Qualitative Research Literature: A Bibliographic Essay

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ABSTRACT
This article presents selected literature that exemplifies (in theory and in practice) four methodological frameworks that have found wide application in qualitative studies: (1) symbolic interactionism, (2) phenomenological description, (3) constructivist hermeneutics, and (4) critical studies. Sources have been chosen to orient the reader within existing and emerging traditions from which she or he may find ample room for further exploration.

INTRODUCTION

To deny the truth of our own experience in the scientific study of ourselves is not only unsatisfactory, it is to render the scientific study of ourselves without a subject matter. But to suppose that science cannot contribute to an understanding of our experience may be to abandon, within the modern context, the task of self-understanding. Experience and self-understanding are like two legs without which we cannot walk.—Francisco Varela

A recent very casual World Wide Web search of available qualitative research monographs turned up nearly 200 titles from a single publisher, and the majority of these have appeared during the past ten years. Such an outpouring of literature from Sage Publications and other publishers points to a renewed (for it is not new) interest in methodologies and methods taken up once more to understand and explain phenomena arising from within the social domain. This interest feeds and is fed by a recogni-
tion of the potential for qualitative studies to provide valuable data that would remain inaccessible by other means, so much so that qualitative research courses are now offered by graduate schools in departments of education, nursing, business management, sociology, psychology, and even library and information science.

If schools of library and information science have lagged behind the renewal of an extended research canon, it is attributable, in part at least, to two factors: (1) the recent rise of LIS toward disciplinary status, and (2) the multiple nature of a discipline whose legitimate subjects of study range from the intersubjectivity arising from information-seeking behaviors to the engineering of data retrieval algorithms. As a young discipline, LIS has in the past displayed the same "physics envy" (Bygrave quoted in Wheatley, 1992, p. 141) that crippled other aspiring social sciences seeking credibility through research programs based on methods of the natural sciences. This tendency, when combined with a move within LIS toward the quickly evolving information technologies whose quantitative connections are less strained, has resulted in a continued emphasis on experimental and quasi-experimental research methods.

As a discipline of inquiry, LIS provides an essential bridge between information users and knowledge producers anchored by information theory and the computational sciences at one end and the science and engineering of data organization and delivery systems linked to the ever-changing, yet constant, human enterprise of self-discovery and cultural invention at the other. The future maintenance of this bridge, then, depends on an empathic understanding of the human need to know as well as the ability to translate and communicate that need into the development and use of appropriate technologies that will sustain the effort.

In examining the strategies for developing information services into the next century, Michael Buckland (1992) points out that "discussion of both means and ends implies consideration not only of what is good and what is not so good, but also of different sorts of goodness" (p. 4). It is clear that this mandate will require an extended repertoire of research approaches that extend beyond the presumed authority derived from statistical machinations. This task will entail the discerning use of methodologies and methods that are sustained not only by the quantitative sciences but by an emerging "science of qualities" (Goodwin, 1994, pp. 196-237) whose history can be traced to the roots of modernism.

**FOUNDATIONS**

Rigor alone is paralytic death, but imagination alone is insanity.

—Gregory Bateson (1979, p. 219)

The notion that science and mathematics are human-invented cultural artifacts can be lost easily in the more common understanding that
modern civilization is a product of the advances of science and mathematics. That there is widespread acceptance of the latter claim points to the predominance of a modern rationalist world view attributable in large part to Descartes, whose plan to achieve true human knowledge by mathematical means provided the basis for the modern sciences. The former view can be traced to the Italian philosopher, Giambattista Vico, who was born shortly after the death of Descartes but not before Cartesian rationalism had begun to sweep Europe. Vico's vision of linking the scientific study of society to the tools of the humanities would have to wait over 200 years to be renewed (Polkinghorne, 1988; Eisner, 1991; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Geertz, 1983). In the meantime, Vico's ideas would come to influence many thinkers including Goethe, Marx and, most notably, the nineteenth-century German philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey, "who called [Vico's] New Science 'one of the greatest triumphs of modern thought' " (Burke, 1985, p. 6). It was Dilthey (1988) who would attempt to develop an interpretive human science (Geisteswissenschaften) based on the goal of understanding (verstehen) rather than prediction and control. It may be argued that much of the methodological literature produced since Dilthey has been to further elaborate the notion of empathic understanding, with the result being a wide range of epistemological positions that do not argue whether or not the proper goal of social science is the understanding of lived experience but rather what it means to understand—i.e., to know.

