



What is Qualitative Research (Bloomsbury)

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BOOK REVIEW

What is qualitative research, by Martyn Hammersley, London, Bloomsbury, 2013, 125 pp., £15.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781849666060

What is qualitative interviewing, Rosalind Edwards and Janet Holland, London, Bloomsbury, 2013, 144 pp., £16.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781849668095

Since each book is sold on the back cover as ‘a vital new resource for both new and experienced researchers across the social science disciplines’, we thought we would put this statement to the test, considering their merits from two perspectives: the professor with 15 years of postgraduate experience, leading a semi-structured-elite interview-heavy economic and social research council (ESRC) project in Scotland (also drawing on documentary analysis); and the early career researcher completing a PhD on prostitution/sex work policy in France, while working on the same ESRC project.

Since both books highlight the role of the qualitative researcher as a source of bias that should be recognised and documented, we decided to document our biases in carrying out the review. Cairney’s attention may be focused more on trying to confirm what he already knows or believes (and it has been a long time since he has read a methods text outside of teaching) and justify what he has been doing for some time, while St Denny may be relatively open to advice. There are potentially major differences in their concern about power relations, regarding their gender, grade and topics. We have tried to consider the texts primarily as self-contained sources of advice (rather than, say, compare them with the literature to identify which insights are novel). Cairney read Hammersley first, partly to go from general to specific, and partly to begin with ontology and epistemology before methodology and method – but these divisions are difficult to maintain.

Our backgrounds are in ‘political science’, described by Hammersley (p. 15) as a relatively harmonious place for qualitative–quantitative relations (it is also the home of approaches not covered in the texts, such as ‘process tracing’). We conduct multiple ‘elite’ interviews in the absence of participant observation, and do not seek to document the life histories of individuals. In our joint project, we seek a mix of ‘factual’ information on events (cross-referenced with other interviews and documents in the public record), and varied personal (or, perhaps, small focus group) accounts – partly to explore how people make sense of and ‘operationalise’ ambiguous terms commonly used in policymaking circles. In the past, Cairney has proved reluctant to adjudicate between competing accounts of policies (why were they made and what was the effect?) to produce something ‘truthful’, ‘factual’ or ‘authoritative’, and often prefers to publish articles with more than one narrative (Cairney, 2013). This does not always make anonymous journal reviewers happy.

Cairney

Before I read each book, I produced a series of questions that had been worrying me for some time. What I wanted from Hammersley was the answer to two of the

big questions we face as researchers. First, I want to know if I need to label myself, to identify a named approach, backed by an ontological and epistemological position, and linked to a body of work to justify my method (if pressed, I call myself an ‘interpretive policy analyst’, drawing from the list of terms discussed by Glynn, Howarth, Norval, & Speed, 2009). Second, do qualitative approaches represent distinct and coherent wholes, with clear and realistic guidance, or can they be described almost as ideal types to be compared with what we actually do when conducting interviews and analysing the results? My reading of Hammersley is that I can get away with rejecting labels and that they *are* ideal types. Confusion abounds when we try to label people and what they do.

Hammersley identifies several potential aspects which *might* define qualitative research – the use of words over numbers; methods to understand how people think and act; a form of puzzle-solving – but are shared by other methods. He then provides an impressive summary of many examples of qualitative studies in the ‘I know it when I see it’ tradition, partly to demonstrate how diverse the field is (note that, by the conclusion, he seeks to reject the ‘qualitative’ term).

Hammersley describes the post-war redevelopment of qualitative methods as a reaction to the rise of quantitative methods (see also Edwards and Holland, p. 13). This is when our initial uncertainty about the meaning of qualitative is valuable. It allows us to reject stark divides and refuse to humour the artificially heated debates that can follow a stylised definition of quantitative and qualitative (by the end of the book, Hammersley suggests that there is more disagreement *within* qualitative research). So, if quantitative research *came to be presented as generally being committed* to large scale and efficient research – testing hypotheses, numerical measurement, standardised measures to promote objectivity, using samples to generalise across large populations, systematic identification of cause and effect, and controlling variables through experimentation – then qualitative research *could* be described as a way to study the real complex world in a more meaningful way, observing behaviour and encouraging interviewee expression rather than relying on closed-box questionnaires. In turn, qualitative methods *can* focus on being flexible enough to modify research as it progresses, rejecting the idea of objective research, and often engaging in in-depth case study research (for some, to produce narratives of complexity, in which it is difficult to separate individual causal elements from each other or identify the same elements in other cases).

