

# **Development Fieldwork**

A Practical Guide

Edited by **Regina Scheyvens and Donovan Storey**



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# 4 Qualitative Research

*Dan Brockington and Sian Sullivan*

It is customary ... to say something about what is somewhat pretentiously called 'methodology'. My field method could be summed up as meeting people.  
(Willis, 1981: xx)

## Introduction

Qualitative research is characterised by three commitments (Bryman and Burgess, 1999). First it seeks to understand the world through interacting with, empathising with and interpreting the actions and perceptions of its actors. Qualitative methods are used to explore the meanings of people's worlds – the myriad personal impacts of impersonal social structures, and the nature and causes of individual behaviour. Second, qualitative research tends to collect data in natural settings, rather than artificial and constructed contexts (such as laboratories). Third, it tends to generate theory rather than test it. Qualitative methods work inductively, building up theory from observations, rather than deductively, testing theories by trying to refute their propositions.

Qualitative methods include a variety of techniques, from participant observation and the writing of ethnography, to semi-structured interviews, oral histories and group discussions (see Table 4.1). They can be considered as simply another set of ways of finding out about the world. But if we reflect on the reasons for asking questions which require qualitative methods, and the nature of the answers they provide, it becomes clear that qualitative approaches also embrace significant philosophical debates regarding the nature and implications of subjective experience, and the legitimacy or otherwise of reducing this to numerical and easily manipulated 'pieces' of data.

Qualitative methods have been used to find out about the world for as long as there has been language and speech. Their recognition as a formal category of methods is more recent but they are now flourishing deservedly with an important set of research tools.<sup>1</sup> Working with them can be exciting and revelatory, making for enjoyable and challenging fieldwork.

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Table 4.1 Qualitative research techniques

Technique	Description	Potential problem
Interviewing	All sorts of forms are possible, from open conversations to semi-structured discussions around particular topics, to highly structured questionnaires (although it is hard for the latter to elicit good qualitative data).	Recoding the data is the difficulty here. Writing while people are speaking is off-putting. Tape recording then transcribing or summarising takes time. Be careful of exploitation. Interviews can result in a one-way traffic of information from which only the researcher benefits.
Focus Groups	A group discussion of a particular issue where it is instructive to learn from the way people discuss things as much as what they say.	Best undertaken when you know people well enough, or situations well enough that you can interpret the group dynamics. See criticisms of PIRA below.
Conversation and Discourse Analysis	Intimate and detailed recording of conversation and talk where personal expressions, pauses and delivery are recorded and analysed.	A research tool that requires much effort. Conversation analysis is part of Discourse Analysis, a diffuse term which covers several disciplines. Make sure that the techniques of discourse analysis that you are using are appropriate for your questions.
Fieldwork Diaries	A day-to-day record of events, diet, work or observations kept by yourself or an informant.	Being a good diarist is not easy. Read published diaries to see what makes for good reading and consider whether they would also make good fieldwork notes. Have a look at Malinowski's (1967) private diary. Practice before you go into the field.
Life Histories and Oral Histories	Tape recorded histories of people, places and events. A detailed literature exists on how to do this properly. This technique provides unique insights into unrecorded situations and alternative views on written histories.	Be prepared to transcribe the tapes so that other people can have access to the raw data. These data have to be treated as any other – sceptically, looking for corroboration.
Photographs, Film and Video and Documents	Texts such as letters, archives and diaries make useful primary and secondary sources. So too are photographs, film and video (which are different sorts of text).	Detailed cataloguing of notes is required if the images and documents are voluminous or else it will be hard to trace which document provided what information.

Participant  
observation

This requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the place/ the societies they are studying. By living closely with the people you are studying it is possible to empathise with their way of looking at and interpreting their world. The note taking involved is rigorous and one is required to constantly test impressions and ideas

Some people's worlds are hard and unpleasant to experience. It requires great effort and determination to learn the language and to understand what people mean.

All the techniques listed above can be used in participant observation. The skill is combining structured data collection with relaxing and letting things happen.

Qualitative methods have a reputation for being anecdotal, or associated with ideas that cannot be described with hard, secure facts. Sometimes it is implied that they are tools resorted to in situations where we cannot generate more precise and focused data. This is wrong. Qualitative methods can provide powerful insights into the world. They can be used effectively with people or places we think are familiar to us, as well as in situations somewhat removed, geographically and otherwise, from our own. Qualitative methods also are sometimes thought of as all that is not quantitative. Again, and as we discuss at the end of this chapter, this can be misleading. Qualitative methods can incorporate quantitative data and quantification. But they go beyond numbers to consider the meanings of quantitatively derived findings to the people they affect, and to problematise, rather than accept uncritically, the production of such data (see Box 3.4, Chapter 3).

