

The Resurgence, Legitimation and Institutionalization of Qualitative Methods

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Abstract: The article considers the place of qualitative research methods in the university curriculum, with a subsidiary commentary on changing uses and applications of qualitative research. There is a discussion of the emergence and early days of qualitative methodology, and its place in the foundational social science curriculum, with some emphasis on the Chicago School and the status of qualitative sociology's creation myth. Qualitative methods were increasingly marginalized during the reign of structural/functionalism, with its affinity for macro-level and/or quantitative analysis. The emergence of grounded theory saw an accelerating resurgence of qualitative method but there were important variations in the picture in North America, the U.K. and continental European social science. The present period is characterized as one of increasing legitimation and even institutionalization. The role in this of US federal program evaluation research, new research technologies and infrastructural resources, and trends in popularity amongst students, accounts for the current place of qualitative research methods in the university curriculum.

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This article considers the early days of qualitative methods in the university curriculum, the resurgence of qualitative methods beginning in the 1960s, and the current period of increasing legitimation and institutionalization. It compares the position of qualitative methods with that of quantitative methods, and, because social science took root most firmly in the US despite its European origins, it takes account of the development of American sociology. [1]

1. The Early Days of Qualitative Methods

The emergence of sociology featured a positivist belief in a "science of society" that, by explaining the causes of social phenomena, could improve social conditions. The early 20th century saw social science establish itself in American universities and acquire distinctive characteristics of social reformism and pragmatic empiricism. American sociologists extracted from the European intellectual inheritance a particular nuance of positivism, the idea that quantification tied to the formulation of sociological problems in terms of the hypothetico-deductive model enabled causal explanations of empirical phenomena. This approach has stood in tension with interpretivist approaches ever since. The field came to be marked by a bipolar opposition, with quantitative

methods associated with causal explanation of macro-social phenomena and qualitative methods with interpretivist understandings of micro-social phenomena. There is no logical reason against quantitatively-based causal explanation of micro-social phenomena, or qualitative causal explanation of macro-social phenomena, and such hybrid approaches do exist (e.g. "Qualitative Comparative Analysis," RAGIN 1987) but our minds are drawn to bipolar oppositions, and the quantitative/qualitative distinction is one of them. [2]

With the quantitative approach growing alongside the general march of positivism and the budding discipline of statistics, the Chicago School is usually seen as the champion of qualitative method during sociology's childhood (FINE 1995, PLATT 1995, 1996, ABBOTT 1999). We know the School for its declaration that the city offered a vast natural laboratory for exploring social phenomena, using ethnographic methods. This was the stance of the first Chicago School, then regarded as the top US sociology department and associated with the empirical approach of figures like W.I. THOMAS (appointed in 1895) and Robert PARK. But in 1927 William OGBURN was appointed to bring in a "scientific" sociology based on statistics and by the 1940s, with PARSONS' rise at Harvard and Columbia's growing dominance in survey research and opinion polling, US sociology had shifted to a quantitative paradigm. In the 1950s a group of quantitative sociologists came to Chicago from Columbia and Everett HUGHES stood virtually alone as representative of the earlier tradition. [3]

HUGHES was at Chicago from 1938 to 1961. His course in field observation methods was compulsory for students of sociology, anthropology and social science. HUGHES was the driving force in developing participant observation as a distinct methodology because he and his students had to justify their procedures against constant criticism from statisticians. Contrasting with the quantitative sociologists' reduction of method to the purely technical, HUGHES linked field methods with what he called "the inquiring attitude." Its first element emphasized comparing social events to those in other times and contexts. Second, he insisted on the mutual enrichment of the empirical and the theoretical, on being able to see analytic significance in apparent social trivia. Third, HUGHES rejected disciplinary boundaries as arbitrary. Last, he valued a free sociological imagination as opposed to narrow hypothesis-testing and recognized the need for eclectic methods and constant methodological innovation. These elements are hard to reduce to bite-sized portions of knowledge that can be easily taught, tested and benchmarked. [4]

The other key Chicago figure in qualitative methodology was Herbert BLUMER, whose symbolic interactionism was developed as an explicit insurgency against positivist sociology. But, like much of HUGHES' methodological writing, BLUMER's was highly abstract, concerned with the logic of inquiry rather than techniques. BLUMER supplied few methodological pointers, as he did not believe in fixed fieldwork techniques (PLATT 1995, p.92). [5]

The place of qualitative methods in Chicago's curriculum was actually quite limited, due to a belief that they could be learned but not taught. Statistics could

be taught in the lecture hall, but the place to learn qualitative methods was the street. Not only that, their content was commonsense. Anyone with normal social skills could observe and write notes about what they saw, and conduct an interview and transcribe it. This approach was epitomized by HUGHES' injunction, sternly repeated to generations of students, that the only way to learn field methods was to "get the seat of your pants dirty" in real research; one should perhaps note that in American English "pants" means "trousers" and not "underwear." [6]

