

Qualitative research: resurgence, institutionalisation and applications

Nigel Fielding

University of Surrey

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Introduction

The way that the social sciences developed in respect of methodological preferences, and differences between European and North American approaches, helps us to understand why secondary analysis has until recently been a limited practice in qualitative research. To unravel the developments that explain the differing circumstances of secondary analysis in quantitative and qualitative research, we will initially consider the early days of qualitative method, and comment on its location in the foundational social science curriculum, represented by the Chicago School, a key centre of social science during the early twentieth century. As the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago matured, it established a long rivalry with departments of sociology in universities on the Eastern seaboard of the US, and it began to change emphasis to more closely resemble the approach that was dominant in institutions such as Harvard and Columbia. Qualitative methodology became a methodology in retreat during the long years when structural/functionalism and quantitative analysis were dominant. Recent scholarship shows that Chicago=s methodological orientation long had a closer relation to mainstream sociology practices than is often suggested. The period when qualitative methodology was a core part of the Chicago methodological curriculum was relatively brief, and even then, these methods received little more emphasis than conventional statistical methods.

Methodological trends generally take some considerable time to ripple out from their origin, though, and national communities of social scientists have their own distinct characteristics. For these reasons we will compare trends in European social science with those in North America during the period that qualitative methodology began its slow re-legitimation.

The present period is one in which qualitative methodology has secured enhanced legitimation, but the position is not universal. Methods journals with generic titles, such as Sociological Methods and Research, still seldom publish anything but statistical work grounded in a positivist position, and as one moves away from the Western-centric academic circuit, the methodological picture is generally more conservative, as early US-influenced positivism has taken a long time to recede in countries whose academic system is modelled on the US and whose academics were largely trained in US graduate schools. But in North America and Western Europe, qualitative methodology has achieved a new measure of institutionalisation and it is increasingly applied in work not only within the academic sphere but in research supported by government and the business sector.

Applications outside the academic sphere form a focus for the closing discussion, which considers the role of programme evaluation research in promoting qualitative methods, and the role of technology in making qualitative research more acceptable to research sponsors. Throughout the discussion, comment will be made on the implications for secondary analysis.

1. The emergence and early days of qualitative method

Sociology emerged as an intellectual discipline at a time of widespread belief that a >science of society= could improve social conditions by discovering the causes of social phenomena, an approach associated with positivism. The late nineteenth century was a time of foment, during which the roots of the class conflicts, revolutions, and military conflicts of the twentieth century were established. There was both a great concern to improve the lot of the ordinary members of society and a strong belief in the power of science and technology -

which had achieved so much in public health, industrialisation, and urbanization - to bring about such improvements. As sociology established itself in North American universities (predominantly those of the United States) during the early twentieth century, it acquired distinctive qualities of social reformism and pragmatic empiricism. That is, it took on a tinge of the particular American approach to improving the lot of the common people.

American academics and intellectuals distilled from the roots of the European sociological inheritance a version of positivism that saw quantification in tandem with the formulation of sociological problems in terms of the hypothetico-deductive model as the way to derive causal explanations of empirical phenomena, particularly >social problems= such as ethnic and racial tensions, deviant behaviours, and industrial conflict. There has been a tension between this approach and interpretivist approaches to the study of people in society from then onwards. The social sciences came to display a bipolar opposition, between quantitative methods engaged in causal explanation of macro-social phenomena and qualitative methods concerned with interpretivist understandings of micro-social phenomena. Bipolar distinctions are often trite, but they are memorable. The interesting space is often the space between the poles, and there is no epistemological or methodological reason that quantitative causal approaches cannot explain micro-social phenomena or that qualitative interpretivist approaches cannot illuminate macro-social phenomena. Indeed, such hybrid approaches do feature in the field of methodology, one example being Charles Ragin=s >Qualitative Comparative Analysis= (Ragin 1987). But the human psyche seems to prefer black-and-white dualisms, or at least to find them most readily digested and retained, and the quantitative/qualitative distinction became one of them.

All this may seem rather remote from the business of secondary analysis in general and the secondary analysis of qualitative data in particular. However, the point to bear in

mind is that in quantitative research the data are regarded as stable and even one-dimensional. This makes them available for further analysis. In qualitative research the data are regarded as unstable and having many properties, and the view that different researchers might understand them differently obstructs secondary analysis. The relative orientation of the two poles of the methodological dichotomy can best be understood by grounding the development of these methodological approaches in the intellectual history of the discipline.