When should we use qualitative methods? As with quantitative methods, discussed in the previous chapter, the answer is, when our questions require them. The importance of qualitative methods for the social sciences is best illustrated by considering the ideas that people have explored by using them. For example quantitative data will tell us about numbers of drug abusers, HIV infection rates, levels of street crime, the rates of urban decay and damage to housing stock and a host of other facts about problems among the urban poor. But how do we answer questions like why do people use drugs? What do drug users make of their use? Is drug use always a predicament for users? Or can entheogenic<sup>2</sup> substances engender positive and transformative experiences when used in settings conducive to this? What do drug dealers think of their trade? How do human relationships and social interactions function in these circumstances? For answers here we have to turn to qualitative methods.<sup>3</sup> To take another example, social scientists have talked about the production and reproduction of social classes and the perpetration of relationships of exploitation. But how and in what circumstances might the exploited reproduce their own exploitation? Do they perceive it as such? If they do not perceive their work as exploitation, then why not, and if they do, then do they resist their exploiters and how? Again for insights into these questions qualitative methods will be necessary.<sup>4</sup> In fact because of our subjective experiences of conducting research, it is nigh on impossible to *not* draw on qualitatively derived information in the process.

In the pages that follow we reflect on our experiences, and others', of practicing

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qualitative research. This chapter is not intended as a manual of techniques, nor is it an exhaustive theoretical discussion of how we can know anything. It is intended to stimulate thinking and discussion which can be followed up in the further reading offered at the end of the chapter. We reflect here on three key issues in qualitative research which reveal its strengths and weaknesses. First, we examine popular 'rapid' fieldwork methods and 'participatory' appraisal; second we discuss the challenge of postmodernism to ethnographic and anthropological fieldwork; third we look at phenomenological and embodiment approaches to research (which theorise and problematise the nature of subjective experience). Finally we consider what distinguishes qualitative methods from quantitative techniques. The common thread to our argument is that although Willis' statement (1981:xx, cited above) may sound naïve to some ears now, there is wisdom in it, which we ignore at our peril.

### The popularity and perils of PRA

In the 1980s and 1990s research in developing countries was challenged and revived with a set of methods commonly known as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). PRA includes a 'family of techniques' for ascertaining features of local groups and situations in ways that are meant to empower the people being researched, as well as being faster to carry out and to analyse than other techniques. PRA distinguished itself from earlier Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) practices - where the emphasis was on the rapidity of the techniques as opposed to the extent to which they were intended to empowering their participants. Later a new version came along in the form of Participatory Learning and Appraisal (PLA), which emphasised the junior, receiving role of the researchers involved.

In part, these techniques and approaches to research are offered as an alternative to the large-scale quantitative surveys which once characterised development research. They are also an attempt to challenge the dominance and power of the researcher and give more prominence to the voices of the researched peoples, to let them determine the content, direction and purpose of the research (e.g. Chambers, 1983; Guèye, 1999). Thus PRA, RRA and PLA are demand-driven fact-finding practices that emerged in a context of professional development work with a requirement for generating usable information as rapidly and accurately as possible, while satisfying the emerging mantra of 'participation' which has featured increasingly in development discourse since the early 1980s (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). As a suite of fieldwork tools, they are now being utilised in academic studies by social scientists across the globe, and some serious attention needs to be given to their validity as an academic research method.

PRA literature is heady stuff. There is a startling degree of concord and celebration in its tone. The emphasis is on spreading the good news of PRA: of the ways it offers of breaking free of the chains of conventional research practices and of the speed with which it offers information that can be useful and valuable to the people 'on the ground'. The techniques involved are numerous, comprising all sorts of

spot using locally available materials (see Box 4.1). We do not wish to review the techniques here in detail, but they are worth looking at and are thoroughly documented in, for example, Cotton (1996) and Martin (1995). Relevant case-studies incorporating these methods can be found in Bishop and Scoones (1994), Hot Springs Working Group (1995), Keough (1998), Mazuchelli (1995) and Mitlin and Thompson (1995).

#### Box 4.1 Examples of PRA techniques

**Wealth Ranking** Informants rank members of a group according to wealth and sort them into as many categories as they see fit. Needs to be accompanied by discussion about what makes people wealthy or poor. Categorisation can be done by having stones or other objects represent the families in question which are then put in different circles drawn on the ground. Useful for all sorts of things other than wealth.

**Transects** Walk through the study site in various directions looking at resource use, and prominent features of the place, observing different practices taking place. Take several transects and vary their timing.

**Mapping** A map drawn on the floor using stones, leaves, charcoal or other material to represent the locality, important resources in it, and social data (e.g. the number of people in each household).

**Resource Evaluation** There are various ways of comparing the value, availability, cost and importance of various resources. Each resource can be allocated different numbers of stones for each variable. Or each resource can be compared against the other in a paired ranking thus:

	Wood	Ease of availability Charcoal	Kerosene
Wood	x	0	w
Charcoal		x	0
Kerosene			x

*This table shows that charcoal is more easily available than wood, wood than kerosene*

**Calendars** A table drawn on the floor and marked with symbols made from local materials which divides up the year into the appropriate seasons and illustrates what activities take place when. Can indicate times when people are particularly busy and under stress (e.g. facing food shortages).

**Spider diagrams** For exploring connections and perceptions of connections between issues under investigation. Participants list the variables and elements which are involved in a particular issue and draw lines between them to illustrate how they are connected.

**Timelines** Construct a history of a place or people with a table showing the important events in recent history. If possible try to establish the years and seasons when things happened. Also used to graphically illustrate a single issue (e.g. changes in cost of living over time).

NB. One of the virtues of PRA techniques is that they can use locally available materials - earth, leaves, twigs, seeds, stones - to construct the maps and diagrams which can be copied later onto paper. While this works for non-literate societies, in some places it is not appropriate and could be considered demeaning.