The remainder of this article will present literature that exemplifies (in theory and in practice) four methodological frameworks that have found wide application in qualitative studies: (1) symbolic interactionism, (2) phenomenological description, (3) constructivist hermeneutics, and (4) critical studies. In arriving at these broad categories for a wide-ranging body of literature that regularly crosses disciplinary boundaries and often resists classification, it should be noted that this attempt at inclusion has been very selective rather than exhaustive. An effort has been made to include sources that will orient the interested reader within existing and emerging traditions from which she or he may find ample room for further exploration.

**Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism was a collection of evolving methods before Herbert Blumer gave it a name in 1937 and much before it was clearly delineated as a methodology by Blumer (1969) in his landmark book, *Symbolic Interactionism*. It emerged early in the century as a complex intermingling of the German social theory of Dilthey and, to a lesser extent, Weber, and the American pragmatism set forth by Mead (1909, 1934), James (1907), and Dewey (1938). It had as its goal the understanding of group lived experience and the meanings that are eminent in the lan-
guage-based, and thus symbolic, interactions that occur within those groups. While owing much to the epistemology of Mead's social behaviorism, symbolic interactionism as method can be traced back to Cooley's (1909) notion of sympathetic introspection, which "was intended to gain access (through observations, interviews, and participation) to the meanings and interpretations of the people involved in this or that setting" (Prus, 1995, pp. 51-52). These connections, as well as contemporary castings of symbolic interactionism, are outlined by Prus (1995) in Symbolic Interaction and Ethnographic Research: Intersubjectivity and the Study of Human Lived Experience.

The center for interactionist development was the University of Chicago, where the "Chicago Sociology" (Kurtz, 1984) became identified with the development of ethnographic methods (Wax, 1971). Reformist and hopeful in nature, students of Robert Park and Ernest Burgess published many significant studies between 1920 and 1940. Of these, Prus (1996, pp. 119-28) identifies the following as some of the most influential of the era: Anderson's (1923) *The Hobo*, which dealt with the experiences of homeless men; Shaw's (1930) *The Jack-Roller*, a study of crime and delinquency; Waller's (1930) study, *The Old Love and the New*, of the divorced and widowed; Blumer's (1933) investigation of how media affects young viewers in *Movies and Conduct*; and Sutherland's (1937) study, *The Professional Thief*, a landmark in the field of criminology.

Even though the 1940s and 1950s would see a move away from the Chicago tradition of researching human lived experience and toward what Mills's (1959) devastating critique would identify as "abstracted empiricism," Blumer's (1969) publication of Symbolic Interactionism would coincide with a renewal and expansion of interest in qualitative methods. This renewal can be attributed to a number of seminal works published during the late 1950s and early 1960s that mark a branching of interactionism into a number of closely related research approaches that continued to share the same ontological and epistemological assumptions. Of particular note was Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and *Asylums* (1961), two works that defined Goffman's generic approach to the study of human interactions based within the metaphor of the stage drama. Other important studies of the decade focused on deviance and social control (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 8)—e.g., Becker's (1963) *Outsiders*, a study of jazz musicians; *The Boys in White: Student Culture in Medical School* (Becker et al., 1961), a multi-method study that would include a range of strategies from participant observation to "quasi-statistics"; and Lofland's (1966) account of a religious cult in *The Doomsday Cult*.

Of major importance, too, during this era were the significant attempts to codify methods based broadly within the interactionist framework and that would come to be applied in fieldwork. A work that has a continuing
influence in many disciplines is *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Other important books of this era that blend methodology and method include: Denzin’s (1970) *The Research Act*, which is now in its third edition (Denzin, 1989); Lofland’s (1971) *Analyzing Social Setting: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*, now in its second edition (Lofland & Lofland, 1984) and co-authored by Lyn Lofland; Charon’s (1979) *Symbolic Interactionism: An Introduction, an Interpretation, an Integration*, now in its fifth edition (Charon, 1995); Bogdan’s (1972) *Participant Observation in Organizational Settings*; Sjoberg’s (1968) *Ethics, Politics and Social Research*; and Wax’s (1971) *Doing Fieldwork: Warnings and Advice*.