Yet, if we accept that qualitative research is heterogeneous and nuanced, we can say the same for quantitative research, and accept the idea that methods can be combined either explicitly (‘mixed-methods’ is now a popular term) or simply because different kinds of social research share many common elements. We should be alright as long as quantitative researchers don’t describe qualitative research as ‘journalistic’, as a euphemism for ‘not scientific’ (even if some qualitative research resembles journalism), and qualitative researchers don’t feel the need to dismiss quantitative research as ‘positivism’ (p. 22), which often translates as ‘you are a naïve fool if you think that you are gathering the truth about the real world’. Indeed, much qualitative research shares aspects of what is often associated with an ‘empiricist’ approach (pp. 23–25). This conclusion is supported by Edwards’ and Holland’s (pp. 40–41) suggestion that research mixes are driven by pragmatism rather than philosophical harmony.

Hammersley’s reading of ‘interpretivism’, ‘positivism’, and “‘critical” theory’ and constructivism (Chapter 2) points to divides within qualitative research. The

discussion highlights debates relating to ontological/ epistemological positions on the nature of the world (e.g. does it exist independently of our perception of it?) and our ability to gather knowledge of it. These debates inform methodological disagreements about our ability to gather and synthesise information when, for example: interview respondents may not know, or be willing to explain, what they think and why they act; we rely on a problematic notion of observing behaviour in 'natural' environments; researcher-biases influence the information they receive (in ways that they don't appreciate or document); and, we consider the role of social research as a detached scientific enterprise, or a tool to be used to influence our object of study (for example, to challenge the dominant ideas or groups associated with inequalities within society).

Yet, again, several approaches share common elements, and I found myself thinking that my approach was some jumble of the four – which seems less of a problem when each approach also seems to contain a jumble of ideas that one does not have to accept in full to earn the label. These positions do not seem so different to mine to preclude meaningful conversations with people in each group – unless those people stick rigidly to stylised definitions of their enterprise to contrast them with caricatures of the research of others. What strikes me most from Hammersley's argument is that there is no external standard to allow us to decide what qualitative research is or what a legitimate qualitative study is (there are funding councils and university standards, and rules to follow, but that is a different matter). Social research involves a choice of approach and a choice to engage, more or less, with people who make very different choices – at least for those with the privilege to choose.

From Edwards and Holland, I wanted answers to a much larger number of more practical questions about interview research, rather than the more fundamental questions addressed by Hammersley, about how appropriate this method is in the first place. These answers are given in Chapter 6, on issues such as sample size, ethics and consent, recording, and the 'how to' of conducting interviews (although I had further questions about whom to contact in organisations and how to address them). Yet, it is difficult to separate these concerns and, quite rightly, Edwards and Holland devote a chapter to the philosophy underpinning interview research. Their treatment of the big questions of ontology and epistemology are similar, but they present some interesting differences of label (Hammersley separates interpretive/ constructionist, but Edwards and Holland (p. 16) treat constructivism as one example of interpretivism; they give feminist research more prominence). Edwards and Holland also raise important questions about the links between practical questions and philosophical foundations. Examples include:

Should I audio (or video) record the interview or take written notes? How structured and systematic should the interview be, to produce results respected by my peers? My usual argument for relying on notes is that the benefit of putting people – and civil servants in particular – at ease (guaranteeing their anonymity and generally treating their comments as 'off the record'), to ensure that they are not so guarded as to defeat the purpose of the interview, outweighs the potential benefit of recording all speech and coding/ analysing it systematically using computer software (even taking into account the potential for my notes and memory to be less reliable than my audio equipment). Yet, there are also bigger issues about the potential links between an insistence on recorded notes/systematic analysis and the 'foundational assumptions of modernism' (p. 26), if verbatim accounts are

required to produce ‘truthful’ accounts. This potential prompts us to be clear about why we engage in a particular way: is it to reflect a philosophical view about knowledge and/or a practical focus on memory, detailed record and software-aided analysis?

We may identify similar issues about interview structure. For example, we may associate unstructured interviews with a desire to encourage participants to speak on their terms and to analyse the results accordingly (a practice linked strongly to interpretive studies of culture and meaning). We may also recognise that the distinction between semi-structured and unstructured interviews often seems blurry, particularly since the focus of the academic study provides structure in each case. The history of qualitative research is also interesting, since it often suggests that the methods we may now associate with respect for participants as co-producers of knowledge may have been used previously to produce an allegedly authoritative academic account (p. 32). Overall, I get the same impression of researcher choice: that the biggest problem is not what choice researchers make, but that they are not clear on why they make it.

