

Cultural Media, Language, 1980
Working Papers in Cultural Studies.
Hutchinson

5 Notes on method*

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1980

If the 'naturalist' revolt was directed against positivism's inability to understand and record human subjectivity, mainstream sociology has nevertheless found it possible to assign participant observation (PO) and case study work a legitimate place in the social sciences.¹

I shall be arguing that positivism's unwilling acceptance of 'qualitative' methodology sees more clearly than its own admissions that the emphasis on *methodological* variety may leave the heartland of the positivist terrain untouched. In its recognition of a *technical* inability to record all that is relevant – and its yielding of this zone to another technique – positivism may actually preserve its deepest loyalty: to its object of inquiry truly as an 'object'.² The duality and mutual exclusivity of the over-nearly opposed categories 'qualitative' methods and 'quantitative' methods, suggest already that the 'object' is viewed in the same unitary and distanced way even if the *mode* is changed – now you measure it, now you feel it.

Still, there is much that is valuable in the 'naturalist' revolt. It has certainly dissociated itself from simplistic causal thinking, and it has developed a set of rules and research procedures which do offer an alternative concrete starting-point to the positivist methods. This article aims to identify the really central principles of the 'qualitative' method and to suggest what is worth preserving and what is worth firmly rejecting in a preliminary attempt to outline a method genuinely adapted to the study of human meanings.

The tradition which has most clearly used the 'qualitative' methods under discussion here was outlined in the last issues of *HPCS*.³ The 'Chicago School' of the 1920s and 1930s originated this tradition.⁴ W. F. Whyte's work in the 1940s marks a continuance of the tradition into a second phase.⁵ The major expansion came in the 1950s and 1960s, with the work of Becker, Geertz, Strauss, Polsky and others.⁶ The tradition crossed to Britain most clearly when the work of this 'third wave' was taken up by D. Downes.⁷ S. Cohen and particularly those associated with the 'sceptical revolution' institutionalized by the National Deviancy Conference.⁸ There has been a sporadic but noticeable interest in, and use of, PO in Britain which is not specifically in this Chicago-derived tradition.⁹ The method itself has been systematized and presented as a 'respectable' methodology in two recent readers.¹⁰

* This is an edited version of an article which first appeared in *Culture and Domination*, *HPCS* 9 (1976).

It may well be that my critique traduces certain texts in the ethnographic tradition. Certainly, there are examples in which a final account transcends the limitations of its own stated methods. In what follows I have mainly relied on codifications of method, such as those above, which are increasingly accepted as authoritative guides for those wishing to use 'qualitative' methods.

The manifest posture

The most obvious thrust of 'qualitative' methodology has been *against* traditional sociological theory and methods modelled on what are taken to be the procedures and tests of the natural sciences. To simplify, the fear seems to be that a theory can only, ultimately, demonstrate its own assumptions. What lies outside these assumptions cannot be represented or even acknowledged. So to maintain the richness and authenticity of social phenomena it is necessary, certainly in the early stages of research, to receive data in a raw, experimental and relatively untheorized manner – 'Allowing substantive concepts and hypotheses to emerge first on their own'.¹¹ It is recognized, of course, that there will have to come a time of closure.¹² It is hoped, however, that the selectivity and theorization of the final work will reflect the patterning of the real world rather than the patterns of received theory.¹³ These 'anti'-theoretical concerns generate a profound methodological stress on contacting the subject as directly as possible. It is as if the ideal researcher's experience can achieve a one-to-one relationship with that of the researched.

This conviction, and the general distrust of theory, are most clearly expressed through and by the techniques and methods it is proposed to use.¹⁴ The researcher is to work in the environment of his/her subjects rather than in the laboratory and is to enter the field as free as possible from prior theory. S/he is to participate in the round of activities of his/her subjects but to avoid 'disturbing' the field. S/he should not question his/her subjects directly but be as open as possible to the realm of the 'taken-for-granted'. S/he must take great care to plan his/her entrance into the field, prepare a feasible role and assiduously court those who might sponsor his/her membership in selected social groups.

It is the openness and directness of this methodological approach which promises the production of a final account which, like an icon, will bear some of the marks, and recreate something of the richness, of the original.

