



PART I

**INTRODUCTION TO
THE THIRD EDITION**





Introducing *Qualitative Research*

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David Silverman

This book seeks to provide a guide to the latest developments in qualitative research. A reader on the Amazon website, reviewing the previous edition of this book, neatly summed up what I aim to do here:

Silverman has compiled a nice collection of papers on qualitative research. Firstly, it covers a broad range of research methods (observation, textual analysis, interviews). Second, they are covered in good depth, starting from the approach (how to think about it) to its practice (how to do it). But best of all, I like the values Silverman espouses in this book. It really gets you motivated to do good qualitative research and gets you thinking about the right things. This book will add to your conceptual and technical 'toolkit' for conducting qualitative research. (Minh Tran, November 2009)

I am most grateful for Minh Tran's comments. I think this third edition is even better. It offers a newly updated introduction to cutting edge issues, written by leading scholars in our field. Chapters from the second edition have been revised by their distinguished authors. In addition, reflecting the changing face of qualitative research in the past decade, the book has been transformed. Ten new chapters have been written for this book so almost half its contents are entirely new. Recognizing the need for practical advice on doing qualitative research, there is an additional part on qualitative data analysis containing seven, highly readable chapters. There are three new chapters on ethnography and, recognising the impact of qualitative research on society, the section on the wider community now includes a chapter on research ethics. Finally, to enhance the reader-friendliness of this book, all chapters contain abstracts, summaries, recommended readings, self-assessment questions and links to relevant websites. Additional material is also to be found on the Sage website (www.sagepub.co.uk).

Like the first edition, this text aims to build on the success of the editor's *Interpreting Qualitative Data* [IQD] (Silverman 2006). Like that book, it was generated by a number of assumptions set out below:

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- 1 The centrality of the relationship between analytic perspectives and methodological issues and the consequent requirement to go beyond a purely 'cookbook' version of research methods.
- 2 The need to broaden our conception of qualitative research beyond issues of subjective 'meaning' and towards issues of language, representation and social organisation.
- 3 The desire to search for ways of building links between social science traditions rather than dwelling in 'armed camps' fighting internal battles.
- 4 The belief that a social science, which takes seriously the attempt to sort fact from fancy, remains a valid enterprise.
- 5 The assumption that we no longer need to regard qualitative research as provisional or never based on initial hypotheses. This is because qualitative studies have already assembled a usable, cumulative body of knowledge.
- 6 The commitment to a dialogue between social science and the community based on a recognition of their different starting points rather than upon a facile acceptance of topics defined by what are taken to be 'social problems'.

Each of these assumptions is, implicitly or explicitly, highly contested within contemporary qualitative research. This is largely, I believe, because such research has become a terrain on which diverse schools of social theory have fought their mock battles. Ultimately, the assumptions set out here try to move the terrain of our field towards an analysis of the everyday resources which we use in making our observations. This point, which is implicit in many of these contributions, is set out in detail in *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting, Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research* [VSB] (Silverman 2007).

Of course, avoiding such battles, in the context of a commitment to a cumulative social science, is far more likely to make our trade appear relevant to the wider community. As we look outwards rather than inwards, with confidence rather than despair, the way is open for a fruitful dialogue between social scientists, organisations, professionals and community groups.

Moreover, it is worth noting that we present ourselves not only to the wider community but also to the students we teach. Both *Doing Qualitative Research* (Silverman 2010) and IQD derive from 30 years of teaching methodology courses and supervising research projects at both undergraduate and graduate levels. That experience has reinforced the wisdom of the old maxim that true learning is based upon doing. In practice, this means that I approach taught courses as workshops in which students are given skills to analyse data and so to learn the craft of our trade. Like many contemporary teachers, I believe that assessments of students' progress are properly done through data exercises rather than the conventional essay in which students are invited to offer wooden accounts of what other people have written.

It follows that I have little time for the conventional trajectory of the PhD in which students spend their first year 'reviewing the literature', gather data in year 2

and then panic in year 3 about how they can analyse their data. Instead, my students begin their data analysis in year 1 – sometimes in week 1. In that way, they may well have ‘cracked’ the basic problem in their research in that first year and so can spend their remaining years pursuing the worthy but relatively non-problematic tasks of ploughing through their data following an already established method.

Like IQD, my hope is that this book will be used by students who are not yet familiar with the approaches involved, their theoretical underpinnings and their research practice. In IQD, student exercises are designed to allow readers to test their understanding of each chapter. In this book, worked-through examples of research studies make the arguments accessible. Moreover, the chapters are not written in standard edited collection style as chapters addressed to the contributors’ peers but inaccessible to a student audience. This means that the presentation is didactic but not ‘cookbook’ in style.

