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Qualitative research – state of the art

Abstract. *The background of this article is the observation that the methodological discussions about qualitative research in German-speaking and Anglo-Saxon contexts are quite different. The article gives an overview of the state of the art of qualitative research in terms of its methodological development and its establishment in the broader field of social research. After some brief remarks about the history of the field, the major research perspectives and schools of qualitative research – grounded theory, ethnomethodology, narrative analysis, objective hermeneutics, life-world analysis, ethnography, cultural and gender studies – are outlined against the background of recent developments. The establishment of qualitative research is discussed with reference to the examples of the German and International Sociological Associations (DGS and ISA), to developments in the area of textbooks and handbooks, and to the founding of specialized journals. Methodological trends such as the move to visual and electronic data, triangulation of methods and the hybridization of qualitative procedures are discussed. In conclusion some perspectives are outlined which are expected to become more important in the future of qualitative research or which are seen as demands for further clarification. Beside the use of computers and further clarification on linking qualitative and quantitative research, and the limits and problems of such linkage, further suggestions concerning the ways of presenting appropriate and at the same time compulsory criteria for qualitative research are mentioned. Trends in building schools and developing research pragmatics, on the one hand, and a tendency towards elucidation and mystification of methodological procedures, on the other hand, are identified as tensional fields in methodological discussions in qualitative research.*

Finally a stronger internationalization in different directions and answering the question of indication are discussed as needs for the future of qualitative research.

Key words. *Methodological trends – Methodology – Qualitative research – Quality criteria in qualitative research*

Introduction

The label "qualitative research" is used as an umbrella term for a series of approaches to research in the social sciences. These are also known as hermeneutic, reconstructive or interpretative approaches (see Flick, Kardoff and Steinke, 2000; 2002 for a recent overview). Under this label, these approaches, methods and the results obtained by using them are attracting increasing attention not only in sociology, but also in education (Friebertshäuser and Prengel, 1997), psychology (Richardson, 1996) and health sciences (Murray and Chamberlain, 1999). Hardly any handbook is published today that does not have a chapter on qualitative research methods (in rehabilitation, nursing science or public health, for instance). In sociology, the interest in qualitative research can be traced back to different theoretical traditions – from Max Weber's *verstehende* sociology, to actor theories, symbolic interactionism and structuralist approaches. Major fields of research – like health and illness – focus on the analysis of biographies, of everyday and institutional communications, of organizations and open fields. Qualitative research has always had strong links to applied fields in its research questions and approaches. In the scientific associations of sociology, for example, it is anchored in different divisions and areas (for example in the sociology of language and knowledge, in biographical research, medical and family sociology, to name just a few). It would be going beyond the scope of this article to discuss the results of qualitative research in these fields in greater detail. Instead the state of the developments in qualitative research methodology will be the focus of what follows.

History

Qualitative research draws on long traditions, which lie at the origin of most social sciences. Renaissances of qualitative research can be

observed since the 1960s in the United States and since the 1970s in German-language areas. However, these developed in different phases and led to different states in the discussions in both areas (Flick, 2002: 10). Methodological discussions in the German-language literature went through a phase of fundamental and theoretical discussions in the 1970s and have since become more oriented towards methodological consolidation and broad application of the methods in empirical studies. The Anglo-American discussions of the 1980s and 1990s have been strongly marked by a new reflexivity and once again by the questioning of methodological certainties. Here the keywords are the crises of representation and of legitimization inaugurated by the debates on writing in ethnography (see the contributions to Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, 2000 or Clifford and Marcus, 1986).

The development of qualitative research proceeded in different areas, each characterized by specific theoretical backgrounds, specific concepts of reality and their own methodological programmes. One example is ethnomethodology as a theoretical programme, which first led to the development of conversation analysis (Bergmann, 2000a) and differentiated into new approaches like genre analysis (Knoblauch and Luckmann, 2000) and discourse analysis (Parker, 2000). A number of such fields and approaches in qualitative research have developed, each unfolding in its own way, with few connections with the discussions and research in other fields of qualitative research. Other examples are objective hermeneutics, narrative-based biographical research and, more recently, ethnography or cultural studies. This diversification is intensified by the fact that German and Anglo-American discussions are engaged in very different topics and methods, and there is only limited exchange between them.