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There are, however, some problems with the claims for research success made by practitioners of PRA. A tendency to respond to new ideas by changing the collective noun used for these methods in itself may imply a need for caution. More importantly, why be in such a hurry in the first place?<sup>5</sup> Is there any need at all to adopt such hasty techniques if more field time is possible? If we are to meet and talk to people, to be good conversationalists, is it wise to do so with one eye on the clock? Of course, the constraints of the 'real world' dictate that much development intervention is based on consultancies and research exercises with only a few days available for gathering information. But the outcome often is the production of inferior and partial data. Good information takes time and patience to gather and requires observation, checking, evaluating and cross-checking.

A second issue is that the application of PRA techniques frequently takes place in group-meetings which become public occasions generating information in the public domain. Even if groups are broken down by gender, age and class the issues discussed and debated in these meetings are still going to be contested and negotiated. Knowledge and information tend not to be revealed on these occasions by willing informants. Instead it is produced and created for an audience of researchers and among an audience of listening neighbours. One has to have an excellent conception of the relevant social, cultural and political contexts in order to access understanding of the knowledges produced and/or excluded on such occasions. As the cases in Boxes 4.2 and 4.3 indicate, it is wise to treat data gathered and banded about in public with prudence and care. While such information can be immensely valuable in terms of reflecting on the circumstances within which it was produced (such as focus groups), its value will only become apparent by revisiting it, and the people who produced it, in different, less public, circumstances.

Because PRA techniques use group interviews and often are intended to benefit groups, a further problem is that they risk invoking an erroneous conception of 'community'. This term often has been used to describe the small-scale collections and agglomerations of people that so often are the focus of social science research and Development Studies. Hart offers a fitting admonition to the tendency to view small-scale rural societies through rose-tinted spectacles:

### **Box 4.2 Tactful public silence in Tanzania**

*My post-doctoral research involved 14 months work in the south of Tanzania investigating contests over natural resources. Integral to these conflicts was the performance of local government (Brookington, 2001), which was itself subject to scrutiny from regional government. Contests and conflicts were discussed each year in a large and unusual public meeting called by the Regional Commissioner who descended upon the village where I worked with a large body of his officials to hear complaints and enquire as to their resolution. These meetings began and ended my fieldwork. The first meeting introduced me to a string of issues which were important locally. It generated interesting information for that reason. The*



had to say the politics of the party and recent elections about which local power struggles had hinged. I also suspected that there were a number of problems which were left unsaid. The meeting was much more than a list of problems. It was a performance, a game played before an audience of neighbours. Understanding what was said at the meeting required a year's work - it would have benefited much more from an additional year as well.

Source: Brockington, post-doctoral research in Tanzania, 1999-2000

Social life organised through kinship...is fundamentally disunited, and it is in response to this disunity that participants stress the opposite in their ideological pronouncements, emphasizing the idea of community and pretending that kinship ties express only solidarity. We, who retain in our language and sentiments the ideology without the substance of a society organised through kinship, project our own romantic nostalgia onto the faction-ridden and anxiety-prone family life of African villages. (1982: 40)

What makes people a 'community'? What holds people together, if anything at all, and what divides them? 'Community' politics frequently are ignored or their significance downplayed. In many cases rural communities in fact may just be geographical juxtapositions of people with little else in common apart from their local geography. The danger here is that PRA may imply that by listening to what may amount to a largely fictional community one can quickly understand what 'it' thinks, when there is no 'it' in the first place. How many divisions, how deep they run and which groups are discernable, may take a long and unpredictable time to fathom.

Finally, a popular variant of PRA is Participatory Action Research (PAR), in which the participants are actively engaged in researching their own condition in order to change it. This is often associated with disadvantaged or marginalised groups and has been known to result in exhilaratingly successful change. Its advocates point to the profoundly democratic nature of research by people into their own circumstances and the special authority and superior insights they can bring into their own lives.

But again there are questioning voices well summarised by Krimerman (2001). Popular participation can be incompetent. Research requires training and expertise, and the learning of valuable lessons from the literature regarding the prior experiences of other researchers. PAR tends to be evaluated according to the degree and nature of change which it brings about, not necessarily the knowledge which it creates or draws upon. Krimerman has argued that ignoring other knowledge can detract both from the research and the solutions attempted.

Krimerman notes further that depending on the circumstances it can be problematic to imbue people's knowledge about themselves with too much authority. Outsiders sometimes discern and understand better than they do an individual's or group's predicament. It is also true, however, that when we are dealing with marginalised or silenced voices researchers have a responsibility to

**Box 4.3 Public meetings as data sources: wildlife, women and exclusion in Namibia**

*In 1994, I attended a meeting held by the Namibian Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) to discuss with a range of stakeholders possible new approaches to conservation in the north-west Namibian landscape. The focus of the meeting was to debate, with local people, the idea of establishing 'conservancies', i.e. new locally-run wildlife management institutions. Despite extensive knowledge and use of regional natural resources by women, all local women who attended the meeting were physically excluded from participating by being obliged to sit outside the shelter in which the meeting was held (Sullivan, 2000). This was justified by the MET convenors of the meeting on the strength that they were working within the constraints of the (male) traditional leadership. Notwithstanding the extent to which current forms of this traditional leadership are a construction of Namibia's colonial history, this is somewhat ironic given that the purpose of the meeting was to try and begin a process of new institution-building, enabling better representation and participation in the decentralisation of decision-making power.*

