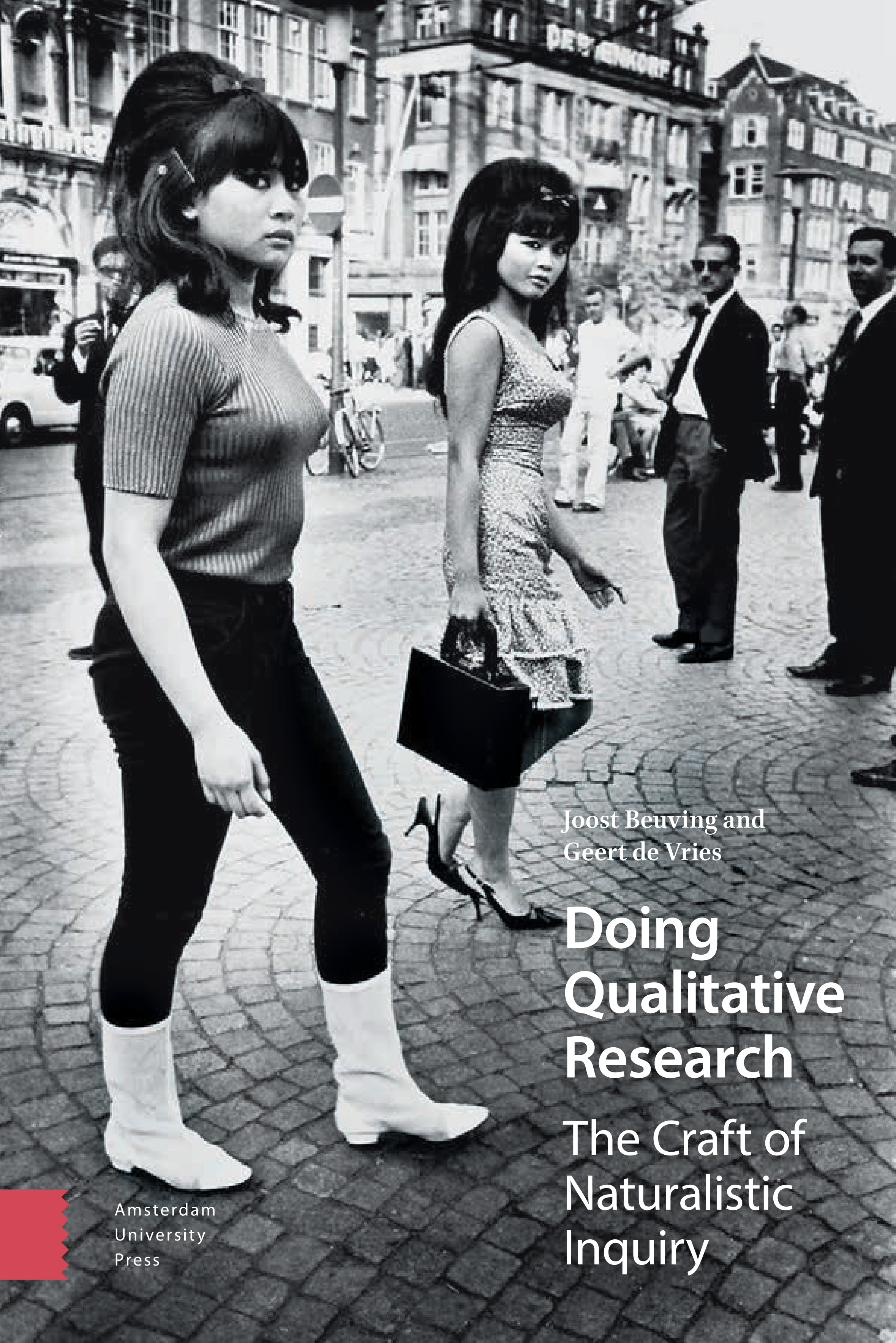

Joost Beuving and
Geert de Vries

Doing Qualitative Research

The Craft of Naturalistic Inquiry

Amsterdam
University
Press

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Amsterdam and Utrecht, October 2014.

Introduction: The arc of naturalistic inquiry

> *Be a good craftsman. Let every man be his own methodologist; let every man be his own theorist; let theory and method again become part of the practice of a craft.*
>
> – C. Wright Mills

Humans are an inquisitive social species. We habitually survey the world around us, looking at our fellow human beings, wondering what makes them do what they do. Think of a close friend at university who unexpectedly drops her course work to dash on a trip around the world. Or consider an older colleague in a seemingly stable marriage who begins an affair with a much younger man. In addition to asking questions of a personal nature, we ask questions of a social nature, pertaining to situations with which we are confronted and societies in which we live our lives. How come that ever more yuppies seem to move into my neighbourhood? How will the newcomers and we, the established, manage to live together? How does our society change and evolve?