The most important schools of research

Research perspectives

Although the various qualitative-research approaches differ in their theoretical assumptions, in their understanding of issues and in their methodological focus, they can be summarized under three major perspectives. Theoretical points of reference are drawn, first, from

TABLE 1
Research perspectives in qualitative research

	Approaches to subjective viewpoints	*Description of the making of social situations*	*Hermeneutical analysis of underlying structures*
Theoretical positions	• Symbolic interactionism • Phenomenology	• Ethnomethodology • Constructivism	• Psychoanalysis • Genetic structuralism
Methods of data collection	• Semi-structured interviews • Narrative interviews	• Focus groups • Ethnography • Participant observation • Recording interactions • Collecting documents	• Recording interactions • Photography • Film
Methods of interpretation	• Theoretical coding • Content analysis • Narrative analysis • Hermeneutic methods	• Conversation analysis • Discourse analysis • Genre analysis • Analysis of documents	• Objective hermeneutics • Deep hermeneutics • Hermeneutic sociology of knowledge
Fields of application	• Biographical research • Analysis of everyday knowledge	• Analysis of life-worlds and organizations • Evaluation • Cultural studies	• Family research, biographical research and generation research • Gender research

Source: Flick, Kardoff and Steinke, 2000: 19.

traditions of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology. A second major line is anchored theoretically in ethnomethodology and constructionism, and interested in routines of everyday life and the making of social reality. The third point of reference is structuralist or psychoanalytic positions which assume unconscious psychological structures and mechanisms and latent social configurations. These three perspectives differ in their research objectives and in the methods they employ. Authors like Lüders and Reichertz (1986) juxtapose the first group of approaches highlighting the ''viewpoint of the subject'' (Bergold and Flick, 1987) and a second group aimed at describing the processes in the production of existing (mundane, institutional or more general social) situations, milieus and social order (e.g. in ethnomethodological analyses of language). The third approach is characterized by (mostly hermeneutical) reconstructions of ''deep structures generating action and meaning'' in the sense of psychoanalytic or objective-hermeneutic conceptions.

The available range of methods for collecting and analysing data can be allocated to these research perspectives as follows: in the first perspective, semi-structured or narrative interviews and procedures of coding and content analysing are dominant. In the second research perspective, data are collected instead in focus groups, by ethnography or (participant) observation and by recording interactions on audio- or videotape. These data are then analysed using discourse or conversation analysis. From the angle of the third perspective, data are collected primarily by recording interactions and using visual material (photos or films), which then undergo one of the different versions of hermeneutic analysis (Hitzler and Honer, 1997).

Table 1 summarizes these allocations and complements them with some examples of research fields characteristic of each of the three perspectives.

Schools and recent developments

All in all, qualitative research, in its theoretical and methodological developments and its research practice, is characterized by a more or less explicit building of schools which differ in their influence on the general debates.

1. Grounded theory

A great deal of attention is still attracted by works in the tradition of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and their approach consisting of building empirically grounded theories. In this approach, the idea of theory development is taken up as a general goal for qualitative research, and concepts such as theoretical sampling (selecting cases and material against the background of the state of the empirical analyses in the project) or different methods – open, axial and selective – of coding are employed. A greater portion of the empirical research in qualitative research refers to one or the other parts of the programme of Strauss and his colleagues (Chamberlain, 1999). The approach has also left its mark on the development of biographical research or is linked to other research programmes.

