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1 THEORY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH:

Traditions and Innovations

Theory...is always in active relation to practice: an interaction between things done, things observed and (systematic) explanation of these. This allows a necessary distinction between theory and practice, but does not require their opposition. (Williams 1976, p. 317)

Theory is useful; it enables, it helps us better to understand what we already know, intuitively, in the first place. But theory is always plural, theories, and multicentred...This is the way social theory works. It depends on enthusiasm, passion, suspicion, scepticism, tolerance, patience and judgement. (Beilharz 1991, p. 1)

Introduction

Theory is integral to the practice of qualitative research in health. Theory is useful in this sense when it informs, and is informed by, practical, empirical qualitative research. This chapter examines some of the theoretical traditions that have informed and influenced qualitative research. There is a long tradition of constructive and vigorous interchange between the more general theoretical traditions and specific health-related empirical research. This chapter continues this tradition of dialogue and debate.

The chapter begins with a review of the role of theory in empirical qualitative research. We argue that different research projects make use of theory in different ways, and that it is important to recognise and accept the variable significance of theory in qualitative research. The rest of the chapter provides an introduction to some of the theoretical orientations that have informed and influenced qualitative methods. These introductions are not sufficient in themselves. They are designed to help a researcher begin to think about which theory might be most appropriate for his or her research. Each section examines one or two key ideas or concepts used in the theoretical orientation, contrasts the theory with other perspectives, and provides a short example of how the theory has been used in empirical health and social research.

There are a large variety of theoretical traditions and orientations (Denzin 1997; Vidich and Lyman 1994). We have selected several that are the most commonly used and have been the most influential in qualitative research. If none of these fits your particular research goals, there is probably another, more relevant, theory awaiting your discovery. The theoretical traditions we discuss are: positivism, interpretative ethnography, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, feminism, poststructuralism and postmodernism, and, finally, hermeneutics.

The first questions in qualitative research

There are three interrelated sets of questions that need to be clearly addressed at the outset of any qualitative study:

1 What is the theoretical framework within which the study is being conducted?
2 What is the substantive issue being researched?
3 What are the desired outcomes of the research?

While these questions follow logically on from each other, in practice much research begins with the second or third question and works from there to the other questions. The three questions are interrelated and all need to be clearly addressed. However, one question may take priority over the others, and just how these questions are answered will depend on the particular goals of the research.

Douglas Ezzy's research among unemployed people developed out of a theoretical framework that integrated symbolic interactionism and narrative theory (Ezzy 1996). The research was designed to facilitate the development of a

particular theory of narrative identity that drew on these theoretical frameworks. The substantive issue of unemployed people's narratives about job loss takes a secondary role behind the primary (theoretical) aim of developing a theory of narrative-identity.

In contrast, a study of transitions in and out of work among people living with HIV/AIDS was designed to provide various government and community sector organisations with information that could be used to improve the services they provide (Ezzy et al. 1999). The substantive issue of employment transitions was integral to the research and the theoretical framework utilised was selected to best facilitate the research goal. A theory that emphasised the role of unconscious forces, or explored the role of the global labour market in the work experience of people living with HIV/AIDS, would not have been very useful in this research. Rather, a theoretical framework was developed, drawing on studies of illness, symbolic interactionism, and gay cultural theory. While theoretical innovation did occur, the theory was employed to serve the more practical goals of the research.

A theory is a set of propositions about relationships between various concepts. Different theoretical frameworks direct attention to different aspects of a phenomenon. For example, rational choice theory is a theoretical framework that assumes that people's behaviour can be explained with reference to rational choices on the part of the individual. Psychoanalytic theory points to the role of the irrational and unconscious in shaping behaviour. Symbolic interactionism emphasises symbolically generated intersubjective interpretations. There are, of course, many other theoretical frameworks. The point is simply that the general theoretical framework fundamentally shapes the sorts of things that the research focuses on and therefore also fundamentally shapes the method and techniques required for the research.

Some theoretical frameworks are better suited to some research problems than to others. A theory that emphasises the embodied nature of social life will probably be more useful in a study of women's experiences of breast screening than in a study of the way doctors interpret new information about breast screening in medical journals. This is not to say that such a theory would not be useful or interesting in such a study. The important point is to match theoretical frameworks with the substantive issue being investigated and with the main goal of the research.

Sometimes theoretical frameworks may be derived from the particular research tradition that the person has chosen to work within. Many qualitative studies, for example, begin with a claim to be doing 'grounded theory' within the symbolic interactionist tradition. However, even the symbolic interactionists are divided among themselves over theoretical issues (for more on this debate, see the later section on poststructuralism and postmodernism).

Some researchers may be more concerned with dealing with a particular research question; for example, the understanding of breast screening among Vietnamese women in Australia. When qualitative research is conducted without

reference to theoretical frameworks, the researcher effectively takes for granted a particular framework without acknowledging it. This may not be a problem if there is an established research tradition in the field where such issues have been worked through. It may be that an established set of techniques have been used before to examine similar problems and the researcher only seeks similar sorts of answers. For example, there may be an established literature on Vietnamese women and on breast screening among cultural minorities in Australia. However, it should be noted that not to examine the theoretical assumptions of the research limits the extent to which new insights can be discovered.

