



The Quality of Qualitative Research

CLIVE SEALE

INTRODUCING QUALITATIVE METHODS

THE QUALITY OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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THE QUALITY OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Clive Seale



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Preface and acknowledgements

This book, on aspects of methodology, starts from the premise that methodological writing is of limited use to practising social researchers, who are pursuing a craft occupation, in large part learned 'on the job', through apprenticeship, experience, trial and error, rather than by studying general accounts of method. The broad thrust of the argument is that methodology, if it has any use at all, benefits the quality of research by encouraging a degree of awareness about the methodological implications of particular decisions made during the course of a project. Intense methodological awareness, if engaged in too seriously, can create anxieties that hinder practice, but if taken in small doses it can help to guard against more obvious errors. It may also offer ideas for those running short on these during the course of a project. Reading methodology, then, is a sort of intellectual muscle-building exercise, time out in the brain gymnasium, before returning to the task at hand, hopefully a little stronger and more alert.

Because of this rather pragmatic and sceptical orientation, of mine, you will find that a lot of this book (especially the chapters in Part II) contains extended discussions of particular examples of research practice. Consider this, if you like, as a sort of vicarious 'apprenticeship' experience. Any contemplation of other people's research work, if it involves thinking seriously about its strengths and weaknesses, can be like this. Methodological writing of the sort you will find in Part II, however, may help to structure this experience a little more, focusing on particular themes that I believe to be of importance when considering how to produce good-quality research.

Part I, on the other hand, is not all like this. It starts with an example, chosen to illustrate some general points, but it largely contains thoughts about the philosophical, political and more purely methodological issues that many people claim lie behind, indeed ought to determine, the decisions that social researchers often make 'on the ground'. As well as concluding that research practice should in fact be conceived of as relatively autonomous from such abstract and general considerations, I also discuss on some other topics of concern. Broadly speaking, it will become clear to you that I am in favour of a fallibilistic approach to

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research, within a 'subtle realist' orientation, that does not give up on scientific aims as conventionally conceived, but also draws on the insights of postscientific conceptions of social research. Methodological awareness involves a commitment to showing as much as possible to the audience of research studies about the procedures and evidence that have led to particular conclusions, always remaining open to the possibility that conclusions may need to be revised in the light of new evidence. It does not, however, mean abandonment of authorial responsibility in favour of an 'anything goes' mentality.

In treading this path, I hope carefully and with due consideration of the great variety of conflicting positions that exist, my aim is to present a guide to some of the key methodological discussions on how to ensure quality in qualitative research. I hope that this will assist you in learning from at least some of the examples shown, or at least make principled decisions not to follow in the steps of particular authors in your own research practice. At the end of the book is a series of discussion exercises related to the chapters. These are designed to help integrate the text with courses in research methods, should this be the context in which this book is read.

I have benefited enormously from the careful consideration given by Martyn Hammersley and David Silverman to drafts of the manuscript. It will become clear later in the book that their distinguished methodological writings have influenced me, in different ways, but I am particularly grateful to have had such direct help from them. Paul Coates generously provided philosophical expertise in checking parts of the manuscript. Nevertheless, the final text, errors and all, remains my own responsibility.

Additionally, I would like to record my deep gratitude for the support and tolerance of my wife Donna in the writing of this manuscript. She is always behind my work with these qualities, but particularly so on this occasion.

Clive Seale
Autumn 1998

Part I

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Why Quality Matters

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I am going to start with an example because I believe that it helps to show why quality matters in qualitative research. It also shows one type of threat to quality, as well as allowing me to indicate how this might be overcome.

Announcing that qualitative research has now entered a 'fifth moment' in its development, two influential commentators on qualitative research, Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (1994), propose that the field is now characterized by responses to a 'double crisis'. Qualitative researchers, they say, face a 'representational crisis', since research texts can no longer be assumed capable of capturing lived experience in the way once thought possible. A second crisis, of 'legitimation', arises from this: the old criteria for evaluating the adequacy of researchers' accounts no longer hold. Words like 'validity' and 'reliability' are markers of an earlier, now largely discredited (or at least no longer fashionable) 'moment' in the short history of qualitative social research.

