

## Qualitative Methods: the new orthodoxy?

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It is an interesting moment to write *Progress in Human Geography's* first report on qualitative methods. In one sense it suggests these methods have, at long last, arrived and been accepted as established approaches. That this is an overdue recognition needs little emphasising when surveying the number of articles drawing upon, at least in part, qualitative material. However, a less encouraging omen is the recent column in the UK Economic and Social research Councils 'Social Sciences news', penned by the chief executive (Marshall 2001). In it he asserts: 'British universities and colleges are not producing quantitatively competent social scientists in sufficient numbers'. Although he does not mention what 'non-quantitative' research is doing, he discusses a series of remedial measures - such as compulsory training in statistics, prioritised awards for quantitative PhD projects, tied studentships and specialist research centres. To paraphrase Spike Milligan's comment on army training, the attitude appears to be if someone dies when you hang them, keep hanging them until they get used to it. It is already feeding through into new postgraduate Research Training Guidelines. The problem we are told is acute, though the evidence presented is scant and ironically seems to be unanalysed, qualitative reports from meetings with civil servants, moreover:

'Failure to [remedy the shortage] is likely to result in Britain falling behind the rest of Europe, both in the provision of talented quantitative social researchers, and the ability to design public policy on a reliable evidence base.'

It seems to imply that qualitative research has not only arrived but gone too far.

Within geography, the last decade has undoubtedly seen an expansion in qualitative work both in terms of the types of work and the topics addressed. So in this first report I want to spend some time looking at the range of topics then beginning to look at the range of methods that might be covered. I want to suggest that we have moved from a period when papers were prefaced with legitimations of qualitative work, to a time when we are seeing debates within qualitative methods over establishing orthodox approaches and standards. I want to conclude this report by pointing towards some gaps, which I hope to comment on further in later reports.

### **New Wine, Old Bottles: changing fields using qualitative methods**

Qualitative approaches have long had a strong association with cultural and social and feminist geographies, in part as a reaction to quantified social geography. In terms of geographies of gender, feminist critiques of masculinist sciences were picked up and an ethical argument about rapport and empathy amplified the concern with qualitative approaches. This also worked the other way to label qualitative work with a feminised language of 'softness' as oppose to hard science. The debate though has moved on from over-quick assumptions that qualitative work was intrinsically more feminist or committed, to considering its weaknesses and strengths in a more balanced fashion. The ambiguous relationship of feminism and qualitative methods can be illustrated by the work of Townsend where *Women's Voices from the Rainforest* (1995), and *Atlas of Women and Men in India* (Raju et al. 2000) both aim to represent women's experience,

but used qualitative and quantitative evidence respectively as a way of gaining attention. Qualitative research has also had to wrestle with the argument that simply listening to, giving voice to and representing the silenced is not enough (though even achieving that much can be difficult, see Wilton 1999). As the saying goes, if representation were the same as power, the world would be run by semi-clad, thin, young women. There has also been ongoing debate not just on the politics and ethics of field work but also the academic institutions of knowledge production and who benefits from the work (Sidaway 2000).

So rather than studying the subaltern increasing attention has been given to how qualitative studies of elites can inform understandings in an unequal world. Thus recent economic geography has broken the equation of big processes being necessarily studied using big datasets to address global processes through the social situations where economic processes happen. This has often been framed through one of two approaches. First, a broadly realist ontology that distinguishes between extensive empirical generalisations about patterns and intensive analyses of causal processes. For instance, Beaverstock and Boardwell (2000:281) recount how official data dominated work on globalisation in the 80s, sectoral survey work in the early nineties, whereas their interviews in the 'global driver sector' of banking reveal the movement of personnel as investment in and deployment of knowledge networks. Similarly Ley's (1999) work on 'entrepreneurs' and business immigrants to Canada dissected tax records, to show that these immigrants actually had a very low rate of economic activity and his interviews revealed personal agendas at odds with official rationales of fostering new entrepreneurial networks. The second, related approach, a consideration of the difference

geography makes, looks at the embedding of economic activities or the culture of firms through qualitative methods, generally interviews, to study the deployment of tacit or local knowledges even in global activities (e.g. Agnes 2000, McDowell 1998, Oinas 1999). Qualitative approaches have enabled the study of, and emphasised the importance of, seeing economic activity as a set of lived practices, assumptions and codes of behaviour.