Against the background of the growth during the early to mid twentieth century of the quantitative approach in tandem with the ascendancy of positivism and advances in statistical methods, conventional accounts of the history of sociology are apt to consider the >Chicago School= associated with the University of Chicago Department of Sociology as the principal champion of qualitative methods during the infancy and childhood of social science. This period has lately been the subject of considerable research and new perspectives have emerged, notably in the work of Rock (1979), Bulmer (1984), Harvey (1987), Fine (1995), Platt (1995, 1996), and Abbott (1999). Most students of sociology know the Chicago School for its declaration that cities like Chicago should be seen as a vast natural >laboratory= in which to explore social phenomena, using the methods of ethnography. Much of the association of the Chicago School with qualitative methods is probably owed to this declaration alone. It is a view that has been reiterated endlessly in textbooks since it was first uttered, not only in the university curriculum but the secondary school curriculum.

The idea that the city - or human communities more generally - was a site for exploration using qualitative methods was primarily the stance of the first wave of the Chicago School. The Chicago department was then seen as the top American sociology department. Its work and perspective was associated with the empirical approach advocated by figures like W.I. Thomas (appointed in 1895) and Robert Park. Several first wave

Chicagoans had their origins not in academic social science but in journalism. They were particularly associated with what was then called >yellow journalism= (because the paper on which the papers were printed was the cheapest possible and turned yellow quickly). This was a sensationalist, campaigning approach in line with the populist social reformism that appealed to their readership, to whom the world was always on the brink of crisis and needed urgent and drastic reform. For sociologists with such a background, the methods associated with ethnography came naturally. It was instinctive to regard the city as a laboratory in which class and other conflictual relations were played out, and there was also a nuance of ephemerality, that the findings of social research were not lasting but needed constant updating, grounding in direct experience, and, if wrong, could always be done again.

However, the new research in historical sociology tells us that this first wave of Chicagoan work gave way surprisingly early to the advancing march of a quantitative, positivist sociology, and that the focus on ethnography and other qualitative approaches was an early victim. In 1927 William Ogburn was appointed by the Chicago department with a specific brief to bring into the department a >scientific= sociology based on statistics. By the 1940s, with Talcott Parsons= increasing prominence at Harvard and Columbia University=s growing dominance in survey research and opinion polling, the practice of sociology in the United States had moved emphatically towards a quantitative paradigm. A group of quantitative sociologists were recruited to Chicago from Columbia in the 1950s, effectively leaving Everett Hughes as the sole representative of the tradition associated with the first wave of the Chicago School.

Hughes worked at Chicago between 1938 and 1961, teaching most famously a field methods course that was required for all sociology, anthropology and social science students. For Hughes, participant observation was a key method because it involved a combination of

different methods, described by McCall and Simmons (1969:1) as including 'some amount of genuinely social interaction in the field with the subjects of the study, some direct observation of relevant events, some formal and a great deal of informal interviewing, some systematic counting, some collection of documents and artefacts; and open-endedness in the direction the study takes'. Hughes may also have taken on the task of developing and specifying participant observation as a distinct methodology, because, along with his students, he faced steady criticism about his procedures from quantitatively-oriented colleagues. For Hughes, the quantitative approach reduced methods to a purely technical practice; in contrast, he saw field methods as a means of pursuing >the inquiring attitude=.

There were several elements to this methodological stance. It first emphasised the need to compare contemporary social events to those in previous times and in other social contexts. Its second element maintained that the empirical and theoretical dimension mutually enriched each other. There was an associated view that there was potential analytic significance in almost anything, even things that were apparently trivial, such as the way that people behaved when waiting for a train. Another major element was Hughes= rejection of the boundaries between cognate disciplines, such as sociology, psychology and economics. These boundaries were seen as arbitrary, a view that presaged the contemporary belief that the understanding of many social phenomena requires a multi-disciplinary perspective, a view that has always been uncondusive to those who believe there is a single correct explanation and that it can be found simply by asking the right question, using appropriate measures, and employing sophisticated statistical analyses. Unsurprisingly, then, the final element of Hughes= >inquiring attitude= was the prioritisation of a free sociological imagination when it came to analysis and conceptualisation, in contrast to narrow hypothesis-testing. Accordingly, Hughes proclaimed the need to apply an eclectic range of methods to the study of social

phenomena and he also believed in continual methodological innovation. These views were received by his students with enthusiasm and loyalty (evident in the warmth of views expressed in the interviews of his past students collected by my former tutor, Jennifer Platt and reported in Platt 1995). The >inquiring attitude= was impossible to reduce to bite-sized chunks of textbook knowledge that could be memorised and regurgitated in the examination hall. The only way to learn the approach was to do it.