*From the perspective of conducting research, and as well as providing rather simple data regarding who may be able to speak at so-called public meetings, the structuring of such events perhaps can speak volumes about perceptions present among those initiating and leading public meetings. In this case, while strong leadership differentials exist between men and women among one ethnic division present at the meeting, these are by no means consistent for both the major ethnic 'groups' affected by the proposals discussed at the meeting. In interpretation, an issue, therefore, is whose traditional sensitivities the convenors of the meeting were trying to observe and why. The blatant exclusion of women at this meeting reveals further departures between rhetoric and practice when broader contexts are considered. Thus, although operating under a national programme with the inclusive title of 'Community Based Natural Resources Management' (CBNRM), a major component of 'the community' clearly was restricted from participating in discussion. Given conventional associations between men and animal wildlife (primarily), the exclusion of women perhaps further reflected the true focus of the meeting on a handful of species of high value in national and international arenas (i.e. large mammals of the endangered variety), as opposed to the broad base of species of local interest and use.*

*Source: Sullivan, doctoral research in Namibia, 1994*

challenge this silencing, or at least to provide some sort of public space for alternative and/or occluded views to be aired (discussed further in Sullivan, 2000; 2002). As an African saying reminds us, until the hunted have their poets then songs of the hunt will always glorify the hunter, not the prey.

We hope that these issues will raise questions for anyone using PRA. We strongly encourage anyone who wishes to use PRA to examine the accounts of those who have tried it which are listed at the end of the chapter. But we do not want to write it off entirely. All methodologies have their flaws. Our task is not to come up with undisputable truths. Rather, as we shall see in the next section, we are required to evaluate and analyse flawed, messy and partial data based on flawed, messy and partial encounters. Spending more time in the field may help but it will not make these problems go away. If PRA techniques are used with awareness of their weaknesses, and if conclusions are qualified and contextualised accordingly, they can be useful.

### **Ethnography: participant observation, oral testimony and the production of texts**

Ethnography implies both a particular suite of methods used to produce a range of qualitative data, and the end product or ethnographic text constructed from such interactions. The key methods are participant observation and oral testimony: the first emphasising the legitimacy of a researcher's interpretation of observed cultural phenomena from their participation and immersion in these phenomena (some recent ethnographies include Boddy, 1989; Bourgois, 1995; Hutchinson, 1996); the second emphasising a researcher's ability to allow people to 'speak for themselves' - to construct their own texts - via the recording and transcription of interview material (for examples, see Bollig and Mbungu, 1997; Brinkman and Fleisch, 1999; Cross and Barker, 1992; Slim and Thompson, 1993; Sullivan, 2002). Overall, ethnographic approaches aim to be 'actor-oriented' in their attempts to convey reality from a subject's 'point of view', increasingly including those of the researcher as final author and editor of the ethnographic text (see below). Ethnography tends, therefore, to read as a conglomerate of interconnected 'facts', thoughts, perceptions and contextual material and, as such, frequently has been downplayed as less rigorous than analyses produced using quantitative approaches. Given poststructuralist critique of assumptions built into the 'harder' sciences, however (e.g. Kuhn, 1970; Latour, 1993; Lyotard, 1984; Nader, 1996), there seems to be no real reason why the 'social facts' generated by qualitative and interpretative approaches should not be considered as 'real' and accurate as those empowered with the confidence of numbers.

Recently all studies which involve methods associated with the production of ethnography have been reeling from a post-modern questioning of their premises, aims and circumstances. Clifford, for example, identifies:

symptoms of a pervasive postcolonial crisis of ethnography authority. While the crisis has been felt most strongly by former hegemonic Western discourses, the questions it raises are of global significance. Who has the authority to speak for a group's identity or authenticity? What are the essential elements and boundary of culture? How do self and other clash and converse in the encounters of ethnography, travel, modern interethnic relations? What narratives of development, loss, and innovation can account for the present range of local oppositional movements? (Clifford, 1988: 8)

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This crisis has several strands. As identified in Chapter 1, economic and other inequalities frequently implicit in relationships between researcher and researched, have contributed to a serious questioning of the legitimacy of fieldwork in Third World contexts, and, of course, of the notion of 'the Third World' itself. This, combined with the massively influential critique of the authority of authorship by thinkers such as Foucault, has conspired, with justification, to reduce confidence in the apparent authority of the academic 'expert' - who by definition is usually constructed within the particular intellectual morays of the academy and bolstered by the structural inequality that consolidates decision-making power among those already holding wealth and power. So, for example, the social sciences in the 1980s and 1990s increasingly have problematised the ways that structural relations of power and inequality act to confer spatial and temporal distance between ethnographer and subject. This distance then becomes essential to the ways in which social and economic differences are constructed: authorising dominant and domineering knowledges (or discourses) of 'the other' (e.g. Said, 1978), and making possible the transformation by which '[t]he Other's empirical presence [in fieldwork] turns into his [*sic*] theoretical absence [in ethnographic writing]' (Fabian, 1983: xi).

