

CHAPTER III.1

Potentials and Limits of Qualitative Methods for Research on Violence

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I. INTRODUCTION

The decision on whether to apply qualitative rather than quantitative methods in research on violence depends to a large extent on three aspects associated with the specific research goal in each project:

First, qualitative methods are applied in situations in which little is known about the lives and cultural backgrounds of those being studied.

Second, they are applied particularly when the goal is to analyze complex structures of meaning or action, or results are expected to show such patterns. An example is research on the motives and causes of violence: The first thing that has to be remembered here is that purely causal or even monocausal relations can hardly ever be assumed in the explanatory models of the social sciences. Hence, examining the causes of a specific act of violence will generally bring to light a bundle of reasons, social conditions, motives, causes, and the like. These, in turn, will also interact with each other. Because the majority of individual factors in such a pattern of effects and actions as well as the interactions between them cannot be anticipated and standardized on all levels before starting to collect data, the best way to plot them empirically is to apply qualitative methods.

Finally, a qualitative approach is chosen when the empirical goal is to access violence and its backgrounds in a way designed to understand subjective experience; in other words, when the concern is to plot the perpetrators' subjective contexts of meaning behind violent acts from a phenomenological or constructivist perspective. Such a goal can be achieved only with qualitative methods of social research.

II. REFERENCE LEVELS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON VIOLENCE

One major criterion for discriminating between individual approaches in research on violence (and in social research in general), which, to some extent, runs counter to the above-mentioned classification of various reasons for a qualitative approach, is the *reference level of empirical knowledge in the social sciences*. This can differ for individual projects. Generally speaking, three levels can be distinguished: first, the “objective” *course of events or circumstances in a society*; second, the *subjective perceptions of such events or circumstances* by those individuals who are involved or observing; and, third, the *memories of formerly experienced events or formerly observed circumstances* that are recollected at a later time, for example in a research interview (see Böttger, 1999).

But—and this is a general comment—positivism’s continued claim that an “objective” reality can be perceived and explained without distortions is abandoned by the form of critical rationalism that provides the most frequent basis for quantitative empiricism in the theory of science (see Popper, 1971). This is because every perception is subject to interpretations and filterings. In general, this “objective level” of social reality (labeled the *course level* in the following) no longer plays any role in qualitative social research. However, although this level remains ultimately inaccessible, the explanatory power of scientific findings can be examined critically by, for example, applying various, also nonverbal, methods of data collection (such as observations)—ideally each applied by several researchers. For qualitative research on violence, an example of when this can become decisive is when the aim is to assess the impact of “objectively” verifiable social conditions on violent acts and their motives.

Nonetheless, traditional qualitative empirical research focuses predominantly on the verbally conveyed *social world from the perspective of the actors*, that is, the persons being studied (see, e.g., Kade, 1983:67). This means the level on which social reality is experienced directly (labeled the *experience level* in the following) as well as the level of actual self-display in the research situation in which memories of earlier experience are confounded with interpretations, exclusions, and, at this stage, also subsequent amendments (labeled the *actualization level*). Strictly speaking, the levels of experience and actualization cannot be separated completely in research, because the experience level deals mostly with “momentary snapshots” that then immediately become part of memory, thus always shifting the process of studying them to the actualization level.

But respondents’ earlier experience of biographical events can also serve as a goal of qualitative empirical research. The qualitative data collection process can try to reconstruct earlier subjective experience as precisely as possible since, notwithstanding later processes of interpretation, this can still largely be seen as part of an individual’s reservoir of knowledge. For example, the experience level becomes the object of qualitative research on violence when the goal is to identify which motives and other subjective conditions were effective before or during the perpetration of earlier violent acts. The *actualization level*, in contrast, is relevant when the aim is to illuminate an individual’s current self-concept at the time of the survey, including the retrospectively actualized biography belonging to this self-concept. Research on violence pursues such an approach when, for example, the goal is to assess the subjective experiences of violent persons from their own perspective at a certain point in time. This perspective may cover the subjective interpretation of their own socialization just as much as current problems, wishes, or dreams.

III. METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

In North America, the methods of *ethnography* represent the most prominent tradition in qualitative research on violence (see, e.g., Thrasher, 1963, [1927]; Whyte, 1981, [1943]), and have also been the methods applied most frequently in recent decades (see, e.g., McCall, 1978; Ferrell & Hamm, 1998).

As a rule, ethnographic studies are characterized by a varied and flexible use of several individual techniques (see McCall, 1978; Jessor, Colby, & Shweder, 1996). The focus is always on “participant observation” in which the researcher adopts an active role as an investigator in the field over a long period of time, which may well extend to years. Participant observation is supplemented by unstructured interviews, focus groups, and/or content analysis techniques for examining contemporary and cultural documents or texts composed by persons in the field. The consequences of applying such a variety of methods are considered to be a particularly problematic aspect of ethnographic approaches to the phenomenon of violence (as well as to other social phenomena): it is almost impossible to subject all potential combinations to standardized rules of application and analysis. However, it is precisely this many-sided access to the field (in the sense of a triangulation of methods) that makes it possible to anticipate more “valid” results (this will be addressed below). Sometimes, the risk of losing the scientist’s “external perspective” is also considered problematic. When work in the field continues over several years, scientists may unconsciously adopt the dominant norms and values of the field. Nonetheless, pointing out this “threat” also reveals a principal strength of the ethnographic approach: It is precisely this danger of a loss of distance that makes “going native” also amount to the greatest possible direct contact with the social phenomenon under study and the actors involved (see Flick, 1995:161). A good example of this is the close friendship between Whyte and one of his “corner boys” (see Whyte, 1981, [1943]:361ff). Nonetheless, researchers who take an ethnographic approach to violence may also be confronted with a dilemma: Under some circumstances, their role in the field may compel them to also become involved in illegal violence, creating not only legal but also ethical problems (see Lyng, 1998).

Compared with North America, European research on violence tends toward a more widespread use of interview procedures. Biographical approaches frequently apply the *narrative interview* method introduced about 25 years ago by Fritz Schütze (1976). He considered the goal of his procedure to be to “lure out” so-called “impromptu narratives” that should initially be allowed to flow without being interrupted by the interviewer (follow-up questions are asked during a later phase). The assumption is that precisely stories of this kind convey the subjective interpretation of biographical events in the form in which they occurred at the time the events were experienced. In other words, they are directed toward the “experience level” in the sense of the concepts developed above. Rausch (1999) has applied this method to violent racist youth. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the advantage of eliciting intrinsically closed narratives has to be weighed against the disadvantage of not always being able to systematically gather additional information relevant for the interpretation.

The *problem-centered interview* developed by Witzel (see 1982, 1996) is used to assess qualitative data—or texts—which may refer equally to either the current life world of the respondents or their interpretations of prior biographical events made at the time of the interview. Unlike the narrative interview, this form of data collection is shaped by dialogue and supported by a guideline. The use of a guideline and the interviewer’s opportunities to intervene during the interview permit a more rigorous orientation toward

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