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'Going Exploring': The Nature of Qualitative Research

LINDA FINLAY

The process of engaging in qualitative research is rather like 'going exploring'. Uncharted territory beyond the reach of conventional research (with its claims to objectivity and its quantitative instincts) beckons us irresistibly. We embark on a 'quest' (Rosaldo, 1989); we sense that 'adventure' (Willig, 2001) lies ahead. Our preparations made, we begin our research journey with no fixed ideas about its content or destination. If anything, we expect to be surprised; we know that, for all our planning, we will stumble into unanticipated situations or tread unmapped paths. What we discover along the way may astonish, delight or perplex us. We may lose our way, go round in circles, find solid ground giving way to mire, it matters not. The qualitative research journey remains enticing though 'full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails as researchers negotiate the swamp of interminable deconstructions, self analysis and self disclosure' (Finlay, 2002, p. 209).

Like explorers bent on penetrating the unknown, qualitative researchers are fired by the excitement and challenge of the enterprise. Frustration and discomfort are more than counterbalanced by moments of exhilaration. The challenge lies in mapping a path, with the help of compass and guides (books, mentors and supervisors), that safeguards our passage while enabling us to experience the richness and complexity of our research terrain.

The chapters in this book aim to reveal something of the excitement and satisfactions of *doing* qualitative research, along with the uncer-

tainties and frustrations. More specifically, the authors who come together in this volume seek to highlight some of the ‘challenging choices’ they have had to face. There are many routes through – many ways of doing – qualitative research, and this very diversity means that decisions need to be carefully thought through. The purpose of this book is to contribute to making well-considered choices.

CHALLENGING CHOICES

One early critical choice that qualitative researchers face when planning research is which of the great variety of qualitative **methodologies** to adopt. As Cresswell (1998, p. 4) observes, qualitative researchers have before them ‘a baffling number of choices of traditions’! Should the research be conducted on the basis of grounded theory? Or should the choice be ethnomethodology? Or discourse analysis? Or phenomenology? Or ethnography? These are just a few of the diverse options. More than just selecting a methodology, we need to think about the aim and focus of our research. If we want to explore individuals’ life experiences, then our options would orientate towards phenomenological, psychodynamic, biographical or narrative research (such as described in Chapters 9, 10, 11 and 12). If the focus is to be more on talk or text, then discourse or conversation analysis would be the better choice (see Chapters 8 and 14). If the aim is to understand cultural practices, then we would opt for ethnography (Chapter 6) or case-study research on organisations (Chapter 15).

The next set of decisions relates to the **methods** we will use to collect, and then analyse, data. What sources of data are potentially available and appropriate? Which methods of data collection and analysis would be most suitable, given our chosen methodology? Should we opt for interviews, observation or other procedures to gather data? Would combining methods (see Chapter 7) offer something more? What can the chosen methods feasibly tell us? Should our analysis take the form of a descriptive narrative (see Chapter 13) or should it be organised thematically (for instance in the grounded theory discussed in Chapter 5)? Given the inevitable constraints of time and competing demands, what is the most practical option?

In focusing on methodology and method, questions are raised about our **epistemological** and **theoretical** stance (see Chapter 2). For example, we should be in no confusion as to whether we are taking a realist or relativist position or whether we are attempting to describe

or explain the social world. Reaching a clear stance in relation to such questions is by no means easy. As two experienced researchers have noted, qualitative research 'embraces within its own multiple disciplinary histories constant tensions and contradictions over the project itself, including its methods and the forms its findings and interpretations take' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 4).

There are also decisions to be made about **ethics** and the kinds of **relationships** we want to develop with our participants (see Chapters 3 and 4) and/or the readers and consumers of our research. Given that there is an 'intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 4), what is our role as researcher? Beyond seeking to do no harm, we often aim to empower and 'give voice' to our participants. We must be mindful that our research – which encourages us to reflect on ourselves and the social world around us – has the potential to be transformative, changing both us and our participants. If such power exists within our research, then that needs to be managed and respected. A key question here is whose interests are served by our research?