The place of qualitative methods in the formal Chicago teaching curriculum was actually rather limited, because Hughes believed they could be learned but not taught. To understand and become proficient in field methods it was necessary to become >immersed in the field=. There was a critical contrast with statistical methods. These could be taught in lectures, whereas the >classroom= for qualitative methods was the street. One reason this approach appealed to students was that behind it was the >democratic= premiss that anyone who possessed the normal social skills most of us learn in childhood had what they needed in order to observe social situations and make analytically-useful notes about what they observed. Likewise, normal social skills were enough for the student to be able to conduct an interview and make a transcription of what was said. These premisses supported the other famous Chicago saying, Park=s injunction, told to each generation of students, that the only way to learn field methods was to >get the seat of your pants dirty= in empirical research in the field.

The Chicago field methods syllabus features prominently in what some have called qualitative methodology=s >creation myth=, and from it we can see the encapsulation, if not the origin, of some of the characteristics associated with the particular Chicagoan construction of qualitative methods that endure to this day and that feature in the reservations that many have about the secondary analysis of qualitative data. One key feature was the

strong emphasis on direct experience via participation in the field setting. Linked to this is another key feature, the emphasis on the need to understand the >context= in which the data were collected if one is to understand the phenomenon. The compulsory graduate-level fieldwork course was taught first by Burgess and then by Hughes, and it always involved fieldwork in the city of Chicago. Students were each assigned a census tract by the instructor and had to base themselves in that neighbourhood and collect data on it. Instruction and advice on how to go about this were deliberately limited. As to assessment of the result of the students= work, this was by a discursive research paper. There was no examination. This emphasis on learning-by-doing and the idea of reporting results in a discursive document were also distinctive features at the time. They were attractive to graduate students and elicited strong commitment.

While many graduate students at Chicago came via conventional academic routes, a number had previously been engaged in other careers, prominently social and community work, and journalism. Mature students of this sort responded particularly well to the approach. Located in the inner city, the Chicago department was near some of the most problematic neighbourhoods and it established a tradition maintained to the present of social science students not only studying difficult neighbourhoods but participating in community activism in them and contributing voluntary work to their improvement. This fed another theme in qualitative methodology that contributes to discomfort with secondary analysis, the idea that fieldwork was motivated and inevitably influenced by the perspective and commitments of the researcher, which engenders a suspicion about field data being used by others who may not share such perspectives and commitments. The broadly liberal - and sometimes more radical - commitments were apparent in the topics that Hughes and other Chicagoans themselves researched. According to Platt (1995, 1996), the approach to

methodological training was one of apprenticeship, not formal teaching (see Figure 1). The apprenticeship approach was not only informed by the Chicagoans= work as academic teachers but by their serving as role models.

Figure 1: Apprenticeship and the Chicago School

ANobody taught any of us; I think you=d say we were self-taught, we proceeded from inspiration from people we liked, like I liked Everett Hughes...@ E. Gross (1984), interview with Jennifer Platt.

A...(M)ost of us learned our research largely by doing; you took courses, but what really was the best learning experience was contact with fellow graduate students, particularly those you came into contact with while doing research@. J. Short (1984), interview with Jennifer Platt.

AWirth repeatedly told his classes that the function of a university was to advance knowledge by providing its faculty with a facility for research; students, he said, should consider themselves very lucky to gather the crumbs of wisdom that fell from the table@. L. Bogart (1990), letter to Gary Fine.

All quoted in Platt (1995).

However, the content of the fieldwork course was not set in stone, and it had moved towards survey methods by the late 1950s. By the 1960s there was only one mandatory graduate school methodology course - statistics.