The hidden practice

If the techniques of 'qualitative' methodology mark a decisive break from 'quantitative' ones, the way in which they are *usually applied* makes a secret compact with positivism to preserve the subject finally as an object. Indeed, what the all-embracing concern for techniques and for the reliability of the data really shows us is a belief that the object of the research exists in an external world, with knowable external characteristics which must not be disturbed.

The central insistence, for instance, on the *passivity* of the *participant observer* depends on a belief that the subject of the research is really an object. The concern

is to minimize 'distortion of the field', with the underlying fear that the *object* may be *contaminated* with the subjectivity of the researcher.¹⁵ Too easily it becomes an assumption of different orders of reality between the researched and the researcher.

The insistent, almost neurotic, technical concern with the differentiation of PO from reports and Art is also a reflection of the subterranean conviction that PO belongs with the 'sciences', and must, in the end, respect objectivity.¹⁶ There is a clear sociological fear of naked subjectivity.¹⁷ The novel can wallow in subjectivity – this is how it creates 'colour' and 'atmosphere' – but how do we know that the author did not make it all up? Indeed, in one obvious way he or she did make it all up! So the search must be for a unified object which might be expected to present itself as *the same* to many minds. The first principle of PO, the postponement of theory, compounds the dangers of this covert positivism. It strengthens the notion that the object can present itself directly to the observer.

On the role of theory

In fact, there is no truly untheoretical way in which to 'see' an 'object'. The 'object' is only perceived and understood through an internal organization of data, mediated by conceptual constructs and ways of seeing the world. The final account of an object says as much about the observer as it does about the object itself. Accounts can be read 'backwards' to uncover and explicate the consciousness, culture and theoretical organization of the observer.

However, we must recognize the ambition of the PO principle in relation to theory. It has directed its followers towards a profoundly important methodological possibility – that of *being surprised* of reaching knowledge not prefigured in one's starting paradigm. The urgent task is to chart the feasibility, scope and proper meaning of such a capacity.

If we are to recognize the actual scope for the production of 'new' knowledge, we must avoid delusions. We must not be too ambitious. It is vital that we admit the most basic foundations of our research approach and accept that no 'discovery' will overthrow this most basic orientation. The theoretical organization of the starting-out position should be outlined and acknowledged in any piece of research. This inevitable organization concerns attitudes towards the social world in which the research takes place, a particular view of the social relationships within it and of its fundamental determinations and a notion of the analytic procedures which will be used to produce the final account. It would also explain why certain topics have been chosen for research in the first place.

This theoretical 'confession', however, need not specify the *whole* of social reality in a given region; it has merely specified the kind of world in which its action is seen as taking place. Although it involves the general form of, it does not include, *specific* explanation – especially concerning the *manner*, the 'how' or the degree of external determination of a given social region – nor does it anticipate the particular meaning of the future flow of data.

It is indeed crucial that a qualitative methodology be confronted with the maximum flow of relevant data. Here resides the power of the evidence to 'surprise',

to contradict, specific developing theories. And here is the only possible source for the 'authenticity', the 'qualitative feel', which is one of the method's major justifications. It is in this area – short of any challenge to one's world view – that there is the greatest possibility of 'surprise'.

This is not to allow back an unbridled, intuitive 'naturalism' on impoverished terms. Even with respect to what remains unspecified by the larger 'confession', we must recognize the necessarily theoretical form of what we 'discover'. Even the most 'naturalistic' of accounts involves deconstruction of native logic and builds upon reconstruction of compressed, select, significant moments in the original field experienced. There is an art concealing art which precisely obscures the theoretical work that has taken place.

Having recognized the inevitability of a theoretical component, it can be used more self-consciously to probe those areas about which knowledge is incomplete.

We will find in any cultural form and related form of consciousness a submerged text of contradictions, inconsistencies and divergencies. If we are tuned in to an illusory attempt to present a single-valency account without interpretative or reductive work, we shall more usually miss (or, at best, simply reproduce) this sub-text. It is necessary to add to the received notion of the 'quality' of the data an ability to watch for inconsistencies, contradictions and misunderstandings and to make theoretical interpretations of them. We must maintain the richness and atmosphere of the original while attempting to illuminate its inner connections. Certainly, the necessary and inevitable level of interpretative theorizing within the method can be used to explicate chosen topics without running greater dangers than are run conventionally in an *unrecognized* way.