On the other hand, some people become obsessed with theory. While it is important to recognise the place of theory in qualitative research, the complexities of the theoretical task should never stop a researcher from asking empirical questions. One of the contributions of the symbolic interactionist and pragmatist heritage of early qualitative researchers was to put some of the more complex theoretical questions on hold, or to work with solutions that were not perfect, and to still conduct empirical research.

Once the researcher has identified a theoretical tradition or traditions, chosen an empirical or substantive focus for the study, and clarified the desired outcomes of the research, the methodology must then be carefully constructed. The rest of this chapter examines in more detail the role of theoretical orientations in qualitative research, and outlines some of the more important theories.

Positivism

Positivism has influenced qualitative research because, in many ways, it is the opposite of qualitative research. It is not a theory so much as a general perspective that includes a number of theories that typically reject qualitative research methods. In social research, positivism refers to a belief that social science can be scientific in the same way as the physical sciences such as physics or chemistry. Positivists usually prefer quantitative methods, to measure things, using structured questions and constructing scales that can be analysed with statistics. Positivists also prefer structuralist explanations and avoid interpretivist explanations that refer to human intentions and emotions (Giddens 1974; Maseide 1990; Mills 1959; Williams 1976).

Like physical scientists, positivists in the social sciences prefer a methodology that is standardised and repeatable, and that tests a pre-existing hypothesis. They believe that this methodology will lead to true and objective results. Positivists attempt to remove or prevent interpretations influencing the research process in order to ensure objectivity. They may, for example, require an interviewer always to ask the same questions in the same way, not to express any emotion while asking the questions, and to distance themselves from the person they are interviewing (Bergen 1993; Prus 1996; see also Gubrium and Holstein 1997 and Silverman 2001 for their arguments regarding 'emotionalism' as an opposite to positivism).

Qualitative researchers have argued that positivists are wrong in attempting to study people in the same way as physical things. People, they argue, are fundamentally different to things because of the centrality of meanings and interpretations to human social life. In order to understand why people do things, you must understand their interpretations of events and actions (Berger and Luckmann 1967). The attempt to understand meanings and interpretations is at the heart of qualitative research.

Ethnography

Ethnography is a methodology that incorporates a variety of theoretical traditions (see Chapter 8 for a fuller discussion of ethnographic research methods). The point of this section is to contrast the theoretical assumptions of one of the main theoretical traditions of ethnography with those of other theoretical traditions in qualitative research. The later chapter focuses more generally on ethnography in health and social research. This section takes a specific look at one ethnographic theoretical tradition.

Ethnography is more closely associated with anthropological research than with sociological research. In fact, ethnography is sometimes defined as what anthropologists do (Atkinson et al. 2001; Denzin 2003; Geertz 1973; Silverman 2001). Ethnography is also increasingly common in psychology and sociology, but is often referred to by different terms, such as 'community studies' (Whyte 1955).

Clifford Geertz (1973) is one of the most influential proponents of interpretative ethnography in anthropology and we will focus on his analysis as illustrative of the theoretical orientation of ethnography. However, it should be emphasised that there are a variety of theoretical traditions within ethnography, and Geertz's interpretative theory is only one of these (see Rosaldo 1989). Geertz argues that ethnography is not defined by the techniques it employs, such as participant observation and interviews, but by a particular kind of intellectual effort he describes as 'thick description' (p. 5). Thick description focuses on detail and background information. It aims to explain people's pattern of life by describing the patterns of meaning that inform their actions, so as to render them accessible and 'logical'. Another word for these patterns of meaning is 'culture', which Geertz argues consists of 'socially established structures of meaning in terms of which people do...things' (p. 12).

Ethnography, or at least the interpretative ethnography described by Geertz, focuses on the culture of a group, the webs and patterns of meaning that make up a culture and that guide and make sense of people's actions. Ethnography focuses on discovering the cultural frameworks, analysing their structure and content, and using this as a basis for explanation of particular social phenomena. It should be emphasised, following Geertz (1973, p. 20), that cultures are never finally mapped out. Rather, ethnographic studies are always partial and incomplete guesses at explanations (Atkinson et al. 2001; Silverman 2001).

For example, Renato Rosaldo (1989) studied head-hunting among the Ilongots in the Philippines. He learnt their language, participated in their social life, interviewed people, and observed their patterns of action in order to try to understand the practice of head-hunting. The Ilongots often told him that 'rage in bereavement could impel men to head-hunt' (p. 3). Stated so simply, this does not really explain their actions, it is too 'thin', and at first Rosaldo dismissed it as an explanation. However, after the death of his wife because of an accident, he began to 'comprehend the force of anger possible in bereavement' (p. 7). Rosaldo describes this experience using 'thick description'. He describes the 'powerful visceral emotional states' and the 'deep cutting pain of sorrow almost beyond endurance'. As he analysed his own experience of bereavement, Rosaldo began to understand the complexity and depth of emotions associated with the Ilongots' experience of rage in bereavement. He describes in detail the intricacies of bereavement and links this to cultural patterns of meaning, providing a thick description of 'rage in bereavement' that in turn makes sense of the Ilongots' practice of head-hunting.