2. Ethnomethodology, conversation, discourse and genre analysis

The starting-point of the second school is ethnomethodology, introduced by Harold Garfinkel (1967). It focusses on the empirical study of the mundane practices through which interactive order is produced inside and outside institutions. For a long time, conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992) was the dominant method for making the theoretical project of ethnomethodology work empirically. Conversation analysts study the methods employed to practically organize speech as processes which unfold in a regular way and, beyond this, how specific forms of interaction – conversations at dinner table, gossip, counselling and assessments – are organized. In the meantime, conversation analysis has developed as an independent area outside ethnomethodology. Studies of work designed by ethnomethodologists like Garfinkel as a second field of research (Bergmann, 2000b) have been less influential. More attention has been attracted by works extending conversation-analytic research questions and analytical principles to larger entities in genre analysis (for an overview see Knoblauch and Luckmann, 2000). Finally, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis have been the background for formulating at least larger parts of the heterogeneous research field of discourse analysis (see Harré, 1998; Parker, 2000; Potter and Wetherell, 1998). Data collection in all these fields is characterized by an attempt to collect natural data (like recording

everyday conversations) without using explicit, reconstructive methods like interviews.

3. Narrative analysis and biographical research

Biographical research in German-language areas is determined essentially by a specific method used for collecting data and by the diffusion of this method. Here the narrative interview, developed by Fritz Schütze, stands out. This method is linked to the approach which makes biographical processes and experiences in one's life-history accessible and collects them by means of narratives. It is applied in several areas of sociology and, in recent years, increasingly in education. By analysing narratives, broader topics and contexts can be studied – for example how people cope with unemployment, experiences of migration, processes of illness or experiences in families touched by the Holocaust. Data are interpreted in narrative analyses (Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal, 1997). In recent years, an extension of the narrative situation and a turn to group narratives (Hildenbrand and Jahn, 1988) or to analysing narratives of several generations in a family can be noted (Rosenthal, 1998).

4. Objective hermeneutics and hermeneutic sociology of knowledge

In the German-language discussion (but hardly beyond), the objective-hermeneutics approach plays an important role. It was created by Oevermann (see recently Oevermann, 2000 and Reichertz, 2000) and offers elaborate instruments for analysing cases (Kraimer, 2000) and their underlying structures. The starting-point is the textual quality of the world (the world as text – Garz and Kraimer, 1994) and of the material to be analysed. The theoretical framework of the multiple studies is often informed by Oevermann's theory of professionalization, by assumptions about socialization and by structuralist ideas. The case structure is reconstructed through a multi-step procedure of interpreting the material. Falsification and abduction (Peirce, 1931–5) are used as modes of inferring and testing hypotheses. In recent years, this approach has been linked with other approaches, like Soeffner's social-science hermeneutics (2000) when

the hermeneutic sociology of knowledge was created (Hitzler et al., 1999), with Luhmann's constructivist systems theory (Sutter, 1997), or with grounded theory (Hildenbrand, 1999). An introduction to the analytical practice of objective hermeneutics has recently been published (Wernet, 2000).

5. *Phenomenology and analysing small life-worlds*

In the traditions of Husserl (1970) and Schütz and Luckmann (1974), approaches to a phenomenology of the life-world have been developed. They focus on how meanings are jointly constructed in natural contexts and how processes of understanding develop. Here the subjective interpretations involved in understanding and meaning-making are seen as central – the question of what subjective interpretations are held by the actors under study and what characterizes them. This is studied in analysing "small life-worlds" and how meaning systems are produced which are shared by the members in these life-worlds (see Hitzler and Honer, 1997). This approach is useful, for example, in studying fitness centres and do-it-yourself groups as well as expert knowledge and techno cultures.

6. *Ethnography*

Since the early 1980s, an increase in ethnographic research can be noted. It has to a certain extent replaced studies that have been conducted employing participant observation. It aims less at understanding social events or processes based on reports about these events (e.g. in an interview). Instead the goal is to understand from the inside the social processes involved in making these events by participating in the development of the processes. This research is characterized by extended participation (instead of one-off interviews or observations) and by the flexible use of different methods (including more or less formalized interviews or analyses of documents). Of central interest since the middle of the 1980s is the part played by writing about the observed events. More generally, this interest highlights the relation between presentation and what is presented (see below). Especially in the United States there is a tendency to replace the label "qualitative research" (in all its facets) with the label "ethnography" (Denzin, 1997). In Germany,

ethnography is closely linked to the study of small life-worlds. Special worlds like elite boarding schools, religious scenes or night clubs have been studied using this approach (Hirschauer and Amann, 1997).