What reasonable compromises can I make between methodological principles and life’s practicalities? We all have to make compromises between our ambitions and resources, such as time and the money to travel. For example, I have used telephone interviews more now than in the past, and I have been surprised at how little I have lost by not conducting them face to face. Both books identify approaches that seek to speak with people in ‘natural’ settings, which suggest that face-to-face exchanges are the gold standard. However, Edwards and Holland also provide a chapter (Chapter 4) on a range of practices (telephone, email, online), in a way that suggests our standards are changing.

What is my ‘sample size’ and how many people should I speak to? Edwards’ and Holland’s (p. 5) answer is that we should not judge qualitative research by the standards set for quantitative research and that sample size depends very much on the type of research. The process is driven partly by the theory and research question, and partly by what we learn while interviewing (including a snowballing process we might use when we learn more about who is out there). On pp. 66–67, they give some rough and ready, but useful, guidance on an adequate number of interviews for particular areas and levels of study. I would add that we also need a sense of the size of the relevant population in some cases. For example, I can often interview *all* of the interest groups consulted by governments in some cases, but only a tiny proportion of those excluded. Similarly, if a ‘policy community’ is relatively small and self-contained, I can speak to a high proportion of that population in a way that quantitative researchers could only dream of.

What image of myself should I present? For example, how knowledgeable should I be and how foolish should I appear? When speaking with students, I recommend that they maximise their background work, so that they are not wasting the time of elite interviewees with questions they could answer themselves. Yet, I don’t always follow that advice. My instinct is often to seek interviews quite early in the research process, not only as a short-cut to useful information, but also to recognise that participants have knowledge that will guide my research in ways that are difficult to anticipate. There is *some* support for this approach in both texts: Hammersley describes (albeit indirectly) the pitfalls of arriving at interviews with too many preconceived ideas that structure the interview, while Edwards and Holland discuss the role of the interviewee as a participant in the process,

‘co-producing’ knowledge. Perhaps it is easier to co-produce when one enters the room with an open mind, full of space for new information and perspectives, or perhaps I am seeking to justify my approach.

Edwards’ and Holland’s Chapter 7 provides a broader discussion of the role of power in interviews, from the researcher as powerful in relation to interviewees from minority or excluded groups, or ‘studying up’ when speaking with elites in public office. They link it strongly to the idea of rapport, in which we seek to make enough of a meaningful connection with a participant to, for example, gain their trust or allow them to be comfortable enough to speak in a relatively unguarded way. They discuss important trade-offs between using a connection, such as a shared gender or ethnic background or shared knowledge – it might help gain trust, but also produce a tendency for the participant to assume that you understand what they are talking about, or to leave many things unsaid as taken for granted (I was once envious of an American colleague whose British interviewees felt the need to explain each point in depth to him, just in case). There are also important ethical/political questions about how detached you should be, to gain information, when participants make statements counter to your beliefs or they talk about issues that make them vulnerable: are you a detached scientific observer merely recording the exchange, a participant seeking to influence the exchange and/or expected to engage emotionally?

On only a very small number of occasions did I think that the book’s focus on sociology was not useful for me. For example, Chapter 5 is interesting, since it discussed various ways – beyond talking – that one could encourage people to reveal thoughts and feelings in sensitive areas, where the participant is vulnerable and perhaps reluctant to engage. In my field, interviewees may be reluctant too, but largely to make sure they do not say too much about political decisions in salient issues. I would have to think long and hard about the use of photos or vignettes to elicit responses.

St Denny

Both books are committed to exploring the ‘what is’ and ‘how to’ of particular methodological approaches and techniques. Therefore, before I started reading – and before reading Cairney’s reviews – I wrote a list of topics and issues I would expect any book purporting to comprehensively address these two dimensions, which I then used to guide my evaluation, starting with Edwards and Holland. I reviewed these books with two hats on: as a research apprentice who can always benefit from revisiting basic books on methodology and the philosophy of science; and as a university tutor on a course on research methods for Politics undergraduates.

Why should/shouldn’t I use qualitative interviewing, and how would I go about doing it?

These two interlinked questions highlight the dual nature of qualitative interviewing. On the one hand, as a research *technique*, qualitative interviewing is one of many procedures available to researchers. Edwards and Holland pay careful attention to the practicalities of qualitative interviews, from where to undertake the interview (Chapter 4), to what type of interview to conduct (Chapter 3), to whether and how to use visual material in an interview guide, to what to look out for when purchasing recording equipment (p. 70). In doing so, the authors pay homage to

the boundless creativity that can be deployed at the service of science. The creative potential of research methods is too rarely celebrated in the academy, and this book will not fail to inspire new social scientists and reinvigorate experienced ones.