Asking these questions is part of everyday life but it is also at the heart of social research. This book is concerned with one particular – and we will argue: a very productive – way that social researchers study the world, called 'naturalistic inquiry'. An initial definition of naturalistic inquiry is: studying people in everyday circumstances by ordinary means. This includes observing how people go about their daily business and how they interact, listening to what they have to tell, considering what they accomplish and produce, understanding what their stories, interactions and accomplishments mean, and reporting back to them. Inquiring naturalistically by ordinary means in social research is like playing on authentic instruments according to original practices in classical music or like using biological ingredients according to local recipes in cooking. It is an effort to get back to what has been lost through mechanization, standardization, digitalization, and other forces of modernization. 'Social research' nowadays too often consists of conducting surveys via the Internet, transforming answers of so-called respondents into 'data', applying advanced statistical techniques to those data, and reporting the outcomes in specialist journals that few ordinary people can read. Naturalistic inquiry aims to bridge the gulf that has emerged between social scientists on the one hand and the rest of humanity on the other hand.

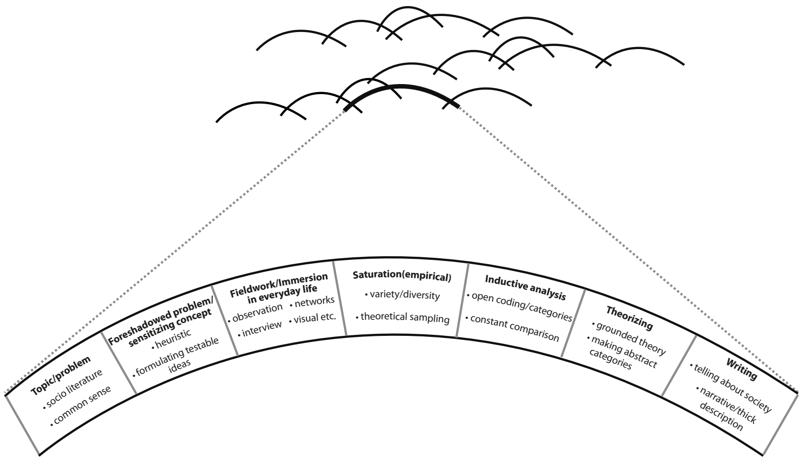
As we will argue, naturalistic inquiry can result in surprising and important insights into the working of society – insights that cannot be gained from surveys or experiments. It can also make these insights understandable and fruitful for many people. Of course, it has its own problems. The naturalistic social researcher studies society as it presents itself naturally. She does not control the situation like researchers using surveys do. Naturalistic inquiry also is an unobtrusive strategy. It cannot – nor does it want to – dissect or manipulate a situation like experimenters can. This confronts the naturalistic social researcher with a special set of challenges. How to choose the situations and the people to be studied? How to combine different research tools (such as interviewing, observing, and reading biographies or poems) in a single research project? How do the meanings people give to their lives compare to the meanings the naturalistic researcher is inclined to attribute to them? Is the outcome of a particular naturalistic inquiry representative? And if so: representative of what?

In the spirit of naturalistic inquiry, this book does not present a cookbook approach to resolving these challenges. This is not a book of recipes. Instead, it aims to stimulate your ingenuity and creativity in coming to terms with the challenges by presenting experiences and solutions, both from key thinkers and from field practitioners. In doing so, it will hopefully help you to become a better cook.

The book builds on the idea that naturalistic inquiry is not something special: it is something that we do all the time. As competent members of society, we routinely interact with a diversity of different persons; we watch them carrying out their business; and, by talking to them, we gain a broad understanding of their points of view. In this sense, we are all 'naturals' at doing research. The challenge of *naturalistic* inquiry for social research is to draw on our natural understandings with a particular ambition in mind: to consciously develop a deeper, theoretical understanding of society. 'Theory' is a charged concept, evoking a world of painstaking and esoteric reflection that seems to be accessible only to a small circle of specialists; but that is not at all what the book intends to say. We look at social theory as one form of 'telling about society' (Becker, 2007), representing that society in a condensed, scientifically informed, yet accessible narrative. To be a credible academic narrative, that story must be both well connected to a body of existing knowledge and carefully grounded in empirical facts.