While symbolic interactionism has given ground to other qualitative approaches and has even been recast toward other ideological ends (see *Interpretive Interactionism* [Denzin, 1989]), symbolic interactionism remains a vital research framework. Two journals, *Symbolic Interaction* and *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, continue to publish research and feature articles. Other recent titles include *Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies* (Becker & McCall, 1990); *Subcultural Mosaics and Intersubjective Realities: An Ethnographic Research Agenda for Pragmatizing the Social Sciences* (Prus, 1997); and *Qualitative Research in Information Management* (Glazier & Powell, 1992).

**Phenomenological Description**

The essence or nature of an experience has been adequately described in language if the description reawakens or shows us the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper manner.—Max Van Manen (1990, p. 10)

Mead’s social psychology and Blumer’s symbolic interactionism are explicit in pointing out that understanding the individual is achieved through understanding the social group that provides the individual’s context. Phenomenological description, however, is less concerned with societal shaping than it is in elaborating the individual meanings that are embedded in everyday lived experience. Phenomenological description is neither problem-driven in the sense of establishing cause and effect, nor is it interested in deriving theory. Whereas symbolic interactionism emerged from within a sociological tradition to focus upon the psychology of social behavior, phenomenological description continues to develop as an applied sociology of knowledge that rests upon the principles and aims of Husserlian phenomenology. What may have remained an arcane set of philosophical postulates, phenomenology was made accessible and relevant to the social sciences by Albert Schutz’s explications, which were published posthumously between 1962 and 1967 as *Collected Papers I: The Problem of Social Reality* (1962); *Collected Papers II: Studies in Social Theory* (1964); and *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1967).
One of the first and most significant applications of Shutz's social phenomenology can be found in Garfinkel's (1967) *Ethnomethodology*, a work that outlines the research task as the nonjudgmental description of how individuals create and sustain meaning in their everyday lives. Garfinkel's work may be seen as a bridge between symbolic interactionism and phenomenology in that he was concerned with studying the meanings emanating from human interactions and the interactions themselves. From his concentration on the interaction process, Garfinkel concluded, as did Berger and Luckmann (1967) in *The Social Construction of Reality*, that individual actors are shaped by and shape the multiple contexts of human lived experience.

An attempt at a generic guidebook for applications of phenomenology to qualitative inquiry appeared in the mid-1970s with Bogdan and Taylor's (1975) *Introduction to Qualitative Research Method: A Phenomenological Approach to the Social Sciences*. Since then, a number of other methodological statements have appeared that link phenomenological description to specific disciplines. From psychology, there is the Duquesne approach developed by Giorgi and his students in the two volumes (Giorgi, 1971; 1975) of *Duquesne Studies in Phenomenological Psychology* and in the later volume, *Phenomenology and Psychological Research* (Giorgi, 1985). The existential-phenomenological approach, with its connection to gestalt psychology with emphasis on the ethical empathic role of the researcher, has been delineated in an expanded series of articles (Valle & Halling, 1989; Valle, 1998) first published as *Existential-Phenomenological Alternatives for Psychology* (Valle & King, 1978). *The Phenomenology of Everyday Life* (Pollio et al., 1997) provides a collection of research articles derived from the collaborative creation of themes based on interview data.

Another variation of phenomenological description is provided by Clark Moustakas, whose descriptive research is less concerned with an abstracted level of experiential essences than it is directed toward an analysis that maintains the wholeness of the experiences related by research participants. The Moustakas approach (heuristic inquiry), which has been applied in disciplines outside psychology, is set forth in two recent books, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Moustakas, 1994) and *Being-In, Being-For, Being-With* (Moustakas, 1995).

