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Rediscovering Qualitative Research

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PART 3

Working within a qualitative tradition
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3.1
REDISCOVERING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
Pieter Van den Broeck

Planning theory and practice have seen a long evolution of research agendas and methods, related to various and sometimes conflicting knowledge traditions. These research agendas mobilise a wide spectrum of epistemologies, theories, research strategies and research methods, which need to be identified to understand the nature of a specific research project. In this context, ‘qualitative research’ – when defined as ‘research using non-quantitative research methods/techniques’ (e.g., participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, field observation or participatory mapping) – is a rather poor characterisation of a research project. Although each of the following nine chapters in Part 3 indeed do mobilise these specific non-quantitative methods and sometimes explicitly discuss them, they – more importantly – are also specific combinations of an epistemological position, theories, research strategies and research methods.

Is it then at all possible to identify meaningful commonalities and a concomitant definition of ‘qualitative research’ in the chapters included in Part 3? We think it is, but only if we go beyond ‘qualitative research’ as referring to qualitative methods. First, it appears that – in the range from positivist to social constructionist epistemologies – ‘qualitative’ refers mostly to the social-constructionist side of that spectrum, which also more or less fits the majority of the chapters in Part 3. The nine chapters indeed mobilise social constructionist methodologies, including related theories and specific research methods. The authors see knowledge as socially constructed, uncover multiple forms of knowledge and combine the analysis of actors, knowledge systems, values, cultures, institutions, etc. Most of the chapters report research in which the phenomena that are analysed and their contexts are closely related and try to understand these phenomena in their sociocultural contexts. The methods used accordingly help us to grasp people’s perspectives, stories, experiences and valuations, as well as the ways these are socio-institutionally structured. These methods are also designed to uncover deeper meanings in social processes (see, e.g., chapters by Silverman, Pinel, Håkansson and Dühr). Second, reflexivity and a concern for ethical questions are prominent in ‘qualitative research’. Given a focus on actors’ strategies and societal dynamics, qualitative methodologies are well suited to account for social dimensions and egalitarian goals in planning. Due to the normative position of planning, some strands in planning theory, practice and research have given greater consideration to equity issues and advocacy in planning. The chapters in Part 3 thus raise questions about the capacity of research to empower individuals and groups, the tension between protection of informants
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('informed consent') and the need for ‘research intelligence’, and the like (see, e.g., Silverman, Davis and Hatuka, and Håkansson). Third, many chapters refer to pragmatism, grounded theory and action research to inform their gradual and cyclical development of theory, methodology, empirical work, and analysis and interpretation, identified by some as ‘abduction’ or ‘emergent research design’. Planning’s rootedness in practice, an action-orientation and the aims of social change make this more self-evident than in other research disciplines. Qualitative planning research is thus strongly related to practice. Although it doesn’t necessarily give direct guidance to practice or practitioners, it can lead to co-production of shared problem statements, build methods of practice from methods of research, or change courses of action in real-life situations (see, e.g., Ng, Pinel, Håkansson and Quintana). The chapters in Part 5 elaborate further on this.

Fourth, the topics of qualitative planning research are not only related to a social-constructionist epistemological position. They also focus on actors’ strategies in their societal dynamics and the interaction of research and practice. Thus, the chapters in this part find stimulation in the qualitative tradition in the exploration of collaborative practice, the production of meaning and values, the cultural meaning of physical space and urban morphology, mapping, socio-economic mechanisms, the profession of planning, potentials for future change, power mechanisms and social exclusion, etc. Finally, several chapters (e.g., Silverman, Pinel, Dühr, Buunk and van der Weide, Davis and Hatuka) stress that ‘qualitative research’ demands the same or even more rigour than is often associated with quantitative methodologies. This applies to research strategies as well as specific research methods. A solid analytical framework, sound methodological design, attention to bias, subjectivity and interaction effects, careful selection of cases, techniques to stimulate self-reflection, iterative and ongoing data-analysis, techniques for recording, organizing, and analysing data, etc. can all help to assure the validity of qualitative research, whether evaluated according to more positivist or more interpretative criteria.