### **Methodological reflections - between self-criticism and growing confidence:**

Johnston (2000) has recently argued that spatial analysis is in danger of being written out of disciplinary textbooks, pointing to the small space accorded quantitative methods in general introductory texts. However, that is not true of 'comprehensive' methodological texts where some of qualitative approaches are just beginning to permeate the undergraduate curriculum, as witnessed by the incorporation of qualitative methods chapters in recent works, but it hardly seems overwhelming. For instance, Flowerdew & Martin (1997) include four chapters (out of sixteen) covering participant observation, interviews and interpreting qualitative sources. Kitchin & Tate's (2000) slightly lower level methods text covers ethnography, observation and interviewing - though parametric tests alone get twice the pages given for all forms of qualitative fieldwork - but this text is remarkable for including two chapters on qualitative interpretation including one on computer based approaches (using NUD\*ist). We might perhaps characterise this as establishing a presence though hardly dominance. However, we are beyond simply championing or justifying qualitative methods and there has been

self-reflection and criticism. In the next sub-sections I want to reflect on current re-evaluations of the most common method (the semi-structured interview) and then reflect on the where some alternative approaches - principally group work and ethnographies - are currently developing.

### Re-evaluating Semi-structured interviews:

Just as it is appearing in textbooks, there has been a re-examination of the staple semi-structured interview. In terms of the context of research, Elwood & Martin (2000) discuss how the physical location of interviews affects discussion and Valentine (1999) addresses the changes in who says what when interviewing couples in households. Meanwhile the corporate interview is also being re-examined, in response to challenges such as Cochrane's (1998:2123) as to whether it is really 'enough simply to buy a tape recorder, invest in a suit and tie or a smart dress, write some letters, prepare a semi-structured questionnaire and seek out some research subjects'. Herod (1999) assesses how interviews with foreign elites confuse often taken-for-granted notions of who is the insider and outsider, and notions of 'authentic' knowledge in cross-cultural qualitative studies. An equally mixed up set of social relations and positions are outlined by Beaverstock & Boardman (2000) suggesting issues of commonality may also be prominent for researcher and interviewee in situations where travelling researchers interview transnational elites. This theme of insiders and outsiders also appears in Mullings (1999) problematising the methodological slippage between seeing informants as representatives of communities or as actors within corporations. Cochrane (1998) reflects on how interview based studies often claim an authority from relaying supposedly privileged and previously hidden knowledge, and thus undermining the

reliability of informants is not generally the aim. Hughes (1999) thus suggests we need a more nuanced and critical interpretation of the self-reporting, partially remembered nature of corporate interviewee's accounts of their practices - emphasising that even relatively powerful actors do not have perfect access to information, even should they wish to share it. Particularly refreshing in all this work is the pluralising of assumptions about the range of positionalities and relationships where gender, ethnicity, nationality and status interact.

#### Group interviews and Ethnography:

Group interviews have emerged as an alternative approach to economic issues when looking at consumers (eg Holbrook & Jackson 1996; Miller, et al. 1998). Drawing upon long established market research traditions (though Burgess (1999) also points out traditions derived from therapeutic practice), the use of focus groups has boomed. In this field then the boundaries of academia and commerce blur in a very reflexive system, and positionalities and commonalities between academia and business researchers are being destabilised. Thus at a time when many are studying soft capitalism and knowledge economies, Leslie (1999) points out Saatchi advertising has taken on board geographical notions that consumption practice is inflected by where it occurs - to such an extent it markets a 'proprietary' technique of 'Anthropological Search'. If the research methods seem increasingly connected then Thornton (2000) offers a fascinating account of the inversions and reflexivity needed to conduct an ethnography of the advertising industry.

