Part I Introduction to the second edition

1 Introducing Qualitative Research

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The first edition of this book sought to provide a guide to the latest developments in qualitative research. This second edition offers a newly updated introduction to cutting edge issues, written by leading scholars in our field. Chapters from the first edition have been revised by their distinguished authors. In addition, reflecting the changing face of qualitative research in the past decade, four entirely new and exciting chapters appear. New to this volume are chapters on visual data, focus groups, Internet data and the applicability of qualitative research to organizational behaviour. To complete these revisions, my concluding chapter on missing issues in qualitative research has been specially written for this volume. Finally, to enhance the reader-friendliness of this book, most chapters conclude with a set of annotated recommended readings.

Like the first edition, this text aims to build on the success of my Interpreting Qualitative Data (IQD; Silverman, 2001). Like that book, it was generated by a number of assumptions set out below:

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 organization.
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 the final chapter of this book.

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, organizations, 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, 2000) and IQD derive from thirty 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. This means 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 the second year and then panic in the third year about how they can analyse their data. Instead, my students begin their data analysis in the first year – sometimes in the first week. 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 were designed to allow readers to test their understanding of each chapter. In this book, worked-through examples of research studies make the arguments much more 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. Eight US researchers join seven from the UK, two from France and Australia and one from Finland. While the majority of the contributors are sociologists, the disciplines of social psychology, criminology 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 and interviews. Following IQD, each author uses particular examples of data analysis to advance analytic arguments.

The two 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, Isabelle Baszanger and Nicolas Dodier begin with the need to ground research in field observations. The question they then raise is how the ethnographer actually goes about relating partial observations to broader generalizations about the ‘whole’. Baszanger and Dodier show how ethnography has been dominated by traditions which seek to integrate observations either by an appeal to the concept of ‘subculture’ or by the understanding or writing of the individual author. Rejecting such appeals to ‘culture’ or ‘the self’, they depict a ‘combinative ethnography’ which seeks to generalize by applying the comparative method to groups of situations or activities collected in the ethnographic ‘casebook’.

In Chapter 3, Gale Miller and Kathryn Fox show how cumulative observation can be combined with analytic vitality. In this chapter, ‘Building Bridges’, Miller and Fox raise the possibility of dialogue between ethnography, conversation analysis and Foucault. Beginning with the focus on naturally occurring data used by discursively oriented ethnographers, Miller and Fox point to what each of these three traditions have in common and to how they can provoke a set of fascinating research questions for the ethnographer. They then show how these questions can be addressed in the single case study as well as in comparative or longitudinal studies.

Part III on ‘texts’ follows Miller and Fox’s call for building bridges by showing how ethnographic reading of texts can fruitfully work with a diverse set of analytic traditions. Paul Atkinson and Amanda Coffey apply theories from the literary theory of narrative and genre to the documents through which organizations 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 organized 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 ‘causes of death’ and a psychiatric interview, 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. Markham shows the importance of distinguishing three ways in which the Internet works: as a medium of communication; as a network of computers; and as a context for social interaction. Using illuminating examples of Internet data, Markham demonstrates how researchers can use the Internet either as a means of conducting conventional interview or focus group studies (albeit with different time constraints) or as a way of studying how participants themselves constitute meaning in naturally occurring websites such as 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 four 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. As I argue in IQD, 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. Using their own research on adolescents’ social worlds, they argue that interview accounts may fruitfully be treated as situated elements in 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’. 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’.

The final chapter on interview data is by Carolyn Baker. In common with Holstein and Gubrium, Baker treats interview talk as social action in which all parties draw upon their cultural knowledge in doing their accounting work. Baker’s particular contribution is to show how interview data may be analysed in terms of the categories that participants use and how those categories are routinely attached to particular kinds of activity. Using this form of Sacks’s ‘membership categorization analysis’ (see also Part IX), Baker shows how we can describe the interpretive work present in data taken from parent–teacher interviews and research interviews with teenagers and the Chair of a school welfare committee. Like the previous two chapters, Baker’s appeals to the ‘cultural logics’ drawn upon by members in accounting for themselves and assembling a social world which is ‘recognizably familiar, orderly and moral’.