Rosaldo's study makes two important points about ethnography. First, ethnography focuses on describing in detail the systems of meaning and emotions that make up a culture and that can account for particular actions. Second, the pre-existing understandings, experiences, and theoretical traditions used by the researcher are integral to what they are able to analyse and describe. Without his own experience of bereavement Rosaldo would not have been able to describe in the same depth the experience of rage in bereavement that leads to head-hunting. The significance of the researcher as a positioned subject will be discussed in further detail later in the chapter.

Another way of thinking of 'thick description' is as 'analytical', or 'theoretical', description. That is to say, the research aims to analyse theoretically social processes and systems of meaning. 'These descriptions must remain close to the concrete reality of particular events, but at the same time reveal general features of human social life' (Hammersley 1992b, p. 12). However, as Hammersley (1992b) points out, the relationship between theory and description is more complex than it might first seem. Early debates focused on whether theory should be developed prior to, or after, empirical description. More recent ethnographers use a more complex understanding of the simultaneous interplay of theory and description (Atkinson et al 2001; Clough 1992; Denzin 1997, 2003; Fetterman 1998; Jackson 1989; Taylor 2002).

Ethnography is distinct as an approach in that it attempts to interpret and present its findings from a cultural perspective. Ethnography searches out the patterns of meanings and emotions that make up culture and how these make sense of actions in everyday life. At the heart of ethnography is good or 'thick' description, typically obtained through an immersion in the everyday life of the group or a given social setting (Van Maanen 1982, p. 103). The theoretical traditions of ethnography are most commonly used in the ethnographic method

(Chapter 8). Focus groups (Chapter 4) and in-depth interviews (Chapter 3) are also often part of ethnography and influenced by its theoretical traditions.

Phenomenology

Phenomenological theory is more influential on qualitative research than is suggested by the small number of empirical qualitative studies that use it as their guiding theory (Jackson 1996; Moustakas 1994; Taylor 1993). The European phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), Alfred Schutz (1899–1959), and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), among others, forms the philosophical background to many of the more familiar theories and methods in qualitative research. After a brief discussion of the concept of the 'life-world', the following section examines one central concept from each of these philosophers to indicate their significance in qualitative research. These summaries are not intended as, and cannot possibly be, representative of the thought of these philosophers. They are simply intended as a reminder of the importance of the phenomenological philosophers, to indicate some of the phenomenological origins of some of the terms used in qualitative research, and to encourage further research. For a more detailed analysis of phenomenological philosophers, see Macann (1993) or Mackie (1985), and for a more detailed analysis of phenomenological qualitative research methods, see Becker (1992) or Moustakas (1994).

Becker (1992, p. 7) puts it simply and clearly: 'Phenomenologists study situations in the everyday world from the viewpoint of the experiencing person'. In contrast to the emphasis on culture that is characteristic of ethnographers, phenomenology emphasises the individual's construction of a 'life-world'. 'Taken together, the whole of people's unquestioned, subjective experience of their biological worlds can be termed their "life-world" (or Lebenswelt)' (Ainlay 1986, p. 43). The life-world is the individual's world of their everyday life. The life-world includes taken-for-granted assumptions about everyday life, such as what clothes should be worn, what the weather will be like, the way you should greet a friend, whether to write from left to right or right to left, and how to deal with embarrassing events. Each individual's life-world is different, and individual's actions can be understood by situating them within the life-world of the actor.

The concept of intentionality is integral to Husserl's phenomenology. As Berger and Luckmann (1967, p. 34) put it, 'consciousness is always intentional; it always intends or is directed towards objects'. This philosophical proposition has important implications for the conduct of research into human action. It means that, if we are to understand why people do things, we have to understand the meaning they give to their actions. The phenomenological concept of intentionality was an early and important influence on the development of qualitative research methods that examined the meanings and interpretations people give to their actions.

Alfred Schutz emphasised the need for sociology to examine in detail the taken-for-grantedness of people's life-world. This focus bypassed a number of philosophical problems and led Schutz on to an examination of the nature of

'typifications' in everyday life (Berger and Luckman 1967, p. 97). Typifications refer to the classificatory systems that people develop as a consequence of their history of interaction. The most important exponents of Schutz's phenomenology in the English-speaking world were Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967). This emphasis on examining the everyday experience of the life-world and the typifications or classificatory systems of understanding used by people in interaction is an important philosophical backdrop that has helped legitimate empirical qualitative research.

Martin Heidegger (1962) used the German term Dasein to refer to the person. He uses it to emphasise that people are beings in the world. He wanted to reject the Cartesian understanding of the person as isolated self-consciousness. Dasein literally means 'being there'. That is to say, the starting point according to Heidegger is the person's experience in their everyday life and shared social practices. Methodological individualism starts with the isolated individual. Heidegger rejects this and refers to 'being-in-the-world' to emphasise this rejection. 'To separate person and world is false; to be a person is to be in a world' (Becker 1992, p. 13). Although the influence of Heidegger's philosophy is reflected in some current qualitative research, the implications of his thought are still being assimilated into the practice of empirical qualitative research (Denzin 1986). The full impact of Heidegger's philosophical innovations is seen in the development of various postmodern and poststructuralist innovations in qualitative methods discussed later in the chapter.