As noted, prominent methodologists and historians of social science have lately questioned the empirical basis for qualitative methodology's creation myth and for the place of the Chicagoans in it. Whether or not the story of Chicago's foundational role in qualitative methodology is empirically valid, the power of field methods and depth interviewing is their ability to reveal hidden corners of the social world. That is one reason why qualitative research has such strong impact on policy audiences, reform groups and so on. However, the more that qualitative research earned its place in mainstream social research methodology by its ability to discover the new, the less interest there was in secondary analysis. The emerging orthodoxy was that qualitative interviewing and observation were >methods of discovery=, things that you did when first confronting a new topic of inquiry. If exploration using qualitative methods suggested something interesting, it was not followed up by secondary analysis but by a separate inquiry using quantitative methods. In the positivist canon, qualitative methods became confined to pilot work, to be followed by quantitative methods offering generalisability rather than by secondary analysis of the original qualitative data. In the relatively few pockets of Anglo-American social science where qualitative methodology remained aloof from the mainstream, the features that we noted above relating to the primacy of experience, the analytic importance of context, and the valorisation of the committed researcher, all worked against engagement with any significant practice of qualitative secondary analysis.

Chicago's early importance in American social science was not only a matter of its

methodological orientation but its engagement with empirical research and with contemporary social problems. But Chicago did not remain dominant for long. By the early mid-twentieth century, theoretical development was led by the Harvard and Columbia Schools, who were developing a macro-sociology based on structural-functionalism, surveys, and quantitative analysis that ultimately proved more influential. It was not only at Chicago that qualitative methods became increasingly subordinate. Set against the experimental orientation of psychology, which aped the control design methods associated with laboratory science, and the formal equation-based modelling of economics, by the 1960s sociology sought to pursue its own claim to scientific status - and the resources associated with such status - by projecting itself as a discipline founded on quantification and statistics. In the sociology taught in secondary schools in the early 1960s the principal emphasis was that the discipline involved the use of statistics to analyse survey data. At that level, the emphasis was more on findings than on the methods by which they were obtained, but there was little acknowledgement that sociological knowledge was derived from qualitative methods as well as social surveys. Qualitative methods were associated with another discipline, anthropology, and its focus was largely on non-Western societies.

2. The resurgence of qualitative method

However, the school curriculum is not the best indicator of the varying status of social science methods, and at graduate and professional level, the rehabilitation of qualitative methods into the mainstream began in the second half of the 1960s. One can, arguably, be even more precise and suggest that its rehabilitation began in 1967, with the publication of what is probably the most-cited publication in the history of qualitative methodology, Glaser

and Strauss= The Discovery of Grounded Theory (1967). These authors intentionally sought to write a formal statement and codification of qualitative methodology because they were convinced that unless this was done, it would soon disappear from the curriculum completely. In later years, these authors irrevocably fell out with each other. Strauss, writing with Janet Corbin, one of his former graduate students, advocated a formalised, step-by-step, highly codified approach to qualitative data analysis. Glaser preserved more of the Chicagoan emphasis on immersion in the field, with field experience and a simple practice of reading the data over and over again as the basis from which analytic insight and conceptualisation would gradually emerge. In the argument between these authors one can detect the endurance of the dilemma the Chicagoans faced between whether qualitative methods could be taught or had to be learned.

Whether it is the programmatic approach of Strauss or the immersive approach of Glaser that appeals, and despite the fact that The Discovery of Grounded Theory (1967) became the dominant text for those not attracted by a statistical approach to social science, the point is that those wanting to actually >do= qualitative research and grounded theory, and especially graduate students, relied on an influential article by Turner (1981) and the Corbin and Strauss (1990) text. These sources showed how grounded theory could be performed as systematically and rigorously as statistically-based research. Neither of these seminal sources of guidance on the practice of qualitative data analysis had any orientation to secondary analysis, although, interestingly, the core example in Turner=s article reports a classroom exercise in which students re-analyse a fieldnote segment as a way of understanding the coding process and the writing of analytic memos. While this is treated as an instructional device, it is worth noting that, when used in classes, students invariably arrive at the same codes, which bears the implication that the importance of >context= does not govern the

analysis of field data as closely as many suppose, but it is not a nuance that Turner draws out.