7. Cultural studies

Another trend currently expanding in media studies primarily but also in sociology (Hörning and Winter, 1999) goes under the label of cultural studies. This trend has sparked a lively discussion, which continues in regular meetings and a number of readers. So far, the degree of commitment to elaborate methodology and methodological principles is rather low. The approach is defined by its object, ''cultures'', their analysis across cultural practices (like media) and an orientation towards (disadvantaged) subcultures and existing relations of power in concrete contexts.

8. Gender studies

Essential impetus for the development of qualitative research questions and methodologies came and still comes from feminist research and gender studies (Gildemeister, 2000). Here, the processes of constructing and differentiating gender and the associated inequalities are studied. Phenomena like trans-sexuality are taken as an empirical starting-point to demonstrate the constructedness of ''typical'' images of gender.

The state of the disciplinary development of qualitative research

Currently some activities can be registered which indicate that the field of qualitative research has become established to a certain extent in sociology and education.

First, there are several divisions within the German Sociological Association (DGS) or the International Sociological Association (ISA), in which research is characterized mainly or at least partly by the use of specific qualitative methods. In the DGS, the Biographical Research division or the Sociology of Language division,

which has just been renamed Sociology of Knowledge, can be cited, but also a number of regularly meeting ad hoc or working groups. After qualitative methods had played hardly any role in the discussions and conferences of the Methods of Empirical Research division in Germany for a long time, the DGS council decided in 1997 to establish a working group devoted to Methods of Qualitative Research. Since then, a series of (sometimes well-attended) conferences have been organized by the working group. Some of the topics discussed have been "Subjectivity in Qualitative Research", "Ethnography", "Archives", "Generalization in Qualitative Research" and – in co-operation with the Methods of Empirical Research division – "Validity in Qualitative Research". At the same time, a stronger interest has arisen, in the Methods of Empirical Research division, in qualitative research and especially in the question of validation in qualitative research. On this issue, a series of conferences have already been held. The working group pursues its aim of advancing the discussion on qualitative research and the methodological consolidation of methodological procedures and giving qualitative methods more room in the methodological training provided by the sociological institutes. A subgroup has just developed curricular suggestions for an integrative formation in research methods (Hopf, 2000: 93). In RC 33 ("Logic and Methodology" Research Committee of the International Sociological Association) qualitative methods are part of the conference programmes, but, here as well, there is a strong interest in questions of the validity of qualitative research, as the programme of the last conference in 2000 demonstrated.

Second, several journals have been founded in recent years which focus on a specific approach (*Sozialer Sinn – Zeitschrift für hermeneutische Sozialforschung*: in English "Social Meaning – Journal for Hermeneutical Research") or on a given field of research (*Psychotherapie und Sozialwissenschaft – Zeitschrift für Qualitative Forschung*: in English "Psychotherapy and Social Science – Journal for Qualitative Research", or *ZBBS – Zeitschrift für Qualitative Bildungs-, Beratungs- und Sozialforschung*: in English "Journal for Qualitative Research in Education, Counselling and Social Research") from the standpoint of qualitative research. This trend is much stronger in the Anglo-Saxon area (*Qualitative Inquiry, Qualitative Research, Qualitative Health Research*), demonstrating a growing interest in qualitative research as well as the fact that

more materials and research reports can be published, which leads to establishing discussion circles and publishing contexts.

Third, the number of published textbooks and handbooks on qualitative research is constantly growing. Besides those which go beyond a specific approach, discipline or method (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, 2000; Flick, 2002; Flick, Kardoff and Steinke, 2002), an increasing number of books are available which focus on a selection of methods (Bohnsack, 1999; Brüsemeister, 2000; Silverman, 1997), single strategies or methods (Hildenbrand, 1999; Wernet, 2000) or the application of qualitative methods from a disciplinary angle: Friebertshäuser and Prengel (1997) for education and Richardson (1996) for psychology. Finally, more and more book series on qualitative research are available or in planning.

These trends show that interest in qualitative research, its methods and its result has grown remarkably in recent years.