So Chicago's importance to qualitative methods in the curriculum revolves around the compulsory graduate-level fieldwork course, taught first by Burgess and then by HUGHES. This always involved work on the city of Chicago. Each student was assigned a census tract and told to collect data on it. Guidance was minimal. Fieldwork was assessed by a research paper, not an exam. Learning-by-doing and the use of research papers were distinctive Chicago features and attracted high student commitment. By the late 1950s, though, the course had embraced survey methods and by the 1960s the only compulsory graduate school methods course was statistics.[7]

PLATT (1995) shows that the dominant mode of methodological training was not formal instruction but apprenticeship. "Nobody taught any of us; I think you'd say we were self-taught, we proceeded from inspiration from people we liked, like ... Everett Hughes" (E. GROSS, interview, quoted in PLATT 1995), and "most of us learned our research largely by doing; you took courses, but what really was the best learning experience was contact with fellow graduate students, particularly those you came into contact with while doing research" (J. SHORT, interview, quoted in PLATT 1995). Staff attitudes to teaching are suggested by L. BOGART's comment that

"Wirth repeatedly told his classes that the function of a university was to advance knowledge by providing its faculty with a facility for research; students, he said, should consider themselves very lucky to gather the crumbs of wisdom that fell from the table" (quoted in PLATT 1995). [8]

The department we are discussing was a graduate department, with undergraduates taught by different faculty in a separately-organized college. All graduate department faculty were expected to conduct research, generating contacts students could exploit in their own fieldwork, thus reinforcing the emphasis on direct research experience. Whatever the status of qualitative methodology's Chicagoan creation myth, subsequent teachers of qualitative method have sought to build similar elements into the curriculum—above all, the value of students going out and getting their own data—rather than the rote learning of the cut-and-dried that makes tidy textbooks and vacuous sociology. [9]

Chicago was important in American social science but it was not dominant. The Harvard and Columbia Schools were the engines of theoretical development and the macro-sociology they were developing, based on structural-functionalism, surveys, and quantitative analysis, was more influential both on research and on

the student curriculum. Chicago and the qualitative methods with which it was associated were increasingly marginalized. Thus, by the 1960s, sociology was pursuing scientific status by presenting itself as a discipline organized around quantitative methods. It became difficult to publish in key journals such as *American Journal of Sociology* without a sea of equations decorating one's argument. This approach enabled sociology to enter not only the university curriculum but also the secondary schools. When I first encountered sociology, in American high school in 1964, it was anchored as a discipline that used statistics to analyze surveys. Qualitative methods teaching was available—in the anthropology half of the course. [10]

2. The Resurgence of Qualitative Method

Within just three years qualitative method began re-emerging into mainstream sociology. Its resurgence can be dated so precisely because it is identified with one book, GLASER and STRAUSS' *Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). They set out to codify qualitative method fearing that otherwise it would disappear from the curriculum under the positivist orthodoxy. It was STRAUSS and his graduate student Janet CORBIN who expounded a systematic, iterative practice of qualitative analysis, while Glaser took a line more consistent with the emergence of analytic insight from immersion—experiencing the field and repeatedly reading the data. While the "discovery" book became a bible for those not drawn to a quantitative practice of social science, it was the CORBIN and STRAUSS re-working (1990) and a paper by TURNER (1981) that allowed grounded theory to be taught as a systematic procedure that was as rigorous as quantitative methods. The fact remains that Glaser's approach better describes what many qualitative researchers actually do, carrying forward the Chicagoans' dilemma over whether qualitative method can be taught or only learned. [11]

The American quantitative approach was influential during this period in Europe too but qualitative methodology was arguably more secure in the European curriculum due to the importance of hermeneutics in German social philosophy and life history method in French and Italian sociology. During the 1960s British social science was under the sway of the American approach. One could not get an undergraduate sociology degree without mastering statistics. Qualitative methods were usually placed at the beginning of general courses in methods, sometimes reappearing in a ritual closing discussion of ethics. [12]

At postgraduate level, there were few Masters degrees in research methods. SURREY's M.Sc. in Social Research, founded in 1966, is regarded as the first in UK. Other Masters degrees were substantively-based and, like the MA (Sociology) I completed at Kent, had one generic methods course, in which qualitative methods were almost invisible. The syllabus of its "Methods and Procedures of Social Research" course included "Statistical methods and ideas in social research," "An introduction to the use of computers in social research" and "Procedures of empirical social research," in which "students obtain first-hand experience of the methods and procedures employed in social research by re-analyzing existing data, or by applying them in ... their dissertation" (University of