To be a credible public narrative, both the story and the facts must reflect the lived realities of ordinary people. Such facts can be presented in standardized and quantified units, e.g. in tables and graphs. More often, though, the naturalistic researcher will employ a more diverse empirical register, includ-

Figure 1 The arc of naturalistic inquiry


Topic/problem
• socio literature
• common sense
Foreshadowed problem/ sensitizing concept
• heuristic
• formulating testable ideas
Fieldwork/Immersion in everyday life
• observation
• networks
• interview
• visual etc.
Saturation(empirical)
• variety/diversity
• theoretical sampling
Inductive analysis
• open coding/categories
• constant comparison
Theorizing
• grounded theory
• making abstract categories
Writing
• telling about society
• narrative/thick description

ing statements of his or her informants, ethnographic descriptions of their social interactions, selections from documents, photographs or other cultural artefacts, and historical reflections on the circumstances under which all of these emerged. Usually, the naturalistic inquirer will draw on all of them at the same time. This book gives guidance in making use of these various registers and explores their place in academic discussions about social theory.

Because of its non-standardized nature, naturalistic inquiry cannot be learned by reading books or by following specialized classes. It is a craft (see also textbox 1). Developing that craft first of all requires hands-on training of skills in the field. These skills start with selecting a problem and asking questions. A naturalistic research project usually begins with a relatively open question that merely points at a particular problematic or 'foreshadowed problem' (Malinowski, 1978). As you proceed, questions tend to become more focused up to a point that you reach saturation: new questions do not result in additional understanding. The process itself is done by making observations of everyday-life social practices; by carrying out qualitative interviews based on asking open or semi-structured questions; by collecting and studying available texts, images and things people produce; by exploring networks (of kinship, friendship, work, sex); by systematically comparing various interpretations and explanations; and last but not least by writing a text that ties everything together and solves the initial problem in a convincing way – the most convincing way, given the materials gathered. As a whole this process may be viewed as an arc:

the arc of naturalistic inquiry, see Figure 1. In the course of the book, we repeatedly refer back to this arc.

On the one hand, the arc symbolizes the distance the naturalistic inquirer travels. Beginning with a mere problem, she ponders on what questions best to ask. She immerses herself in fieldwork by exposing herself both at length and in depth to the everyday life of people. Gradually, her questions become focused and her experience becomes saturated. Often, she explores the various meanings and possible explanations of her findings several times. She gradually distils them into a theory that is grounded in those findings. And she then writes in order to make her findings and conclusions available to others – 'telling about society' – including the people her inquiry was about.

On the other hand, the arc symbolizes that the naturalistic inquirer returns to her initial problem, but not at the same spot upon which she started. She has carried the problem further and she has provided new, deeper insight into it.[1]

We have drawn the arc of naturalistic inquiry as being one enlargement out of a whole canopy or mosaic of inquiries. This is to remind us that each separate scientific study is just one of a much larger number of studies, being conducted both simultaneously and consecutively by other researchers. It is a contribution to that canopy or mosaic. Apart from providing the most convincing explanation of her own problem (her own facet), the naturalistic researcher must ask herself how her contribution relates to the canopy as a whole, how it fits in with the larger mosaic.

The key difference between participating in society *naturally* and researching society *naturalistically* is that, while participating, the naturalistic inquirer makes a sustained effort to reflexively understand both society and her own participation in it. Reflexive understanding may be described as the capacity to think about one's own thinking. The arc of naturalistic inquiry represents the road towards this reflexive understanding and the competences required at each stage. Taken together, these competences constitute the craft of naturalistic inquiry.

It is important to stress that the arc, as we have drawn it in Figure 1, represents in a stylized and simplified way what naturalistic inquirers actually do. As usual, reality is more complex and messy than the way it is officially portrayed. Typically, a naturalistic researcher regularly shuttles back and forth along the arc. After having explored initial concepts by asking broad questions of her informant, she may return to her initial problem: 'Is high school dropout really the problem, or should I delve deeper and focus on the underlying problem of youth unemployment?' Or: 'Is sex work a health problem, as it is often presented, or should I also look at it as a symbolic issue for politicians and moral entrepreneurs?' While already coding and analysing her material, she may decide to return to the field once more and do some additional in-depth interviewing among a specific set of people. 'I cannot fully understand the situation without also taking into account the viewpoint of truancy officers.' Or: 'I must go back and interview a few more police officers from the red light district precinct in order to be able to fully factor in their perspective.' And so forth. Naturalistic inquiry is often described as an 'iterative' process, rather than a linear one. Still, the overall movement is a steady one from left to right along the arc.

