The Epistemological and Methodological Foundations of Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Qualitative research provides a unique and powerful lens on the details, processes, and idiosyncrasies of social life, but the scholars who choose this path face complex challenges and difficult decisions at every stage of their work. This article thus provides readers with a theoretical, practical, and ethical toolkit with which they can further explore the vast potential of qualitative research. Upon examining how qualitative research is shaped through epistemology, methodology, data collection, and analysis - both within and beyond academia - we conclude the article with a reflection on the promise and pitfalls of qualitative inquiry.

Keywords: Qualitative research, qualitative methods, methodology, epistemology

ES: La investigación cualitativa ofrece un lente único y poderoso sobre los detalles, procesos, e idiosincrasias de la vida social, pero los académicos quienes escogen este método enfrentan retos complejos y decisiones difíciles en cada etapa de su labor. Este artículo así provee a los lectores herramientas teoréticas, prácticas, y éticas con la cual pueden explorar más el vasto potencial de la investigación cualitativa. Luego de examinar cómo se forma la investigación cualitativa a través de la epistemología, metodología, recolección de datos, y análisis – tanto dentro como fuera del ámbito académico – concluimos el artículo con una reflexión sobre la promesa y las dificultades de la investigación cualitativa.

FR: La recherche qualitative fournit un outille de haut niveau sur les détails, les processus et les particularités de la vie sociale, cependant les chercheurs qui choisissent cette voie font face à des défis complexes et à des décisions difficiles à chaque étape de leur travail. Cet article donne aux lecteurs un ensemble d'outillage théorique, pratique, et méthodologique avec les quels ils peuvent explorer le potentiel de la recherche qualitative. En examinant comment la recherche qualitative est construite par l'épistémologie, la méthodologie, la collecte et l'analyse de données dans de contexte académiques et non-académiques, nous construisons cet article par une réflexion sur la promesse et les principes de l'enquête qualitative.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide readers with a foundation upon which they can explore and pursue the principles and practices of qualitative research in social scientific research. While qualitative research is a broad term that encompasses a wide variety of research practices, a desire to learn about social reality is common to all such inquires. Unlike quantitative

research, qualitative research complies textual data and analyzes it within its textual form, rather than converting it to numerical categories (Carter and Little, 2007).

Qualitative research can be used to illuminate different aspects of social reality by exploring social phenomena, attempting to decipher the meanings that research participants ascribe to their reality, or building thick descriptions of a specific aspect of social life (Leavy, 2014). Disagreements exist between qualitative researchers as to what can be made known through qualitative methods, and researchers bring into their work assumptions about what can be known about the world and the nature of social reality. These assumptions constitute a set of first principles that help each individual researcher make sense of their lived experience. These principles inform paradigms that influence the methods researchers choose, their justifications for using those methods, and their beliefs about what the data collected by such methods reveal (Babbie, 2004; Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

In what follows, we first review the epistemological and theoretical divides at the heart of all scientific inquiry, including qualitative research. Seriously addressing these matters helps to clarify how and why different research communities have competing ideas about what constitutes 'quality' in qualitative research. Next, we examine major qualitative paradigms and methodologies and, in so doing, consider key empirical evidence while assessing representative research that has emerged from these perspectives. We then investigate the methods that have emerged from these methodological paradigms. We conclude by reflecting upon future directions of the qualitative genre while also speaking to what qualitative research has to offer beyond the ivory tower.

Epistemology and Qualitative Research

Qualitative research paradigms generally fall within four categories: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, and constructivism. These perspectives are divided by their approach to ontology, or beliefs about the form and nature of reality, as well as epistemology,

or beliefs about how and what the individual can know about reality (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Each paradigm reflects a different stance on the status of truth and knowability. One's epistemological stance influences the researcher's methods, their methodological justifications, and how they interpret their data.

All four of these paradigms offer answers to the question of what is true, and how we might come to know that it is true. This question, relevant in all areas of life, is made explicit in scientific inquiry. In attempting to establish knowledge about the world, science foregrounds the question of what is true and what can be known. This is not to say that scientific inquiry occurs apart from the subjective perspectives of individuals who undertake it. As Babbie (2005) posits, everything that we know is known through our minds, and our minds have been shaped in turn by our subjective experiences. Regardless of whether we believe that objective truths exist outside of our minds, we experience reality through the lens of our subjective minds. In order to prevent epistemological chaos, scientific inquiry offers a path forward in which we can establish knowledge about the world through collective agreement. Through science, we verify our subjective experiences of the external world with others for the purposes of finding a (temporarily) stable truth. Science, at its best, recognises its own fallibility and subjectivity while also building transparent avenues for evaluating truth claims (Babbie, 2005).