There are some grounds to speculate that, while the quantitative, positivist approach was also influential on the practice of sociology in western Europe during this period, the place of qualitative methods was not quite as parlous as it was in Anglo-American sociology. This speculation is based on the enduring importance of hermeneutics in German social philosophy, which influenced sociology in northern Europe, and on the quite distinctive practice of life history methods in Italian and French sociology. There was also an associated practice of life history interviewing in Germany which had emerged from the de-briefing of Holocaust survivors, in which the practice of taking life histories combined a counselling function with that of documenting that dark episode in European history. In French sociology, the influence of Raymond Boudon maintained the Durkheimian insistence that society is something more than individuals agglomerated, and therefore social behaviour cannot be reduced to statistics. This tradition endures in the work of French sociologists such as Mohamed Cherkaoui (2006). Although his position is complex - he is critical both of those who promote qualitative techniques and those who see quantification as pre-eminent, instead advocating a combination of rigorous empirical methods with a search for the >invisible codes= that account for collective social action - Cherkaoui preserves what one suspects has always been a stronger current in continental European sociology than in the Anglo-American circuit.

British sociology was rather more strongly oriented to the American approach and remained so for much of the 1960s. For my generation, an undergraduate degree in sociology could not be obtained without mastering quantitative methods and statistically-based analyses; one had at least to be able to calculate tests of significance and to be able to construct a cross-tabulation. Qualitative methods were not absent from the curriculum, if for

no other reason than that many surveys obtained their data by interviewing, but the principal emphasis in the teaching of qualitative methods was that they were incapable of working with representative samples, lacked standardisation, and could not produce reliable and valid generalizations. Since the approved role of qualitative methods was to conduct pilot studies, methods courses often presented these methods at the beginning of the course, and only returned to them at the end, in order to discuss social research ethics, where qualitative studies could be relied on to produce evidence of the dilemmas and dangers of field research.

However, the picture began to change again in the 1970s, at least in the UK. The number of universities increased with the building of new publicly-funded universities, most of which sought to offer a full range of disciplines. Thus, sociology expanded for institutional reasons and there were a number of new academic teaching posts available. The recent graduates that took up these posts were au fait with the newer currents in the discipline, including the enhanced profile of qualitative methods associated with the influence of the grounded theory approach. Moreover, the late 1960s, and the 1970s, were a period of rapid social change, the growth of a youth counter-culture stimulated by opposition to the Vietnam War and apartheid, and political radicalism provoked by industrial unrest engendered by the country's economic difficulties. As a discipline, sociology was seen as intrinsically open to criticism of conventional social and political arrangements, and this made it particularly attractive to the students of the time. This trend was also apparent in the USA, and Anglo-American sociology became influenced by critical and radical perspectives, including a hostility to positivism. For many, quantitative methods reflected the conservatism of the structural-functionalist conceptualisation of society, whereas qualitative methods had the overtone of a more questioning approach that challenged established theory and reached out directly to the disprivileged, giving them a voice inside the academy. This perspective

endures in the Denzin and Lincoln (2001) handbook and its subsequent editions, where qualitative research is presented by a number of contributors as the champion of the disprivileged and oppressed.

3. Legitimation, institutionalisation and application

After 1980 qualitative methods have enjoyed increasing legitimacy and institutionalisation. They are seen as a necessary part of induction into the discipline=s methodological base and in many graduate-level courses they are given equal weight to quantitative methods. There has been a great increase in the number of journals specialising in aspects of qualitative methods and research, and articles using such methods are increasingly found in prestigious journals, such as the American Journal of Sociology, and Sociology. The US National Science Foundation, the UK Economic and Social Research Council, along with other major institutional funders, regularly fund not only substantive research projects exclusively using qualitative methods but infrastructure projects in qualitative methodology (the CAQDAS Networking Project, which trains in qualitative software and which I co-direct, is an example). Further, qualitative methods are increasingly used in applied research for government, commercial, and voluntary sector sponsors. This kind of evidence has led some to declare an end to the >paradigm wars=. Despite evidence that in some quarters, particularly in the US, dinosaurs still roam the academic jungle, it is safe to say that many, probably the majority, of social scientists have moved to the view that no methodology is intrinsically superior and that it is a question of the right tools for the job. Relatedly, interest has greatly increased in multiple method research (or >triangulation=), where there is a division of labour, with qualitative methods answering some parts of the research question

and quantitative methods answering other parts. This trend appears to be especially strongly-developed in applied research for government.