Kent 1972, p.29). Since the "procedures" element of the course was based on independent study, any exposure to qualitative methods was self-taught. [13]

The 1960s and 1970s saw university expansion in the UK. Most universities wanted to offer the full range of disciplines. Sociology expanded for institutional reasons, and recent graduates acquainted with new trends in method were appointed as lecturers. The period was also one of alternative culture and radical politics, and sociology seemed almost innately oriented to cultural and political change. Methods were politicized, with quantitative methods seeming allied to the structural-functionalism that served the establishment, and qualitative methods seeming democratically accessible, the method of the underdog, a connection that endures in the chapters in DENZIN and LINCOLN (2001) which present qualitative research as champion of the oppressed. Anglo-American sociology was increasingly critical of positivism. [14]

3. Legitimation and Institutionalization

The period 1980 to now has seen enhanced legitimation and institutionalization. In 1984 I was invited to give a seminar in the criminology department of a large American university. When it became clear that my paper was based on qualitative data the department chairman stopped me and asked if I had any "real" data. My dinner invitation was withdrawn and I was left with an embarrassed teaching assistant who told me he was the only person in the department who had used qualitative methods, and that had been on the West Coast. In 2001 I saw this department's postgraduate list. The majority of its current postgraduates were using qualitative methods. [15]

One reason things have changed in the US is federal program evaluation. One of the largest programmes is in compensatory education (affirmative action) but quantitative evaluation suggests it has little impact. Because there may be program impacts on individuals that disappear in the aggregate, qualitative methods have increasingly been used in research aiming to defend these programmes (ONG 1999). Technologies that enhance the rigor of qualitative methods have also helped legitimation. The first such transformative technology was the audiocassette recorder, which allowed researchers to move from selective, summarized notes to verbatim transcripts. Recently the Internet and e-mail have given us online interviewing with people far beyond our travel budget, and chat rooms to observe groups of people interacting who never physically meet. Qualitative software has helped legitimate qualitative method by supporting analysis which is more systematic, transparent and therefore accountable. Better archival resources enable the follow-up studies that have long been done in quantitative research, and provide new teaching resources. [16]

So qualitative methods now enjoy necessary resources, enthusiastic students, and the interest of research sponsors. These improvements in the legitimacy of qualitative research bring new responsibilities. We need to address the traditional weaknesses of qualitative research while maintaining its strengths. In addressing issues like validity, generalizability and the relationship of qualitative method to

other methods we have to educate non-academic audiences who want to use qualitative research in the decision process. In the UK the government Cabinet Office is currently setting quality standards for qualitative evaluation, due to the increasing amount of officially-sponsored qualitative research. Among social problems to which official qualitative research is currently being applied is public response to the flood warning system, public support for the National Health Service, and the over-representation of ethnic minorities in violent crime. [17]

While qualitative methods have a lot to contribute it is necessarily part of a multiple method effort. This can lead to some serious methodological traps. An example is the program of research into parental resistance to vaccination of children against common diseases. Policy researchers leading this program wanted to add qualitative understanding to large-scale epidemiological and survey data, and proposed a meta-analysis of qualitative studies, simply adding together the samples from many small qualitative studies to make what they regarded as a large enough "N." When this kind of thing happens it is important for qualitative researchers to make clear that the epistemology of qualitative methods does not permit such a manipulation. It is vital that the university curriculum pays attention to the way qualitative methods can be used and misused, and that, as well as imparting technical skills, we stress to students the need to understand research problems holistically and that an analytic sense should guide the application of method. [18]

Coverage of qualitative methods on the increasing number of methods-based Masters programs in the UK has steadily expanded, reflecting student enthusiasm and changes in the social research labor market. SURREY's current MSc syllabus is roughly evenly divided between quantitative, qualitative and IT-oriented courses. Quantitative modules include Data Analysis, Statistical Modeling, and Research Design and Survey Methods. Qualitative modules include Field Methods, and Innovative Ethnography and Documentary Analysis. IT-oriented modules are SPSS and Data Management using Qualitative Software. A generic Theory and Method course helps students relate conceptualization and methodological concerns. The program also imparts practical research skills by a two-week full-time placement in a research organization, a Group Research Project, and a dissertation, in which students conduct an original piece of empirical research. Most group and dissertation projects are qualitative. [19]

The main source of postgraduate funding in the UK is the Economic and Social Research Council, which periodically publishes what it considers to be the essential curriculum. Figure 1 shows the ESRC's Training Guidelines (applied to all social science disciplines). In addition, the ESRC's sociology-specific guidelines strongly emphasize qualitative methods, and require that students understand archival, documentary and historical data, life stories, visual images and materials, ethnographic methods, case studies and group discussions, at least one qualitative software package, and a range of analytic techniques including conversation analysis and discourse analysis. Since the guidelines are

written by senior academics, they clearly index the institutionalization of qualitative methods.