The particular contribution of this reader lies in its assembly of a very well-known, international team of researchers who share my commitment to rigorous, analytically derived but non-polarized qualitative research. Nine US researchers join twelve from the UK, two from Switzerland and one each from Italy, France, Norway, Finland and Australia. While the majority of the contributors are sociologists, psychology, feminist studies, health studies and educational studies are also represented. In any event, I believe that all contributors have succeeded in making their presentations accessible to a multidisciplinary audience.

Rather than denying their own analytic position in favour of some woolly centre ground, these authors have clearly set out the assumptions from which they proceed while remaining open to the diverse interests of their readers. Each has written a chapter which reflects on the analysis of each of the kinds of data discussed in IQD: observations, texts, talk, visual data, focus groups and interviews. Following IQD, each author uses particular examples of data analysis to advance analytic arguments.

The three chapters on observational methods seek to rescue observational work from the pitfalls of mere ‘description’ and lazy coding and towards exciting methodological and analytic directions for observational research. In Chapter 2, Giampietro Gobo shows how observation is the basic tool of ethnographers. Using examples from political science, Gobo demonstrates why, if we want to understand behaviour and interaction, it is not enough to ask questions. We must also observe the routines and practices of social actors. And we can do this reliably and consistently. Moreover, as Gobo notes, ethnography, like any other methodology, is not simply an instrument of data collection. It is born at a particular moment in the history of society and embodies certain of its cultural features. Gobo’s concept of the ‘Observation Society’ focuses upon why ethnography has come into fashion.

Marie Buscatto builds on Gobo’s comments about the limits of purely interview-based research. Her aim is to describe and explain the specific contributions of the ethnographic method to analysis of gender differences in work settings or situations.

Using cogent examples from her research on female jazz singers and musicians and trade unionists, she reveals the specific contributions that the ethnographic method makes to the study of gendered social relations at work. Drawing upon the ideas of Erving Goffman, she makes ‘the arrangement between the sexes’ the entry point for her analysis. Her methodologically illuminating chapter reveals how ethnography can allow researchers to spot disparaging gender stereotypes, describe ‘male’ occupational networks, and identify gendered norms and conventions.

While Buscatto shows the power of ethnographic method for our understanding of the construction of gender relations, Thomas Eberle and Christoph Maeder give us insights into how ethnographers go about studying organisations. As they argue, abstract organisation theory is not a necessary starting point for research and there is a continuum between theory- and data-guided ethnographic studies. Their chapter contains some illuminating case studies which demonstrate the methodological strengths of observing routine practices within organisations. They conclude with a helpful account of practical considerations in doing organisational ethnography such as field access and participation, data collection and data analysis, informant and field relations, reporting back, ethical questions, and finally writing up.

Part III on texts shows how ethnographic reading of texts can fruitfully work with a diverse set of analytic traditions. Paul Atkinson and Amanda Coffey draw upon ethnomethodology’s study of ‘the documentary method of interpretation’ and literary accounts of narrative and genre. They apply these contemporary concepts to the documents through which organisations represent themselves and the records and documentary data they accumulate. Taking the example of ‘audit’, they show how we can fruitfully analyse financial statements produced by accountants and accounts of their work by university departments. They also remind us of the ‘audit trail’ as documents refer to other documents. Following Atkinson and Coffey, we are given the tools to explicate systematically how texts are organised through the concepts of ‘authorship’, ‘readership’, ‘intertextuality’ and ‘rhetoric’.

In Lindsay Prior’s chapter on texts, we move from literary theory to theories of discourse. However, unlike the stultifying theoretical level of some introductions to this topic, Prior has written a delightful, accessible chapter which shows, in practice, what it is like to ‘do things with documents’. Avoiding references to a knowing ‘subject’, Prior shows us how we can instead focus on the ways in which a text instructs us to see the world. Using examples as diverse as a statistical summary of prevalence rates of mental illness and talk between scientists in a cancer genetics clinic, he reveals a thought-provoking toolbox that we can use when working with textual material.

In the twenty-first century, however, conventional documents are not the only textual material that circulate in the world. The Internet is now perhaps the prime site where words and pictures circulate. Annette Markham’s new chapter develops this insight and, in so doing, offers readers an invaluable guide to interpreting such data. In a revealing phrase, she points out that the Internet is *chrono malleable*.

Not only does it collapse distance, but also it can disrupt the way in which time is relevant to interaction since it can accommodate both asynchronous and synchronous communication between individuals and groups. Markham shows the importance of distinguishing research studies which simply use the Internet as a way to gather data (e.g. online interviews) from studies of Internet practices as phenomena in their own right (e.g. the mechanics of online dating or chatrooms). Following this latter option, we learn, as in the other chapters on texts, how participants actively construct meaning.