In fact, the evaluation of federally-funded programmes has been an important reason behind the change in the fortunes of qualitative research. A particular stimulus came from the politically-charged debate over the value of >affirmative action= education programmes in the US. Poor areas have for many years received enhanced funding for schools beyond what the local community can afford through local taxes, with federal funding used to employ extra teachers and to progress a number of special initiatives with the aim of increasing the educational achievement of the disprivileged, especially Afro-American, Native American, and Latino children. Naturally the federal government wanted to know that it was receiving a return on the investment, and systematic evaluation research has regularly been applied to the programmes. These quantitatively-based evaluations showed no overall gain in educational performance as a result of the federal funding, with the threat that the programmes would cease and the nation=s poorest communities would lose a substantial source of additional resources. Before seeing this happen, those committed to affirmative action commissioned qualitative research, which was able to demonstrate the value and successes of the programmes that disappear in the statistical aggregate or the effects that crude measures, like examination scores and rates of college entrance, cannot detect (Ong 1999). Among UK examples of other major social problems to which qualitative research is currently being applied is public response to the warning system for major floods, public support for the present system of delivering health care, and factors accounting for the over-representation of ethnic minorities in violent street crime.

The legitimization of qualitative methods has also been enhanced by technological developments that enable - and demonstrate to sceptics - improved reliability and validity in

qualitative research. The introduction of the audiocassette recorder let researchers work with verbatim transcripts instead of having to write partial and summarised notes on interviews, or laboriously write complete notes which lowered validity by inducing respondent (and interviewer) fatigue. This simple development enabled an increased use of depth interviews, life history interviews and the like. More recently, e-mail and the Internet have provided a means to conduct interviews and forms of observation (e.g., via chat rooms) with people at sites remote from the researcher who would normally only be accessible at considerable expense. The demanding chores of managing qualitative data and organising it for analysis by way of coding and compiling sets of related extracts have been made easier and more systematic by qualitative software (>CAQDAS=, or Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis). There is much testimony that qualitative software has made qualitative research more legitimate in the eyes of sceptics and research sponsors (Agar 1991 is the seminal source). For some it is simply the fact that analysis now takes place using a computer, but those with a closer understanding of research methods note that software-based qualitative data analysis is more transparent (it is easy to display how the researcher has coded and manipulated the data in the process of constructing their analysis) and more systematic (the computer doesn't misplace data, and it is harder to ignore data that contradict a developing line of analysis; moreover, it is easier to revise the analysis if one generates new thinking). Of particular relevance to secondary analysis, in the US, but especially in the UK, the research infrastructure now includes digital archives of qualitative data that allow follow-up researchers to extract added value from data collected by others. In recent years there have also been significant initiatives in this field in Germany, Switzerland and the Nordic countries.

In the UK, postgraduate social science is supported and regulated by the publicly-

funded Economic and Social Research Council, which lays down the methodology training required if it is to support students attending approved graduate programmes. This curriculum clearly illustrates the institutionalisation of qualitative methods. Students are required to be able to conduct and document interviews, manipulate qualitative datasets and understand how they are used, know how to use, interpret and present >an appropriate and justified selection of techniques for the collection of qualitative data such as the use of focus groups, observation and participant observation, structured and unstructured interviewing techniques, archival and documentary analysis, and methods for examining qualitative data, such as content analysis, discourse analysis and other innovative techniques= (ESRC 2001). This applies to all social science graduates including economists, socio-linguists and so on. Sociology graduates must additionally understand >the range, value and utility as sources of data for sociological research of archival, documentary and historical data, of life stories, and of visual images and materials ... ethnographic methods, case studies and group discussions=, know how to use at least one qualitative software package, and master >techniques for analysing qualitative data (e.g. discourse analysis and conversation analysis=.

The current picture of qualitative methods is therefore quite positive. They receive the resources needed to do substantial research, students are enthusiastic about them (to the extent that there is now a concern in UK about declining interest in, and standards of, quantitative research), and they are the focus of some of the most exciting new developments in research technologies, such as the use of Access Grid Nodes to conduct >virtual fieldwork= (Fielding and Macintyre 2006) and digital streaming video to conduct collaborative analysis sessions over networks. The fact that qualitative research features increasingly in both the academic and applied fields is not free of problems, however. There are trends in the popularity of particular methods and approaches and if the current fashion

does not deliver robust findings, other methods and approaches will be adopted. Moreover, if qualitative research is to be used increasingly in the applied field, real-world decisions will be made on the basis of such research. Policy-makers, and the public, will want to be assured that such decisions are grounded in reliable findings. The field also needs to ensure that policymakers and other non-academic audiences understand the constraints that apply to qualitative methods, and where such work is combined with quantitative research, that those contributing quantitative expertise to multiple-method research do not simply assess qualitative work on the standards applicable to qualitative work.