Thus there has been a questioning of the tendency in ethnography for ethnographers to adopt an authoritative viewpoint over 'a society' and then construct a portrait of 'its' norms and rules, often in an 'ethnographic present' tense. The depictions which resulted tended to be timeless 'still lives' which may well have accurately portrayed interactions and interdependencies but which did not give much insight into the dynamics and history of the people studied. This blindness to change seems strange in a discipline whose methods are meant to allow the researcher into such intimate contact with the lives of the people that they are working with. But the tendency has been surprisingly long-lived. Hutchinson's masterly and award-winning book about the Nuer, published in 1996, has the humble (though by no means simple) aim of not seeking a homogenised image of culture and society (Hutchinson, 1996: 28-9). Instead she wished to examine how conflicts of interest and power are worked out within and between diverse interests among the Nuer peoples. Such a purpose was necessary because of the generations of work which had gone into explaining the internal logic of a particular social system and how it works as it does, rather than the potential for change and contestation.

But the criticism is not just of an apparent lack of history, social process or sensitivity to the distribution of power in ethnography. It is also of the process of producing and creating ethnographic texts. The post-modern problematising of ethnography as first and foremost a writing practice (Clifford, 1986: 2) leaves us with the uncomfortable phenomenon whereby observation is reduced to 'the text' that describes it, and claims to empirical 'facts' are treated with varying degrees of suspicion (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). Ethnographies thus become prey to deconstruction as socially produced texts and as building blocks in the construction of accepted discourses (for approaches to textual analysis and deconstruction see, for example Fowler 1991; Spender 1980). Extreme reflexivity regarding one's own

tant can also render the production of ethnography as something more akin to individual psycho-analysis than as a means of enabling alternative perspectives on the 'real world' to gain public space.

Thus the mandate of ethnographers to do ethnography is challenged. And it is a potentially paralysing attack. If there is no mandate then the only thing to do is to be quiet: to let other groups and individuals who can somehow claim more powerful or legitimate mandates take over the task. It leaves social scientists writing about ethnography itself, with ever-increasing reflexivity.

As one of us has argued elsewhere (Sullivan, 2002), perhaps the time is ripe for a revitalised, even realist, validation of the way(s) 'culture' filters and moulds the post-modern worlds that we engage in and create as both participants and observers. While ethnography, like other approaches to research, has had to shed old certainties, there are a range of exciting research foci in this new landscape. Our field 'sites' now comprise unrelenting interpenetrations of local and global; the actors of our research, not to mention ourselves, are 'permitted' to have changing and dynamic identities; and 'the Ethnographic Other' is as likely as ourselves to experience the dislocations and interconnections generated by recent decades of mass-communications technology. Given these circumstances, and in acknowledgement of the power and wealth differentials still afforded by access to education, citizenship, and so on, it is conceivable that an appropriate role for ethnography today might be the attempt to provide public space for views that otherwise are likely to go unheard. Undoubtedly, academic research will flavour these views with selection by the author, not to mention interpretation and context: it is for the reader to decide if these are justifiable or not, given the material presented. Following Gordon (2000), however, perhaps it is time to celebrate the subversive and advocacy potential of independent (as in not-institutionally-driven) ethnographic work - in consultation with a group, a people, a culture or counter-culture, who, due to some element of difference, lacks public voice. Such an approach has become increasingly important, for example, in attempts at a 'corrective and anti-colonial' African environmental history (Beinart, 2000: 270) that emphasises the role of particular environmental discourses in justifying and extending a colonial hegemony (Leach and Mearns, 1996).

The danger of reflexivity and of writing about writing is that it can ultimately only ignore the wider world about which these accounts were written in the first place. Philippe Bourgois, who spent thousands of hours recording the conversations and lives of crack dealers in Harlem, was dismayed at the elitism of postmodern critiques of ethnography. He writes that:

Although postmodern ethnographers often claim to be subversive, their contestation of authority focuses on hyperliterate critiques of form through evocative vocabularies, playful syntaxes and polyphonous voices, rather than on engaging with tangible daily struggles. Postmodern debates titillate alienated, suburbanised intellectuals; they are completely out of touch with the urgent social crises of the inner city unemployed. (Bourgois, 1995: 14)

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The critique is important because it has begun to cut short the pretensions and grander statements made by anthropologists and social theorists, and has encouraged an openness and co-operation in the task of writing about other people. Both Bourgois and Hutchinson shared their notes and ideas and early drafts of their written material with the people that they were working with (see also Chapter 11 on 'Writing and representing'). They debated and discussed them with their subjects. This cannot hide the fact that they retained final editorial control. But the processes leading up to these products were different, and we would argue much improved, from earlier work. Hutchinson became known as a good conversationalist, and people would seek her out in order to enjoy the pleasure of her company. Bourgois had dealers coming up to him and asking to have their lives recorded arguing that they were worth at least a chapter in his book. We have each had similar experiences in conducting ethnographic research in the context of illegal 'raves' and in 'squatted' premises in London (Sullivan, 2001), or being asked to visit and talk to herders and farmers in conflict in Tanzania (Brockington, 2001).