Beyond the commonalities of ‘qualitative research’ identified earlier and as already mentioned, specific research projects can be properly characterised only as specific combinations of an epistemological position, theories, research strategy and research methods. Besides some common aspects, the chapters of Part 3 thus give an idea of the variety of qualitative research. This is reinforced by the different contexts the authors come from: Asia, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and the US.

Robert Silverman first explains a number of general principles for analysing qualitative data. He highlights how qualitative analysis is an ongoing activity in the research process and how qualitative data analysis is systematic. It involves the use of tried and tested techniques for recording, organizing, and analysing data, including problem framing, normalising and managing anxiety, coding data, memoing, diagramming and flexible thinking. The main part of Silverman’s chapter, however, discusses the application of core qualitative methods to planning practice. The methods identified in the chapter do not make up an exhaustive list, but provide a foundation for the acquisition of additional skills in qualitative analysis. Topics covered in the chapter include: field notes and field observations, semi-structured interviewing and focus groups. Each topic is discussed in the context of planning practice and supported by examples from the author’s own research – for example, on community development corporations and homeowners’ associations in Detroit. Finally, participatory action research is identified as a growing field.

In the completely different context of Hong Kong, Mee Kam Ng starts from a core discussion in planning theory on collaborative planning, to seek out the truth about the more bottom-up as well as government-initiated community engagement activities in post-1997 Hong Kong. She develops a flexible research framework as well as an appropriate strategy, research questions and suitable methodologies. This is even more important in the Asian context since many of the
theories developed in the urban field are based on western contexts that could be fundamentally different from Asian ones. Ng then explains how she identified four major cases as representative of the urban development and planning issues under study. A three-pronged approach was developed to proceed with the research: desktop research to position the case studies in broader socio-economic and political changes, interviews with different key stakeholders, and efforts to participate in various engagement activities related to the case studies. Ng finally stresses the importance of generating locally grounded knowledge, pointing to avenues for practical and transformative actions.

Sandra Lee Pinel and Maria Håkansson both focus on ethnographic inquiry as the close observation of the people and events being studied and on accounting for how the actual context affects those observations. Ethnographies now describe culture as how people mediate change through symbols, social institutions and their own agents. Participatory research involves the ‘subjects’ of the research or planning intervention in defining research questions and collecting data, and may even focus on how the community is empowered towards transformative action. It requires a will and ability of researchers to critically reflect reality, to see other aspects of it from an open and flexible attitude. Pinel first briefly reviews three planning problems that call for the use of ethnography: finding and documenting the values and concerns of stakeholders; evaluating the feasibility and appropriateness of alternative courses of action; and facilitating collaborative spatial planning through understanding various cultural landscapes. Pinel's chapter then describes participant observation, semi-structured interviews and participatory mapping as three of the most established ethnographic methods from cultural anthropology and human geography. The author’s own work as a planner and researcher on western US Indian tribal governments is used as an illustration.

Håkansson considers the way meaning is shaped, individually and in interaction with others. The basic ground in this kind of research entails asking what something means rather than revealing the truth. The research process and the outcome thus include interpretative understanding, creating meaning and aiming to gain a more in-depth understanding of the individuals’ experiences. As such, there is an interaction between data gathering and the development of theories. Ideally, data gathering, data processing, analysis and theory building take place simultaneously. Therefore we also need a repertoire of suitable methods to involve people as subjects in ethnographic studies. In this sense, the approach is pedagogic – through the interaction with and involvement of the practitioners. The methods used need to help us to grasp people’s perspectives, stories, experiences and valuations, and understand the phenomenon in its socio-cultural context. Håkansson identifies and discusses interviews, focus groups and observations as suitable methods. Also, text analysis as discourse analysis can be useful, but is not discussed in her chapter.