On the other hand, by being used as a means of discovering or generating information, qualitative interviewing is also inextricably linked to research *methodology*, or the science of systematically solving research problems. Overall, while Edwards and Holland provide a great deal of information on both the technical and methodological dimensions of qualitative interviewing, they are often conflated under the umbrella term ‘method’. As a result, the technical discussion is regularly interspersed with dense and intricate methodological discussion concerning how interviews fit with broader assumptions researchers can have regarding the nature of reality and human existence (ontology) and how we can know about it (epistemology). While the resulting content and structure may be a bit inaccessible for novices, new and experienced researchers nevertheless stand to benefit from (re)acquainting themselves with the debates surrounding what qualitative interviews can and cannot bring to the social science research table.

How does qualitative interviewing fit into the historical development of social science research, and how has it changed over time?

Edwards and Holland dedicate their second chapter to tracing the historical development of the interview technique, in its different forms. The appropriate use, value added, and challenges of different types of qualitative interviews are addressed, from ethnographic interviews to feminist emancipatory interviews and semi-structured elite interviews, and many others. Throughout their critical assessment of the forms and functions of qualitative interviews, the authors urge readers to never lose sight of the unique motivations and assumptions that underpin their endeavour, or of the real world contexts in which they are operating. The authors supplement this basic introduction to building qualitative interviewing into a sound and feasible research design with an overview of different philosophical conceptions of the nature, role, uses of interviews and the information they can yield. Overall, the plurality of qualitative interview techniques is introduced in a manner that fosters methodological consistency. Moreover, Edwards’ and Holland’s systematic deployment of relevant and insightful examples of research which uses or discusses the use of interviews, as well as the inclusion of an annotated bibliography signposting further reading, makes this book an ideal starting point for novices.

How do I devise a methodologically sound and technically feasible interview sample?

Once a researcher has decided to use qualitative interviewing as part of their research design, the next step is usually to decide who to talk to. The selection of these individuals is referred to as sampling. While Edwards and Holland do not dedicate a clear section to sampling, they do discuss the issue at several points throughout the book. On the one hand, Edwards and Holland treat the technical aspect of devising a sampling strategy quickly and effectively. To the question ‘How many interviews is enough?’, the authors’ prosaic answer is that it depends – it depends on the nature and the purpose of the research, it depends on the practical parameters (resources, time, access) of the research, and it depends on who you are trying to convince with your research (p. 66). On the other hand, the methodological aspects of sampling and, in particular, how sampling strategies relate to a researcher’s theoretical aspirations, are alluded to but not unpacked (p. 6). Moreover, the brief and underdeveloped references to sampling strategies, such as

theoretical and purposive sampling, or those derived from grounded theory, are poised to baffle those who have never heard these terms. More generally, while the initiated may not feel the absence of a basic introduction to developing theoretically, methodologically and practically sound sampling strategies, this omission may yet hinder beginners.

What are the ethical challenges and implications of conducting qualitative interviews, and how does this type of research impact on interviewers and interviewees?

Essentially, qualitative interviewing is about human interaction, and engaging with live human subjects often entails complex power dynamics and related ethical issues that need to be considered. One of the greatest added values of this book is its excellent introduction both to the interpersonal opportunities and the pitfalls of conducting interviews. In particular, Edwards and Holland show a rare but welcome concern for the impacts qualitative interviewing can have on the researcher. More than a simple means of gathering information, interviews are often a form of emotional labour that can leave participants transformed in ways they had not anticipated. Becoming aware of these dynamics and their potential implications is a key stage in the apprenticeship of qualitative interviewing. Far from remaining abstract, the authors make these issues tangible for readers by exploring them with extensive references illustrating social science researchers' own experiences of undertaking interviews. Finally, the ethical dimension of conducting qualitative interviews is supplemented by a critical analysis of the different approaches to gaining informed consent and passing ethical approval in academia.

Overall, introductory books on research methods feature a trade-off between the breadth and accessibility of content and the depth of the engagement with the intricacies of the subject. Edwards and Holland are not spared that difficulty, and the intricate weaving of the finer technical and philosophical points of qualitative interviewing may prove hard to unpick for beginners. However, the serialised nature of the Bloomsbury 'What is?' collection means that books with common substantive and structural commitments can easily be read alongside each other in a useful and complementary manner. In this way, Hammersley's *What is qualitative research?* is the perfect companion to Edwards and Holland.

What is qualitative research?

