

THE DILEMMA OF QUALITATIVE METHOD

**HERBERT
BLUMER
AND THE
CHICAGO
TRADITION**

Martyn Hammersley



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THE DILEMMA OF QUALITATIVE METHOD

The dispute over the value of qualitative versus quantitative approaches to social research originated in nineteenth-century debates about the relationship between the methods of history and natural science. Within sociology, this dispute first arose in the United States during the 1920s and 30s, between adherents of 'case study' and 'statistical' methods. One of the main advocates of case study was the Chicago sociologist, Herbert Blumer. His influential writings on methodology provide a link between this earlier controversy and the debates of the 1960s, 70s and 80s. However, Blumer's arguments for qualitative, or 'naturalistic', method retain a central ambivalence: does that method share the same logic as natural science, or does it represent a different form of inquiry characteristic of history and the humanities? That issue continues to underly discussions of qualitative method, and provokes fundamental questions about the procedures employed by qualitative researchers.

The Dilemma of Qualitative Method is a stimulating guide to this key area of social research methodology. The author sketches the historical context of the dispute and provides a detailed account and systematic analysis of Blumer's methodological writings, including his doctoral thesis. The strategies for qualitative research advocated by Blumer and others within the Chicago tradition are reviewed and assessed. The author's conclusions about the current status of qualitative method are likely to be controversial.

THE DILEMMA OF
QUALITATIVE
METHOD

*Herbert Blumer and the Chicago
Tradition*

MARTYN HAMMERSLEY



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This book is dedicated to the memory of Herbert Blumer who, had he lived to read it, would have written a robust reply.

I also offer this book to Joan, Rachel, and Paul, in recompense for time that might have been spent otherwise.

At least knowing where the difficulty lies, we should be prevented from engaging in the practice of the ostrich or in expecting some form of magic to make the problem vanish.

Herbert Blumer

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INTRODUCTION

In the social sciences over the past thirty years there has been a tremendous growth in the use and acceptability of what has come to be called 'qualitative method': research using 'unstructured' forms of data collection, both interviewing and observation, and employing verbal descriptions and explanations rather than quantitative measurement and statistical analysis. One of the features of this recent period of growth is that qualitative method has become institutionalized as a largely self-sufficient approach to social research, with its own literature, both substantive and methodological.¹

The attitude of qualitative researchers to quantitative method varies considerably, from tolerance to outright rejection. Often, though, quantitative research is criticized on the grounds that it is committed to a conception of research method that is modelled on the natural sciences and which neglects the distinctive character of the social world. Qualitative researchers claim that operationalization of sociological concepts in terms of quantitative indicators squeezes the meaning out of those concepts. Similarly, they argue that conceptualizing the social world in terms of variables and the relationships among them abstracts away the character of social life and produces distorted, inconclusive, irrelevant, banal, or even plainly false results. They suggest that if we are to understand the social world, rather than merely aping the natural sciences, we must attune our methods of inquiry to its nature. Human behaviour is complex and fluid in character, not reducible to fixed patterns; and it is shaped by, and in turn produces, varied cultures. Adopting this conception of the social world, qualitative method often involves an emphasis on process rather than structure, a devotion to the study of local and small-scale social situations in preference to analysis at the societal or the psychological levels, a stress on the diversity and

variability of social life, and a concern with capturing the myriad perspectives of participants in the social world.²

The sources of qualitative method, and of the ideas surrounding it, are various, but one of the most important is what has come to be called ‘Chicago sociology’. This originated in the Chicago Department of Sociology in the 1920s and 1930s, and was transmitted to and developed by several generations of students at Chicago, and elsewhere. Members of this tradition have not only produced studies that have served as exemplars of qualitative research, but have also written articles and books about qualitative methodology that have been used as guides by many neophyte qualitative researchers.³

In this book I want to examine the methodological ideas that underlie the Chicago tradition of qualitative research, and to do this I shall focus on the writings of one representative of this tradition who has given particular attention to methodological issues: Herbert Blumer. Blumer’s long career links the Chicago sociology of the 1920s and 1930s to the resurgence of interest in qualitative method in more recent times, after a period in which it had been eclipsed by quantitative approaches. Blumer joined the Chicago sociology department as an instructor in 1925, became a full professor in 1947 and remained there until 1952, when he moved to the University of California at Berkeley. Through his teachings at Chicago and at Berkeley, and through his writings, Blumer was a leading figure in US sociology and beyond. His name is closely associated with symbolic interactionism, a distinctive approach to sociological theory. Indeed, he invented that term in 1937 and, as he says, ‘somehow it caught on’ (Blumer 1969b:1). Equally important, and closely related, has been his advocacy of what he calls ‘naturalistic research’, a form of qualitative method. His presentation of these metatheoretical and methodological ideas in a collection of articles published in 1969 was especially influential (Blumer 1969b).