This idea of the 'active' reader is carried over into Part IV on interviews and focus groups. All three chapters in this section remind us that both respondents and social scientists actively construct meaning in each other's talk. Jody Miller and Barry Glassner address the issue of finding 'reality' in interview accounts. I argue in IQD that the desire of many researchers to treat interview data as more or less straightforward 'pictures' of an external reality can fail to understand how that 'reality' is being represented in words. Miller and Glassner set out a position which seeks to move beyond this argument about the 'inside' and the 'outside' of interview accounts. They fruitfully draw upon their research on gender inequality in youth gangs and on violence against African American young women in urban neighbourhoods. Based upon this research, they argue that interview accounts may fruitfully be treated as situated elements in adolescents' social worlds, drawing upon and revising and reframing the cultural stories available in those worlds. For Miller and Glassner, the focus of interview research should be fixed upon what stories are told and how and where they are produced.

In their chapter, James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium show us how a focus on story and narrative structure demands that we recognize that both interview data and interview analysis are active occasions in which meanings are produced. This means that we ought to view research 'subjects' not as stable entities but as actively constructed through their answers. Indeed, in Holstein and Gubrium's telling phrase, both interviewee and interviewer are 'practitioners of everyday life' who 'animate' the interview. Thus the issue that should confront qualitative researchers is not whether interview accounts are 'distorted' but the interpretive practices present within each interview. Using examples from their research on nursing home residents and on carers of elderly family members, they invite us to locate the interpretive practices which generate the 'hows' and the 'whats' of experience as aspects of reality that are constructed in collaboration with the interviewer to produce a 'narrative drama'.

Sue Wilkinson's chapter on focus groups carries forward Holstein and Gubrium's concern with how we construct the social world with our respondents. Using illuminating extracts from her own data on breast cancer patients, Wilkinson reveals the complicated interpretive activities between members of focus groups as they try to make sense of each other (and the researcher). This close attention to the details of short data extracts is contrasted with how most focus group (and interview) research

is usually conducted. Wilkinson's concern with theoretically driven, detailed data analysis stands apart from the dominant tendency to treat focus group talk as a straightforward means of accessing some independent 'reality'. Above all, Wilkinson shows us that content analysis and a concentration on the mechanics of how to run a focus group are no substitute for theoretically informed and detailed data analysis of talk-in-action. Like all the contributors to this volume, Wilkinson underlines the fact that we must never overlook the active interpretive skills of our research subjects.

Part V is concerned with audio data. Jonathan Potter discusses 'discursive psychology', more commonly known as discourse analysis (DA), as a way of analysing naturally occurring talk. Potter shows the manner in which DA allows us to address how versions of reality are produced to seem objective and separate from the speaker. Using examples drawn from television interviews with Princess Diana and Salman Rushdie and a newspaper report of a psychiatrist's comment, he demonstrates how we can analyse the ways in which speakers disavow a 'stake' in their actions.

Potter argues that DA focuses on rhetorical organisation, while conversation analysis (CA) is concerned with sequential organisation. John Heritage's chapter presents an accessible introduction to how conversation analytic methods can be used in the analysis of everyday interaction. He clearly presents the assumptions and basic principles of CA. From a methodological point of view, Heritage then helpfully sets out the nuts and bolts of doing CA. Using extracts of talk, he shows us how he goes about deciding whether a conversational practice is distinctive, how to locate it in a sequence and then how to determine its role or function. He concludes with a powerful reply to critics who maintain that CA cannot deal with the social context of talk.

The elegance of Heritage's account of everyday talk is matched by the two chapters in the next Part on visual data. Like Sue Wilkinson (in her chapter on focus groups), Michael Emmison argues that visual researchers have worked with inadequate theories. For instance, most tend to identify visual data with such artefacts as photographs and, to a lesser extent, cartoons and advertisements. Although such work can be interesting, it is, in a sense, two dimensional. If we recognize that the visual is also spatial, a whole new set of three-dimensional objects emerge. By looking at how people use objects in the world around them (from streetmaps to the layout of a room or urban street to the design of a hospital), we can study the material embodiment of culture.