Along with the phenomenological philosophers, there is also a well-developed empirical phenomenological research tradition that aims to describe the essences of everyday experience, or individuals' life-worlds. Phenomenologically oriented researchers study everyday events from within the life-world of the person experiencing them. 'The aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it' (Moustakas 1994, p. 13).

Phenomenological theory was utilised by Corin and Lauzon (1992) to study the experience of sufferers of schizophrenia in the community. They observe that psychiatry has not systematically studied the construction of interpretations and meanings by sufferers of schizophrenia. Open-ended interviews were conducted with sufferers of schizophrenia that sought to understand 'the rehabilitative strategies and specific forms of being-in-the-world associated with an ability to remain in the community' (p. 266). Traditional approaches to schizophrenia view withdrawal from the community, such as inactivity and lack of involvement, as an indicator of a negative prognosis. In contrast, on the basis of their interviews, Corin and Lauzon argue that withdrawal is understood by the sufferers as a positive, or intentional, strategy that ensures non-rehospitalisation: 'It is characterized by a position at a distance from social roles and social relationships, combined with various strategies for keeping more tenuous links with social environments'. This study demonstrates the usefulness, and importance, of using a phenomenological method to understand an experience from the perspective of the participant.

Phenomenologists focus on the social construction of the life-world, emphasising that people's actions can only be understood when they are situated in the taken-for-granted meanings and routines that constitute their everyday world. Further, phenomenologists emphasise that people's actions should be explained with reference to their conscious intentions, and with references to the typifications, or categories of understandings, that people develop. Phenomenological studies often utilise in-depth interviews (Chapter 3). More generally, phenomenological theory is an important influence on most of the qualitative research methodologies described later in this book.

Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism has its roots in American sociology, in contrast to the European philosophical focus of phenomenology, and the anthropological origins of ethnography. Symbolic interactionists examine how people make sense of their experiences through a common set of symbols. Symbolic interactionists emphasise that these symbols are developed and find meaning through and in interaction. While early interactionists were influenced by philosophical considerations, interactionism has been characterised by a strong empirical focus.

Arguably, the most important symbolic interactionist was George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). At the time Mead was developing his thought, psychological behaviourists argued that, although minds and meanings may exist, they were irrelevant in explaining what people do. The behaviourists believed that only observation of behaviour could explain behaviour. In contrast, Mead (1934) argued for the importance of meanings and symbols for understanding human behaviour. Human beings construct action on the basis of the meanings of the objects they encounter. This insight is best expressed in Thomas' (1928, p. 584) dictum that 'if people define situations as real they are real in their consequences'.

Mead takes this analysis of meaning one step further when he describes the way that the self becomes an object to itself. Through the process of role-taking, a person imagines how they themselves appear to others, thus becoming a symbolic object to themselves (1934, p. 137). People then respond to themselves on the basis of the meanings they give to their actions through the process of role-taking. Herbert Blumer (1969) extended Mead's argument, emphasising the 'in-process' nature of meaning. Meanings are continually created, recreated, and modified in interaction, 'on the fly'. This leads to a conception of the self very different to the Cartesian idea of a solid self-substance: 'The self is [not]...a solid given entity that moves from one situation to another. It is rather a process, continuously created and recreated in each social situation that one enters, held together by the slender thread of memory' (Berger 1975, p. 124).

Symbolic interactionism was a widely used perspective up until the late 1960s; during the 1970s it became less fashionable, but it has experienced a recent resurgence in popularity, championed by the work of Norman Denzin (1989a,

1997). There are a number of other important symbolic interactionists, including Howard Becker, Erving Goffman, and Anselm Strauss. Each conducted important research in health-related areas, including studies of student doctors (Strauss et al. 1961), mental patients (Goffman 1961), and a number of other empirical studies on health-related topics (see Maines 1991b for a bibliography of Strauss' work).

Goffman's description of the process of internment of mental patients illustrates clearly the powerful way in which social relationships shape the self concept. Goffman describes the various stages of movement towards internment that involve a continual decline in status until not only interactions with relatives, doctors, and friends, but also the physical settings, suggest to the patient that they are considered to have a non-viable self. Changes in the environment and in the way the individual is treated by others lead to changes in their self-conception, such that they come to think of themselves as mentally ill when they previously had not thought of themselves in such a way. Once inside the hospital, the patient is required to participate in 'confession', either in private or in group psychotherapy, where they must 'insightfully come to take, or affect to take, the hospital's view of [them]' (Goffman 1961, p. 143). The hospital demands that the patient recognise that they are mentally ill, because only then can the hospital begin to set itself to the business of 'straightening up'.

Symbolic interactionists argue that experiences take on meaning as they become symbolically significant through shared interaction. They study the interactional sources and development of these shared symbol systems and explain actions with reference to them. One of symbolic interactionism's most important contributions to qualitative methods was the development of grounded theory, discussed in detail in the next chapter. Symbolic interactionist studies have typically utilised methodologies such as in-depth interviews (Chapter 3), focus groups (Chapter 4), unobtrusive methods (Chapter 5) and ethnography (Chapter 8).