In their heyday (during the 1940s and 1950s), positivists held that the social world was objectively real and could be studied independently of individuals' beliefs, including those of researchers themselves. Positivists attempted to ascertain the 'true state of affairs' without taking into account the socio-historical context of their research. These assumptions about ontology – that the social world was knowable and stable – influenced researchers' epistemic position: they assumed that, given appropriate methods, their findings could reveal the objective nature of reality at a given moment. The methodology they employed mirrored that of the natural sciences: beginning with a research question, researchers formulated hypotheses that could be tested with empirical data. Emphasis

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was placed on replicability and predictive power (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

The paradigm of positivism has changed over the past forty years. Guba and Lincoln, amongst others, have argued that this image of the positivist is no longer prevalent in qualitative research. Instead, some scholars have moved towards post-positivism. A post-positivist paradigm accepts the idea that truth exists, but that our ability to know it is limited, or 'imperfectly apprehendable.' (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 110). Objectivity continues to be an imperfectly sought ideal, but greater emphasis is placed on the need for verification of findings through interpretive communities. This epistemology influences what methodologies are available. While post-positivists will often share methodologies with positivists, greater emphasis is placed on 'critical multiplism', or verifying findings through triangulation and multiple studies (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Post-positivists have also started focusing on the meanings that people ascribe to their own actions, rather than trying to reduce reality to a single principle or interpretation (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

In contrast to positivism and post-positivism, constructivism is characterised by the belief that the nature of reality is apprehendable only to those interpreting it. Here, research on how individuals make meaning of their reality reflects contingent, local, and temporally-bounded truths. For constructivists, the status of the researcher is not objective – rather, s/he is engaged with participants in co-creating their data (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

Finally, the influx of critical theory and cognate positions has shaped the epistemology of many social scientists, even those who do not identify as critical theorists per se. Critical theorists study the creation and impact of historically embedded structures and ideologies that serve to influence an individual's experience of the real. For critical theorists, these structures are ontologically real, in the sense that they are experienced as such, but are also created through the discursive and material practices of economics, social, and cultural forces (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). This *a priori* commitment to critical theory influences what the researcher believes can be known, in that they are committed to the belief in particular structures and seek to deconstruct them. Findings are therefore, to use Guba and Lincoln's term 'value-mediated' (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 110).

These epistemological and ontological divisions have significant consequences for qualitative researchers' selection of methodological strategies. As Carter and Little (2007) point out, epistemology shapes every stage of the research design process. Reflexive researchers acknowledge that adopting an epistemology – or theory of knowledge – is inescapable. Epistemology determines, and 'is made visible' through, methodology, while providing justifications for it (Carter and Little, 2007). A researcher's beliefs about the intelligibility of social reality determine what methods are available to them, and why and how they justify them. Gunzenhauser (2006) takes this assertion one step further to argue that if knowledge is co-created by researcher and participant, then the epicentre for epistemology itself lies in the relationship between them. Drawing from the field of care ethics, he suggests that the researcher/participant relationship itself structures both parties' ability to know, and that the quality of the relationship affects the methods available to them, the researcher's methodological justifications, and the content of the data itself.

The debate over what constitutes 'quality' in qualitative research and how this research should be conducted has a rich history, one deeply enmeshed in the aforementioned epistemological divides. Brinkmann et al. (2014) point out several directions in which this history has unfolded and converged. They argue that while qualitative research did not coalesce as a distinct field until the late twentieth century, individuals have employed qualitative methodologies for many years. Furthermore, qualitative research, as a field, inherited the qualitative/quantitative divide from an intellectual history stretching back hundreds of years, wherein scholars attempting to understand human perception and objectivity created a dualism between the stability of quanta and the subjectivity of qualia. Internally, they posit, the development of qualitative research owes much to three philosophic traditions. (1) The hermeneutic tradition brought forth the idea that

understanding is central to the human experience. Qualitative research writ large is influenced by hermeneutics, in that it attempts to illuminate human experience through analysis of how individuals generate meaning. (2) From phenomenology, qualitative researchers take their emphasis on understanding (locating) social phenomena, how they are experienced, and how these experiences become the basis for a shared sense of reality. (3) Lastly, in the tradition of pragmatism, qualitative researchers focus on praxis, values, and the outcomes of human action.