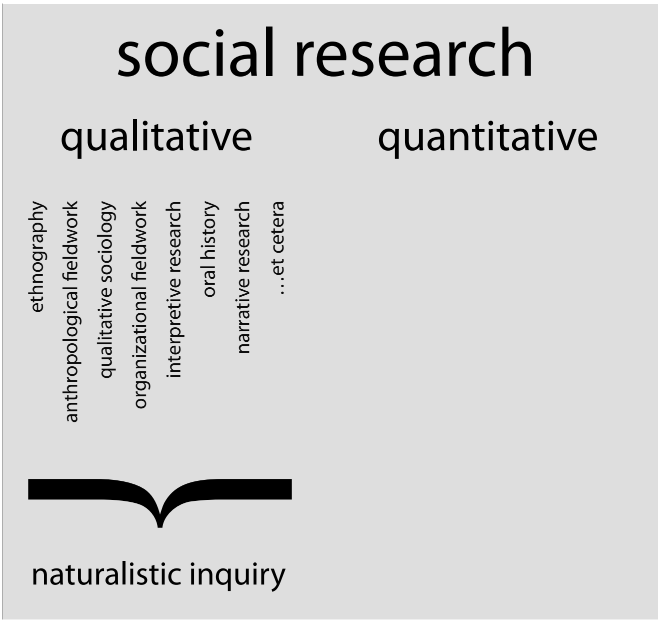
---

[1] Conventionally, this is referred to as the empirical cycle. It is often visualized as a circle, suggesting that the researcher eventually returns to the same spot. The image of an arc better represents the progress that is being made, the insight gained. A next logical step would be to visualize the process as a spiral, moving forward. For clarity of exposition, we have chosen the image of an arc.

Naturalistic inquiry and qualitative research

How to situate naturalistic inquiry in the field of qualitative research and of social research in general? Broadly speaking, qualitative research in social science aims to describe, interpret, and explain social reality through the medium of language (as opposed to quantitative research, which aims to do so through the medium of mathematics). Qualitative research thus is a generic approach in social research covering ethnography, anthropological fieldwork, qualitative sociology, organizational fieldwork, interpretive research, oral history, narrative research, and so on (see Figure 2). Although each of these has its own tradition, usually linked with the history of a particular social-scientific discipline (anthropology, sociology, organizational and administrative science, social history, linguistics), we feel that they all belong to the same family. As we emphasize in the figure, they are branches of the same tree of qualitative research. Naturalistic research is qualitative research by ordinary means into everyday situations, aiming to disturb these situations as little as possible. It strives to blend in, respecting people in their everyday lives, taking their actions and experiences seriously, and building on these carefully. As a craft, naturalistic inquiry may be considered the artisanal core of qualitative research and hence of ethnography and all the other varieties of qualitative research.

Figure 2 Place of naturalistic inquiry in social research


social research
qualitative
quantitative
ethnography
anthropological fieldwork
qualitative sociology
organizational fieldwork
interpretive research
oral history
narrative research
…et cetera
naturalistic inquiry

Genesis and audience of the book

This book grew out of teaching social research methods to a variety of undergraduate and graduate students in anthropology, sociology, political science, communication science, liberal arts, and management and organization studies. The authors, the one trained as a social anthropologist (Beuving) and the other as a historical sociologist (de Vries), co-designed and co-taught several research methods courses at the VU University and the Amsterdam University College. In the process, we explored our shared interests in naturalistic inquiry and gradually began to formulate what we feel are its basic principles. We searched for ways to better share these principles with our students, and this book is one attempt to do so. Our ideas crystallized in an orderly way when we designed and co-taught the course 'Advanced Qualitative Research Methods' at the Amsterdam University College. The structure of that course found its way into the chapter organization that forms the backbone of this book.