Feminism

This section does not attempt to provide an overview of feminist thought (Clough 1994; Collins 1991; Kitzinger 2004). Rather, we review three ways in which feminist thought has influenced qualitative research methods. First, feminist thought has facilitated qualitative research through advocating the value and legitimacy of research methods that examine the experience and subjectivity of the person being studied. Second, feminist thought has politicised the research process. Arguing against the idea that research can be objective, feminists have demonstrated the integrally political and ethical nature of the whole research process, including the information provided in research reports. Finally, feminists have explored the reflexive nature of the research encounter, underlining the significance of the researcher as an inseparable part of the research process. While these aspects of qualitative research methods predate feminist research, feminism has accelerated their acceptance and examined their implications in considerable depth.

Denzin (1997, p. xiii) argues that 'ethnography is a gendered project'. Qualitative research cannot produce a gender-neutral story about the real world. As Dorothy Smith (1987, p. 152) puts it, 'it has been argued extensively that, until recently, established sociology had a concealed gender subtext, that it was thought, investigated, and written largely from the perspective of men'. Smith points out that this feminist critique has two foci. First, feminists highlighted the absence of women from both the topics being studied and the research reports. 'However, a second major theme in the critique has questioned established sociological methods.' The second theme pointed to how traditional positivist sociological methods objectify social processes, treating people as passive rather than actively constituting their social world. The sociological emphasis on organisational processes, concepts, and variables has ignored or elided the 'actualities of a naturally existing world', and particularly ignored and made invisible roles and activities performed by women that are integral to these social organisations (Smith 1987, p. 153).

Sands (1996, p. 167) puts it succinctly when she says that, 'during the 1980s, feminist literature proposed the existence of a silent, tongue-tied "different" woman who craves to exercise her own voice'. Feminist theorists advocated research methods that enabled women to express their experience from their own perspective, contrasting this with positivist methodologies that claimed to be objective, but that were constructed, conducted, and analysed from the perspective of men. 'To enlarge our understanding as women of how things come about for us as they do, we need a method beginning from where women are as subjects' (Smith 1987, p. 153). Qualitative research methods that examined interpretations and meanings were thus very important to early feminist researchers. While feminism was important in facilitating the growth of qualitative methodologies, more recent feminists have argued that feminist research can be both qualitative and quantitative, depending on the research problem (Jayaratne and Abibail 1991).

Feminist theorists did not simply argue for the introduction of new topics, focusing on 'women's issues', into sociological research, or for a more interpretative and qualitative approach to sociological research. They also highlighted the role of political and social processes in the development of understandings about social life, both by society and by the sociologists who have studied social processes. In short, they argued that much of social research is androcentric, developed from the perspective of men to serve their political interests (see Hughes 2002; Jarviluoma et al. 2004; Kitzinger 2004; Reinharz 1992).

Dorothy Smith (1987, p. 154), for example, is unashamedly political, arguing that feminist social research is a form of 'consciousness raising' and that it attempts to identify how private experiences of oppression may by understood as part of a general system of oppression that shapes women's experience. Smith here echoes C.W. Mills' (1959) well-known distinction between private troubles and public issues. However, Smith goes further than Mills in her specifically feminist

argument that many of women's private troubles are not recognised as shared public issues because of established sociological methods that systematically ignore the experience of everyday life in general, and of women in particular. Bergen (1993, p. 202) makes a similar point when she argues that 'considering the consequences (on both a personal level and in terms of policy implications) of the research for the participants is essential to the work of feminists as their goal is the liberation of all women'. Mies (1991, p. 63) takes this argument a step further when she argues that the motto of a feminist approach could be: 'In order to understand a thing, one must change it.'

There are some problems with Smith's analysis, particularly as a product of her insistence that feminist theory offers a more accurate account, or science, of empirical reality. Drawing on postmodern perspectives, Clough (1994, p. 74) criticises Smith for not developing an 'analysis of how text-mediated discourse is related to unconscious desire, subjectivity, and production of the reality of experience'. Nonetheless, Smith's work is important because it exemplifies two significant impacts of feminist thought on sociological research. She focuses on the political dimensions of the research process, and on a methodology that attempts to understand experiences from the standpoint of those being studied. Feminist researchers, and particularly poststructuralist feminists, have highlighted this issue of reflexivity and the role of the researcher in the research process (Clough 1992; Sands 1996). This issue is discussed in more detail in the chapter on interviewing methods.

Raquel Bergen (1993) utilised feminist theory in her study of marital rape survivors. Her main research method was in-depth interviews. She states that feminism influenced her study not only through her choice of topic, but also the way in which she conducted the interviews. Bergen rejected the traditional interviewer role as distanced, emotionally neutral, and disinterested. Rather, she become 'consciously partial', in the sense that she attempted to make the interview interactive, discussing her own biographical history and interacting on a 'personal level'. In particular, when some of her respondents became distressed when recounting their experiences, she did not attempt to be detached and 'objective'; rather, she 'spent a long time offering support' (p. 208). She argues that this provided her with important insights that would otherwise have been missed. This conscious partiality is consistent, Bergen argues, with feminism's goal of forming 'nonexploitative relationships' with research subjects.