Symbolic interactionism and naturalistic method achieved particular prominence in the USA and Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time they formed part of the reaction against those kinds of sociology that had become dominant in the 1940s and 1950s. The attack on these orthodoxies involved political, theoretical and methodological arguments. At the heart of the critique was the claim that the dominant theoretical tradition—notably, structural functionalism—portrayed human society as a natural object independent of and controlling human behaviour. This, it was argued, contradicted the nature of human social

action, as well as serving to support the status quo by implying that people could not change society. Similarly, the dominant methodological approach, survey research, was criticized as dehumanizing, as eliminating the most significant elements of human life, and thereby producing a distorted picture of the world.

Blumer's theoretical and methodological arguments were an important resource drawn on by many of the critics of sociological orthodoxy in this period. Symbolic interactionism grew popular as a theoretical counter to functionalism, and the 'naturalistic' methods advocated by Blumer became one of the most common alternatives to survey research. On both sides of the Atlantic, there was considerable growth in the amount of interactionist ethnography in many fields, but especially in the study of deviance, medicine, and education. Blumer was an important, though by no means the only, influence on those adopting this approach. Most of the arguments currently used to legitimate qualitative research are to be found in his writings.

This book is not an intellectual biography of Herbert Blumer. It focuses almost exclusively on his methodological writings, and it is framed within my own concerns about qualitative methodology. More than most books, this one is centred on the obsessions of its author.

My interest in Blumer's work stems from a dissatisfaction with the methodological arguments currently used to support qualitative research. I find the criticisms that qualitative researchers direct against quantitative research cogent in many respects. What is more problematic is the implication that qualitative research resolves or avoids these problems. Twenty years ago when I began social research I believed that it did; today I am no longer convinced.

If one looks closely at the methodological rationales for qualitative research, and at empirical work within this tradition, I believe that serious doubts appear about its capacity to deliver what its advocates promise.⁴ Fundamental questions abound: Is ethnography devoted to description or is it also concerned with developing valid explanations and theories? If the latter, what are the means by which the validity of explanations and theories are assessed? If operationalization of concepts in terms of concrete indicators is to be avoided, how can concepts be clarified and related to data? And, perhaps most fundamental of all, how do ethnographers know that quantitative research fails to capture social reality, what access do they have to the latter? If that access is through

everyday experience of the social world, what justification is there for taking this to represent the true nature of that world?

These questions are not novel, but I find them increasingly troublesome. Even more troubling is what seems to me to be complacency on the part of qualitative researchers towards these questions. When they are not effectively dismissed as founded on the assumptions of an alien paradigm (Williams 1976), or treated as imponderables generated by the anti-philosophical temperament of symbolic interactionism (Rock 1979), the answers that are given are disturbingly vague and inconclusive. The latter is sometimes true of the work of Blumer himself. However, that work has the virtue of posing the fundamental problem that faces qualitative research; and in most of what he writes Blumer does not pretend that the problem has been resolved. He identifies what he refers to as a 'dilemma' facing social research: on the one hand, social phenomena cannot be understood without taking account of subjective as well as objective factors; yet, at present we have no way of capturing subjective factors that meet the requirements of science (Blumer 1939). The central question I shall address in this book is whether qualitative method can resolve Blumer's dilemma, and if so how.

I approach answering this question by means of a detailed investigation not just of Blumer's own writings but also of the intellectual context from which they emerged. However, this is not primarily a historical study. I am not concerned so much with documenting the influences on or impact of Blumer's ideas as with exploring the variety of arguments that have been used to support qualitative method and analogous approaches. What I offer is, in effect, an immanent critique. By outlining some of the diverse intellectual background to Blumer's writings, of which Blumer tells us little, I want to show that the issues underlying the advocacy of qualitative research are more complex, diverse, and problematic than is sometimes recognized.

