



QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND SOCIAL CHANGE

European Contexts

Edited by PAT COX, THOMAS GEISEN
and ROGER GREEN



Qualitative Research and Social Change

Also by Pat Cox

CHILD SEXUAL ASSAULT: Feminist Perspectives (*co-edited*)

Also by Thomas Geisen

MIGRATION, MOBILITY AND BORDERS: Issues of Theory and Policy
(*co-edited*)

Also by Roger Green

VOICES FROM THE MEAD: People's Stories of the Kingsmead Estate

Qualitative Research and Social Change

European Contexts

Edited by

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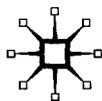
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Acronyms

EU	European Union
IALS	International Adult Literacy Survey
ILO	International Labour Organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development
OMC	Open method of coordination
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

Contributors

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Paul Hoggett is Professor of Politics and Director of the Centre for Psycho-Social Studies at the University of the West of England. He has longstanding interest in the role of emotion and unconscious forces in political behaviour and his current ESRC project focuses on the 'emotion work' required of regeneration workers as they negotiate the ethical dilemmas of their jobs. He is the UK Editor of the journal *Organisational and Social Dynamics*.

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Introduction: The Importance of Qualitative Research to Social Change – Preliminary Considerations

Pat Cox, Thomas Geisen, and Roger Green

The context of research

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of interest in countries across the world in the undertaking, findings, and application of social research, together with a groundswell of debate and discussion about methodology and methods applied in social research. The ‘paradigm wars’ (Halfpenny, 2001), especially those relying on the relative merits of quantitative and qualitative methodologies and methods for their focus, continue apparently unabated: it is also possible to identify a more pragmatic stance towards this debate. Here pluralism in methods and methodology is seen as the one-size-fits-all approach, referred to by some as triangulation (for example, Flick, 2002). At the same time, this ‘new’ acceptance of qualitative approaches as a valuable contribution to social research brings into question not only the reason for this acknowledgement but also the question of its strength. Flick (2002) identifies social change as an important issue in the rise in practice and interest in qualitative research:

Rapid social change and the resulting diversification of life worlds are increasingly confronting social researchers with new social contexts and perspectives...traditional deductive methodologies...are failing...thus research is increasingly forced to make use of inductive strategies instead of starting from theories and testing them...knowledge and practice are studied as local knowledge and practice. (Flick, 2002, p. 2)

2 *Qualitative Research and Social Change*

Underpinning this insight into the weaknesses of traditional deductive methodologies in social research is an epistemological position in which the relevance of complexity and context for understanding the social world is highlighted. Therefore, following Kuhn's (1970) acknowledgement that knowledge is context dependent, numerous qualitative researchers have agreed that there is 'no god's eye point of view' (Putnam, 1981) and that it is impossible that there should be a 'view from nowhere' (Nagel, 1986). Given that 'context' is an extremely relevant condition for social research, the relationship of social research and social change becomes significant in social research. From a critical perspective, the relation between them must be understood not as a linear relation but as one which is intricate and ambivalent: social research seeks to understand social change but at the same time social change also influences and guides social research. Therefore, from the position of critical qualitative research there is a need not only to find answers to the question of how social research can best contribute to the understanding of the social world: as or possibly more important, is a second question: What is the contribution of social research to social change? This question is not neutral; it is a question about the assessment of approaches within and practices of social research: Does this approach contribute to improving social conditions by means of emancipatory praxes? Does it result in relevant and reliable data which can be taken up by those who have some responsibility for law or public policy, health, welfare, or education; in short, those with responsibility for implementing social change?