Because it originates in teaching to a diverse audience, the book aims to speak to a broad readership of non-specialist readers. It does not depend on specific background knowledge, and its use in teaching is not confined to a particular discipline. Examples from the full breadth of the social sciences hopefully contribute to this. The book intends to resonate with the questions and queries of both the novice and the more seasoned student of social research. Thus, it can be used for teaching at both undergraduate and (post) graduate level. Perhaps the sole requirement for fruitfully using the book is a genuine interest in both empirical and theoretical questions. In the spirit of naturalistic inquiry, the book approaches the 'grand theories' (Mills, 1959) taught in many of the social science curricula not as revealed truths but rather as interesting propositions for empirical inquiry, to be further explored in a naturalistic setting. In the same spirit, the book considers the 'abstracted empiricism' (Mills, *ibid.*) taught or implied in many of the methods tracks of the same curricula – measurement models; scale construction; survey interviewing – as distracting from serious theoretical thinking. As Peter Berger has remarked: 'In science as in love, a concentration on technique is likely to lead to impotence' (Berger, 1963). Naturalistic inquiry has a distinct and important place in social research, which is usually done in faculties of social sciences and institutes for social research. Its use is not limited to that however. In medicine, for example, there is an increasing interest in exploring the life worlds of patients in order to better understand the impact of medical treatments, the use of prescribed medicines, the consumption of illegal drugs, the family constellations of psychiatric patients, the social networks of elderly and very old people, and so forth.

Beyond the world of social science and medicine, naturalistic inquiry is practiced in management consultancy. When asked to advise on the future of a company or organization, serious consultants often negotiate the opportunity to first do a round of naturalistic inquiry that includes all stakeholders – including at shop floor level. This allows them to gain in-depth insight into the company or organization and to come up with solutions that are supported by that organization as a whole (instead of only by its shareholders or board). This is one reason why naturalistic inquiry has an affinity with the field of organizational studies and organizational anthropology.

More informally and even more widely, students who have been trained in naturalistic inquiry benefit from it in the various professional environments that they encounter after graduating from university. Many of our students, for instance, reported that they could understand company meetings better because they had come to appreciate their symbolic aspects – a point to which naturalistic inquiry draws attention (Barry & Slocum, 2003). Outside such meetings, what is often negatively stereotyped as 'gossip' in fact turned out to be an important vehicle for the background rehearsal of views expressed in meetings. Also, our students began to see how seemingly innocuous encounters at the coffee machine unveil important information about the network of interpersonal contacts at work; and they appreciated better the ritual aspects of encounters at the work place, for instance seeing how the yearly appraisal with the supervisor is a public way to reaffirm a difference in social status (see also Down & Reveley, 2004).

But even beyond the pragmatic considerations relating to manoeuvring in a work environment, naturalistic inquiry isessential in helping to understand the world around us better. Consider, for instance, the consequences of contemporary globalization. Because of globalizing migration, more and more people from different cultural backgrounds and walks of life live together. Initially applauded by cosmopolitan elites as denoting the success of the 'multicultural' society (Friedman, 2002), its more grim consequences are nowadays a popular topic for public conversation. The experience of cultural difference underpins this: living in close proximity with others whose customs and cultural practices are experienced as foreign, sometimes as alien. Through their ability to understand various life worlds 'from the inside', students trained in naturalistic inquiry may develop a special competence in making understandable cultural difference, a major step towards mitigating social tensions resulting from that. This book subscribes to the viewpoint that universities must foster public social science. Armed with the apparatus of naturalistic inquiry, social scientists can understand the life world of both those who are experienced as 'different' and those who feel threatened by them (Burawoy, 2005). They can offer the empirical antidote that is much needed to steer the overheated public debate around 'multiculturalism' and 'the other' into calmer waters.

Last but not least, the careers of many social research graduates will veer towards public office. They will work in the sphere of policymaking and implementation, and their decisions will affect the daily lives of considerable numbers of ordinary people. Thus, policymakers have a special responsibility in understanding the society in which they seek to intervene. Their interventions are routinely structured by the mass of statistical data that are available to them. Yet training in naturalistic inquiry can help them to look beyond mere numbers and imagine the real problems with which the members of society struggle. Naturalistic inquiry has a *verstehende* ambition, seeking to understand the problems of society from within; i.e. in terms of the viewpoints of its members. The world of policymaking is often far removed from that. Receiving training in naturalistic inquiry makes you more sensitive to the existence of multiple viewpoints on what seems from a distance to be a singular policy problem. This is a valuable capability which can, hopefully, contribute to a better world.

Outline

The book is divided into a sequence of eight chapters, roughly corresponding to the stages of the arc of naturalistic inquiry. As already touched upon, distinctions between the successive stages are to some extent artificial. Thinking about naturalistic inquiry, carrying it out in the field, and reflecting on the significance of the collected information for the problem of interest are interconnected practices. The book is thus critical of an idea of social research that looks at research as a linear trajectory from design through verification to established propositions. This is a normative simplification of what actually happens in the practice of doing naturalistic research (Kaplan, 1964; Feyerabend, 2002). Qualitative or naturalistic inquiry 'is designed in the doing' (Becker, 1993: 219). It entails a constant going back and forth, or iteration, between problem, questions, evidence, and theoretical ideas. Naturalistic inquiry entails a special commitment to 'thinking with data' instead of 'thinking about data' (Wuyts, 1993: 7). It revolves around the formulation and reformulation of essential concepts and relationships between these concepts as these emerge from empirical realities.