It is surprising that there is such an apparent concentration in geography on interview based methods of research instead of traditional 'immersive' ethnography. The two need

not be entirely distinct of course, since ethnography can combine both long term observation and repeated interviews (e.g. Beazley 1998). However, in this journal, Herbert (2000) recently noted the sparsity of research based on extensive periods of participant observation - suggesting around 3-5% of journal articles derived from this sort of work. Herbert suggests scepticism about the merits of ethnography may be the explanation of this weak presence. He points out this relative absence is limiting studies since this is one of the approaches in qualitative work that can address the non-discursive and study what people do as well as what they say. Alternatively, the reliance on interviews may be, as McDowell (1998), hints as a least bad option in circumstances when other forms of access to research settings are denied. It is certainly true that subtle interpretation of interview material, rather than participatory access, have been used to reveal how specific locales enable and sustain identity formation and reproduction (Woods 1998; Pain et al. 2000). I am myself perhaps more inclined to flag up the practical difficulties of conducting participant observation not just in terms of gaining participatory access to field sites but also securing funded periods of absence from home to undertake ethnographic research. The latter means getting funding from bodies that increasingly want a clear set of predicted outcomes rather than an evolving programme. Shurmer-Smith (1998) gives an excellent illustration of these issues in her recent research in India describing a project that had to be fitted in one semester while securing a local school place for her son. Meanwhile she had to justify how the research itself evolved in ways far from the original proposal into a study of elite formation in situ. As an account of working through multiple positions and conflicting demands this is a great case study.

A different set of dilemmas and directions can be traced in DeLyser's (1999) work on the

preserved 'ghost town' of Bodie. She notes that geographical approaches to landscape have tended towards the archival and semiotic, whereas she followed popular practices of landscape interpretation by working as a member of staff alongside the town's staff of interpreters for ten summers. DeLyser's account comes from the position of a worker, looking at the practices that produce the portrayal of a mythified landscape. Her work resonates with my own experiences with historic reenactors. Here too there were reflexivities between ethnography and a group that were themselves making an 'ethnographic representation' of a fictive historical community (Cragg 2000). This raises questions of how we recount a situation of closeness to informants and what writing strategies convey co-presence and similarity of academic and participant. On the other hand, her ethnography of identity and tourism prompts Kneafsey (2000) to reflect on both the surprising resonances, and lack thereof, of her cultural identity in Ireland and Brittany respectively, where expected commonalities with respondents at her field site in the former were uneasy at best, while in her 'foreign' site, respondents' assumption of commonalities with her were unanticipated. These studies make clear that ethnography, identity politics and tourism all invent notions of culture as objects of interest and thus share aspects of poetics and, occasionally, practice.

Still there remain difficulties in producing ethnographies on mobile and transnationally connected cultures - though some interesting studies of mobile and transient communities are appearing (e.g. Jaquemet 1999, Murphy 2001). Some recent migration studies have shown the potential of qualitative research in examining non-elite but globalised processes, from Lawson's (2000) study of poor people's transnational connections in Quito, to Willis and Yeoh (1998) on the gender relationships in transnational households,

to Ifekwunigwe's (1999) careful tracing of the senses of diasporic belonging.

Alternatively, O'Reilly's (2000) ethnography of a British expatriate community on the Costa del Sol is an example of a classic local community study reframed for transnational groups.