Finally, we need to think about how we should **evaluate** and **present** our research (see Chapters 16 and 17). How can this be done to ensure that our work is responsible and has integrity, meaning and value? As Seale points out:

A fallibilistic approach . . . is not well served by presenting a personal interpretation and then simply saying that people are free to disagree if they so wish. It requires a much more active and labour-intensive approach towards genuinely self-critical research, so that something of originality and value is created. (Seale, 1999, p. 6)

The choices we make inevitably lead us along different paths into varied explorations of contrasting terrains. Our versions of qualitative research will vary considerably. For all that, however, there are similarities to be found in the territory we explore and the navigational tools we use to guide us and give us direction. There are basic tenets or commonalities that unite seemingly disparate qualitative methodologies.

COMMONALITIES

If you put all the authors of this book in the same room it would probably be a noisy affair! We would fiercely debate the nature of the social world (ontology) and we'd argue about the best way to study it. Not all

of us would agree on the objective existence of a social world for us to study in the first place. Some would argue that it is the meanings, interpretations and language we use that construct that world. Some qualitative researchers would aim for objective, systematic research that reflects the social world as much as possible. Others disagree, valuing instead the existence of multiple realities and subjectivities and the potential of the research to transform what is being studied. In these ways, we would bandy words and concepts, contesting their meanings. (A quick look at the glossary at the end of the book will give you an indication of the sorts of ambiguities we face here.)

For all our passionate (but friendly) disagreement, however, we respect one another's choices. And we're also conscious of sharing certain assumptions, which distinguish us in a fundamental way from researchers in the quantitative, positivist tradition. To a greater or lesser extent, qualitative researchers all acknowledge and value

- the central role played by the researcher in the construction of knowledge;
- the significance of the researcher's relationship with participants and/or the social world;
- inductive, exploratory, hypothesis-generating rather than hypothesis-testing research;
- the role of interpretation and emergent meanings;
- the complex, rich and messy nature of qualitative findings.

These ideas are briefly explored below.

THE RESEARCHER'S ROLE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Qualitative researchers accept that the researcher is a central figure who influences, and perhaps actively constructs, the collection, selection and interpretation of data. Researcher subjectivity – called 'bias' in quantitative research – is celebrated rather than seen as something to be shunned; it is viewed as an opportunity rather than a problem (Finlay, 2002).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCHER'S RELATIONSHIPS

We recognise that research is co-constituted, a joint product of participants, researchers and readers, and the relationship they build. Our

participants affect us, just as we affect them. We also recognise that we are influenced by wider social relationships and our historical and cultural situatedness in the world – and this recognition is subsumed into our work.

THE INDUCTIVE, EXPLORATORY, HYPOTHESIS-GENERATING NATURE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative researchers start with open research questions rather than having a hypothesis to test. Qualitative research aims to investigate and understand the social world rather than to predict, explain and control behaviour. The focus is on the 'how' and 'what' rather than 'why' and 'whether'. For instance, instead of investigating whether a treatment intervention is effective by comparing a treatment group with a control group, the qualitative researcher would ask: 'How does this client experience this treatment?'

THE ROLE OF MEANINGS AND INTERPRETATION

We are concerned with how people make sense of the world and how they experience events. 'Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 2). We understand that meanings are fluid, subject to interpretation, and are negotiated within particular social contexts. We acknowledge that other researchers, using the same data, are likely to unfold different stories.

THE COMPLEX, RICH AND MESSY NATURE OF QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Qualitative researchers believe in rich, textured description that has the potential to move others. At the same time we recognise that findings are always partial, tentative, ambiguous, fluid and open to multiple interpretations and emergent meanings. We see our social world as too chaotic to be represented in unambiguous, clear-cut ways, or in terms of cause and effect. Whatever methodology qualitative researchers choose to embrace, we embark on a journey that is endlessly fascinating: a potentially transformative exploration of relationships and meanings within our social world. Whatever we know of our world, the

qualitative research journey opens fresh horizons, showing us how much more lies waiting to be explored.

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