The contemporary sensibilities of the 'fifth moment' were expressed in raw form in a book review written some years earlier by Denzin (1988a), in which he delivered judgement on a work emanating from the 'modernist phase' or 'second moment' of qualitative research: Anselm Strauss's (1987) book, *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. Denzin reflects:

this book marks the end of an era. It signals a turning point in the history of qualitative research in American sociology. At the very moment that this work finds its place in the libraries of scholars and students, it is being

challenged by a new body of work coming from the neighboring fields of anthropology and cultural studies. Post-Geertzian anthropologists (Marcus, Tyler, Clifford, Bruner, Turner, Pratt, Asad, Rosaldo, Crapanzano, Fischer, Rabinow) are now writing on the politics and poetics of ethnography. They are taking seriously the question 'How do we write culture?' They are proposing that postmodern ethnography can no longer follow the guidelines of positivist social science. Gone are words like theory, hypothesis, concept, indicator, coding scheme, sampling, validity, and reliability. In their place comes a new language: readerly texts, modes of discourse, cultural poetics, deconstruction, interpretation, domination, feminism, genre, grammatology, hermeneutics, inscription, master narrative, narrative structures, otherness, postmodernism, redemptive ethnography, semiotics, subversion, textuality, tropes. (1988a: 432)

Denzin argues that the modernist assumption of an empirical world that can be studied objectively by qualitative methods is no longer sustainable. He makes the apparently democratic point that scientific emphasis on theory generated by researchers gets in the way of paying close attention to the theories that people use in everyday life. He says that Strauss's modernist demand to make generalizations across cases obstructs a detailed focus on the individual characteristics of particular cases. Denzin observes: 'By making qualitative research "scientifically" respectable, researchers may be imposing schemes of interpretation on the social world that simply do not fit that world as it is constructed and lived by interacting individuals' (1988a: 432). Instead, we live in a postmodern world of multiple selves and endless fragmentation of experience. This, Denzin claims, has profound consequences for the practice of social and cultural research.

We thus see in this review a clash of two 'moments'. On the one hand is the older, scientific view of Strauss. On the other hand, Denzin proposes a postscientific vision of locally relevant, temporary accounts, perhaps collaboratively written by researchers and those whose lives have been researched. No single account should dominate others in this postmodern conception which, nevertheless, is itself a successor to earlier 'moments'.

This divide, which I may have exaggerated a little, points to a central problem for qualitative social researchers that I hope this book will help to solve. Where competing conceptions exist about such basic matters as the nature of the social world and how we may know it, and these appear difficult, if not impossible, to resolve, how is the social researcher going to decide where he or she will stand? I argue in this book that researchers can use methodological debates constructively in their research practice without necessarily having to 'solve' paradigmatic disputes of the sort I have outlined.

So that you can see how this might be done, I will continue to use Denzin's work as an example.

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Denzin's alternative

Denzin himself points the way towards this resolution of paradigms or 'moments' since, contrary to the impression I have given so far, he does not say that the modernist grounded theory methodology of Strauss is invalid, or to be dispensed with as being in some way wrong or misguided. Such a position would in fact itself be a modernist strategy, signalling that its author is proposing some improved grand narrative for social research. Denzin is careful not to fall into this trap, instead adopting the more liberal view that grounded theorizing is simply one choice among many that qualitative researchers can make: 'it is now clear that qualitative researchers have choices. Twenty years ago they didn't' (1988a: 432).

It therefore seems incumbent on us to evaluate the quality of Denzin's alternative, which we can do by examining one of his own studies (Denzin, 1994), done in the style of deconstructionism which, in his preamble to the study, he claims 'may be employed as a postmodern research strategy for the interpretive study of contemporary society' (1994: 182). The work involves an analysis of the meanings of a Stanley Lumet film (*The Morning After*), in which a Los Angeles actress awakes to find herself next to a murdered man. The film tells the story of her struggle to avoid being framed for the murder.

At one level, Denzin's report reads like a somewhat elaborate film review, briefly giving us the plot of the film and then recording his personal response to it. Thus, he is clearly offended by some of the underlying political messages that he sees. At a certain point Alex (the actress) meets another character (Turner) and they speak as Turner drives:

Turner: (driving, looking over his shoulder) A spade in a caddy ran into somebody.