Many of the current demands for social research findings are driven by steady changes in a world dominated by capitalism. In his analysis Marx (1960, p. 465) emphasized that the permanent and revolutionary change of all social relations is an inherent condition of capitalism. And it is the capitalist mode of production in which permanent change seems to be the only reliable consistency, damaging or destroying established social relationships based on mutuality, continuity, reciprocity, and solidarity (Touraine, 1971). For social research this situation is demanding, since social stability and continuity are both fragmentary and under pressure (Haug, 1991). On the one hand, there is an immense growth in affluence, not only in the Western world and in Japan – the established centres of capitalism – but increasingly also in the new boom areas of capitalism in China, India, and Southeast Asia. This growth has been the driving force for a fierce race for raw materials, first for oil and more recently also for food. This is paralleled by a rapid growth in poverty in both the majority and minority worlds. In politics

neo-liberalism has become established as the predominant ideology in the United Kingdom and in the United States, and has now become influential in, and been adopted by, other western European countries and by some in eastern Europe. This ideology and its variants also impact upon qualitative social research endeavours, see Andrews (2001).

One of the most obvious consequences of these increases of both affluence and poverty/superfluity (Castel, 2002) is migration. The 'age of migration' (Castles and Miller, 2003) is also an age in which wealth results in high mobility and transfer of different kinds of labour-forces (Geisen, 2004a, b); both being deployed and deploying themselves for production and re-production. This dynamic brings about another significant feature, the simultaneity of the global and the local; the 'glocal' (*Glokalisierung*), see Bauman (1996, p. 661). All these developments present challenges for social research, testing its limits in undertaking research in a world of instability, discontinuity, and fragmentation in social relationships; key features of social life in what Giddens (1991) has termed as the 'late modern age'.

Research now occurs in rapidly changing global and local contexts. Poverty and the social exclusion of individuals, groups, and communities of peoples is rife across the globe and many migrate in search of a different and a better future (Cox, 2007; Nguyen, 2005) The outcome for qualitative researchers is that there is an ever-growing range of 'lived experiences' (Van Maanen, 1988) to understand and to make visible within the world, particularly where these 'lived experiences' are less stable and fulfilling than others.

Currently, the majority constituency of social science qualitative research is people who are marginalized, dispossessed, and excluded from societies' mainstreams. However, Gouldner (1973) criticized sociological sentimentality towards members of marginalized groups and 'advocacy' research which described and 'displayed' them, but which did not change their situations. Gouldner also noted that research was 'tamed by being harnessed to the State in welfare and research funding modes' (Stanley, 2000, p. 57). In this Gouldner highlights two key issues: that peoples who are marginalized are also peoples most exposed to exploitation and oppression and that they are very likely to be among the most scrutinized and researched in pursuit of knowledge production.

Concern about how social science and its associated research activities risk becoming tools of the powerful continue to exist; see, for example, Henriques et al. (1984), Mergner (1999, 2005), and Walkerdine (1997).

Such concerns mean that researchers need constantly to analyse how we are implicated in the development and production of knowledge and of its deployment and to be aware of how findings become – or may become – commodified.

As Plummer notes:

what has happened recently is a concern that ‘research knowledge’ only makes sense if we can acquire understanding about the active processes through which such knowledge becomes produced. (Plummer, 2001, p. 208)

The purpose of this book – critical reflections

Contributions to this book seek to reflect critically upon relationships between research and social change, aiming to stimulate thinking and critical debate on the interconnections between them. Reclaiming the concept articulated by critical theorists that research should do more than represent *what is*, the contributions emphasize that, irrespective of theory, methodology or method, qualitative research can and should work for society and help to bring about beneficial social change. This book derives from the editors’ and contributors’ experiences of undertaking qualitative research with individuals, groups, and communities across the world. The aim of the book is to explore and analyse the relationships between research theory, praxis, and social change through a focus on exploration and examination of the interconnections between theories, methodologies, methods, and the potential for social change. Such explorations form the subject matter of each chapter.

Within the social science research and social research communities (academics, research students, researchers, service users and carers, community groups, professional practitioners in agencies) there are ongoing debates concerning the relevance and the status of social research with regard to the uses made of research findings. Compared with the emphasis upon, and attention paid to, the outcomes of research, the capacity of research to inform and improve social life and bring about social change is rarely addressed in research accounts. We think that the product of social research – its potential and actual benefit to individuals, groups and communities in a society – should be seen as the final link in a process that begins with the developing of a research interest and question, continues with the application of a theoretical perspective and moves through considerations of methodology and method.