Methodological developments and trends

Without any claim to this being an exhaustive overview, several methodological trends can be observed.

Visual and electronic data

Beyond the traditional forms of data for qualitative research collected in interviews, focus groups or participant observation, visual data have become more important. The analysis of video and film is used not only in media studies but also in sociology (Denzin, 2000; Harper, 2000). This raises questions such as how to edit these data appropriately and whether methods originally created to analyse texts can be applied to these sorts of data. More and more often, chapters on visual data are included in handbooks and texts. What new forms of data are available for studying the Internet and electronic communication (like email) and what data have to be collected in order to analyse the processes of construction and communication that are involved here are topics deserving further discussion (see Bergmann and Meier, 2000 for this).

Triangulation

Especially in education, but also more generally, the idea of triangulation is widely discussed. Linking different qualitative or qualitative and quantitative methods (Kelle and Erzberger, 2000) will become essential in the study of complex fields of investigation. The special appeal of triangulation is that it makes it possible to go beyond the limitations of a single method by combining several methods and giving them equal relevance. It is becoming more fruitful to combine different theoretical approaches or to take these into account in combining methods (see for more details Flick, 1992, 2001).

Hybridization

In several of the research perspectives and schools discussed above, trends towards a hybridization of methodological procedures can be noted. For example, ethnography and cultural studies, and also grounded-theory research, are not restricted to specific methods. Rather researchers here select methodological approaches in a field according to pragmatic research needs and combine different methods if it seems useful to do so. This pragmatic use of methodological principles and the avoidance of a restricting subscription to a specific methodological discourse have been termed "hybridization" (e.g. by Knoblauch, 2000).

Perspectives

Some topics can be identified which will become more important in the future of qualitative research or are in need of further clarification.

Using computers

The development of computer programs for supporting qualitative research is a trend which is taken up very optimistically, regarded with scepticism (Knoblauch, 2000), or more or less ignored – as many qualitative researchers still do. The best-developed area here

is the use of computers for analysing texts. Several more or less extended, user-friendly and comfortable programs with varying functions and features are available in the commercial circuit (ATLAS/ti, NUDIST, WINMAX). Questions arise as to whether, in the end, these programs are simply different ways to achieve a quite similar use and usability, whether they will have a sustainable impact on the ways qualitative data are used and analysed, and what will be the relation of technical investments and efforts to the resulting facilitation of routines and procedures in the long run. These programs support the handling and administration of data (e.g. matching codes and sources in the text, displaying them jointly and tracing back codings to the single passage in the text they refer to). Whether the development of voice recognition software will ever lead to computer-supported transcription of interviews and whether this will be a desirable development or not are still open questions. Generally speaking, the use of software in qualitative research is welcomed in the English-language literature with much more enthusiasm than in the German-speaking literature and research practice.

Linking qualitative and quantitative research

Several positions on this issue can be identified in the literature. On the one hand – especially in hermeneutic or phenomenological research – hardly any need is seen for linking qualitative research with quantitative research and its approaches. The argument is based on the incompatibilities between the two research traditions, their epistemologies and their procedures. On the other hand, for example in the research association "Status Passages and Life-Course Research", located in Bremen, Germany, models and strategies are developed to link qualitative and quantitative research (Kelle and Erzberger, 2000). Finally, in everyday research practice beyond methodological discussions, linking the two approaches often is necessary and useful for pragmatic reasons. Therefore it would be especially important to discuss how to conceptualize such a triangulation in a way which takes both approaches, their theoretical and their methodological peculiarities into serious account without any premature subordination of one approach to the other.