On reflexivity: the politics of fieldwork

If we wish to represent the subjective meanings, feelings and cultures of others, it is not possible to extend to them less than we know of ourselves. What is so often taken as the 'object' and the researcher lie parallel in their humanity. The 'object' of our inquiry is in fact, of course, a subject and has to be understood and presented in the same mode as the researcher's own subjectivity – this is the true meaning of 'validity' in the 'qualitative' zone. The recognition of this truism is not, however, to declare against all forms of 'objectivity'. We are still in need of a method which respects evidence, seeks corroboration and minimizes distortion, *but which is without rationalist natural-science-like pretence*.

Though we can only know it through our own concepts, there is nevertheless a *real* subject for our inquiry, which is not entirely spirited away by our admission of its relativized position. If our purpose is a fuller understanding and knowledge of this subject, then we must have some concern for the reliability of the data we use. Furthermore, if our focus is not on isolated, subjective meanings but on their associated symbolic systems and cultural forms, then we are concerned also with real material elements. It is perfectly justifiable to use rigorous techniques to gain the fullest knowledge of these things. This is, therefore, to go partly down the road

of traditional 'objectivity': many of the techniques used will be the same. The parting of the ways comes at the end of this process. The conventional process takes its 'objective' data-gathering as far as possible and then consigns the rest (what it cannot know, measure or understand) to Art or 'the problem of subjectivity'. Having constituted its object truly as an 'object', and having gained all possible knowledge about this 'object', the process must stop; it has come up to the 'inevitable limitations of a quantitative methodology'. But it is precisely at this point that a reflexive, 'qualitative' methodology comes into its own. Never having constituted the subject of its study as an 'object', it is not surprised that there is a limit to factual knowledge. What finally remains is *the relationship between subjective/cultural systems*.

The rigorous stage of the analysis, the elimination of distortion, the cross-checking of evidence and so on have served to focus points of divergence and convergence between systems. Reducing the confusion of the research situation, providing a more precise orientation for analysis, allows a closer reading of separate realities. By reading moments of contact and divergence it becomes possible to delineate other worlds, demonstrating their inner symbolic qualities. And when the conventional techniques retire, when they cannot follow the subjects of subjects themselves - this is the moment of *reflexivity*. Why are these things happening? Why has the subject behaved in this way? Why do certain areas remain obscure to the researcher? What differences in orientation lie behind the failure to communicate?

It is here, in this interlocking of human meanings, of cultural codes and of forms, that there is the possibility of 'being surprised'. And in terms of the generation of 'new' knowledge, we know what it is precisely *not* because we have shared it - the usual notion of empathy - but because we have *not* shared it. It is here that the classical canons are overturned. It is time to ask and explore, to discover the differences between subjective positions, between cultural forms. It is time to initiate actions or to break expectations in order to probe different angles in different lights. Of course, this is a time of maximum disturbance to researchers, whose own meanings are being thoroughly contested. It is precisely at this point that the researcher must assume an unrestrained and hazardous *self-reflexivity*. And it is the turning away from a full commitment, at this point, which finally limits the methods of traditional sociology.

It is in these moments also that there can be a distinctive relationship with a specifically Marxist-form of analysis. The terrain uncovered and explored during this reflexive stage is likely to concern contradictions and tensions, both within the field of study - contrasting moments of subjective experience, tensions between what is said and done, differences between what collective forms or materials seem to say or promise and what *actually* happens or is experienced - and between the researcher's expectations, codes and cultural forms of understanding and those which he or she is uncovering. It is likely to be a difficult field of contradictions, picked up at this point precisely because it is the notion of *contradiction* which the traditional 'naturalistic' technique is unable to register

or registers only as a weakness or breakdown in its method, or as the 'limit case' to the researcher's effectivity in the field - beyond which lies only 'going native' or withdrawal. With only a notion of 'what follows' taken from the surface reality of the 'object' and picked up transparently in the universal codes of 'science', contradictory messages, conflicts or breakdowns between codes and broken communication can only be understood as 'failures': to be transcended ultimately by better technique.