Emmison cites Christian Heath's discussion of face-to-face interaction in museums as one way of looking at three-dimensional data in fine detail. Like Emmison, Heath differentiates the wide-ranging interest in the 'visual' in sociology and cognate disciplines, from research that uses video-recordings to analyse conduct and interaction in 'naturally occurring' day-to-day settings. Beginning with a clear account of CA's focus on sequential organisation, Heath shows how CA can be used to study visual conduct and how the physical properties of human environments

are made relevant within the course of social interaction. Like Heritage, Heath uses a series of telling examples from auctions to London Underground control rooms. He shows how Goffman's idea of a 'participation framework' can be used to analyse the unfolding interactional order present in a video of an auction. Heath also provides highly practical information for students about field relations when using video and how best to record and transcribe such data. Heath concludes by showing the relevance of these insights to studies of the workplace, including human-computer interaction.

As I have already pointed out, the next Part on qualitative data analysis is entirely new to this third edition. Tim Rapley clearly and informally reveals what he calls the 'pragmatics' of qualitative data analysis. As Rapley shows, the hard work begins when we try to explore and explain 'what is "underlying" or "broader" [in our data] or to "distil" essence, meaning, norms, orders, patterns, rules, structures etcetera (the level of concepts and themes)'. Rapley goes on to offer invaluable advice about how to do good qualitative data analysis, emphasizing the importance of detailed readings, reviewing and refining your categories and using your provisional analysis to inform how you collect, transcribe and analyse data when you return to the field. As Rapley argues, good qualitative research is about 'living in the detail'. However, like any good research, we must not rush to offer generalizations but actively seek out contrary cases.

Like Rapley, Kathy Charmaz and Tony Bryant seek to remove the veil from what they call 'the almost magical emergence of theories and concepts from data'. They elucidate the elements of grounded theory (GT) and show what, in their view, has been right and wrong about criticisms of the GT approach. They then go on to demonstrate how GT already contains underused strategies that increase both its methodological power and the credibility of its data analysis. Using helpful illustrations from their own data analysis, they demonstrate what a 'constructivist' GT methodology can look like in practice, showing how we can work with credible data and achieve analytic and theoretical credibility.

In her chapter on narrative inquiry (NI), Catherine Riessman continues this hands-on, student-friendly, approach to the pragmatics of data analysis. Her aim is to distinguish such work from GT and from other methods of analysing interview data. For Riessman, NI, like oral history, is concerned with case-centred research. Hence the leap to broader theories or generalizations is slowed down or even avoided in favour of the interrogation of particular instances, sequences of action, the way participants negotiate language and narrative genres in conversations, and other unique aspects of a 'case'. For Riessman, NI involves resisting what she calls the 'seductive power' of stories. Instead, it asks: Why was the story told *that* way? What do the specific words a participant uses carry on their backs from prior uses? What other readings are possible, beyond what the narrator may have intended? Using two long interviews (reproduced in full on the Sage website for this book), Riessman shows how we can answer these questions by examining the way a segment of data

is organised and the local context, including the questioner/listener, setting, and position of an utterance in the broader stream of the conversation.

As every student is taught, elegant data analysis presupposes a well-defined research topic, based on a review of earlier studies. Mary Dixon-Woods asks how we can make our literature reviews more robust. Systematic review methodology treats the production of a review as a scientific process. It typically uses pre-specified protocols for the conduct of a review, which formalize and codify the review question; eligibility criteria for studies to be included; searching strategies to be used; quality appraisals to be undertaken; and methods to be used in synthesizing the included studies. Dixon-Woods clearly describes the extent to which the conventional systematic review template is appropriate to qualitative research. As she argues, a key question concerns the extent to which conventional systematic review methodology, with its origins in the 'what works' template, and its focus on estimating the effectiveness of a particular intervention on average, can be consistent with aspirations of those aiming to produce more interpretive forms of overview of bodies of research evidence.

From the point of view of the research student, there remains the problem that we can spend so much time on literature reviews that we have too little time to gather and analyse our data. As I suggest in DQR, one quick solution to this problem is to work with secondary data. Clive Seale shows that the chief reservation expressed about secondary analysis of qualitative data is that secondary analysts will not have the kind of detailed contextual knowledge about the circumstances of data collection possessed by the primary researcher. Seale argues that this rests in part on an unexamined stereotype of the way secondary analysis of quantitative data sets proceeds, and does not recognize that archived data may be analysed with methods and for purposes that do not require in-depth knowledge of context. He supports his argument with two case studies which show the degree to which general methodological debates are relevant to this form of research practice. Once one gets involved with a data set it is often possible to show the value of secondary analysis without falling into the pitfalls imagined by the critics. As he sagely suggests: 'just do it'!