Titles from other disciplines that are based within the broad realm of phenomenological description include: *Researching Lived Experience* (Van Manen, 1990) which links phenomenology and the study of teaching; and *Interpretive Phenomenology: Embodiment, Caring, and Ethics in Health and Illness* (Benner, 1994), a collection of theoretical and research articles generally applicable beyond the healthcare audience for whom this volume is intended.
CONSTRUCTIVIST HERMENEUTICS

Hermeneutics, like freedom itself, may not be compatible with ontological security.—Gerald Bruns (1992, p. 266)

Constructivist hermeneutics encompasses a wide range of research approaches that focuses on understanding and interpreting the many versions of socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1985) or individually constructed realities (Kelly, 1963; von Glasersfeld, 1984). Whereas phenomenological description aims at a faithful description of the lived experience and is accomplished by a bracketing of the researcher’s frame of reference, constructivist hermeneutics acknowledges the embedded nature of the researcher’s frame as the beginning point in the process of coming to understand and interpret the phenomena under study. Lonergan (1958) provides an apt distinction between descriptive and interpretive studies in his critical remarks aimed at Husserl’s phenomenology:

But description is not enough. If it claims to report data in their purity, one may ask why the arid report should be added to the more lively experience. If it pretends to report the significant data, then it is deceived, for significance is not in the data but accrues to them [data] from the occurrence of insight. If it urges that it presents the insights that arise spontaneously, immediately, and inevitably from the data, one must remark that the data alone are never the sole determinants of insights that arise in any but the infantile mind and that beyond the level of insight there is the level of critical reflection . . . . (p. 415)

Whereas understanding indicates a grasp of the reality of being, interpretation signifies a grasp of that reality’s meaning or the “intention of being” (Lonergan, 1958, p. 358).

One of the primary aims of constructivist hermeneutics is to enact a methodology based on the recognition that every research act is an act of interpretation or that every observation is made by an observer (Maturana, 1980) whose purest descriptions are purely interpretive. In other words, the observer can never bracket her status as an observer, for it is that ontological status that directs any resulting epistemology. While such a statement may appear tautological, the implications are profound for the sciences, human or otherwise. It signifies no less than a dismantling of the objective/subjective debate for, if the argument holds, then even the best analysis of data may yield no more than a knowledge that Maturana (1980) characterizes as “objectivity in parenthesis.”

The hermeneutic problem (Gadamer, 1976), then, is not the search for one best interpretation but rather the co-emergence of perspectives that result from an active merging of boundaries or the “fusion of the horizons” (Hekman, 1986, p. 145) by researcher and participants. It is to this end that the researcher strives by means of a reflexive immersion in
the data and by a close attention to biases or preunderstandings (Gadamer, 1976) of both researcher and research participants. Rather than trying to corral preunderstandings within brackets, they are accepted as the personal backdrop from which understanding and interpretation operate in the migration to higher viewpoints (Gadamer, 1976).

Constructivist hermeneutics encompasses a range of research frameworks that are fairly new to the qualitative toolbox. From anthropology, a seminal statement on the intertwined nature of description and interpretation can be found in Victor Turner's essay, *Symbols in Ndembu Ritual* (1970). Turner's influence can be seen in Geertz's interpretive approach presented in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (1983), which promotes "thick descriptions" of meanings that result from human experiences.

As suggested earlier, the development of two main branches of constructivist hermeneutics can be traced to varying emphases placed on the individual minds that shape social processes (constructivism) and the social processes that shape individual minds (constructionism). While a full accounting of these distinctions is beyond the scope of this article, several qualitative research titles are worth noting that may be located within the general range of the two branches.

The constructionist approach can be located in two books by Denzin published during 1989: *Interpretive Interactionism* and *Interpretive Biography*. Another book from the same year is Guba and Lincoln's (1989) *Fourth Generation Evaluation*, which updates an earlier title, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The strong emphasis on social processes can be found, too, in participatory action research (PAR). The history and principles of this movement can be found in *Action and Knowledge: Breaking the Monopoly with Participatory Action Research* (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991).


**Critical Studies**

Although critical studies encompasses a wide range of concerns that center around class, race, and gender, this mode of inquiry is represented by two main branches: (1) social research based within critical theory
(Marcuse, 1968; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Giroux, 1988); and (2) textual analysis that is inspired by critical hermeneutics and deconstruction (Habermas, 1972; Foucault, 1972; Derrida, 1978). While the latter has as its goal the emancipation through the de-privileging of language (Denzin, 1992), the former promotes social emancipation or at least an emancipatory consciousness.