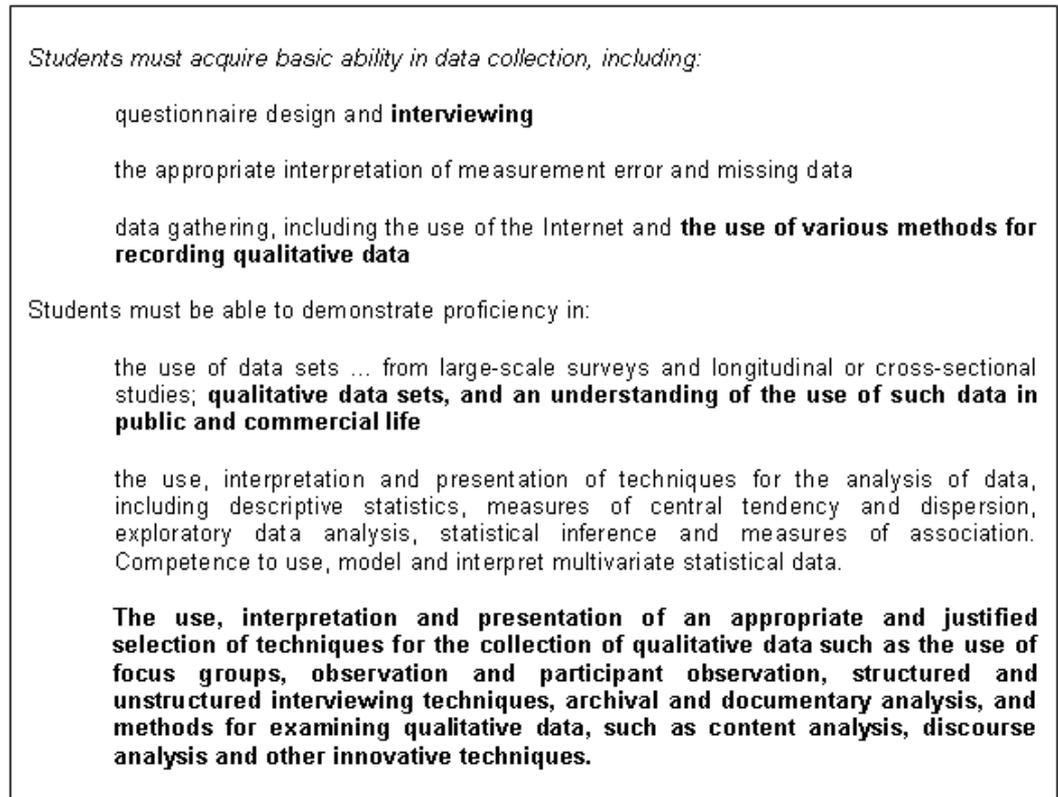


Figure 1: ESRC Postgraduate Training Guidelines (extracts) [20]

Such institutional initiatives offer an important framework, but limited indications, for how to deliver what is required. However, experience suggests that there is substantial agreement amongst instructors about the principal difficulties and requirements in the practice of qualitative methods. For example, one common flaw of student projects is poor research design, typical problems being poor linkage between the method and the analytic point the student wants to develop, and failure to realistically plan the time to be spent on the various stages of the research. A clear understanding of research design is important. Since people learn by doing, practical exercises are useful, especially in teaching data collection. An exercise might involve a morning observing in a public place such as an airport with field notes being written that reflect progressive focusing on some particular interaction out of those on display. Another exercise might involve students working in pairs to interview each other, with notes evaluating the interview being written afterwards and shared with the class. [21]

Guidance on data analysis techniques has long been elusive in the qualitative methods literature. Different schools of thought have different analytic postures but there are generic analytic techniques that can be taught and that will support work in most analytic traditions. Students need to understand the practical requirements of data management involved in preparing data for analytic

manipulation. They should be exposed to the range of views on adequate transcription, something that seems mundane but which masks major analytic decisions. The importance of classification and coding in most qualitative analysis means that some practical instruction should be given in defining and applying codes, which can be tied to a session on grounded theory. The essentials of qualitative data management and code-and-retrieve analytic strategies are suitable topics with which to introduce qualitative software. [22]

Students also need to understand the working environment in which research takes place—getting published, getting funding and other resources, constructing an ethical research practice, getting involved in professional networks, project management, and responding to sponsors' needs. These topics all read differently for qualitative research than for quantitative research. Students find qualitative methods intrinsically attractive and we need to build on this by imparting professional skills that will serve them throughout their careers while promoting the sense of discovery that is an enduring reward of this mode of enquiry. [23]

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