Qualitative research approaches, throughout the 1990s and more latterly, have made valuable contributions to theory and praxis in social research and social science. However, the continuing dominance of the positivist paradigm and quantitative methods has meant that contributions to social change made by qualitative research are rarely analysed and have been relatively neglected in research literature to date. Even if researchers are not concerned with the impact of their research practice while undertaking it, such an influence is always there. Being concerned about this means therefore viewing the research process as a process of interaction in which findings are co-produced by people involved and participating in the research process. Therefore, there is an urgent need for research, especially for that research practice which understands itself as critical, to reflect upon its immediate influence which occurs before any outcome is 'produced'. For example, what does it mean for the research process and its outcomes if the research process itself is democratic and participatory? Taking into account that much social research is undertaken with marginalized peoples in vulnerable situations, it is important for researchers to think about what the effects of both emancipatory practices – and their opposite – might be? Do research practices, however well intended, reinforce and confirm peoples' social situations (see above, Gouldner, 1973)? From whom is information collected and to whom does the researcher give it? The question can be asked: What do research subjects get back from the research process? This question, of course relates not only to research practice; it has implications for social relationships more generally. Therefore, one of the main reasons for writing this book is to encourage such critical debate and engagement about research, amongst ourselves, and with and amongst our readers.

Critical reflections on the links and interconnections between theories, methodologies, methods, and social change should be an indispensable component of research and accounts of/narratives of research, wherever and however it is/they are undertaken. For example, to add to the questions raised just above: how are research subjects involved in research endeavours: are they treated merely as research subjects or do they have a voice in the research process? How do they perceive research and what does this mean for development and social change? How do the interconnections between theory, methodology, method and social change vary? How are they realized and to what degree? While the impact of quantitative research can result in change in public policy (top-down change), qualitative research may result in social change for individuals, groups and communities, which may be bottom-up, as well as top-down (Cox et al., in press; Green, 2000).

What is different about this book is its substantive focus on the exploration of the links between theory, methodology, method, and social change in qualitative research. Some of the chapters are more theoretical in orientation; in others, the authors explore interconnections through examples of their own research projects. Thus, the subject or focus of the book is addressed in a variety of ways, ensuring that the book appeals to readers with a range of research interests and experiences. Editors and contributors are from across the world and our work represents therefore a range of differing traditions in theorizing about and undertaking critical and qualitative research. This is an essential part of the book's appeal: readers who are less familiar with some theories, methodologies and methods than with others can learn something of other approaches to research directly through the words of the researchers writing here, rather than in a 'contextless' text book.

Many research texts concentrate either on theoretical and methodological approaches, or on method used, or on outcomes (sometimes all three). What the editors and contributors of this book provide, in a more innovative way than existing publications, are explorations of interconnections of theory, methodology and method in qualitative research with social change, including change for research subjects, for communities, and sometimes for researchers themselves. The book both models and encourages reflection and reflexivity and will be of interest both to novice researchers and to those who are more experienced. Ethical issues are not specifically addressed in each chapter, as there are a number of texts on ethics in research already in existence: however, ethical behaviour in research is implicit throughout the book.

Content of the book

The book is arranged into three complementary parts with three chapters in each (see below). We have made a decision not to impose a formal editorial structure, or too much editorial influence on the contributions and thus each is very different in style and in how the authors address their subject matter. We believe that the differences in style and content will encourage and sustain reflection and debate for some time to come.

The title of Part I is 'Exploring Concepts and Approaches' and in these chapters each contributor addresses in particular the application of theory in undertaking qualitative research to bring about social change.

The first chapter in this section is Pat Cox's chapter: *Changing Research, Research for Change: Exploring the Perspectives of Complexity*

Science. In this chapter, Pat Cox explores the contribution of complexity science and complexity science concepts to research and social change, including questions of theory, methodology and method.