Sue Wilkinson’s chapter on focus groups carries forward Baker’s focus on how we construct the social world with our respondents. Using illuminating extracts from her own data, 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 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.

In its focus on how reality is locally constructed, DA shares many concerns with conversation analysis (CA). John Heritage’s chapter presents an accessible introduction to how conversation analytic methods can be used in the analysis of institutional talk. After a brief review of the main features of such
talk, Heritage devotes the rest of his chapter to an illuminating analysis of a short telephone conversation between a school employee and the mother of a child who may be a truant. He shows how, using CA, we can identify the overall structural organization of the phone call, its sequence organization, turn design, the lexical choices of speakers and interactional asymmetries. Finally, Heritage demonstrates how each of these elements fits inside each other – ‘rather like a Russian doll’, as he puts it.

The elegance of Heritage’s account of institutional 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 recognise 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), we can study the material embodiment of culture.

Christian Heath’s discussion of the analysis of face-to-face interaction through video shows one way of looking at three-dimensional data in fine detail. Beginning with a clear account of CA’s focus on sequential organization, 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 an extended example. In a medical consultation, a patient’s movements serve to focus the doctor’s attention on a particular aspect of her account of her symptoms. The example also shows that, while the visual aspect of conduct is not organized on a turn-by-turn basis, as Heath puts it: ‘the sequential relations between visual and vocal actions remain a critical property of their organization’. Heath concludes by showing the relevance of these insights to studies of the workplace, including human–computer interaction.

The final four chapters of this book, by Peräkylä, Bloor, Miller, Dingwall and Murphy and myself, move on to broader themes about the credibility and wider impact of qualitative research. Anssi Peräkylä discusses how qualitative research can seek to offer reliable and valid descriptions. Following Heritage’s chapter, Peräkylä illustrates his argument with CA research on institutional interaction. He shows how good transcripts of audio-recorded interactions can maintain the reliability of the data. However, Peräkylä also shows how we can accommodate the fact that tapes do not necessarily include all aspects of social interaction and addresses such ‘nitty gritty’ questions as the selection of what to record, the technical quality of recordings and the adequacy of transcripts. Finally, validity questions are discussed in terms of conventional ‘deviant case analysis’ as well as specifically CA methods, such as validation through ‘next turn’. 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.
Michael Bloor’s chapter also 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.

Bloor’s focus on how professionals can make use of qualitative research is complemented by Miller, Dingwall and Murphy’s chapter. Like Bloor, they are concerned with the wider community. However, their attention is on the variety of ‘stakeholders’ in the organizations that dominate our lives. Economists and management consultants hold centre stage in this arena and qualitative research receives little attention. Yet the latter’s ability to reveal organizational processes suggests that we have much to offer to managers. Using illuminating examples of studies of both private corporations and public agencies, Miller, Dingwall and Murphy establish precisely what qualitative research, with its flexible research designs, can offer organizations. Organizational complexities can be recognized and, as a result, new ways of reframing organizational problems can be posited.

Not all of the contributors to this volume are in agreement about every issue. We particularly see this within Parts II and V, where contrasting views of each kind of data analysis are advanced. None the less, I believe that the contributors to this volume 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 an attention to the mundane properties of everyday description. Therefore, this volume concludes with a postscript, drawing upon the work of Harvey Sacks, in which I sketch out these properties and their consequences for qualitative research. I thank Geraldine Leydon, Jay Gubrium and Judith Green for their comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

I want to conclude this introduction by mentioning an absent friend. Carolyn Baker had agreed to revise her brilliant chapter on interviews for this volume. Tragically, a serious illness prevented her fulfilling this commitment. Sadly, Carolyn died a few days before I wrote this introduction. She will be sorely missed for both her intellectual brilliance and personal qualities. In the circumstances, I have limited myself to some minimal updating of her chapter for this volume.
As always, my thanks are also due to Gilly for putting up with me and to my friends at the Nursery End for giving me summers I can look forward to.

REFERENCES