Further, as Brinkmann et al. (2014) argue, any account of qualitative research is incomplete without recognising the ways in which qualitative research has been historically marginalised as a method of scientific inquiry, having been repressed or unacknowledged despite undergirding innumerable scientific disciplines. Anxiety over its own perceived legitimacy, in contrast to quantitative inquiry, is a recurring theme in the annals of qualitative inquiry. But Brinkmann et al. (2014) also point out that qualitative research has a social history unto itself, having evolved in response to the changing cultural, social, and economic conditions of its creation and maintenance. Qualitative research as we know it today would not be possible, for example, without the technological advancements that have shaped our current communities of practice.

Methodological Traditions

The use of the primary tools of qualitative data collection (e.g. interviews, focus groups, and ethnography) and analysis depends on their methodological foundations. In this section, we provide an overview of grounded theory, hermeneutics, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and case study research – five foundational methodological strategies that have significantly shaped the field of qualitative research.

Grounded theory

The methodology of grounded theory provides qualitative researchers with 'systematic inductive guidelines for collecting and analysing data to build middle-range theoretical frameworks that explain the

collected data' (Charmaz, 2000: 509). For grounded theory scholars, the ideal way to conduct research is to suspend prior theoretical assumptions from the outset of the study, as this can bias one's interpretation of the data. Moreover, the grounded theorist recommends that data be coded as it is collected, as this serves to define and categorise the data while initiating the process of theory development. Here, the theory is constantly revised on the basis of new data, such that theory and data collection develop in tandem. The core principle of grounded theory is that line-by-line coding helps to prevent researchers from imposing their own views on what is going on.

Grounded theory has provided qualitative research as a whole with a solid conceptual foundation for theoretical sampling, i.e. sampling according to the problem of interest as opposed to the need to statistically represent an entire population (Glaser and Strauss, 2017; Charmaz, 2000). Theoretical sampling involves locating the actors, locations, and groups of interest, and then continually involving more and more participants until a saturation point is reached – i.e. when the addition of further participants would be unfruitful with respect to the development of the theory.

Lastly, grounded theory has been applied through both constructivist and positivist approaches towards qualitative research. Constructivist grounded theorists assert that 'discovery' emerges as a result of the researcher's interaction with the data. In contrast, 'objectivist' grounded theory is more positivist in its orientation - it rests upon the general assumption that different observers will describe the world in more or less similar ways because truth is singular, not plural.

Hermeneutics

As a methodological tradition, hermeneutics is concerned with the interpretation of understanding (Arnold and Fischer, 1994). Hermeneutics, moreover, emphasises the singular role that language plays in understanding. Language creates the shared structures of understanding that individuals are born into and the way these structures create their own audiences. The hermeneutic tradition thus affords to language an ontological status, and it emphasises interpretation

of understanding as a bridge between the speaker and the other.

Hermeneutics developed through the need to exegete – to discern and apply divine meaning – from sacred texts. Methods for reading sacred texts originated within various theological traditions, and these practices influenced very different approaches to reading and understanding the written word. As a result, several distinctive hermeneutic theories were developed over many centuries. During the early twentieth century, German philosophers such as Fredrich Schleiermacher, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Gorg Gadamer undertook a philosophical exploration of hermeneutics. These thinkers emphasised the indeterminate meaning of texts, locating meaning in the ongoing process of the text's interpretation, and the way the on-going process of understanding transforms the interpreter (Arnold and Fischer, 1994; Mueller-Vollmer, 1988). In the late twentieth century, critical hermeneutics as a movement sought to problematise the idea of a shared structure of pre-existing understanding found within language. Instead, practitioners of critical hermeneutics sought to emphasise the role of power and potential for domination within linguistic structures (Arnold and Fischer, 1994; Foucault, 1988, 1995). Lastly, phenomenological hermeneutics, championed by philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur (2007) sought to locate the convergence of meaning between the text and its interpretation through semiotic analysis.