Chapter 1 carves out more securely than has been done in this introduction the outlines of naturalistic inquiry by contrasting it with positivism, a view that currently prevails in social research. It questions the often-made distinction between qualitative and quantitative research methods, arguing that both approaches to data collection have their place in naturalistic inquiry. Chapter 2 explores the role of social theory in naturalistic inquiry, advocating an iterative view on the relation between theoretical concepts and empirical findings, known as grounded theory. Chapters 3 to 6 explore different strategies in finding out about society, respectively: making focused observations; carrying out interviews and having casual conversations; studying texts, images, and things; looking at social networks. Chapter 7 is concerned with the analysis of qualitative information, propagating a procedure known as open coding: identifying small building blocks of data and creating abstract categories from them. This procedure logically flows into Chapter 8, which talks about writing in naturalistic inquiry. Writing about society and thinking about society are intertwined mental processes, mediated by data, and together they tell a story about society. In the Epilogue, we look back on the arc of naturalistic inquiry; we discuss problems of ethics and accountability; and we look ahead into the future – or futures – of naturalistic inquiry.

Box 1 Naturalistic inquiry: art, craft, or recipe?

Naturalistic inquiry may be viewed as an art, as an intellectual craft, or as a collection of techniques or recipes (Hammersley, 2004). Exemplary specimens of naturalistic inquiry, like William Foote Whyte's study of an American-Italian slum (*Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*, 1993 but first published in 1943), Clifford Geertz's study of the Balinese cock-fight ('Deep play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight', in Geertz, 1993) or Lila Abu-Lughod's study of the culture and poetry of North-African nomads (*Veiled Sentiments: Honour and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*, 1986), strike us as great works of art. Only a person well-versed in all aspects of her trade, having a deep knowledge of her subject-matter, being highly experienced in all matters of fieldwork, *and* being an accomplished and subtle writer, could have produced such a work.

Obviously, much artistry has gone into each one of them. Yet, like in Rembrandt van Rijn, Pablo Picasso, or Alexander Calder, the artistry of Whyte, Geertz, and Abu-Lughod is deeply rooted in craftsmanship. The idea of 'pure' artistry, descending from heaven and endowing the receiver with an effortless capacity to produce great works, is a romantic myth. It is an unfortunate myth, precisely because it obscures the role of learning, practicing, appropriating, exercising, fine-tuning, and combining the various competences that together make up a craft. Only as a result of extensive practice and exercise of all of these aspects may a craft eventually engender what we call art.

Nor, on the other hand, is naturalistic inquiry (or painting, or sculpting) solely a matter of technique. From a technical point of view, there may perhaps have been better painters – even better painters – than Rembrandt or Picasso in their respective days, and better sculptors than Calder. In a narrow sense of the word, there may have been better observers than Whyte; better describers of cultural artefacts than Geertz; or better interviewers than Abu-Lughod. However, there were no better interpreters *of what is important* than they were. And their sense of what is important was based on their simultaneous mastery of *all* the various aspects of their craft: being aware of the literature in their discipline; intuiting a problematic without prematurely narrowing down the focus of their research; having the stamina to hang around for prolonged periods of time; establishing rapport with those studied, having casual conversations with them and interviewing them at length; being alert to the meaning of images and things (objects, artefacts); being able to make sense out of the sum total of all the sometimes confusing materials gathered; and last but not least being able to write it all up. Each single aspect may be considered under the heading of 'technique'; of qualitative analysis; and so forth. Yet only the mastery of all of them, the ability to mobilize them in combination at the appropriate time, and the courage to deviate if need be from routines that may be 'technically' correct, mark the true craftsman or craftswoman. This goes for naturalistic inquiry as it goes for painting and sculpting.

It also goes for cooking. One cannot become a cook by rote learning recipes from a cookbook. Recipes are necessary: for chicken broth; for pizza dough; for basic tomato sauce; for omelette *fines herbes*. Cooks know these by heart and can prepare them blindly. What makes them good cooks, however, is that they know how and why these various recipes work; that they can combine them; that they can create new recipes for new dishes; and (most of all) that they can create courses from fortunate combinations of dishes and dinners from a stimulating series of courses. A good naturalistic study is like a good dinner. It may require various techniques; it may make strike you as a work of art; but its quality ultimately depends on craftsmanship.