Hammersley dedicates his entire first chapter to tackling the tall task of defining qualitative research. His strategy is twofold. In a first instance, he describes what *qualitative* research is not and, more particularly, how qualitative research is different from quantitative research. He compares and contrasts the two modes of scientific inquiry without dogma, acknowledging the contention over whether the two are equal, and perhaps even complimentary, but ultimately appropriate for different research purposes, or whether they are incommensurate (prompting us to reject one mode entirely). In a second instance, he sets out the most common characteristics of qualitative research, from its propensity to study a small number of cases, to its recognition of the subjectivity of the researcher, to the importance given to observation and studying phenomena in their natural, real-world settings. While the discussion of these characteristics is necessarily limited to an overview, the strength of Hammersley's approach rests in his extensive use of examples of qualitative research, in the form of in-text references and substantial extracts from seminal works. This allows readers to get a sense of the tremendous variety that exists in qualitative research. Moreover, Hammersley distinguishes qualitative *research* from

other genres that deploy verbal rather than statistical information, such as journalism or literary non-fiction. This is important because knowing the difference between research and other forms of reporting is crucial to source evaluation, which is a key (and transferable) skill undergraduates need to develop.

What is qualitative research used for?

In light of the vast epistemological and ontological expanse covered by qualitative research, it isn't always clear what analytical endeavours such approaches are best suited to. Hammersley provides a concise typology of analytical objectives in qualitative research, comprising four 'orientations'. These are: causal explanation; the investigation of individuals' lived experience(s); the 'penetration of fronts', which is aimed at uncovering facets of reality that may be as yet repressed or overshadowed; and the investigations of the processes that generate or underpin social phenomena. He identifies what each orientation sets out to do and unpicks how (if at all) each of them relates to each other. While the typology may seem strict to more advanced researchers, it has the merit of drawing the main analytical motivations that underpin qualitative research clearly and concisely. Moreover, a typological approach sidesteps the reductiveness of qualitative research (being best suited to questions of 'how') and quantitative research (to questions of 'how many'). Finally, by clearly explaining how certain analytical orientations in qualitative research can work together, and how others are incommensurate, Hammersley provides beginners with basic guidance for assessing the internal coherence of the assumptions that underpin their research framework.

Why don't some qualitative researchers get along with each other?

To the extent that qualitative research cannot be strictly defined, qualitative researchers make up a motley crew, and the advent of mixed-methods designs has blurred the lines between both approaches even more. I was, therefore, particularly curious to see how Hammersley would address the extent to which different epistemological and ontological assumptions could accommodate or preclude each other. In this, I was pleasantly surprised. Rather than focusing only on the dichotomous disputes over the extent to which qualitative and quantitative approaches are incommensurate with each other, the author also extensively explores some of the unresolved tensions within qualitative research itself. In this way, his fourth chapter is dedicated to two debates that continue to divide qualitative researchers: the limits of the validity of naturalistic data and, in particular, of interview data; and the extent to which qualitative research should set itself up to serve normative interests, especially those of the disadvantaged.

The manner in which these two elaborate debates are presented is very accessible. In each case, Hammersley uses a set of related academic texts as a frame and a lens for unpicking what is at stake. As a frame, these texts offer bounded instances of methodological disputes that are representative of broader unresolved methodological discussions. As a lens, they allow the author to focus on the different assumptions and arguments that oppose qualitative researchers, some of which are more immediately discernible than other. Moreover, by methodically addressing each point of contention, Hammersley's approach is a good example of how to critically assess a related body of research rigorously and clearly, which will help those tackling their first literature review. In fact, in his discussion of the claims made by Potter and Hepburn (2005) that interviews tend not to (and perhaps cannot) provide valid and meaningful evidence in qualitative research, Hammersley provides a more robust critical assessment of the limitations of qualitative interviewing than even

Edwards and Holland. Finally, the author does not expand much on the possibility of reconciling elements of qualitative and quantitative research through the use of mixed-methods designs; instead, he urges readers to consider the issues involved in introducing epistemological or ontological assumptions that may be competing or contradictory.

Cairney and St Denny

Overall, our positive impressions of the books were rather similar, and they perhaps differed most according to the levels of advice we were seeking or willing to accept. The less experienced reader may have different thoughts, and more concerns, if they are new to the field, seeking definitive answers to methodological questions, and looking over to quantitative research which often *seems* to give those answers in a more precise and practical way. Yet, social research is as much a skill as a science, and one which develops as we simultaneously do it and learn to do it. Therefore, no qualitative book can be judged negatively for not providing ‘the answer’ to these questions.

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