Although hermeneutic theory, philosophical hermeneutics, critical hermeneutics, and phenomenological approaches to hermeneutics emphasise different things, they have several shared features as a methodological tradition. First, hermeneutics as a whole emphasises that both the object of interpretation and the interpreter are preceded by a linguistic tradition and culture. In other words, both the object and the interpreter are embedded within a shared structure of meaning. This structure thus enables the interpreter's understanding, even if this understanding is always limited. As a methodology, hermeneutics seeks to identify the overarching social structures that condition the reader's pre-understanding(s). Secondly, shared pre-understandings create a dialogic commu-

nity to which the interpreter belongs. Meaning is not singular or monolithic within a dialogic community, but it does shape and limit available meanings – both constitutively and through relations of power. Lastly, hermeneutics emphasises that the process of interpretation and understanding changes the self in relation to the other. It is an ongoing process of meaning making and change. With respect to method, the technique of choice for many hermeneutics scholars is discourse analysis (see below).

Phenomenology
Research in the phenomenological tradition examines individuals' lived experiences of   social phenomena (Creswell, 2012). Accordingly, the goal of studying a social phenomenon is to grasp its essence, as experienced by a collection of individuals. For example, a researcher may investigate the experience of anger, helplessness, or grief within an individual's lived experience. Because the phenomenological researcher wants to understand the experiential structure of these phenomena, s/he will often 'bracket' or suspend, personal judgments about it, approaching it instead on its own terms (Creswell, 2012). Philosophically, phenomenological researchers commit to the belief that the 'reality of an object . . . is inextricably related to one's consciousness of it' (Creswell, 2012: 59). Because of these epistemological commitments, phenomenological researchers often conduct in-depth interviews with multiple individuals. Not only does this method of data collection allow phenomenological researchers to focus on the experience of a phenomena, it also showcases how the participants believe their context has influenced their experience (Creswell, 2012). Subsequent analysis focuses on identifying clusters of shared meaning, generating thick descriptions of a phenomenon, and analysing how individuals experience it in the context of their everyday lives (Thompson et al., 1989).

Ethnomethodology
Like phenomenology, in which it is partially rooted (Turowetz et al., 2016), ethnomethodology examines practices through which society's members co-produce a commonsensical, known-in-common reality.

Harold Garfinkel (1967), the founder of this tradition, called these practices *ethnomethods*, and he worked to specify how they are used to constitute social settings. Three central notions in ethnomethodology are accountability, reflexivity, and indexical expressions (Maynard and Clayman, 1991). Garfinkel (1963, 1967) argued that accountability, or how people hold one another accountable for cooperatively constituting a social reality, constrains and regulates actors' use of ethnomethods. The competent use of ethnomethods, in turn, requires reflexivity, the process by which parties to an interaction continually update their definition of the situation based on the just-prior actions of interlocutors. As such, reflexivity captures the temporal, sequential dimension of interaction: each successive turn displays an understanding of what just occurred, providing others with the information they require to take their own next turns, and so forth. Finally, indexical expressions are utterances or embodied actions that can only be understood with reference to the context of their production. Linguists have identified a number of such expressions, including 'this,' 'that,' 'there,' and 'here' (Bar-Hillel, 1954). Garfinkel's innovation was to radicalise the traditional conception of indexical expressions, arguing that all talk (and non-verbal action), irrespective of its content, is inherently indexical. The meaning of an utterance cannot be separated from, and is identical with, the concrete occasions of its use (see Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970). For ethnomethodologists and their intellectual heirs, key methods of data collection include ethnomethodological ethnography – a mode of inquiry that concentrates on 'members' methods' (Garfinkel, 1967) for making sense together – and conversation analysis (see below).

Case Study Research

Case study research attempts to isolate and explore an issue within a bounded context, or contexts, utilising multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2012). Accordingly, case studies produce context-dependent knowledge about a social issue(s). Because they attempt to understand an issue in its context, case study researchers often employ multiple forms of data collection, including in-depth interviews, participant ob-

servation, and ethnography. Recognising that the information acquired is contingent upon time and place, case study researchers attempt to situate collected data in a larger historical context. However, while researchers may agree that the knowledge generated by case studies is context-dependent, some argue that this information can be applied beyond its context. Flyvberg (2006), for instance, contends that context-dependent knowledge is at the heart of human learning, and that is through hundreds of cases that we come to form generalised rules and expectations. Furthermore, he posits, even a single case may serve as a paradigmatic example that can be used to generate further knowledge. Above all, case studies are intended to produce thick descriptions and rich, complex narratives.