### **Trustworthy Stories: plausibility, rigour and reliability in qualitative work**

There has been continued work not just on the conduct of research but its reporting. Thus Revill & Seymour (2000) discuss the possibilities for seeing interviews as producing stories. Certainly notions of biographical narrative as shaping self-identity for informants have been important (e.g. Vereni 2000) and recent work continues to show the vital role of thinking through similar auto-biographical stories for researchers (e.g. Fielding 2000). Notably of late the potential of reflexivity for underwriting good research as come under renewed scrutiny. Reflexivity has become something of a shibboleth -- no one will brag about being unreflexive -- but it has been critiqued for implying the eventual goal of a fully known social situation, when claiming to know even our own motives is difficult enough (Rose 1997). Rather than aspiring to such transparent knowledge Bennett's (2000) reflexive account offers a dramaturgical version of interviews conducted while doing participant observation among farming households. Her account points out that as an anticipated (or desired) audience, the reader is implicated in fieldwork, and goes on to look at the inter-subjective anxieties so often buried in accounts of 'good research', the contingencies, and the strains of relating the imperfectly performing 'me' to muddled and always partial senses of a true 'I', let alone understanding 'them' -- the respondents. Rather Bennett suggests the fragile nature of any understanding. The view of dialogues

involving the 'citation', explicit or not, of others terms and concepts, the anticipation of roles and the clashing of speech genres has also been stressed as a way of understanding corporate interviews by Oinas (1999). We do need to question the all too common assumption that there is one researcher, with an unchanging and knowable identity, and one project, with a singular unwavering aim.

These accounts of the situated production of knowledge suggest that the informant quote, or even the full transcript is poorly served by being taken as 'data'. Leslie (1999) points out how researchers' concerns over maintaining the validity and reliability of qualitative work in business research have entailed resisting the evidential 'mining' of responses for the ready quote and pushing for more codified approaches. In geography, there has also been debate about ways of ensuring the rigour and evidential quality of qualitative work, set in motion by Baxter & Eyles's (1997) critique of the lack of methodological transparency in published papers based on interviews. They endorse Lincoln and Guba's influential set of categories -- of credibility of the account (glossed as authenticated representation), the transferability of the material (intelligibility to the audience), the dependability of the interpretation (whether it is idiosyncratic or partial) and finally its confirmability (say through personal reflection, audit processes, opportunities for informants to reply). Their call was responded to by Bailey et al. (1999) who acknowledge the issue of audit and transparency, to allow capricious interpretations to be challenged, but worry over the loss of idiosyncrasy and creative insight. Meanwhile Winchester (1999) casts doubt on the popular response of using the triangulation of different methods - worrying the complementarity may be illusory rather than real, and more fundamentally, raising concerns that rigour is being equated with an empirical

realist, objectivist generalisability (page 63). Certainly the burgeoning use of software packages to help with interpretation is often promoted under this rubric (for summaries see Crang et al. 1997, Hinchliffe et al 1997). It seems to me these debates are touching upon unresolved arguments where qualitative interpretation has very often got an evidential realist flavour - that for all the reflexive arguments over positionality, the analysis leans towards 'verificational realism' (Rennie 1998). The transcripts are evidence, against which theories can be tested and drawn. And yet this sits awkwardly with some of the more intersubjective, dialogic ethnographic approaches outlined above, where the emphasis is on the speech act not the written account, and language as doing rather than representing (Laurier 1999).

### **Gaps in the literature.**

I want to close this report by highlighting a few noteworthy omissions from current approaches. Most strikingly amongst this current work we can note the concentration remains strongly on the verbal. Some good work is now emerging on the visual, most significantly Gillian Roses's (2001) text which, for someone who teaches practicals on visual media where students ask 'is there a textbook?', is very helpful. It is a good text with a finely angled argument balanced with a degree of catholicism about methods that adds to some recent texts outside geography (Emmison & Smith 2000, Van Leeuwen & Jewitt 2001). It does not branch out into ethnographic films, but new texts by Banks (2001, Banks and Morphy 1999), Russell (1999) and Pink (2001) offer a good mix of illustrative material and guidance on that topic. Alternately Hopkins' (1998) offers a template for structured interpretation of visual sources, such as promotional material,

while Becker (2000) provides an exemplary study of using photography as part of ethnographic fieldwork.

However, what does seem underplayed in the literature are approaches and methods that take up the recent growth in interest in non-cognitive, embodied and haptic experiences. Interests in different ways of knowing and producing knowledge about the world do not come through that strongly. The opening up to different methods and approaches from (semi-structured) interviews is something I hope to focus upon a little more next year.

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