Developing from a tradition of American social meliorism and the social reproduction theory of the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, 1972; Adorno, 1973), critical social research has had to contend with a social goal and an underlying philosophy that are at cross purposes—i.e., an emphasis on social transformation achieved through human agency and an underlying historical determinism inspired by Marx. The faltering utility of this apparent contradiction has been recognized, and the postmodern criticalists have called for a closer linkage (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994) to the “egalitarian impulses of modernism” (p. 144) and to the more recent poststructuralist branch of critical studies that focuses on the deconstruction of power relations that exist in the linguistic domain.

This social branch of critical studies has produced a wide-ranging methodological literature from numerous disciplines. Two sound introductions with many references are provided by Quantz (1992) in On Critical Ethnography (with Some Postmodern Considerations) and Carspecken and Apple (1992) in Critical Qualitative Research: Theory, Methodology, and Practice. Other recent titles include: Kellner’s (1989) Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity; and Critical Theory and Methodology (Morrow & Brown, 1994).

Critical textual analysis is often characterized by a skeptical and irreverent style of inquiry that attempts to expose the hegemonic tendencies within language constructions and “the practices that surround them” (Denzin, 1992, p. 81). Based on the “doubt that any discourse has privileged place... [or] general claim to authoritative knowledge” (Denzin, 1992, p. 179). Critical textual analysis seeks to de-privilege, de-center, and/or deconstruct the oppressive elements within particular research contexts. While some who embrace this approach seek to maintain a tangible connection to the social realm, works such as Clough’s (1992) The End(s) of Ethnography: From Realism to Social Criticism and Game’s (1991) Undoing the Social: Towards a Deconstructive Sociology urge a concentration on the deconstruction of language, particularly the language of the sciences (Aronowitz, 1988). Other influential titles from this research genre include: Anthropology and Cultural Critique (Marcus & Fischer, 1986); Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (Clifford & Marcus, 1986); Doing Critical Ethnography (Thomas, 1993); and Postmodernism and Social Inquiry (Dickens & Fontana, 1994).
FUTURE UNDERSTANDING

One thing that should be fairly clear from this overview is the interdisciplinary, or even transdisciplinary, nature of qualitative inquiry. Though most often framed within disciplinary contexts, the nature of qualitative inquiry spills over these boundaries when studying the meanings generated as a result of social interactions (symbolic interactionism); or elaborating descriptions of essential qualities of lived experiences (phenomenological description); or interpreting the multiple natures of worlds brought forth by human actors (constructivist hermeneutics); or uncovering the relations of power within a frame of reference (critical studies). It should be expected, then, that library and information studies, a discipline that provides crucial links among various social settings and many domains of knowledge, would continue to pursue research methodologies that are themselves adaptive and open to the continuing evolution of human culture.

NOTES

1 This would include schools whose chosen designations emphasize, de-emphasize, or ignore the question of scientific status. I refer to schools of library and information science, library and information studies, schools of information science, or schools of information.

2 The contrast between Vico and Descartes is an important one to note because, in many respects, it mirrors the current theoretical distinctions that can be made between the positivist/reductionist approach to science and the constructivist/hermeneutic approach of qualitative studies. Vico, however, did not argue against the analytical methods developed and synthesized by Descartes, nor did he argue against the derivability of truth. If Descartes and Vico were alive today, we might see one concerned with statistical significances and the other with the measure of meaning.

3 For an elaboration of these distinctions, see Schwandt's (1994) Constructive, Interpretivist Approaches to Human Inquiry in the Handbook of Qualitative Research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

4 Critical studies has not been placed at the end of this essay out of a belief that postmodern criticalists have the last word in qualitative research. In fact, it has been argued (Gadamer, 1976; Hekman, 1986; Marquard, 1998; Prus, 1997) that the postmodern sensibility (Denzin, 1993) that fuels the research of this genre represents a departure in the otherwise steady refinement of methodologies that, until now, have remained open to a wide range of frameworks for the study of human lived experience. For if constructivist hermeneutics has been guilty of formulating ontological insecurity with the introduction of the hermeneutic problem, then critical studies may be seen as introducing the hermeneutic solution with an all-encompassing critique that provides the beginning and ending points for all inquiry. The future relevance of critical studies may be determined by the way it deals with its own ontological insecurity. If it opts, as a methodology, to "solve" the hermeneutic problem with an arcane, nihilistic critique that seeks to undermine all other knowledge claims, then its utility may be limited to the perpetuation of its own tribal solipsism.

REFERENCES


ADDITIONAL REFERENCES