Writing qualitative research

In the 1980s and 1990s, the discussion about the appropriate ways of presenting qualitative procedures and results had a strong impact especially in the United States (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). Beyond comparing different strategies for reporting qualitative research (van Maanen, 1988), main topics in this discussion still are: How can qualitative researchers do justice in their writing to the life-worlds they study and to the subjective perspectives they meet there? What is the impact of the presentation on what is presented – research itself – and on the way the latter is conceptualized? What is the role of writing in assessing and its importance for the assessability of qualitative research? The stress is laid in different ways. Ethnography sees the act of writing about what was studied as at least as important as the collection and analysis of data. In other fields, writing is seen in a more instrumental way – as a way of making procedures in the field and the foundation of results transparent and plausible to recipients (other scientists, readers, the general public, etc.). Overall, interest in the discussion about writing has dwindled, because of such reactions as: "Except for some gains of extra reflexivity, these debates had little results one could catch or that were helpful on the level of research practice" (Lüders, 2000a: 398).

Quality criteria

The topic of appropriate criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research still attracts much attention. This is demonstrated by the conference recently organized by the Methods of Empirical Research division of the DGS in Germany, or in RC 33 of the ISA at the international level. There are now several books approaching this subject from different angles (Seale, 1999; Steinke, 1999). The basic alternatives, however, still determine the discussion. Should the traditional criteria of validity, reliability and objectivity be applied to qualitative research as well, and how? Or should new, method-appropriate criteria be developed for qualitative research? What are these and how exactly can they be "operationalized" for assessing the quality of qualitative research? A fundamental scepticism about using criteria in general is found mainly in US discussions. The question of appropriate criteria for distinguishing good

and bad qualitative research is an internal problem and at the same time a need related to the attractiveness and the feasibility of qualitative research in the markets and arenas of teaching, research grants and the policy impact of social sciences.

Qualitative research between developing schools of research and pragmatics

Another tension in qualitative research is the relation between methodological purism and research pragmatics. Further elaborating the pure textbook versions of hermeneutic methods, for example, leads to further increasing the expenditure of time and personal and other resources when applying these methods. This raises the question of how to use the methods in research projects for a ministry or company, or, more generally, aimed at consulting politicians in a pragmatic way so that the number of analysed cases can be large enough to make results "accountable" (Gaskell and Bauer, 2000). This leads to the question of what are pragmatic but nevertheless methodologically acceptable short-cut strategies for collecting, transcribing, and analysing qualitative data (Lüders, 2000b) and designing qualitative research (Flick, 2000).

Qualitative research: between clarification and mystification

After a closer look at the recent new edition of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), one is left with the impression, in several chapters, that the discussion tends to go in the direction of a further mystification of qualitative research rather than aiming for further clarification of methodological procedures. For example, following a lengthy discussion of the crises (of representation, legitimization and practice), Lincoln and Denzin (2000: 1052) claim to see the future of qualitative research in a "sacred epistemology". What impact this tendency may have on the theoretical and methodological foundations of qualitative research, on research practice and on the mediation of qualitative research to the "outside" (professional, political and general public) will have to be observed. In German literature, these discussions have so far had a limited impact.

Internationalization

So far there have been only limited attempts to publish on the methodological procedures determining the German-speaking discussion, literature and research practice in English-language publications as well (Flick, 2002; Flick, Kardoff and Steinke, 2002; Rosenthal, 1998 to name some of the few examples). Accordingly, the resonance of German-language qualitative research in the English-language discussion is fairly modest. An internationalization of qualitative research is needed in several directions. Not only should German-language qualitative research pay more attention to what is currently being discussed in Anglo-Saxon – or French (Kaufmann, 1999) – literature and take it up in its own discourse; it should also invest much more in presenting ''home-grown'' approaches in international, English-language journals and at international conferences. And finally, the Anglo-Saxon discussion needs to open up more to what is going on in the qualitative research of other countries.

Indication

A final need is to further clarify the question of indication – similar to the way in which, in medicine or psychotherapy, the appropriateness of a certain treatment for specific problems and groups of people is checked. If this is transferred to qualitative research, the relevant questions are: When are what qualitative methods appropriate – for what issue, what research question, for what group of people or fields and so on? When are quantitative methods or a combination of quantitative and qualitative indicated? This leads to the search for criteria for answering such questions. Finding these criteria can contribute to a realistic assessment of isolated qualitative methods and of qualitative research in general. This will ultimately prevent us falling back into fundamentalist trench warfare over ''the'' qualitative versus ''the'' quantitative research.

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