### **On subjectivity and experience: phenomenological and embodiment approaches**

Subjective and experiential dimensions of research are receiving increasing emphasis in the social sciences. Felt aspects, bodily and psychologically, of what people do increasingly are the concern of the researcher. Another aspect of this relates to the bearing of the experiences of the researcher on the process of fieldwork, the interpretations of research 'findings' and, as discussed above, the writing-up - the metaphorical 'setting in stone' - of the work. Willis, for example, who, as noted above, summarised his methodology as 'meeting people', also provides a detailed description of the psychological and 'almost bodily' tensions produced within him as he wrote down and categorised descriptions of his encounters (1981: xxi). In other words, the experience of research does not end with one's exit from the field: it overflows as the sensations produced by memories of place, people and events conjured up in the process of constructing a written story from the fieldnotes and data brought home (see Chapter 11 for a discussion on returning home).

A highlighting of the role/s of subjective experience in research can be considered in part as a response to the sense that felt experience has tended to be written out of the views of reality legitimised by the European Enlightenment project that took-off in the 1600s and 1700s. Building on classification and categorisation as its conceptual cornerstone, Enlightenment thinking left behind a legacy of conventional dualisms between mind and body, culture and nature, reason and emotion, male and female, science and art, and so on (e.g. Merchant, 1980). Knowledge and research built on these essential dichotomies, however, undermines the seamlessness existing between these categories as often perceived by those framed as 'Other'. This has been highlighted in feminist and post-structuralist writings (e.g. Belenky et al., 1986; Fabian, 1983), building on ideas expressed in the theoretical oppositions of...

#### Box 4.4 Phenomenology and embodiment: implications for fieldwork

We all have a body, and we all have subjective experiences of ourselves. Our bodies make possible and constrain the experiences of the world that we have. The experiences that we have are integrated bodily – embodied – as well as psychologically in our subjective and variously conscious constructions of the self. Given these underlying strata of being, it should be possible to draw on body- and self-knowledge as research tools. This should enhance understanding of people's actions and body language, their perceptions of their actions, what they may verbalise regarding these perceptions, and the impacts on body and self of the actions of others and of significant contexts – particularly the roles of culture, power and ideology in inscribing the body and the ways in which people may subvert such inscriptions. A challenge implicit in such an approach to research, however, is the tension generated between the sharing of experiences as part of the fieldwork process – in a sense 'upfronting' the participation component of 'participant observation' – and the ability to reflect on these experiences and on their implications in relation to research aims. As Crouch (2001: 69) describes, the process involves both othering ourselves as researchers, and being othered to varying extents by those whose practices, perceptions and worlds we are researching.

Crouch is a cultural geographer who is concerned explicitly with a rethinking of how people live and feel (2001: 61). In a recent paper he draws on ethnographic work with recreational caravanners in the UK to explore people's accounts of what they do, their tactics, imaginations and movements in relation to broader contexts that people may draw on in these personal narratives and actions. Importantly, by highlighting the 'existential immediacy' of the body, as well as people's felt multidimensional relationship with the world (Crouch, 2001: 62), such work renders peoples – their bodily selves – as agential in relation to the spaces they inhabit. Although he and his fellow researchers draw in this project on interviewing as a field technique, they also considered their own felt sensations, bodily and psychologically, as data in the processes of both doing the research and of reflecting on their encounters with caravanners and their own caravanning process. The field thereby emerges as a site of constant renegotiation of the self, others, researcher and researched through a process of uneven counter (Crouch, 2001: 72) – an acknowledgement that is extremely significant given the structural inequalities frequently encountered (and making possible) fieldwork in Third World contexts.

As Crouch argues, such an approach to fieldwork, thinking and writing makes possible great acceptance of the nuanced complexity of what people do, and of how they explain and express these doings. Given a world where differences between people have been, and remain, used as justifications for persecution in many contexts, such an approach to the richly varied fora of human action might be considered relevant indeed.

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ultimate reason and rationality. In Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, for example, attention is drawn to the ways that people experience their existence and thereby make choices based on their experiences (e.g. Sartre, 1969). For Heidegger, emphasis is placed on human subjects as 'Beings-in-the-world' (or *Dasein*), thus breaking down the distinctions between individual and context or place (e.g. Heidegger, 1962). Here we have the seeds of a phenomenology of being - a philosophical genre centred on the phenomena of the perceived world as known only through one's subjective experience of 'it'.

More recently such thinking has been extended by the extraordinarily influential social theorist Michel Foucault, in his multiple theses illustrating the ways in which subjective experience and 'the body' also are politically and historically situated (Foucault, 1977; 1990). By highlighting the nexus of power relationships that legitimate particular knowledges in particular situations and times in history, Foucault paves the way for an elucidation of the myriad and experientially-based knowledges of the multiple peoples excluded from power. This clearly is relevant for research in Third World contexts, as expounded by the Columbian author Arturo Escobar (1995; 1996).

Merleau-Ponty (1962) has extended a thinking through of the bodily grounds and constraints of experienced phenomena. Thus 'Being-in-the-world' is further 'concretised' as embodied experience - such that 'embodiment is an existential condition in which the body is the subjective source or intersubjective ground of experience' (Csordas, 1999: 143). Given that we all have bodies and we all experience felt, bodily sensations as well as mental reflections regarding these, 'the body' and 'its' sensations thus can become effective means for communication and interpretation in research. Phenomenological and embodiment approaches to field-based research and writing thus have much to offer in terms of validating ways of knowing and experiencing the world that are not easily shoehorned into interview surveys and quantitative analyses. As such they are becoming increasingly important in the human sciences (e.g. Bender, 1998; Crouch, 2001; Ingold, 2000; Sullivan, 2001; Tilley, 1994; Weiss and Haber, 1999). Box 4.4 considers some methodological implications of pursuing a phenomenological approach to research.