The Rhind report (2003) suggested that while British social science was strong in qualitative methods, the problems of representativeness and generalisability were still present. There followed the Spencer review of quality standards for qualitative research, commissioned by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Spencer et al 2003). Such reviews tend to result in checklists of what is needed to obtain reliable and valid qualitative research, and are uncomfortable reading for those who do not construe qualitative research as a matter of following recipes, but there is no doubting the significance of such developments. Due to the increasing amount of officially-sponsored qualitative research in the UK the Cabinet Office of government has recently set quality standards for qualitative evaluation research (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Quality standards for qualitative research

Eight major facets for assessing quality (reliability and validity) of qualitative research

findings, sample, data collection, analysis, reporting, reflexivity and neutrality, ethics, auditability

Each facet is subdivided into components, from which 18 main >appraisal questions= are derived

for example, in considering the quality of >findings= the reviewer must assess >credibility=, >knowledge extension=, >delivery on objectives=, >wider inferences=, and the >basis of evaluative appraisal=

For each appraisal question there are >quality indicators= (four or five per question)

A government department (or other policy organisation) seeking to commission qualitative research, or evaluate research it has commissioned, would thus have 75 indicators with which to judge its quality.

Spencer et al (2003)

There is a special need for vigilance when qualitative methods are employed alongside quantitative methods in a multiple method research design. An example from health research involves the UK controversy over the MMR (Measles, Mumps and Rubella) vaccine, a

combined vaccination against common childhood diseases. A very small sample study conducted by a medical researcher who was also a practising doctor suggested that there was a link between the vaccine and autism. Considerable publicity was given to this study. As a result, during the 1990s there was substantial parental resistance to MMR vaccination, and this had the effect of increasing the incidence of the diseases. Researchers in the health policy field were asked to address these problems. They wanted to supplement large-scale epidemiological and survey data with findings from qualitative research on parental resistance factors. They proposed a >meta-analysis= of qualitative studies by simply adding together the samples from a number of small qualitative studies of parental resistance until they had what they regarded as a large enough sample size from which to draw inferences. These researchers had no direct expertise in qualitative research themselves. It had to be explained to them that simply >adding together= a cluster of qualitative studies would be to ignore the different modes of eliciting parental views, different analytic techniques, different degrees of experience of vaccination amongst the respondents, and so on. >Adding together= would do little more than multiply error. When this kind of thing happens it is important for qualitative researchers to make clear that the epistemology of qualitative research questions such manipulations.

Similar considerations apply to the prospects for an enhanced practice of secondary analysis of qualitative data. To put the contrast in rather stark terms, research sponsors who fund qualitative archives want to see these resources used and are impatient with social scientists who raise methodologically-principled reservations about such work, while there are epistemological and practical arguments that make some qualitative researchers regard secondary analysis as impossible and dangerous. Between the two is a pragmatic middle ground that maintains that the problems of epistemology, lost context, lack of involvement in

the original immersive field experience, and so on, are certainly important, but that they apply differently in each specific case. Some qualitative studies may have been documented by the original researchers in a sufficiently detailed way that re-analysis with attention to context is possible, some studies are of a type where context does not matter very much or can be assessed by reference to other sources of information, and some analytic purposes are such that the epistemological objections do not pertain (Fielding 2000, 2004). Provided one does not adopt an across-the-board position that secondary analysis is always OK or always impossible, a discriminating practice of secondary analysis is possible, for some purposes, some of the time.

We earlier noted that the power of qualitative research lies in its accessibility, its participatory nature, and its ability to bring alive the experiential world of those it studies. The consumers of applied research - policymakers, politicians, pressure groups, corporate clients - are just as susceptible to the power of qualitative research as anyone else. Their responsibilities and interests mean, however, that they must also be certain that research is trustworthy. If decisions are going to be made on the basis of qualitative research we must ensure that its pedagogical, practical and technical foundations are as strong as we can make them. The Chicagoans gave birth to a strong and beautiful child but since then we have learned a lot more about what it needs to enjoy a long and productive maturity.

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