1. On naturalistic inquiry: Key issues and practices

> *Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.*
>
> – Clifford Geertz

After our first acquaintance with naturalistic inquiry in the Introduction, this chapter goes into more depth. It begins with a discussion on interpretivism – the intellectual home of naturalistic inquiry – and positivism – which currently prevails in social research. It is shown that positivism, analogous to the natural world, looks for universal social laws in society, whereas interpretivism sees society as emerging from the actions and perspectives of its members. To study that emergent aspect of society, practitioners of naturalistic inquiry usually make a distinction in their work between describing, understanding, and explaining what people say and do, subsequently showing how in daily practice acts and meanings continuously interact. It is shown how this dialectical nature of the facts of society raises serious questions about proper – or useful – strategies in the collection of information. Moving into a discussion about research design, we pay specific attention to an often-used distinction between quantitative and qualitative research methods. We argue that the distinction between them, although often reiterated and even reified in scientific discourse, is a weak one if one considers a more fundamental difference between positivism and interpretivism. That is, in positivism, the researcher seeks to control the research situation, which from the viewpoint of naturalistic research is problematic because it engenders the creation of an artificial situation. Naturalistic inquiry, on the other hand, begins and ends with situations as they naturally occur and unfold in people's lives. That difference in viewpoint has obvious consequences for ideas about the validity and reliability of social research, a concluding point that the chapter addresses by offering practical suggestions.

1.1. Positivism and interpretivism: Auguste Comte versus Max Weber

Positivism – or to be precise: ontological positivism[1] – is the epistemological assumption that the natural world and the social world are ordered by similar principles (Turner & Roth, 2003). These principles are thought to take the form of law-like regularities – not unlike the law of gravity or the laws of motion as proposed by Isaac Newton. From this position, it follows that the social world can be studied with methods developed in the study of the natural world, and that they can be described in the same language. Because major advances have been achieved in describing the natural world in mathematical terms, mathematical formulae and propositions have become the preferred syntax of those advocating positivism in the study of human societies. The genesis of this position in social science is associated with the work of the French philosopher Auguste Comte. Once freed from the obscurities of religion and metaphysics, or so he felt, the empirical or 'positive' study of society would develop into a 'social physics', unveiling to humanity the laws of its own existence and showing it the path towards an enlightened future (Comte, 1975; Collins & Makowsky, 1998: 21 ff.).

Interpretivism or naturalistic inquiry represents a fundamentally different position. It is also concerned with the order of the social world, but it rejects the prevalent idea in positivism that this order follows law-like patterns as they operate in the natural world. Instead, it adopts the view that social order follows from how humans understand their situation and act upon that (Athens, 2010). In that sense, it is heir to *Verstehen*[2] (literally: understanding) – a hermeneutic viewpoint coined by the German social thinker Wilhelm Dilthey but theorized by Max Weber, which holds that society is best understood in the mental categories of its members (Outhwaite, 1986).[3] Weber's ideal was 'a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects' (Weber, 1947: 88). Note that Weber does not construct an opposition between understanding and explaining but rather sees the first as a necessary step towards the second. Understanding is a prerequisite to explaining. In order to explain human actions, we first have to understand what those actions mean to those who perform them. The same physical exercise in a yoga class may be part of a spiritual experience to one participant, and healthy gymnastics to another.

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[1] As opposed to *logical* positivism, which does not necessarily attribute an objective status to reality but merely stipulates that statements about reality should be capable of empirical verification. See Kaplan (1964: 36 ff.). Hereafter, we use 'positivism' as shorthand for *ontological* positivism.

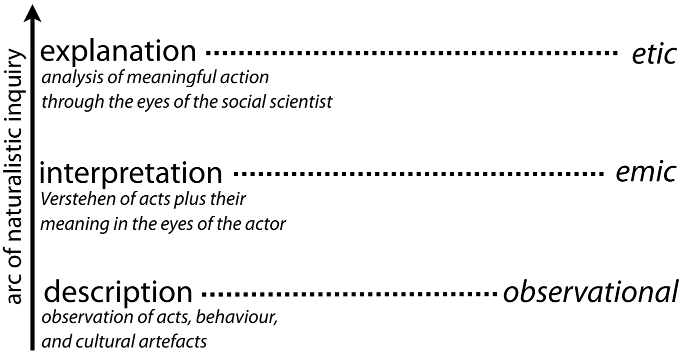
[2] Following the convention in German, we use a capital letter for the noun *Verstehen* (to understand) and a lower case letter for the adjective *verstehende* (understanding).