Alex: Spade in a caddy. Is that anybody like Jack in the Box?

Turner: I wish I had the caddy dealership in Watts. Spades, ah, they spend disproportionately on their transportation, also in dressing their young.

Alex: What are you, the Klan anthropologist?

Turner: You can learn a lot about a person by the car they drive.

(Denzin, 1994: 194)

Denzin comments: 'In this dialogue, the text criticizes Turner's racism through the two phrases "Jack in the Box," and "Klan anthropologist," thereby neutralizing the unrepresentable through an appropriate moral stance. But the effacement of blacks stands' (1994: 194) and later, after exegesis of messages about homosexuality contained in the film, he observes that 'the film . . . asserts that gays and "spics" who, if not evil, are persons about whom jokes can be told' (1994: 195). Denzin, then, is unhappy about the dependence on stereotypes that can be seen in the

superficially anti-racist and pro-gay messages contained in the dialogue and characterization, saying that: 'The above analysis reveals how the deconstructionist method may be utilized in the reading of a contemporary cultural text' (1994: 195).

Yet his 'findings' (to use a word from the modernist era) are more ambitious than this. He also wishes to read the film as conveying what it is like to live in the conditions of postmodernity. For this reading, he relies heavily on the ideas of Baudrillard, Lyotard and Derrida. In particular, he draws on Baudrillard's (1988) depiction of America as the location of a media-dominated culture, in which the real has become 'hyperreal', where human beings are judged by 'their ability to match up to media representations' (Denzin, 1994: 188). Additionally, people's identity is decentred and fragmented according to whatever context they inhabit at a particular moment. Alex, the key figure in *The Morning After*, is thus analysed by Denzin as conveying 'a decentred character' who drifts in and out of relationships and widely varying social settings so that she 'is constituted in these relationships' and yet 'has no center' (1994: 192). The film's location in Los Angeles is also significant, as Denzin understands this city to be 'the quintessential postmodern American city' (1994: 184).

Denzin ends his analysis with a vision of the more general effects that can be achieved by the application of deconstructive method, which he now locates as falling within cultural studies rather than sociology, his previously preferred disciplinary identity: 'Cultural studies . . . is a project informed by the politics of liberation and freedom, by a post-Marxism with no guarantees . . . texts [such as *The Morning After* are] ideological efforts to find a common ground in a postmodern world that has neither a fixed center nor a coherent understanding of this thing called human' (1994: 197). He thus is mixing two postscientific tendencies within social theory, those of postmodernism and critical theory. Presumably reluctant fully to embrace the relativist tendencies within postmodernism, he wants to rescue the quest for deconstructive readings of everything by asserting a moral position on heterosexism and racism, positions that he clearly regards as foundational and unassailable.

At one level, it can be argued that evaluating this as a report of qualitative social research is inappropriate. It is a different sort of project, not setting itself up as an authoritative, defensible interpretation of a cultural artifact, but simply presenting one person's response, from which readers are free to vary if they wish. Yet this would be to avoid some important issues. Denzin, as we saw in his review of Strauss's book, clearly feels that his approach can be seen as an alternative strategy for doing qualitative research; at one level, at least, a successor 'science' to Strauss's modernist conception. His reading also contains numerous markers of his desire to persuade readers of the truth value of his deconstructive reading. This is seen most obviously in his assumption of the correctness of the particular moral positions that he

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adopts. This is not an innocent, liberal-minded, personal response to a film that we can take or leave as the mood suits us, but a claim on our hearts and minds.

It is therefore an interesting exercise to apply the canons of grounded theorizing, the modernist methodology outlined by Strauss (1987), to Denzin's text, as if it were a more conventional research report rather than the exotic new animal that Denzin himself announces. First, we may ask how well grounded are Denzin's concepts in his data? Secondly, have his theories emerged from data, or are they preconceived and forced on the data? Thirdly, has he actively searched, through theoretical sampling perhaps, for negative instances in order to develop his theory by a method of constant comparison? (These terms are explained and illustrated further in Chapter 7 of this book.) If we can answer these questions, we may go some way towards learning what is valuable in Denzin's choice, while retaining a sense of what is valuable in Strauss's alternative. In this way we can learn from both, without having to resolve the matters that divide the two 'moments' that they represent.