Burawoy (1998) argues that the seemingly incompatible epistemological positions of positivism and constructivism can be put into conversation through the 'extended case study,' a methodology that seeks to link micro and macro while building on preexisting theory. For Burawoy, positivist science is heralded for its embodiment of the 4Rs: reactivity, reliability, replicability, and representativeness. Thus, survey research seeks to accomplish this through the 4Ss: neutral stimulus, standardised interview, stabilised external conditions, and careful sampling. The problem, though, is that survey research runs into context effects: interview effects, respondent effects, field effects, and situation effects. Survey researchers attempt to measure, reduce, and control these problems, but constructivist (or 'reflexive') science takes the view that 'context is not noise disguising reality but reality itself' (Burawoy, 1998: 13). Here, intervention is a virtue, situational knowledge is transformed into social processes, social processes reflect the social forces that structure life, and researchers are concerned with reconstructing theory rather than representativeness. The downsides of the reflexive approach are power effects: domination, silencing, objectification, and normalisation. Hence, Burawoy (1998: 30) concludes that 'positive methods are more appropriate to the study of enduring systemic properties, while reflexive methods are better attuned to study everyday social interaction'. Putting these methods into conversation

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in an extended case study, as Burawoy details, allows the researcher to examine the systemic properties that influence everyday social interaction.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

Just as epistemology influences methodology, methodology provides a justification for the methods employed to collect data. Collecting data raises numerous questions regarding the researcher's relationship to participants, and this only underscores the critical role of epistemology and methodology with respect to both the ethical and practical dimensions of method selection. In this section, we explore several different methods by which qualitative data is collected and analysed.

Interviews

Qualitative researchers from across the epistemological and methodological spectrum use interviews to collect data from participants. Though various forms of this practice exist, interviewing essentially involves an interviewer asking questions of a participant in order to answer a broader research question. When using interviews, researchers must be cognisant of the theoretical assumptions underlying their conception of interviewing (Roulston, 2010). Traditionally, Koven (2014) argues, the genre of interviewing has been predicated upon three basic assumptions: first, that interviews can reveal an individual's mental state; second, that through interviews, an interviewee's true voice can be heard; and third, that interviewees are representative of larger publics. These assumptions have influenced how interviewers understand the data they generate and the claims they think they can make. Thanks to the epistemological cleavages that have since emerged across the academy, these beliefs are no longer universally shared. As Koven points out, everyone – interviewees and interviewers alike – understand the genre of interviewing in a different way. The way each person understands the genre of interviewing (namely, what the interview can and cannot reveal) influences the outcome of the interview itself.

Understanding the theoretical assumptions that one brings into an interview can help to clarify the parameters for what constitutes quality. Quality, Roulston (2010) posits, is comprised of four elements: whether the interview data actually informs (i.e. responds to) the research question posed; whether the interview was engaging (communication was clear between interviewer and interviewee, and elicited data that responded to research questions); whether the process of design, execution, and interpretation was performed with the proper rigour; and whether the methods are consistent with the study's theoretical (i.e. epistemological and methodological) underpinnings. Here, reflecting on one's own theoretical assumptions is key to reflexivity and the proficient navigation of ethical dilemmas. As Kvale (2014) argues, interviews, like all communication acts, involve power dynamics and asymmetries. The interviewer effectively rules the interview: the 'dialogue' is instrumental and oriented toward the interviewer's purpose; it is one-way; and it has the capacity to be manipulative. One need not adopt Kvale's agonistic interview model to accept the assertion that different interviewing practices produce different forms of knowledge, and that researchers need to be cognisant of how their theoretical frame informs their ethical decisions.

Focus Groups

To borrow the words of Barbour and Kitzinger (1999: 6), focus groups are 'group discussions exploring a specific set of issues.' The distinguishing feature of focus groups is the use of group interaction to generate data. They are thus ideally suited for 'exploring people's experiences, opinions, wishes, and concerns' (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999: 8) particularly when the researcher is interested in participants' explanations and accounts, the development of frames and vernacular, and the effect of a social setting on individual reasoning. Ensuring the quality of focus groups depends on study-specific considerations: group size, heterogeneity, participants' interpersonal familiarity, recruitment, and gatekeepers. Quality is also determined by researcher's decision about where to conduct the focus group and when/how to use artifacts to stimulate conversation. Researchers themselves –

through their social identity and moderator skills – can also affect the quality of the focus group (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999).