Feminism has had a significant impact on qualitative research (Hughes 2002; Kitzinger 2004). Feminists helped to establish qualitative research as a legitimate methodology. Further, they have highlighted the political and reflexive nature of all social research. Feminist research has used a wide range of methodologies, including all of those described in the methods chapters of this book (see also Hughes 2002; Kitzinger 2004; Olesen 2000; Reinharz 1992; Taylor 1998). Researchers using memory-work (Chapter 7) and participatory action research (Chapter 9) are more likely to draw on feminist theory than on other theoretical traditions.

Postmodernism

Poststructuralism, postmodernism, cultural studies, and deconstruction refer to a group of ideas and theories that have had a broad impact on the social sciences and humanities (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000; Grbich 2004; Harvey 1989; Lemert 1997; Lucy 1997). While some of the postmodernist texts are difficult to understand, we believe that the insights they can provide are worth the effort. There are a number of themes in the postmodernist literature of relevance to qualitative methods that are not discussed here, including debates around the nature of subjectivity (Cadava et al. 1991) and different forms of writing (Grbich 2004; Richardson 1997). We will limit our discussion to a few examples of the way in which qualitative research has been influenced by postmodernist approaches, focusing on debates about the nature of 'reality'.

The implications of postmodernism and related theories for qualitative research are still being worked out, and are often associated with strongly expressed emotions (Richardson 1997, p. 127). This is clearly illustrated in the debate surrounding Denzin and Lincoln's *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2000a). Snow and Morrill (1995, p. 341) criticised the first edition of this book for 'privileging the postmodern perspective', arguing that the usefulness of postmodernism for qualitative research still needs to be demonstrated. In reply, Denzin and Lincoln (1995, p. 352) argue that innovation is at the heart of qualitative research: 'The open-ended nature of the qualitative research methods project leads to perpetual resistance against attempts to impose a single umbrella-like paradigm over the entire project'. Both observations are correct, but are used selectively by the authors to argue for different practices among qualitative researchers. Snow and Morrill are arguing for the value of tradition and tried-and-proved methods in qualitative research. Denzin and Lincoln, on the other hand, are arguing for the value of innovation and experimentation that characterise postmodernist qualitative research.

One of the first premises of the postmodernist perspective is that simple summaries or recipes (grand narratives) are not very good explanations. They argue for descriptions of the world that are complex, overlaid with competing and perhaps contradictory understandings. It is therefore rather difficult to briefly summarise the ideas of postmodernism when one of the assumptions of the theory is that simple summaries are not very useful. However, it is possible to illustrate some of the central assumptions that guide postmodernist thought.

Norman Denzin (1997, p. xiii) argues that 'the worlds we study are created, in part, through the texts that we write and perform about them'. What does this mean? Does Denzin mean that reality does not exist and that there are only texts and interpretations? Some qualitative researchers think that postmodernism involves a form of extreme scepticism and relativism that denies the existence of reality (Faberman 1992; Prus 1996). However, Faberman and Prus appear to have misunderstood what the postmodernists are saying. Faberman and Prus could be paraphrased as arguing that either reality exists independently of our

interpretations, or it does not exist at all. Postmodernists, such as Denzin, refuse to accept this two-way choice. As we understand it, the point of much postmodernist theory is not to deny the existence of reality, but to point out that reality is as much constructed in talking and writing as it is 'out there'. However, it must be acknowledged that there is considerable diversity of opinion among postmodernists and some appear to advocate an approach that borders on the form of scepticist relativism criticised by Prus and Faberman, while others clearly do not.

The postmodernist analysis of 'reality' is difficult to understand. This is, in part, a consequence of the difficult language that many postmodernists use. However, they are also difficult to understand because they are talking about qualitative research in a very different way, and this difference in perspective is difficult to understand. In the next few paragraphs we will examine a quote from a postmodernist and then try to translate and reinterpret the meaning of the text.

Trinh is a film-maker who has developed a critique of contemporary ethnography derived from her analysis of modern cinema (Denzin 1997). The following extract is taken from her (1991) book *When the Moon Waxes Red*. While her thought is more complex than is represented in this short quote, it indicates some of her central ideas:

> The task of inquiring into all the divisions of a culture remains exacting, for the moments when things take on a proper name can only be positional, hence transitional. The function of any ideology in power is to represent the world positively unified. To challenge the regimes of representation that govern a society is to conceive of how politics can transform reality rather than merely ideologize it. (Trinh 1991, p. 2)

What does this very dense quote mean? Let us examine the first sentence. One of the reasons that postmodernist approaches are so threatening, and generate such heated debate, is that postmodernists do not simply argue for a different approach or for the usefulness of a particular kind of theory; they argue for a fundamental shift in the way that research and theorising are practised. The reference to 'positional and hence transitional' indicates Trinh's postmodernist approach. This means that things (including illness, doctors, or the moon) do not have any intrinsic definition, meaning, or 'proper name'. Rather, their significance depends on the position of the person naming them, and may change as a consequence of changed social situations (hence they are transitional).