Building on Witkin's (2002) assertion that in today's climate of ontological and epistemological uncertainty is the potential for creativity, changing levels of awareness, and establishing new priorities, she analyses the nature of values and knowledge underpinning research and examines the application of complexity science to research and research processes. She explores the potential of complexity science to move beyond the positivist and interpretivist paradigms and to contribute to the development of a new epistemological framework for research practice and processes that centralize relationships and understanding and learnings as well as knowledge and which may initiate different forms of social change.

Ambivalence is a concept which relies on the epistemic assumption that an object, situation, or action cannot fully be described and analysed using a single category, because it contains at least two notions contrary to one another. It became well known as a theoretical concept through post-modern theorists (Zygmunt Bauman, 1995) and post-colonial theorists (Stuart Hall, 1994a, b). Within the concept of ambivalence, social change cannot be equated with the improvement of social conditions, or with the steady continuation of political freedom. Thomas Geisen argues that the concept of ambivalence can make a fruitful contribution to social research, since it facilitates a plurality of perspectives, practices, and rationalities, based on the plurality of human existence and human actions. From this perspective the researched are part of the research process, since valuable insights can only be reached by organizing the research process as cooperative and dialogical practice. In this chapter, he explores characteristics of the concept of ambivalence and discusses its relevance for theory, methodology, and research practice and process.

Stephen Hicks and Carolyn Taylor challenge the notion that discourse analysis is unable to address issues relating to social change, recognizing that discursive approaches present fundamental challenges to Enlightenment thinking by their rejection of grand narratives of social change and their focus upon language as social action. Selecting two differing approaches – discursive psychology and a Foucaultian analysis – Hicks and Taylor outline key tenets before offering examples of how discourse analysis can be used to address issues of social change: the first example explores the minutiae of everyday 'race' talk; the second deploys a genealogical method to research sexuality and social welfare.

In the course of their discussion the authors offer a critical assessment of the complex terrain of discourse, drawing out similarities and differences in the two approaches and emphasizing their contribution to researching social change. They thus argue for a more nuanced understanding of the concept of social change and underline the potential of detailed empirical work in this area.

Part II is 'Welfare Issues and Community Development'. Here contributors focus on research in and with communities and with those who work in them, with a particular emphasis on involving research subjects more deeply in research praxis.

In the first chapter of this part, Roger Green discusses and analyses the lessons learned from an ongoing participatory action research project with residents on an estate in East London. The research aims to involve local residents and organizations in supporting collective community action to tackle the poverty, marginalization, and social exclusion they experience everyday. The research remains ongoing and has been effective in supporting funding for a number of community projects and initiating a community development process for social change and re-empowerment. The chapter focuses on how the contextualization of applied social research methods in a community which has historically experienced disadvantage and exclusion over many years, mounts a challenge to what Freire (1970b) has termed the 'culture of silence', with its oppressive and passive acceptance of the status quo.

Michael Wrentschur brings new insights to debates about qualitative or quantitative methodologies, arguing that neither can provide a complete answer to a specific practical, ethical, and political research problem: how can people, who are affected by certain issues be empowered to research their own experiences and possibilities for change? How can body and mind, knowledge and actions, be integrated into the research process? The author discusses these questions, using the example of a social-cultural theatre project with homeless people in Graz, Austria. Following the concept of the 'Theatre of Oppressed' and 'Legislative Theatre', developed by Augusto Boal, theatre is used in this example as an artistic approach to facilitate a participatory and empowering research process and as a tool for social change. The effects on the participants and on the socio-political contexts are analysed, as is the role of the researcher and the specific quality of 'knowledge' in these processes. In conclusion, Michael discusses the potential of theatre as a tool for social research.