However, if these moments of crisis can be seen as a creative uncertainty, entered through a structured social relationship, indicating and arising from important contradictions, then further theoretical and methodological options become available. For the theoretical understanding developed through what I am characterizing as a more active and reflexive method can be in the form of a reformulation and more precise articulation of what I called earlier the larger theoretical 'confession' and, in particular, a more concrete extension of the way in which larger determinations and categories are seen to relate to the particular relationships and patterns of determination within the regional area under study. And often this must be through recognizing a necessary unevenness and complexity in the way that external forces or ideologies pattern a given area. This is a non-mechanistic, non-reductive view of the relationship between levels, which may wish to leave some scope for reciprocal effectivity between located cultural forms, subjective experience and larger structures or may insist on indirect or mediating processes, but which is still concerned with determination. This greater theoretical elaboration, extension and specification - especially within a theory which recognizes the play of contradiction - will then allow the better grasp and explanation of the now more complex and layered subject of study and the nature of the relationship which has uncovered it so far. It should also suggest *particular* questions and difficulties which renewed and more conventional methods can seek to clarify. There is thus the possibility of a circular development between a progressively more specified 'theoretical confession' and the specific contradictions and tensions of fieldwork on to, in the return sweep, reconstituted forms of theory and back to the specifics of the fieldwork relation. This is the project of producing, finally, a fuller explanatory presentation of the concrete.

I am not necessarily arguing that the final account should show the several stages of this often tortuous process, or that these stages are necessarily always self-conscious: I would argue that it is something of this sort, often unconscious or even denied, which has taken place in the research work of those 'naturalistic' accounts which do have explanatory power. Nor am I denying that, as in the more classical notion of the Marxist method, this circular movement cannot occur after fieldwork is finished or upon secondary data, through the principles of search and selectivity on existing or received materials. What I am arguing, in the context of 'qualitative' methods, is that significant data are collected not through the purity or scientificism of its method, but through the status of the method as a social relationship, and specifically through the moments of crisis in that relationship and its to-be-discovered pattern of what is/what is not shared: the contradictions within

and between these things. And, furthermore, that where the fieldwork is really extensive or where the researcher, in whatever form, can theorize, so to speak, on his/her feet, for all the difficulties and disorientations, reflexivity can allow the progressive constitution of the concrete in relation to theory, not merely as an analytic protocol but as a dynamic, dialectical method. This can give a concentration and an obstinate capacity to penetrate through successive layers of 'blank' data in the pursuit of particular themes not available to other methods. Not only the quality of the data, not even its (however qualified) capacity to 'surprise', but this potential, at least, for a cyclic control and focus of method in the rich veins of 'lived' contradiction is what can most distinguish the 'qualitative' approach.

On technicism

The notion of a reflexive methodology, then, takes us beyond a simple concern with techniques of data-gathering. It is often stated as a truism that forms of data collection and analytic procedures are profoundly interconnected. I am arguing that it is precisely a *theoretical* interest which induces the researcher to develop certain kinds of technique, to make comparative forays, to invent or invert methodological canons, to select certain 'problems' for analytical explication. Though techniques are important, and though we should be concerned with their 'validity', they can never stand in the place of a theoretical awareness and interest arising out of *the recognition of one's role in a social relationship and its variable patterning*. Without this theoretical quickening, the techniques merely record unritically only the apparent outward face of an external 'reality'.

We should resist, therefore, the hegemonizing tendency of technique. It seeks to take command whenever there is uncertainty. It disguises the creative potential of uncertainty. In particular, we should deconstruct the portmanteau, heavily mystified notion of PO, whose mere invocation and taxonomical description seem to guarantee the quality of an account. We should break down and detail its parts, along with a number of other techniques, to give us a flexible range of particular techniques to be drawn upon according to our theoretical needs. Within its spectrum the following techniques can be specified:

participation
 observation
 participation as observer
 observation as participant
 just 'being around'
 group discussion
 recorded group discussion
 unfocused interview
 recorded unfocused interview.

It is clearly misleading to think of these techniques as constituting one blanket methodology. Techniques lower down this list, for example, are more likely to be

applied to a phenomenon from the past (cf. the development of 'oral history'). A particular strength can be gained by a more self-conscious combination of methods, where different modes of data collection, used at different times, give important cross-checks, as well as indicating the particular layered configuration of important contradictions. All of these techniques are relevant to the principles of 'qualitative' methodology, and each should be rigorously thought through in its particular research context.

Conclusion

Traditional sociology, then, provides a useful starting-point. But we must submit its methods to a rigorous screening to make explicit the denied theoretical account and to remove the hidden tendency towards positivism. We must liberate the whole notion of 'methodology' and argue, finally, for a recognition of the reflexive relationship of researchers to their subjects.