First, it is clear that Denzin does not use theoretical concepts without showing the reader the phenomena to which they refer. To take just one concept, that of the decentred self, it is clear that Alex's life exhibits this condition, and Denzin's text describes several illustrative passages from the film to show this. On the second question, however, Denzin's analysis is powerfully driven by a pre-existing set of theories, rather than emerging from an original reading of 'data'. He has chosen this film to illustrate the truth of certain ideas derived from Baudrillard. He might have chosen some other film to do this, but the theoretical messages about our supposed postmodern condition would have been the same. The text is, in this sense, highly overtheorized, in the manner of the 'theoretical capitalist(s)' that Glaser and Strauss (1967: 10), in their original account of grounded theorizing, had wanted to overthrow. We might feel that their postmodern equivalents appear now to be renewing their ascendancy over qualitative research.

On the last question I also find Denzin's report lacking. A fallibilistic approach, which I advocate in this book as desirable in qualitative research, is not well served by presenting a personal interpretation and then simply saying that people are free to disagree if they so wish. It requires a much more active and labour-intensive approach towards genuinely self-critical research, so that something of originality and value is created, with which, of course, people are then always free to disagree, but may be less inclined to do so because of the strength of the author's case. Take, for example, Denzin's belief that in a postmodern world our lives and fragmented, changing identities are overdetermined by media representations. Clearly, this belief is something that he has taken from Baudrillard. Rather than regarding this as given, Denzin might have generated a rather different form of research project investigating people's relationships with media representations, through interviewing

or observational methods. This might have led him to some novel insights about the applicability of concepts like hyperreality, grounded in data about people's experience.

Take, too, his view that this particular film contains subtly racist and heterosexist messages. At present, we are given Denzin's own reaction as evidence that this is the effect of particular passages of dialogue, and we are shown the dialogue itself in order to persuade us to go along with Denzin's interpretation. How much more interesting and revealing it might be to seek to understand the responses of ordinary cinema goers to these passages in the film. At the same time, Denzin's deconstructive method is a useful preliminary exercise in imagining the sort of questions one might ask of such cinema goers, and in formulating the more general research questions that might inform such a project, which would itself be a very different type of exercise from the review that Denzin presents.

Conclusion

We should not, of course, take this too far. It can be argued that Denzin is engaged in a different project from that of Glaser and Strauss, one of social or cultural commentary rather than social research perhaps, somewhat distanced from the need to develop ideas through a genuinely fallibilistic approach to the interaction of ideas and data. It should not, then, be judged in terms of how well he does what his predecessors did.

One could take the view that it is simply a matter of preference as to which 'moment' one adopts, or which approach one takes. However, this seems a characteristically postmodernist way of dealing with the issue, avoiding concerns about the purpose of social research. It also seems questionable to promote Denzin-style analysis as necessarily morally or politically superior to its modernist predecessors (see Chapter 2). If we reject preference or moral superiority as adequate reasons for adopting 'fifth moment' analysis, we are left with the view that such work may be a useful source of ideas, but cannot be proposed as a wholly adequate successor to more scientific conceptions of social research.

At the same time, an unproblematic return to modernist assumptions seems impossible. The widespread appeal of alternative conceptions of research is based on some fundamental dissatisfactions with the scientific world view. This book takes this tension as its starting point.

Quality does matter in qualitative research, but I agree with Denzin that the modernist headings of 'validity' and 'reliability' are no longer adequate to encapsulate the range of issues that a concern for quality must raise. Instead, we need to accept that 'quality' is a somewhat elusive phenomenon that cannot be pre-specified by methodological rules. This in fact is the 'threat' to quality that I referred to at the start of

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this chapter: the idea that research must be carried out under the burden of fulfilling some philosophical or methodological scheme. Practising social researchers can learn to do good work from a variety of examples, done within different 'moments', without needing to resolve methodological disputes before beginning their work. At the same time, the quality of qualitative research is enhanced if researchers engage with philosophical and methodological debate, so that the pursuit of quality becomes a 'fertile obsession' (Lather, 1993) as methodological awareness develops and feeds into practice. But before I discuss this, we should consider further the sources of disquiet with scientific conceptions of qualitative method.