As Denzin (1989b, p. 74) puts it, Trinh 'seeks to undo the entire realist ethnographic project'. Terms such as truth, reality, and facts come to have very different meanings in the postmodernist project. They no longer refer to taken-for-granted understandings of things 'out there'. Rather, they refer to social processes that are integrally part of the construction of facts, truth, and reality. Trinh does not, however, believe that all interpretations are equal, or that there are no criteria by which analyses should be judged. She suggests that any study

of culture (including ethnography and much of qualitative research) is demanding, or 'exacting'. In other words, postmodernists are not trying to avoid the issues of rigour that make qualitative research worthwhile (see Chapter 2).

The chapter from which the above quote is taken includes a number of stories about the moon. To illustrate her argument, Trinh reviews the way in which the meaning of the moon changes depending on historical period and social location of the person observing. For example, the Asian autumnal festival of the full moon involves street dancing, food, and music, and can be understood, and valued, as a celebration of the 'feminine beauty and the carnal presence of the loved woman' (Trinh 1991, p. 3). However, these same celebrations of the moon were understood, and denigrated, by Chinese revolutionaries as symbols of counter-revolutionary Chinese feudalism. Similarly, Trinh points out how the colour changes of the moon are understood to symbolise impending calamity in some cultures, but have now been demystified and commodified by scientists who even so find them 'undeniably lovely' (p. 8).

Trinh also points out how the way in which the moon is understood is part of a broader societal culture and worldview. The repression of the festival of the full moon in revolutionary China is consistent with a more general attempt to remove the influence of feudalism from China's social organisation and culture. We understand Trinh's references to an 'ideology in power' and to 'regimes of representation' as referring to these more general cultural practices, such as revolutionary China's rejection of anything associated with feudalism. The world is 'positively unified' in the sense that the understandings of the moon are forced to be consistent with these more general cultural practices. The moon festival could not be tolerated by the revolutionary Chinese as it was not consistent with their desire to leave behind feudalism.

In her final sentence, Trinh says that 'to challenge the regimes of representation that govern a society is to conceive of how politics can transform reality rather than merely ideologize it' (p. 15). Trinh does not want to simply exchange one particular cultural formation with another. She wants to 'challenge' the way social and cultural formations are constructed and used. She wants people to recognise that the way things are described (including the moon, illness, and doctors) are political acts that both reflect and change the nature of things, including the organisation of society. Trinh's title of her own book, *When the Moon Waxes Red*, draws on the imagery of the coloured moon as an indicator of impending calamity, suggesting that she has a broader conception of society as headed towards calamity, or at least as in crisis. This crisis is, in part, a product of the realisation that there is no correct way of understanding the moon. We should not attempt to find a correct way of understanding the moon, or, more generally, a final solution to all our health and social problems. Rather, postmodernists, such as Trinh, argue that we must recognise that all truth is partial and benefits some people and disadvantages others. In short, she could be paraphrased as arguing that qualitative researchers must stop pretending that we have final and correct answers.

Michel Foucault's (1967) study of mental illness provides a good example of how postmodernist insights have been applied to issues in health. One of the central themes of Foucault's work is that the treatment of madness since the Enlightenment reflects an Enlightenment emphasis on the importance of logic and reason (Samson 1995). Since the Enlightenment, truth has been understood to be discovered through logical reason. Thoughts, ideas, and people who did not use logical reason were denigrated and silenced as not truthful. Prior to the Enlightenment, the mad and mentally ill were at liberty to wander and were not excluded from society. Following the Enlightenment, people who were mad were understood as being irrational, to be separated off from society in institutions. In other words, the silencing and repression of the mentally ill in institutions that began in the eighteenth century was a product of a particular post-Enlightenment culture that silenced and repressed anybody or anything that could not be subjected to logic and reason. See also Kendall and Wickham's recent writing (2004) on the use of the Foucaultian framework in their research.

Postmodernism and poststructuralism have generated considerable debate among qualitative researchers (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000; Grbich 2004). One of the themes of postmodernism is that specific understandings and interpretations reflect more general cultural patterns and understandings that are integrally political. Further, interpretations, and cultural patterns of meaning, are not fixed, but continually changing and transforming under the influence of the power of vested interests. Postmodernist qualitative researchers try to present analyses that acknowledge the situated and political nature of their particular analysis. Postmodernist and poststructuralist studies have used a range of methodologies, but they tend to favour unobtrusive methods (Chapter 5), often focusing on secondary analysis of existing data, or on historical analysis. Participatory action research (Chapter 9) is also consistent with this approach as a consequence of its integration of political action.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the 'critical theory of interpretation' (Rundell 1995, p. 10; see also Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000). It focuses on meanings and interpretations. Early biblical hermeneutics examined biblical texts. More recent hermeneutics has argued that human action can be interpreted like a text (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000). The hermeneutic method is applied to social life. One of the central arguments of hermeneutics is that the tradition of interpretation influences how a text or set of events is understood. Positivists describe interpretations as uncertain, variable, and dependent on the observer, and contrast interpretation to truth, which is certain and invariable. Hermeneutics turns this understanding on its head, by pointing out that truth is not as certain and invariable as it seems and by exploring the way in which interpretations and interpretative contexts make truth meaningful.