Like Seale and Dixon-Woods, Anssi Peräkylä is concerned with the credibility of qualitative research. He is particularly interested in how qualitative research can offer reliable and valid descriptions of its data. Following Heritage's chapter, Peräkylä illustrates his argument with CA research. Validity questions are discussed in terms of the comparative method and conventional 'deviant case analysis' as well as specifically CA methods, such as validation through 'next turn'. He also demonstrates one way of generalizing from case studies and discusses the uses and limits of quantitative techniques in qualitative research. Overall, Peräkylä is right to claim that his chapter is the first systematic attempt to discuss such matters in relation to CA. At the same time, his discussion has a much broader relevance to all serious qualitative research. As I argue in my VSB (Chapter 3), paying attention

to sequences of data, rather than apparently striking instances, is a hallmark of all good qualitative research rather than something confined to CA.

Ultimately, good qualitative data analysis is expressed in how well we write. Amir Marvasti argues that novice researchers need to learn the basic skills or craft of writing. In qualitative research, there is no such thing as a format for 'the standard scientific paper'. Marvasti shows that different genres are available to us and describes the stylistic choices available and their advantages and limitations. He also comments upon the strategic choices authors have to consider as they try to publish their work and make it accessible to various audiences. He suggests that a 'perfect paper' is one that strikes a balance between craft skills, genre and intended audience.

One audience for our research may be policy-makers, practitioners, clients or research subjects. The final Part of this book positions qualitative research within the wider community. Michael Bloor's chapter deals with a topic that concerns most qualitative researchers: the ability of our research to contribute to addressing social problems. Bloor argues that our focus on everyday activities makes it particularly relevant in helping practitioners to think about their working practices. He demonstrates his argument by detailed discussions of case studies which he conducted of male prostitutes in Glasgow and of eight therapeutic communities. Both sets of studies illustrate Bloor's point about the ways in which rigorous qualitative research can have relevance for service provision, even if, at least in the UK, it is unlikely to have much impact upon policy debates at the governmental level. Finally, Bloor reviews (and rejects) the argument that social scientists should not be practitioners' helpers.

The final chapter by Anne Ryen addresses how ethical issues arise within qualitative research. As she shows, ethics involves many more interesting matters than the tedious business of form-filling in order to satisfy ethical review committees. Our search for 'rich' data can mean that we organise long stays in the 'field'. Ryen uses her data from research on Asian businesses in East Africa to illustrate and discuss the complexity of research ethics in ethnography. Working in the field involves emergent ethical dilemmas which are different from survey research and cannot be sorted out at the outset. This means that the underlying biomedical model of most guidelines may unduly simplify the social world as understood by qualitative researchers. Instead, we must unpick difficult issues involved in the ethics and politics of matters like rapport, intrusion and harm. As she concludes: 'Qualitative research calls for moral responsibility in a field scattered with dilemmas, not quick answers.'

Not all of the contributors to this volume are in agreement about every issue. Nonetheless, I believe that my authors share enough in common to make this a coherent volume. Many of my contributors, I suspect, would agree with most of the six points at the start of this chapter. With more certainty, I would claim that we share a fairly common sense of what constitutes 'good' qualitative research. For instance, even though we come from different intellectual traditions, I would be surprised if we were to have any fundamental disagreement about, say, the assessment

of an article submitted to us for refereeing. This common sense of what we are 'looking for' derives, I believe, from our common attention to the mundane properties of everyday description (VSB, Chapter 2).

I would like to express my gratitude to my contributors for tolerating my school-masterly messages about deadlines and for the brilliant work they did in offering suggestions on each others' draft chapters. I thank my Sage editor, Patrick Brindle, for his helpful suggestions about this volume. As always, my thanks are also due to Gilly for putting up with me, to Sara Cordell for keeping my back in working order, and to my friends at the Nursery End for giving me summers to which I can look forward.

References

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Using This Book: A Student Guide

I recognize that academic books are not usually read in the same way as novels. For instance, although you may want to resist the temptation to skip to the final chapter of a whodunnit, no such prohibitions are sensible when using a textbook. So, for example, if you are currently having troubles with your data analysis, you may want to begin by reading Tim Rapley's chapter. Each chapter is more or less self-contained and so there should be no problems in zigzagging through the book in this way.

As I commented in DQR, zigzagging also makes sense because qualitative research rarely follows a smooth trajectory from hypothesis to findings. Consequently, most readers will want to move backwards and forwards through the book as the occasion arises. Alternatively, you may find it useful to skim-read the book in advance and then work through certain chapters in greater detail to correspond with different stages of your research.

As already noted, all the chapters found here have helpful student-oriented features. However, in my view, certain chapters stand out as particularly relevant to a student audience. So, if you are a novice, you might want to begin by reading Gobo's chapter on ethnography, Holstein and Gubrium on interviews, Markham on Internet research, Rapley on data analysis, Marvasti on writing and Ryen on research ethics.