The history of debates about qualitative and quantitative method is rather neglected by researchers today. There is a tendency to pick out Malinowski, Max Weber, phenomenology, Chicago sociology, and so on as sources of the methodological ideas supporting qualitative research, these being contrasted with positivism in the form of the quantitative sociology that dominated US sociology in the 1950s. But this is to ignore not only the variety of views about key issues to be found among those labelled as positivists (see Halfpenny 1982), but also the diversity of

perspective among nineteenth-century writers from whose work those regarded as the precursors of qualitative method drew many of their ideas.⁵

Furthermore, our historical awareness is sometimes distorted by present concerns and assumptions. In the case of Weber, there has been much debate about interpretations of his methodological views and this has raised questions about the relationship between these interpretations and the theoretical assumptions of the interpreters (Runciman 1972; Bruun 1972; Burger 1976; Bauman 1978; Manicas 1987). Similarly with Schutz (German 1977; Thomason 1982). In the case of Chicago sociology several authors have claimed that there are inaccuracies in contemporary understandings of its history. Some have challenged Blumer's claim that his arguments for naturalistic method derive from the work of the Chicago philosopher George Herbert Mead (Lewis 1976; McPhail and Rexroat 1979; Lewis and Smith 1980). Jennifer Platt has shown that, contrary to what is often assumed today, the Chicago research of the 1920s and 1930s did not use participant observation in the modern sense of that term (Platt 1983). Similarly, Lee Harvey has demonstrated that the usual picture of the early Chicago sociologists as symbolic interactionists engaged in research that was primarily qualitative is mythical (Harvey 1987; see also Bulmer 1984).

Neglect or mythologization of the past can have the effect of narrowing the range of theoretical and methodological resources available to us. For this reason, I have provided detailed accounts of nineteenth-century debates about the relationship between the natural and social sciences, about the philosophical pragmatism that underlies a considerable amount of current social research methodology, quantitative and qualitative, and about discussions within US sociology in the first half of this century about case study and statistical methods. What will become clear from these accounts, I hope, is that these arguments cannot be reduced to two contrasting positions, quantitative versus qualitative; or even to a single set of polar types. The debates involve multiple issues, and a wide variety of positions have been adopted. Several of these issues recur throughout this book. Among the most important are the following:

- (a) Realism versus phenomenism. Is there a reality independent of our ideas and experiences whose character we can come to know; or must our knowledge always and forever be only of phenomena as they appear in our experience?

- (b) The priority of epistemology or ontology. Must we found our investigation of the world on assumptions about how knowledge is possible or on assumptions about the nature of the world that we seek to understand?
- (c) Is science the only source of knowledge; or is it only one, and perhaps even an inferior one, among many sources?
- (d) Unity of science versus diversity of science. Are all the sciences fundamentally similar in methodology, or do they differ profoundly in both assumptions and techniques?
- (e) The pursuit of abstract knowledge versus the attempt to portray reality in its immediacy and wholeness.
- (f) The search for laws versus the identification of limited patterns. Is human behaviour governed by universal laws of the kind often assumed to operate in the physical world? Or is the most that we can expect the identification of limited patterns, culturally specific and/or probabilistic in character?
- (g) Is knowledge acquired by inventing hypotheses and testing them (the hypothetico-deductive method); or by unearthing relations among phenomena (a more inductivist or discovery-based approach)?

Over the past 200 years, those advocating what we would today call qualitative methods have adopted a variety of views about these issues, as have the critics of these approaches. Like writers today, they have also sometimes been unclear about where they stood in relation to these issues or have conflated them. For all these reasons, one does not find a simple contrast between two fixed positions.

I should perhaps warn the intending reader who is tempted to turn to the end of this book to discover my solution to Blumer's dilemma: none will be found there. In my view, there are no convincing solutions currently available. To make that clear is, indeed, one of the main purposes of this book. However, I do discuss a number of ways in which a resolution might be achieved. My hope is that this book will move us towards a solution by placing the issues with which it is concerned higher up the agenda, and by making more accessible some of the resources that might contribute to a solution.

