In built-infrastructures and product designs
- The same is true for the question of **what it means to be elderly**:
 - (inevitable, a disease, a source of wisdom, being dependent on others, ...)
- This has 2 sorts of **consequences**:
 - **For methods**: What does it mean to do research with the elderly?
 - **For research questions**: What are relevant questions to be researched in the light of elderliness as doing being old?



When our informants are elderly...

- Older people might be **less time constrained** => easier to approach?
- They might tend to **feel more vulnerable** and thus be restrained when it comes to the issue of **trust**. Trust being a precondition for qualitative research, this would be disadvantageous.
- They might have **longer stories to tell**, especially when narrative elements are involved in the data-generation process.
 - Rich source of contextualized knowledge to be researched
 - A challenge for research resources and the complexities of theory-generation
- Elderly people are **diverse**:
 - **Young old people** are more often than not well integrated in social activities, they have more money to spend, they have a higher degree of mobility due to better physical and mental conditions
 - **Elderly of very high age** deviate from this scheme in various degrees. Among them it is more likely to find frail people or those with a difficult mental state. Communication problems might arise from limited auditive or visual capabilities.



Suitable research questions for qualitative studies with elderly people?

As I am not engaged in ‚silver research‘, this part might be a bit speculative, however:

- How do People become ‚elderly‘? What pattern of this construction process unfold in which types of context?
- What are elder peoples perspectives on consummation? How do they go about ‚spending money on things and services‘?
- How are processes of consummation organized in practice when it comes to elderliness?
- ...
- I‘ll leave the development of further research questions to the discussion.



arigato gozaimasu!
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