Ethnography

Ethnography is the process by which a researcher studies a group or a social phenomenon through embedded observation. Practical and epistemological concerns shape how a researcher approaches this process of observation, particularly regarding their relationship with the community being studied. At one end of the spectrum, often associated with constructivism, is the participant-observer style of research whereby researchers actively participate alongside community members in producing the phenomena under study. On the other end of the spectrum, often associated with positivism and post-positivism, the researcher is detached from the community, observing as an outsider. There are, of course, many degrees between and within these two positions. Nonetheless, the relationship that the researcher establishes with the community, and how they position themselves in relation to it, will definitely shape the study's findings.

Epistemology also shapes how ethnographic researchers understand the process of observation and the claims that can be derived from it. Here, Emerson et al. (2011) encourage researchers to first recognise that all humans interpret their experience through their own hermeneutic lens. Our lens shapes what we find interesting and what we see in our observations. Secondly, they emphasise that, in converting our observations into notes, we engage in narration, which necessarily involves choice (i.e. highlighting some aspects of experience at the expense of others). Knowing this, researchers should try and capture indigenous meanings, or what certain aspects of participant behaviour mean to those involved in them (Emerson et al., 2011). This can only occur through prolonged daily contact and involvement, continuous fieldnotes, and closely documented interactions.

As ethnographic researchers acknowledge the larger role that they play in co-constructing the data that they produce, scholars such as Lareau and Schultz (1996) have advocated for greater transparency in

how researchers talk about the problems they encountered in their research. Rather than hiding the mistakes made in the field, or factors limiting the study, Lareau and Schultz argue that revealing these limitations actually enhances the quality of the analysis and the reader's confidence in the researcher's claims.

In addition to mistakes and limitations, the matter of claim-making haunts ethnography in another way. Traditionally, ethnography used static geographic categories – e.g. local, national, and international – to analyse the world. However, as Gille and Riain (2002) point out, globalisation has inspired researchers to recontextualise communities and places: instead of defining community through geography, ethnographers, via multi-site research, have increasingly pivoted toward communities distributed across myriad social networks. Ultimately, all ethnographers have to make conscious choices about where to draw the boundaries of the community they are researching.

Discourse Analysis

Broadly speaking, discourse analysts study the relationship between language and social life. Like all qualitative research, it takes as its unit of analysis human action and communication. Language, as the predominant mechanism that humans use to communicate within a shared reality, is a fertile and highly significant site for qualitative analysis (Johnstone, 2008). As Johnston notes (2008), researchers across disciplines have gravitated towards the study of discourse as a means of understanding how humans represent the world around. Taking up the work of philosophers such as Michel Foucault, qualitative researchers have studied both discourse and discourses in order to understand how humans structure (and are structured by) language.

While differing in method and epistemologies, researchers who utilise discourse analysis share the basic theoretical assumption that we are all born into shared structures that enable us to interpret and understand reality (Dryzek, 1995). These structures are created, reproduced, and maintained through language; thus, to a large degree, language structures our experience of reality. Human communities operate within these structures in their attempts to apprehend physical and

social realities. These linguistic structures, or discourses, have significant consequences for how human communities comprehend, identify, and act within the world (Carbo, 2016).

The practices by which qualitative researchers analyse discourses vary. Dryzek (2005) suggests that researchers identify, within a communicative event, how the discourse acknowledges ontology, naturalises assumptions about relationships, ascribes agents and motivations, and operationalises metaphors that help those within the discourse establish relationships between objects and people. Johnstone (2008) advocates approaching a bounded (constructed) text with a heuristic for evaluation. By this, she means that researchers should consider the sources of invention and constraint within a given text. This heuristic recognises that discourse is co-constitutive of the world where the text resides, the language of the text, the participants who find expression within the text, prior discourses that shape the text, the medium of the text, and the purpose that calls forth the text.