KEY POINTS

- A variety of conceptions of qualitative research exist, with competing claims as to what counts as good-quality work.
- Rather than opting for the criteria promoted by one variety, 'paradigm', 'moment' or school within qualitative research, practising researchers can learn valuable lessons from each one.

2

Postscientific Critiques

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Two broad currents of criticism and disquiet have served to dislodge modernist visions of quality in qualitative research, opening up the field to a more flexible and pragmatic relationship between research practice and methodology. Political perspectives have involved objections to the hidden values which modernist commitments to guiding ideals like objectivity and rationality have involved. In the wake of this, post-modernism appears to have shaken the foundationalism on which much qualitative research has depended. Denzin's research practice, exemplified in the previous chapter, contains elements that address both sources of criticism. I shall consider each in turn.

Political perspectives

Marxist, feminist and other perspectives from critical theory argue that the quality of research should be judged in terms of its political effects rather than its capacity to formulate universal laws or apparently objective truth. The overriding criterion for judging the quality of a study is its capacity to emancipate, empower or otherwise make free a particular oppressed group of people (Lincoln and Denzin, 1994). Techniques of 'member validation' (discussed in Chapter 5), in which the perspectives of participants in a research study are incorporated in its validation, have at times been linked to the achievement of such political goals (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), on the grounds that if people whose lives have been researched endorse a study this is an indicator of its value. Methods of

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communicating research findings are linked with this: action research attempts an interactive cycle between practical struggles, the formulation of research questions and the reporting of research findings in a way that informs further practical struggle (Schwandt, 1996). Feminist standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1986) argues that starting research from the concerns of women is likely to be more objective than starting anywhere else, as such an oppressed group will possess insights otherwise concealed by the biases of dominant versions. More broadly, the dominance of policy makers in setting research questions has long been a source of concern to practising researchers, whose livelihood often seems to depend on conforming to the world view of people in power.

These views have considerable appeal and, if adopted with due regard to other aspects of rigour, offer advantages that have been ignored in other research traditions. Political sensitivity is a necessary part of the methodological awareness that social researchers should possess. There is, however, a fundamental problem that political versions of research quality like this must face: the fact that there is no general consensus on what is politically desirable. Unfortunately, a common response to this problem has been to ignore political diversity in favour of vigorous promotion of particular value positions, or advocacy of the supposed interests of particular groups. This itself clearly has the potential for sustaining oppressive social relations. Additionally, it is a mistake to assume that oppressed groups have the best insights into the sources of their oppression (although they can explain some of its consequences), which the uncritical advocacy of member validation and standpoint epistemology can assume. If this were the case, oppression might not be so common. It is at least as likely that oppressors will understand how oppression works (Hammersley, 1995b), though they might not wish to reveal this to a researcher.

At times, the goals of politically critical researchers look strikingly similar to the conventional goals of a liberal education. Thus Schwandt (1996) argues that:

social inquiry ought to generate knowledge that complements or supplements rather than displaces lay probing of social problems . . . [it] can be judged in terms of whether [it] . . . is successful at enhancing or cultivating *critical* intelligence in parties to the research encounter . . . [and] on the success to which his or her reports of the inquiry enable the training or calibration of human judgement. (Schwandt, 1996: 69)

The idea that these things are desirable in the population is of course a value position itself, consonant, for example, with the cultural values of late modern USA, where the advantages of individualism and democracy are largely unquestioned. Societies which value conformity, based on uncritical trust in authority and tradition, are routinely stigmatized in such a view. Many in such cultures would view as potentially

oppressive the Western values promoted by Schwandt's version of research. Given, however, that social research is a largely Western phenomenon, one would expect most social researchers to endorse Schwandt's value position.