### Qualitative not quantitative?

There is a tendency to treat qualitative and quantitative methods as not really compatible. Smith for example writes that qualitative methods are concerned with subjective understanding rather than statistical description and analysis (1994: 491). But statistical descriptions cover all manner of things. As Hammersley points out, it is hard to get away from statistics (Hammersley, 1992). Any form of words meaning 'more than', 'less than', 'frequently' or 'regularly' and the like are quantitative claims. Many could be put into numerical form. The difference, Hammersley argues, is in the high degree of precision which statistical approaches use, not in the fact of dealing with quantities. Conversely, however, statistical descriptions alone rarely take on the systems of meaning which qualitative methodologies seek to uncover. Qualitative methods could be seen to embrace quantitative techniques and use



**Box 4.5 Combining qualitative and quantitative data: plants, people and practice in north-west Namibia**

*My doctoral thesis (Sullivan, 1998) had two primary aims. First, to analyse patterns and determinants of natural resource use and management by Khoe-speaking Damara farmers in arid north-west Namibia. And second, to assess the ecological implications of this resource-use in the context of the unpredictable variations in primary productivity characteristic of dry-land environments. Given these objectives, a combination of quantitative and qualitative anthropological and ecological techniques were employed. For example, the use of gathered non-timber products for food and medicine was monitored in 7 repeat-surveys over an 18 month period for a sample of 45 households comprising 2017 individual 'diet-days'. Qualitative data derived from the experience of collecting resources with people on collecting trips within the broader landscape and from informal discussions and interactions with local people. With regard to the second research objective, woody and herbaceous vegetation datasets were also compiled, the former comprising 2760 plant individuals in a stratified sample of 75 transects and the latter consisting of 48 quadrats, half fenced to exclude livestock, in which herbaceous vegetation was monitored over two growing seasons. A number of standard ecological variables, including patterns in community floristics, diversity, cover and population structure, were used to explore the prediction that concentrations of people and livestock cause measurable impacts on vegetation around settlements. More recently, recorded oral testimony material focusing on the perceptions of individuals of landscape change and environmental management practices have been collated (Sullivan, 2000; 2002).*

*In other words, an attempt was made in my thesis to explore the multifaceted relationships between people and environment with a similarly multifarious set of research methods - combining social anthropology, human ecology and natural science tools, concepts and field techniques. While this enabled a complex analysis of complex relationships, a number of problems also were generated by the attempt to try and integrate such broadly different approaches to research. Although my thesis was passed with no changes, as one of the examiners noted in their report '[t]he result is a thesis in two halves...rather schizophrenic in that each part is conceptually, methodologically and stylistically distinct'.*

*Source: Sullivan, doctoral research in Namibia, 1994*

From the quantitative side, an error is a tendency to treat qualitative data as somehow inferior or less 'real' than 'hard' statistical information. For example, we have heard well-qualified seminar speakers apologise for offering 'anecdotes not data', as if stories from the field were somehow less rigorous than other forms of information. All stories have a context and we need carefully to interpret and record them, as we will see below. But treated properly they are as strong, relevant and interesting as data that are numerical or otherwise easily categorised.

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Qualitative and quantitative methods are not mutually exclusive approaches to learning. Both can be necessary depending on the question that is being asked. We have both combined complex statistical analyses of data with detailed qualitative interviews to learn more about the places and people we were studying. The latter make for richer and 'thicker' descriptions of observed phenomena (Geertz, 1973). Importantly, we need to choose the types of methods that are appropriate for collecting data on the research questions we might be interested in and to know how to combine different types of data into powerful and relevant analyses (Box 4.5).

Though it is important to combine these tools, it is rarely easy. Perhaps the hardest thing when doing fieldwork is how to manage one's time. Collecting, cataloguing and entering qualitative data is exhausting work. Tape-recorded interviews need to be transcribed (preferably) or summarised shortly after they are taken. Transcriptions need to be annotated with the detail of body language and other impressions significant for the interview. Historical records need to be interrogated, and written records of meetings need to be discussed with those who were there. Each encounter generates a string of leads to be followed up and checked. Collecting rigorous qualitative data is hard work. Equally, collecting quantitative data of household surveys or vegetation formations is also demanding. It can be repetitive and boring. It is often pressured and rushed, especially if there is a large sample to be completed in a set time, as with repeat-round surveys. The fixed agenda of collecting given samples can make it hard to follow up leads and new developments as they arise. In short, combining the two approaches is difficult. Qualitative data collection does not offer a break to quantitative data collection; instead it offers new demands. At the same time, rigorous quantitative work on meaningful samples is not to be taken lightly. Added to these difficulties are the everyday problems of working in a second language, and in tropical climes where, as both of us have experienced, a researcher may have to contend with a host of aggressive diseases - most inconvenient for fieldwork schedules.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

We have argued that qualitative research is essential if we are to understand what makes our world meaningful for people. It offers powerful techniques which can reveal a great deal, and they can also be combined effectively with quantitative data. As new techniques evolve, those conducting fieldwork are being presented with new ways of doing research. We have also argued that the claims of publicly conducted research, and the authority of ethnography need to be carefully considered. In writing up we need to be suitably but pragmatically wary of transforming and transmuting rich multi-textured field experiences into the written word (see Chapter 11).