Conversation Analysis

Conversation analysis (CA) is the study of naturally occurring social interaction (Clayman and Gill, 2012). Developed by Harvey Sacks (1992), CA, as noted previously, grew out of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967). Examining interactions in everyday and institutional settings, CA researchers aim to identify the rules and procedures people use to assemble recognisable social objects. In turn, these objects – which range in scale from mundane greetings-exchanges (Schegloff, 1986) to social identities like race (Rawls, 2000) and gender (Stokoe, 2011) – comprise the *social facts* (in the Durkheimian sense (see Rawls, 1996; Schegloff, 1968: 1086) that make up society. Working with specialised transcripts of audio and video recordings, researchers examine the sequential, turn-by-turn co-production of such facts by social actors. These analyses are grounded in parties' displayed understandings of the interaction in progress, as revealed in their responses to immediately prior turns at talk or embodied action (in other words, their *reflexive* practices; see the section on ethnomethodology, above), rather than those of the analyst. Because social

facts are the building blocks of society, the study of how they are cooperatively assembled in real time provides a foundation for other modes of sociological inquiry. It also differentiates CA from other ways of doing sociology: whereas sociologists traditionally ask how groups and outcomes vary, CA is primarily focused on the preconditions for recognising variation in the first place. That is, CA asks how we go about constituting the taken-for-granted background against which variation is perceptible as such. In this respect, CA (and ethnomethodology) has strong affinities with phenomenology.

Qualitative Research: Beyond Academia

Qualitative research, though often associated with academia, is performed in everyday social life to achieve commonsensical knowledge of the world. As we have argued throughout this paper, qualitative research is a means by which to understand social reality. Because it can help us make meaningful observations about our social environments, qualitative research has been employed beyond academia – in non-profits, public policy, community activism, and corporations. Some researchers have gone as far as to argue that in order to reinvigorate disciplines that use qualitative methods, greater efforts must be made to engage multiple publics (Burawoy, 2005; Liew, 2015). Burawoy, in fact, argues for the necessity of a client-led social science, in which professional research (and its methods) would be applied to perceived problems within communities (Burawoy, 2005). How these publics should be engaged - and the role of the qualitative researcher within them - remains contested.

Social communities informally use qualitative methods to collectivise and problem solve. As Randy Stoecker (1999) notes, academics and communities can leverage these methods to collaborate in meeting mutual needs and pushing for social change. For communities struggling to collectivise or meet basic needs, participating in qualitative community-based research can be a mechanism to formalise group cohesion, or present needs to a broader community (Stoecker, 1999). In formal institutional settings – both at the

national and local level – qualitative research methods can be used for purposes of program evaluation (i.e. evaluating the merit and effectiveness of a given program in meeting its goals) (Brandon and Sam in Leavy, 2014). Indeed, qualitative research methods are increasingly being used for what Liew has called 'policy sociology' – sociology aimed at improving public policy implementation and outcomes (Liew, 2015). Through processes of program evaluation, advocacy, and ensuring accountability, researchers involved in policy sociology can use qualitative methods to help improve public policy.

In the private sector, the need to develop user-centred products in a competitive market has led some to embrace qualitative methods to gain insights about non-quantifiable experiential meanings. At corporate organisations such as Xerox, ethnography has been used to tailor innovation to the lived environments of its users. Ethnographic research thus allowed Xerox to get 'rich, thick insight into the social context in which users live and the space where they use products' (Xerox, 2016). Here, ethnography enabled these researchers to get past merely observing how their products were used to better understand the 'attitudes and behaviors associated with it' (Xerox, 2016).

Discussion: The Promise and Pitfalls of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research empowers investigators to focus on the details and idiosyncrasies of specific texts, phenomena, people, communities, and cases rather than entire populations. It therefore enables researchers to fully absorb the nuances, and richness of the social object and/or issue being studied. Regardless of their philosophical or practical approaches, all qualitative researchers face unique challenges and difficult decisions at every stage of the research process. Qualitative researchers must identify and define the narratives that they intend to portray, decide how they will code their data to subsume texts and accounts under one narrative or another, ensure that their conclusions are substantive, and inevitably limit the sites, participants, texts, and interactions being studied in order to balance depth and breadth. Above all, qualitative

researchers must reflexively consider which knowledge claims they will accept, which they will reject, and why. As Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2013: 36) put it, 'taking the tack, "I'll start somewhere and take it from there," is asking for trouble.'

Beyond the question of what constitutes 'quality' in qualitative research, there are also many competing ethical and professional obligations for the qualitative researcher to consider: legal/institutional obligations to adhere to IRB guidelines and protect research participants, interpersonal obligations to not abuse the trust of participants, social obligations (to people, animals, and nature), and career obligations (i.e. pursuing research that will be funded, publishable, interesting, accessible, and finished in a reasonable period of time). Resolving these challenges can result in creative - but potentially contradictory - approaches. Being clear about one's epistemological and methodological approach – not to mention broader professional, social, and ethical commitments – is critical to one's success as a qualitative researcher.

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