Moving on from debates between critical rationalists and post-modernists, psychosocial approaches enable researchers and researched to co-produce meanings, whilst retaining continuing processes of

critical reflection. Through psychosocial approaches, research teams are developing new ways to explore the interactions between individuals' agency and socially constructed contexts. In this chapter, Chris Miller, Paul Hoggett, and Marjorie Mayo explore how such approaches provide a different focus to the study of social change, using the exemplar of research into how policies are impacting upon front-line professionals in human service professions who are engaged in community involvement in urban regeneration programmes. They demonstrate how psychosocial approaches provide more participative ways of gaining new insights into the ways in which individuals both experience and grapple with the dilemmas associated with social policy changes and the impact of emotions in the workplace.

Part III is 'Issues in Research'. In this part, each contributor addresses an issue or issues arising from their own experiences of undertaking and of teaching research.

Diana Wendy Fitzgibbon's chapter concerns the effectiveness in practice of the current pre-occupation in social welfare and probation practice with risk assessment and criminal justice. Following a review of the main themes in research in this area, the author examines methodological issues arising from an evaluation of the E-OASys used by the Probation service in the United Kingdom. The research focuses on a limited number of cases from the London area, exploring whether E-OASys had identified those offenders with mental health problems, those most at risk and whether or not this led to effective case management both to reduce risk and to provide support to clients. A follow-up study contrasted the findings of this random group with those revealed by examining a number of 'Serious Further Offence Reports', also from within the London area. In the final section of the chapter, Diana Wendy Fitzgibbon analyses the strengths and limitations of this particular research methodology for yielding knowledge that is relevant to policy concerning risk reduction and client support.

Undertaking research and teaching research are two important components in the production and dissemination of knowledge. Zvi Bekerman discusses the many, longstanding – and frequently hidden – ways in which both education and education research have maintained existing social divisions, instead of being a force for bringing about social change. This is an engaged account of the author's own commitment to research that makes a difference, both in the academy and in the social world. In this chapter, he reflects upon his experiences as a teacher of anthropology and education, and analyses reasons for difficulties he encounters when trying to share with students the paradigmatic

perspectives which he believes might help overcome the predominance of traditional empirical perspectives in the social sciences in general and in education in particular.

A linear policy model underpins the new evaluative paradigm in policy research conducted by international organization such as the OECD or the EU, argues Katrin Kraus in her chapter. Additionally, the changing role of the nation states as political actors par excellence of the nineteenth and twentieth century challenges policy analysis in education. Against this background the chapter offers with the 'policy circle', a model that facilitates better understanding and analysis of policy as a process in highlighting crucial phases like agenda setting or negotiations and important elements, such as actors, interests, or power. The chapter draws attentions to the necessity of multi-perspectivity and multilayered approaches in order to face the complexity of political processes and to work out contradictions between education policy and pedagogical practice. Differences between official and hidden agendas can be addressed only by contextualizing political process diachronically as well as synchronically. The critical question is who is given voice by the selection of sources for policy analysis.

We editors began this project, this book, in October 2004, following discussions between ourselves that began at a conference and have been sustained in the main by emails, with phone calls and occasional coming together at conferences. We were certain that the proposed focus on the interconnections between theory, methodology, methods, and social change would resonate with others undertaking qualitative research, as they do with us.

Personal experiences and anecdotal evidence from amongst qualitative researchers we know suggests that there is little, if any, encouragement for such considerations and engagement in reports of findings from qualitative research and that some journals discourage it. One of the striking issues to emerge as the book developed and we editors read the draft chapters sent to us was that, given the institutional pressures on all of us to 'do' research, how strong is the commitment among qualitative researchers to take the time to pause, to consider, and to engage critically with their own work and the epistemological and methodological frameworks which underpin it. Throughout all the chapters runs a sense that we live and research in challenging times and that researchers must be responsive to this, including questioning our own roles in knowledge production.

Taken together, the chapters provide a strong argument for the worth of the contribution of qualitative research to learning about life, work,

education, communities, criminal justice, and relationships in the twenty-first century. In a climate in which much research is becoming subordinated to managerial, policy, and political agendas, these chapters raise issues which are both practical and moral and which renew qualitative research's engagement with understanding the social world and its potential for social change.