Qualitative research requires cognizance of the position and powers of the researcher and the politics of doing research. Critical consideration of this process is an important element of any successful project, particularly given the inequalities

of engagement that characterises qualitative research clearly thus is only as good as the degree of critical reflexivity pursued by the researcher. This inevitably means treading a fine line between this and self-indulgent naval-gazing. If this line is trod healthily however, it is both instructive and rewarding.

Methodology may just mean a series of meetings with people, but if researchers are appropriately self-aware, and meetings are characterised by good listening, and conversation, we will have much to learn about the world in which we live. The basic requirement for good research, qualitative or quantitative, is that one is friendly and engaging with people, and open to learning from what they tell you and from what you observe and experience.

### Recommended Reading

#### *General*

Bryman, A. and Burgess, R. G. (1999) *Qualitative Research* Sage Publications, London. Exhaustive and comprehensive. The definitive guide.

Barley, N. (1983) *The Innocent Anthropologist. Notes from a Mud Hut* Penguin, London. A hilarious book, compulsory reading.

#### *PRA*

Chambers, R. (1991) Shortcut and participatory methods for gaining social information for projects. In M. Cernea (ed.) *Putting People First. Sociological Variables in Rural Development* World Bank, Washington DC, pp. 515-37.

Robert Chambers is the guru of PRA. Compulsory reading on its advantages.

Mosse, D. (1994) Authority, gender and knowledge: theoretical reflections on the practice of participatory rural appraisal. *Development and Change* 25: 497-526.

Bevan, P. (2000) Who's a goody? Demythologising the PRA agenda. *Journal of International Development* 12: 751-59.

Both of the above articles provide useful critiques of the claims and practices of PRA.

#### *Ethnography and oral testimonies*

Bourgois, P. (1995) *In Search of Respect. Selling crack in El Barrio* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

An extraordinary tour-de-force on the insights ethnography can offer when done well.

Ellen, R. F. (1984) *Ethnographic Research: A Guide to General Conduct* Academic Press, London. An often-cited text which is a classic in its field.

Clifford, J. and Marcus, G. E. (eds) (1986). *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* University of California Press, Berkeley.

Fabian, J. (1983) *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* Columbia University Press, New York. Both of the above are vital readings to explore the problems of ethnography's claims.

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### *Phenomenology*

Crouch, D. (2001) Spatialities and the feeling of doing. *Social and Cultural Geography* 2(1): 61-75.

Crouch's paper has been discussed in some detail in Box 4.4. His work is particularly useful in elucidating the ways in which phenomenological and embodiment ideas can inform fieldwork practice, highlighting for example the interpretative significance of the subjective experiences of the fieldworker.

Weiss, G. and Haber, H.F. (eds) (1999) *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersections of Nature and Culture* Routledge, London.

This edited collection of essays emphasises both the theoretical and empirical significance of conceptualising and experiencing 'the body' as subject as well as object of research, and provides an extremely timely introduction to the value of embodiment approaches for thoughtful and reflexive field research.

### Notes

1. Though not nearly as recent as Smith suggests when she states that they are 'a product of the advent of humanistic geography' (1994: 491). Participant observation is much older than that. Anthropologists, following the somewhat hypocritical urgings of Malinowski (Kuper, 1983), were among the first to set about formal (though often ill-defined) fieldwork using a variety of qualitative and quantitative techniques but doing so while all the time 'immersed' in the language and norms of their study site. This established, in the British school at least, participant observation as a central method in any attempt to find out about the wider world. The Chicago School of Sociology is also widely, though perhaps erroneously, perceived to have been responsible for promoting qualitative methods in the United States (Bulmer, 1984).
2. The term 'entheogen' - literally 'becoming divine within' - has been coined by entheo-otanist Jonathan Ott (e.g. Ott, 1996) and others to refer to substances, normally derived from plant material, that when consumed stimulate subjective mystical and religious experiences.
3. An extraordinary illustration of this is Bourgois' book *In Search of Respect* (1995), an award-winning and powerful but disturbing insight into poverty and drug dealing in New York.
4. For some fascinating answers see Willis' book *Learning to Labour* (1977), about how young school leavers accept the lowest low-prospect jobs, or Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), about how peasants in Malaysia resist exploitation by land owners and wealthier farmers.
5. Robert Chambers, PRA's arch-protagonist, once told one of us (Dan) of a PRA activity undertaken among pastoral communities in East Africa which had involved a mapping exercise. He spoke with praise of an excellent map produced by one youth in only four hours, after which the research party had had to leave. But how legitimate can this single and rapidly produced representation of the lie of the land possibly be? It is good, if 'results' are needed, that such material can be so quickly available, but a bigger question is why were only four hours available for the research in the first place? Problems here relate to whose view is represented in such PRA 'products', the danger of fixing fluid categories in two-dimensional representations of landscapes, and the ways in which land marked as claimed or unused in one mapping exercise with one group of people might be contested by others whose views might be occluded in the process (e.g. Hodgson and Schroeder, 2002; Peluso, 1995; Sullivan, 2002).
6. Practical difficulties associated with data collection are discussed further in Chapters 5 and 7.