Placing to one side, for the moment, the issue of whether emancipation is a universal good, we can also note that there is some dispute over whether the emancipatory potential of research is inevitably linked to particular research methods. Buchanan (1992), who feels that there is such a link, argues that quantitative, 'positivist' research aims to control and predict, while qualitative research aims at a more ethical goal of helping people lead less alienated lives. As is usual with such attempts to dictate the meaning of research practice, it is not difficult to think of examples where the opposite is true. For instance, quantitative social surveys have often been used to document the consequences of oppression and inequality (Booth, 1886–1902; Rowntree, 1901; Russell, 1986; Arber and Ginn, 1991). Pursuing a similar line to that of Buchanan, Oakley (1981) once claimed that qualitative, depth interviews with mothers resulted in data that were more valid in exposing people's true feelings and opinions than were structured interviews, thus enabling her research better to represent women's views on a public stage. The equation of feminist research practice with qualitative method has, however, been questioned by other feminist researchers, who argue that issues of method should not be conflated with the politics of research (Jayaratne, 1983; Reinhartz, 1992; Maynard and Purvis, 1994). These authors argue that feminist political perspectives are relevant in influencing the sort of questions researchers ask, or the issues they address, but not in determining the methods used to answer them (beyond a general commitment to ethical practice). It is of interest to note that in more recent work, Oakley (1989) has found that quantitative methods can be effective in generating findings to promote women's interests.

Another attempt to link a political position to a method is contained in the view that researcher and researched need to share the same social status if authentic accounts are to be revealed. Thus there is debate between feminist methodologists about the desirability of men doing research on women, or of middle-class white women doing research on the lives of black or working-class women. Clearly, there are arguments for saying that trust may be more likely in circumstances where researchers and researched share similar experiences. Trust can lead to particular sorts of account, which may be of value for certain research purposes. For other research purposes, however, it can be relevant to see the effects of distrust, since public as well as private accounts are potentially of interest to social researchers (Cornwell, 1984). Additionally, there is no guarantee that trust results from conditions of equal social status. People may find it easier to reveal secrets to strangers. The experience of feminist women interviewing non-feminist women has

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also disrupted this view (Millen, 1997). Maynard and Purvis (1994) present a version of feminist research which reflects a decoupling of this aspect of method from the politics of research.

The attempt to gauge good research practice from political positions is reminiscent of attempts to link philosophical considerations to issues of method. I argue in Chapter 3 that this is a mistake. Just as philosophical debates can be used as a resource by researchers wishing to generate ideas and reflect on techniques, so can political disputes. These can act as a helpful sensitizing context if the researcher does not allow them to overdetermine practice. A general awareness that a research study may have both intended and unintended political consequences seems desirable. The danger of prioritizing particular political goals in research is that these also come to dominate researchers' interpretations of the social world being investigated. Convinced by prior reasoning that oppression exists, that it takes particular forms and that it is universally undesirable, some qualitative research proceeds to 'discover' matters that someone who does not share the same political views would not find. One sees this, for example, in Waitzkin (1979) and Graham and Oakley (1981). (I analyse the latter study in more depth in Chapter 9.) Quite conventional approaches to validity and reliability, such as the avoidance of anecdotalism, attention to sampling issues and searching for data that challenge an emerging theory, seem appropriate responses here.

Calls for 'relevance' are a less dramatic version of the critical political perspectives viewed above, and in Hammersley's (1992b) formulation of subtle realism (which I discuss in Chapter 3), relevance is one criterion by which the quality of research can be judged. Relevance as a criterion, compared with the more glamorous goals of emancipation or empowerment, appears thin and weak. The researcher concerned with relevance may recognize that a research study may be relevant to different groups in different ways, and that unforeseen relevance may emerge in unpredicted quarters. The perspective of relevance acknowledges that the same policy makers and practitioners who commission research will use research findings as rhetorical resources in debates about practice, where carefully established research findings will compete on an equal basis with anecdotes, hunches and other fleeting thoughts (Green, 1998). Alternatively, they may simply ignore relevant research information. A research report may be relevant not because it points people in a particular practical direction, but simply because it allows people to see their practice from a novel point of view. Reading conversational analysis of one's own speech, for example, is a little like seeing slow-motion film. It enables otherwise taken-for-granted skills to be perceived and made into objects of thought for the first time (Silverman, 1997a, b). Because this stimulates a more reflective mood it may lead to changed practices, but these will not be directed by any normative exhortations by the researcher. Additionally, one can argue