Chapter One
PHILOSOPHY AND THE HUMAN
SCIENCES IN THE NINETEENTH
CENTURY

At the heart of Blumer's metatheoretical and methodological work is the question of the relationship between the methods employed by the natural and those appropriate to the social sciences. Of course, the idea of a science of human social life has a long history, going back beyond the point in history when the concept of science began to be distinguished from philosophy.¹ With the striking developments in physical science in the seventeenth century, the proposal that the same methods be applied to the study of human social life gained ground. Then and later there were also reactions against the encroachment of the new science on areas that had hitherto been the domain of theology, philosophy and the humanities. By the nineteenth century, as a result both of further rapid progress in the natural sciences (not just in physics but also in chemistry, physiology, and biology) (Knight 1986) and of the growing influence of the Romantic reaction against Enlightenment thought, the question of the relationship between the social and natural sciences reached crisis-point.

Before the nineteenth century much thinking about society had been based on the ideas of natural law or natural rights. The central concern of this tradition was with the common good and with how society might best be organized to achieve this. Initially, the common good was conceptualized in terms of the realization of the essential character of humanity. For Aristotle and those who followed him, every kind of thing, including animal species, had its own nature or end, and the good was defined as anything that was conducive to the achievement of that end. In the case of humans, the good was sometimes conceived as a life spent in pursuit of philosophic truth, though politics was viewed as a more distinctively human activity (Lobkowitz 1967). Among later natural right theorists, such as Hobbes and Locke, the common good became

redefined as peace in the war of all against all, and as the satisfaction of human needs and wants.

Natural law, the law of the perfect society, was distinguished from the laws of actual societies, and regarded as probably unattainable. Nevertheless it was the ultimate standard by which human societies were to be judged, and it represented a combination of what we would today distinguish as legal and scientific laws. Natural law was held to be discernible by reason, and the discovery and clarification of natural law was the function of the philosophers. Richard Wollheim (Wollheim 1967) usefully summarizes the core of natural law doctrine as follows:

The whole universe, on this view, is governed by laws which exhibit rationality. Inanimate things and brutes invariably obey these laws, the first out of necessity, the second out of instinct. Man, however, has the capacity of choice and is therefore able at will either to obey or to disobey the laws of nature. Nevertheless, owing to the character of these laws, it is only insofar as he obeys them that he acts in accord with his reason. 'Follow nature' is therefore, on this view, the principle both of nonhuman behavior and of human morality; and in this last category justice is included. The laws which apply to man and which he can and should obey are not identical in content with those which apply to, for example, planets or bees and which they cannot but obey. Nevertheless, since the universe is a rational whole, governed by a unitary principle of reason, the analogies between the laws of nonhuman behavior and those of human morality are very strong and readily penetrated by the rational faculty with which man has been endowed.

(Wollheim 1967:451)

This concept of natural law remained central to the work of writers on society up to and including Rousseau (Strauss 1953), but its meaning was gradually transformed until it came to be descriptive rather than normative, picking out causal relations or at least regularities in the natural world. Eventually the concept of natural law came to be understood in the context of the modern sciences of nature, and its application to the study of human society became seen in analogous terms (Zilsel 1942; Needham 1951; but see also Ruby 1986).

The success of the natural sciences in the nineteenth century highlighted the question of the limits of scientific knowledge. It not only

raised the issue of the proper relationship between scientific knowledge and religious belief, but also challenged assumptions about the connection between science and our everyday experience of the world. Was science the only source of true knowledge, and would it expand to deal with all aspects of our experience of the world, including our understanding of human life itself? Or was science only able to help us understand the material world? Indeed, was it able to do even this except in a partial and inadequate manner?²

Sometimes, these issues were conceptualized in terms of the clash of two contrasting positions: for example, idealism versus realism.³ However, the terms 'idealism' and 'realism' are treacherous, since they are used to refer to a variety of positions that differ in important ways. A particular problem is that they conflate epistemological and ontological issues, questions about how we know with questions about the existence and nature of reality. Nonetheless, they are a useful starting point for an analysis of trends in nineteenth-century thinking about the study of human life.⁴

I shall apply the term 'realism' to the claim that there is a reality independent of our ideas or experiences, and that we can gain knowledge of it. Very often, though not necessarily, realism is associated with the idea that science is the only true source of knowledge. In the nineteenth century, realism was also usually associated with materialism. This complex of ideas formed a key element of much Enlightenment thought

Materialism has had a curious history, as Bertrand Russell remarks in his preface to what is still one of the major philosophical texts on the subject, Frederick Lange's *History of Materialism* (Lange 1865):

Arising almost at the beginning of Greek philosophy, it has persisted down to our time, in spite of the fact that very few eminent philosophers have advocated it. It has been associated with many scientific advances, and has seemed, in certain epochs, almost synonymous with a scientific outlook.