The implication of this hermeneutical analysis is that there is never any truth independent of interpretation. Every researcher brings assumptions, a tradition of understanding, to their research. These assumptions shape how the research is conducted, what is done, and what is found. Positivists attempt to avoid, or deny, the effect of these assumptions, arguing that they can study reality independently of their interpretations. On the other hand, some postmodernists argue that there is no independent reality, or at least that the facts of what actually happened are irrelevant (Linde 1993, p. 14). Hermeneutics attempts to chart a middle ground between these two extremes. It acknowledges that our understandings of reality are always influenced by interpretations, that there is no independent truth. However, hermeneutics argues that our understandings of reality are also influenced by what happens in the world, providing us with historical information. It attempts to accept the influence of pre-existing interpretations and to examine how these shape the research process. These points are illustrated in the discussion below.

There are many similarities between phenomenology and hermeneutics. Some of the philosophers previously discussed in the section on phenomenology are sometimes considered as part of the hermeneutical tradition, particularly Heidegger. Phenomenology focuses on the detail of everyday life, or the 'life-world'. Hermeneutics, on the other hand, takes a broader view, with a fuller analysis of both the past and the future, and broader cultural factors (Rundell 1995, p. 12). Perhaps the most important current hermeneutical philosopher is Hans George Gadamer (1975). However, arguably, the person who has done the most to provide a bridge between philosophical hermeneutics and applied qualitative research is Paul Ricoeur (1984, 1985, 1988, 1992). Specifically, Ricoeur's concept of 'narrative-identity' provides an analytic bridge between philosophical hermeneutics and the empirical concerns of qualitative research.

Ricoeur (1988) argues that self-identity is not something that people are born with, that remains unchanged throughout life. However, neither is self-identity an illusion, as some of the poststructuralists have suggested. A person creates a sense of self-identity through telling a story, or narrative, about their life. This story provides a sense of continuity, of self-sameness, through their life. However, the story also changes as the person has new experiences and as new events occur. The story a person tells about themselves shapes how they understand and experience events, and events, in turn, also shape the self-story or narrative-identity. New events shape new self-stories and new self-stories lead to new actions and events. Life is an ongoing cycle of actions and constructing and reconstructing self-stories.

Douglas (Ezzy 1998) has used Ricoeur's hermeneutic theory of narrative-identity to examine the experience of living with HIV/AIDS. He identifies two self-stories told by 'Scott'. The first is a narrative-identity that assumes that HIV/AIDS means that Scott only has a short time to live. This identity develops as a result of events such as a serious illness and a positive HIV test. The narrative-identity also leads to particular actions, including changes in employment and lifestyle. The second narrative is of hope for a longer life with HIV/AIDS.

This narrative-identity develops as a result of the event of new treatments for HIV/AIDS and Scott's taking up of these treatments.

Hermeneutics examines the cycle of interpretations as lived experience and storied interpretations continually influence each other. Hermeneutics provides a sophisticated philosophical response to some of the issues raised by the postmodernists, but it also suggests an alternative way of avoiding the problem of relativism that focuses on the hermeneutic circle of interpretations (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000). As the above example suggests, narrative method (Chapter 6) is particularly consistent with hermeneutic theory, although hermeneutic theory can also be used to inform a variety of other empirical methods.

Summary

Many of the theories outlined above make similar points. This is because they are all broadly consistent with the emphasis of qualitative research on understanding meanings and interpretations. However, each has a long tradition with distinctive emphases. Each theory will be more useful in some research projects and less relevant to others. The qualitative researcher should attempt to identify the theoretical tradition that best suits their research topic and explore this theory in detail. Useful theoretical traditions can often be identified by reviewing which theories other researchers have used in similar studies. However, new insights and understandings can also be obtained by applying a new theoretical tradition to an old research topic. Good qualitative research depends on a combination of careful research and some imagination and intuition on the part of the researcher in deciding which theory and methodology will provide the best results for the particular topic under study.

Qualitative methods are currently in a liminal or transitional state (Denzin 1997). Positivist, interpretative, and postmodernist theory, methods, and evaluation criteria coexist. There is no singular, authoritative, and agreed-upon set of methods for conducting qualitative research. 'Until consensus about this new form of textuality occurs, each position is obliged to clarify the standards and programs that organize its practices' (Denzin 1997, p. 21). That is to say, qualitative researchers should not assume that the particular theory and research method used in their project will be understood by all other qualitative researchers. If a piece of research is to be meaningfully understood and assessed by other qualitative researchers, the researcher must explicitly state the theoretical tradition and methodological criteria employed.

Tutorial exercise

Existing research suggests that many teenagers engage in brief sexual encounters when they are on holiday and that they are less likely to use condoms when they do so. Public health authorities are concerned about an outbreak of sexually transmitted diseases

such as chlamydia, herpes, hepatitis B, and HIV. Imagine that you have been commissioned to do some research on the processes that lead teenagers to be less likely to use condoms when they are on holiday. What might be some of these reasons? Can you suggest how using feminist theory might facilitate your examination of some reasons but not others? How would this differ if you drew on symbolic interactionist theory?

Further reading

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