An Invitation to Qualitative Fieldwork

A Multilogical Approach

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Table of Contents in Brief

Preface

1. The Multilogical Approach

Ways of Relating
2. Participants and Communities – the They Voice
3. Researchers – the You Voice
4. The Audience – the We Voice

Ways of Gathering
5. Listening: Interview Methods
6. Looking: Ethnographic Observation
7. Participating: Action Research, Collaboration, and Auto-Ethnography

Ways of Telling
8. The Multilogics of Writing
9. The Promise of Field Work

References
Glossary / Index
Table of Contents in Detail

Preface

1. The Multilogical Approach
   • Contextuality and Intercontextuality
   • A Multilogical Method for a Multilogical World
   • Weber’s Scar
   • The Three Voices of Research
   • A Cooking Book for Qualitative Fieldwork
   • The Form of the Book

Ways of Relating

2. Participants and Communities – the They Voice
   • Multiplicity
   • Singularity

Recipes for the They Voice
   • A Context Dump
   • Population Narratives
   • Link Holes and “The Literature”
   • The Trouble with Categories

3. Researchers – the You Voice
   • Positionality
   • Narrativity

Recipes for the You Voice
   • Who am I?
   • The Familiar Stranger
   • The Interested Innocent
   • Communicating Your Story
   • Shining a Light
   • Authorial Authority

4. The Audience – the We Voice
• Contestability
• Extendability

Recipes for the We Voice
• Triangulation
• Heteroglossia
• Disconfirmation
• Accessibility
• Extending
• Unfinalizability

Ways of Gathering

5. Listening: Interview Methods
• Before the Interview
  • Theoretical Sampling
  • Recruitment
• During the Interview
  • Interview Guides and Probing
  • Power Relations in an Interview
  • Informed Consent
• Time and Place
• Bringing the Interview to Conclusion
  • After the Interview
    • Summaries, Notes, and Analytical Memos
    • Coding and Memoing

Recipes for Listening
• Sampling Frames
• Interview Guides
• Participant Recruitment
• Interview Exercise
• The Note Taking Triangle
• An Interview Notes Template
• Transcription
• Interview Analysis and Coding
• A Note on Focus Groups
6. Looking: Ethnographic Observation
   • Getting In
   • In the Field
   • Remembering to Remember

Recipes for Looking
   • Access Canvass
   • Jottings 3x3
   • Training the Eye
   • Field Notes: a Template
   • Analysis: Writing Forward

7. Participating: Action Research, Collaboration, and Autoethnography
   • Research with People
   • Processes of Participation
   • Forms of Participatory Research
   • Participating with Your Self: Autoethnography

Recipes for Participating
   • Collaborative Autoethnography
   • Contestability in Autoethnography
   • Participating with...
   • The Nobel Savage
   • The Research Cycle
   • Member Checking
   • Adding Action
   • Citizen Science
   • Emotional Recall
   • Translating

Ways of Telling

8. The Multilogics of Writing
   • Multilogical Writing
     • Venue
• Social Science Art
• Narrativity and Partiality
  • Writing Multilogically
    • The Lead
    • Methods and Results
    • Getting It Out the Door

Recipes for Writing
  • Voicing
  • Academic Art
  • Fiction for Nonfiction’s Sake
  • Venues
  • Results by Numbers

9. The Promise of Field Work

References
Glossary / Index
Preface

What is there left to say about qualitative methods? Once seen as the realm of outlaws and bohemians, qualitative research is now an accepted and prominent feature of the academic landscape. Indeed, our own academic library lists hundreds of books about qualitative methodology. Do we really need another one?

We believe, yes, we really do. There is more to say, much more, precisely because so many scholars are now talking about qualitative research. The endeavor is growing rapidly and lushly, with a wide range of new cultivars, polymorphs, and off-shoots. Indeed, qualitative methods have become so diverse that it is easy to feel bewildered by its variety and overwhelmed by its increasingly detailed body of knowledge. Even experienced qualitative fieldworkers sometimes feel left behind and confused, kind of like a parent of a teenager, befuddled and maybe even alarmed by the latest cultural trends.

That’s why we titled this book An Invitation to Qualitative Fieldwork. We mean it to be a welcome to students, novices, and rookies to try their hand at qualitative fieldwork. And we mean it to be a re-invitation for those looking for a refresher. We seek to provide a clear language for thinking about fieldwork, along with practical tips for making it happen. As we describe in Chapter One, we think of this invitation as a kind of cooking book – a work that explains both the “why to” and “how to” of qualitative cooking, both the theory of qualitative research and practical “recipes” for how to do it. Such an approach we hope will be inviting to
those feeling a bit scared by all the stuff that we have now in the cabinets and drawers of the qualitative kitchen.

Fieldwork sometimes has a mystique, as though it takes a special kind of person, someone more adventurous or outgoing than many of us. It really only takes a special set of skills, and enough knowledge of the logics those skills embody to be able to adapt them to the unique circumstances of every fieldwork project. By blending practical advice and exercises with more philosophical considerations, our book aims to teach the skills and knowledge needed to cook up a fieldwork project from inception to fruition.

As such, this book can be used in two ways. Read it in order, learning about the different methods and perspectives of qualitative fieldwork from conception to dissemination. Alternatively, if you have a question on a particular topic—consent forms?—or want to practice a skill—ethnographic observation?—skip around. The index is thorough and complete, filled with references to where you can find skills, topics, and other practical matters that the book covers.

The kitchen of social context is infinitely complex. But there is no need to make what comes out of it bland and dull, because of some sense that we need to simplify its possibilities. Through fieldwork, we can embrace that complexity and the multiple logics it manifests. We can make a social science cuisine that is tasty, nutritious, fulfilling, and diverse. And it doesn’t have to be difficult. We hope in this book to show how, using multilogical methods for a multilogical world.