

Qualitative Family Research

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A Personal History of the Development of Grounded Theory

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At the University of Chicago when I was a graduate student (1939-44), there was a well entrenched tradition of doing what is now called qualitative research. It wasn't called by this name then, and there was no self-consciousness about quantitative versus qualitative studies. Chicago theses and monographs might use both, or one or the other methods. They also used a variety of data sources: interviews, field observations, archival materials, library materials, diaries, government reports and statistics. This department also had close relations with anthropology, and I took a minor in social anthropology. The data for my doctoral thesis were part questionnaire and part in-depth interview. My major post-doctoral research was a study of children's conceptions of money, a Piaget-like developmental study, again using statistics and interviews. It was not until almost 15 years after graduation that I headed a team studying psychiatric ideologies in mental hospitals that I began to develop the ethnographic style characteristic of my research since then. (We did build in a minor quantitative side to the research in close conjunction with the field observations.)

Field Work and Developing Effective Sociological Theory

During the 1960's, when Barney Glaser and I were doing our research on dying in hospitals, quantitative research was dominant in sociology and qualitative was much eclipsed in the major training university departments. Perhaps the accident of my own career protected me against abandoning field observation and interviewing. I believed in it, for one thing; and enjoyed doing it. But just as important, perhaps, is that from the beginning I was also concerned with developing effective sociological theory. Field observation and interviews was proving appropriate to that aim. Also, I had the opportunity at UCSF to found a doctoral program (1968) and one of its emphases was on training students in qualitative research, and we were being successful at this.

The other important strand in this narrative is that during the psychiatric ideology study, we had begun to do elaborate comparisons in the organizations being studied. This led me in the next study (of dying) to continue with these methodological procedures, and together with Glaser to develop what's now known as grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). So it all hangs together for me: theory, grounded theory style and the procedures I've used since its inception, plus the use of materials that are

“qualitative.” These have induced studies that just use interviews, studies that are based on field observations (most), and studies that basically used library data (autobiographies, journals, newspapers, novels).

Grounded Theory as a General Way of Thinking

A parenthetical paragraph about grounded theory: This is a general way of thinking about analysis, and we say so in the discovery book, which in its logic is not confined to qualitative research. (In *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, there is a chapter written by Glaser showing how it could be used with quantitative data.) However, it seems not at all to have been used by quantitative researcher, whereas rather obviously now it has influenced many qualitative researchers.

Maximizing Your Own Creativity

I don't know that my particular career, running as it does through a different set of years and impinging conditions, has any message for anyone today. If there is one I would put the emphasis on having a sense of what fits your own style and temperament, what too you want to get from research—and sticking with resolve to that, and quite as important also attempting to manage conditions to maximize your own creativity and warding off or minimizing those that will lessen or destroy it. If qualitative research lines up with those directives, then you do it and keep on doing it.

Positivism and Post-Modernism

The climate supporting qualitative researchers has vastly improved, for over the last two decades increasing numbers of people have turned to it—besides the usual anthropologists and a proportion of sociologists—in education and nursing especially. Social work has yet to work through its reliance on purely quantitative methods, but like nursing it surely will pass through that phase into one of increasing tolerance and then acceptance of pluralism. The recent book on social gerontology and qualitative methods edited by a sociologist and a social worker (Reinharz & Rowles, 1988) had papers by researchers in several disciplines and hardly a trace of defensiveness about their qualitative research.

The other trend that will support your kind of interest and work is the general international skepticism and frank attack on “positivism” and on taking uncritically natural science as the model for studying humans. I am skeptical myself about much post-modernism, but it is having its impact on social research and probably some of it will be lasting, at least in some fields—perhaps not in social work through, which lie sociology has pressing problems to address.