In Stefanie Dühr’s chapter, a qualitative research design to investigate the design and content of policy maps and text in different European countries is presented. The analytical framework for spatial planning maps is based on theoretical perspectives on cartography and spatial planning, which understand maps as social constructions. Such interpretative approaches require a discussion of the methodological challenges of empirical analysis, including how to control for subjectivity in the reading of maps and texts. Applying a ‘deconstructivist’ approach to map analysis or map reading requires qualitative research methods that allow a deeper reflection on the planning context and the resulting plan maps and an understanding of the potential of maps to shape discourse, to empower some parts of the public or the territory and to disadvantage others. With the help of cartographic literature, Dühr develops criteria for analysing both the graphic and linguistic structure of cartographic representations in strategic spatial plans.
The aim of Gabriela Quintana Vigiola’s research is to explore the relationship between the urban morphology of a place and its inhabitants and how a sense of place is constructed within urban psychosocial practices. Quintana focuses on the interpenetration of the process of a religious procession in Venezuela and its specific morphology. To understand the meaning within the space and culture, a qualitative case study approach and ethnographic methods presented themselves as the most appropriate option. Within this approach, Quintana highlights the importance of piloting, organizing different research stages and continuous data analysis. Furthermore, Quintana establishes close links to the community that she works with. From a socio-constructionist epistemology she mobilises qualitative methods as participant observation, interviews and informal conversations, audiovisual and photographical survey, and bibliographic review. In addition, a series of urban analyses, such as public space system, urban fabric and its building blocks, land uses and paths, among others, are linked to the places people recognise as meaningful.

W.W. Buunk and L.M.C. van der Weide show how discourse analysis can be used as a research method to find underlying values that play a role in the practice of planning processes and decision making. Discourse analysis can unravel the meaning of specific words, like ‘justice’, ‘pride’ or ‘urban density’, which can be recognised as values, when it becomes clear in their social context how they express deep felt beliefs, general preferences, motives, incentives, desires or more practical judgments in social and political processes. Discourse analysis thus lends insight into the frames and storylines by which actors create their view of the world, and of spatial development issues. The challenge is to have the confidence to interpret the outcome of discursive analysis, using academic knowledge and skills, as well as practical expertise. Buunk and van der Weide demonstrate the search for values in two different research strategies followed in two projects in the Netherlands: one is strictly empirical, using document analysis and loosely structured interviews with key actors, and in the other the theoretical framework was developed alongside the empirical analysis.

Diane Davis and Tali Hatuka aim to bring creative visioning back into the planning lexicon. They argue that future visioning can be a ‘method’ deployed by planners and designers to generate knowledge about the city, as well as to assess the limits and possibilities of effective planning action. Visioning exercises can produce a critical understanding of real-world institutional and political-economic constraints, while at the same time nurturing the hope that the future can be different. Furthermore, they can reveal the misperceptions, intransigence and biases of citizens and other stakeholders, which also must be recognised as key elements in the planning process. Davis and Hatuka base their knowledge on data generated in the course of an experimental project called the ‘Just Jerusalem Competition’, which used visioning to generate non-conventional planning strategies for that city. Using discourse analysis, they map and assess the data about possible urban futures, categorise them along a continuum from pragmatic to utopian ideas, and identify ideas that transcend the pragmatic-utopian divide as potentially visionary.

Finally, Mahyar Arefi provides an account of an exploratory research into the contradictions of contemporary Dubai, starting from a background of Dubai’s complex development history. From its inception as a fishing village to its rise as an emerging global city, Dubai has changed drastically in a short time. In addition to its Arab roots, Dubai has joined the global economic network, and has assumed leadership as a main trading and export centre. The chapter focuses on Dubai’s old and new commercial geographies (souqs and shopping malls) which occupy a considerable portion of Dubai’s land use and manifest the tension between globalisation and tradition. Based on an operationalisation of “types and scales of elusiveness”, observation and interviews, the chapter explores how souqs survived the explosion of shopping malls and how
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intricate interrelationships emerged both on physical and socio-economic scales, thus showing pathways to new research questions to be answered.

The variety of theories, research strategies, topics and research methods in the chapters in Part 3 shows how planning research is developing a growing tradition of ‘qualitative’ research, beyond qualitative techniques. Within a predominantly social-constructionist epistemology, planning research provides insight into how planning practices, tactics and strategies are part and parcel of social dynamics and the interplay of agency with socio-economics, knowledge systems, cultural expression, values and imagination, and discourses, etc. The position and meaning of past and present planning strategies – for example, in terms of equity and social inclusion or exclusion – become more and more clear. Although the selected chapters cannot cover all the research strategies or methods – we are, for example, aware of gaps regarding socio-ecological dynamics, planning and design, or institutionalist analysis – we are confident that these chapters offer stepping stones for further exploration of the planning research field.