(Russell 1925:v)

For the materialist, the world is made up of matter: that is the substance from which all else is constructed. Furthermore, everything in the world obeys the laws of matter, including human behaviour and consciousness. For most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century materialists, science was

the only true form of knowledge and could in principle explain everything. Materialists often regarded their views as anti-philosophical: they believed that science would replace both religion and philosophy, and, in any event, it was felt that the success of science removed any need for philosophical justification.⁵

An early advocate of materialism, realism and science was Francis Bacon. He argued that science was the most important source of knowledge, condemning the scholastics' interminable arguments and the humanists' reverence for ancient texts. He believed that the nature of the world, both physical and human, was to be discovered by observation and experiment. From facts about the world established in this way, the laws governing the world could be induced by rigorous method. Bacon conceived the process of acquiring knowledge in terms of the overcoming of various obstacles to true perception that he referred to as 'idols': universal or idiosyncratic mental weaknesses (the idols of the tribe and the cave), errors arising from language (the idols of the market), and those deriving from philosophy (the idols of the theatre). In order to discover the nature of the world, Bacon suggested, paraphrasing the New Testament, we must become as little children, ridding ourselves of the various idols that we have acquired in the course of our lives and that obscure our vision.

In reaction to materialism and realism, some philosophers—for example, Descartes—identified different realms, matter and mind, and in so doing both emphasized and placed limits around the power of scientific knowledge. Descartes viewed animals as machines, and therefore as subject to materialistic forms of explanation. Some human behaviour was treated as mechanistic too, but for the most part it was subject to reason and therefore not open to scientific explanation. Descartes also represented a contrast with Bacon in his conception of method. Where the latter stressed the role of induction from observational data, Descartes advocated a more deductivist approach, seeking to deduce scientific findings from a small number of first principles which were taken to be ideas innate to reason, and therefore indubitable.⁶

The issue of the limits to science and to its application to human social life took on particular importance in Germany in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, perhaps because at that time Germany witnessed both a flowering of the natural sciences and of the study of history.⁷ Furthermore, as we shall see, the German intellectual scene was a very important influence on philosophers and social scientists in the United

States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of whom studied there and were familiar with the German debates (Herbst 1965).

The most extreme reaction against the materialism associated with the development of the natural sciences in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was the absolute idealism of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. They sought to combine, on the one hand, the stress on spiritual or cultural diversity to be found in German Romanticism with, on the other, the emphasis on the freedom of the human will deriving from the Reformation, and brought to fullest expression in Kant.

The Romantics—for example Lessing, Herder, and Goethe—rejected the Enlightenment view of humanity as representing a single, universal rationality and as governed by material needs, and of society and nature as mere resources for the fulfilment of human desires. They dismissed the associated view of science as analytic, as concerned with breaking nature down into its components and treating the world as a vast machine. Rather, humanity was for them an expressive unity, each part only finding its true meaning in its relations with other parts; just as the elements of a work of art find their expression in the whole. And, indeed, for the Romantics, art was the highest form of human activity. They rejected the analytic stance of modern science in favour of a more spiritual approach concerned to enter into communion with nature. They were also opposed to the individualism of the Enlightenment. For them, humans were expressive beings because they belonged to cultures developed and transmitted within communities; and there were many such communities, each bearing a distinctive form of life, valuable in its own right.

Absolute idealism also drew on Kant, and particularly on Kant's notion of individual freedom as the pursuit of rational ideals. Kant sought to clarify and justify the grounds of natural scientific knowledge, adopting much of the empiricist critique of metaphysical speculation to be found in Hume. However, he departed from Hume in arguing that our experience is structured by categories that are *a priori*, such as space and time. According to Kant, then, our experience is a joint product of reality and of the categories of mind. We can never know reality independently of those categories, but science can discover causal laws within our experience. In this way, Kant sought both to secure the foundations of natural science, and to place limits on it. Science could not tell us about reality as such. Furthermore, Kant was particularly concerned to preserve ethics from the determinism of science. While he recognized that human beings are part of nature and are to that degree subject to the operation