[3] This is not the same as defending a subjectivist position in which my view on society is as valid and valuable as yours. That is the position associated with postmodernism, which, reasoned to its radical extreme, cannot distinguish between knowledge that is arrived at after numerous rounds of careful research during which various rival interpretations were tested (and rejected) and a private opinion (Ritzer, 1996).

1.2. Describing, understanding, and explaining

First of all, of course, we have to observe the physical exercise, to *describe* the very actions we wish to understand and explain. Arguably, social science does not two but three things: it *describes* or reports what people say and do; it understands (or *interprets*) what the things people say and do mean to them; and it *explains* both the things said and done and their meanings. To elaborate the brief yoga example above: an ethnographer or sociologist or anthropologist would first of all observe what was going on in a particular yoga class, making notes and elaborating these notes into a careful description. He would also speak, probably at length, with various participants, asking them why they practiced yoga and what yoga meant to them. He might find that some participants have spiritual aims; others have health concerns; and again others are worried about their figure. Eventually, our researcher might try to explain all of these concerns of the yoga students (and therefore their participation, i.e. their behaviour) from a broad theory of modernity – perhaps along the lines of: traditional religion is waning; governments stress individual responsibility for your health; beauty is an important asset in the marriage market. Note that the social-scientific explanation (the social conditions of modernity) is an extra layer of meaning – social-scientific meaning or significance – that is added by the social researcher to the meanings people provide. The participants in the yoga class may themselves be unaware that their various motivations and behaviours may all be viewed as reactions to the condition of modernity. Also note that the social researcher could never have explained their doing yoga if he had not first asked for their motivations. To paraphrase Max Weber: only by first attempting the interpretive understanding of the yoga student's actions could he arrive at a causal explanation of these actions. Figure 3 provides a summary of the epistemological distinctions just introduced and adds to them two terms often used: emic and etic.

Figure 3 Description, interpretation, and explanation


arc of naturalistic inquiry
explanation
analysis of meaningful action through the eyes of the social scientist
etic
interpretation
Verstehen of acts plus their meaning in the eyes of the actor
emic
description
observation of acts, behaviour, and cultural artefacts
observational

Emic is the meaning of things (acts, behaviour, human products) to the people involved, the insiders – here: the spiritual, health, or sexual meaning of yoga to various practitioners (see Box 2 for how meaning can also pertain to things). Etic is the meaning or significance attributed by those studying them, the social scientists, the outsiders – here: seeing it as a reaction to modernity[4]. Typically, the social researcher moves from description to understanding to explanation, along the arc of naturalistic inquiry.

Box 2 The Heider-Simmel experiment

The term understanding applies to the behaviour of our fellow humans and other animals, but is not limited to that. As the famous Heider-Simmel experiment (1944) shows, this facility even encompasses the behaviour of seemingly inanimate objects. In the experiment, a short animation clip was shown to a selected audience in which three geometrical figures (a large triangle, a small triangle, and a circle) move in various directions and at various speeds. The only other figure in the field is a rectangle, a portion of which could be opened and closed like a door. A still from the clip is shown in Figure 4.

The experimenters then asked their audience to describe what they observed in the short clip. Strikingly, very few of the participants told their story about the clip in entirely geometrical terms ('A large solid triangle is shown entering a rectangle', and so on). Instead, most participants began to tell lively stories about the geometrical figures *as if these were humans*. They imputed motives and character traits to the figures, and offered complicated plots explaining their movements. For instance: 'The larger triangle tries to attract the attention from the circle, who appears to be not interested in it'.

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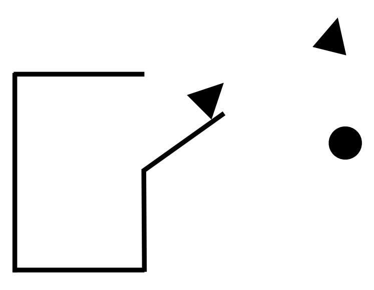
[4] The twin terms were coined by Pike (1954). For a history of their use in anthropology, see Harris (1968: 568 ff.). An amusing report of how the spiritual meaning of yoga is felt to undermine established religion (a clash between different emic meanings) is provided in Kramer (2013).

On the basis of their intriguing experiment, Heider and Simmel concluded that we attach meaning to the behaviour of other people by attribution, much in the way that the audience attributed motives and so on to the geometrical figures. As ordinary members of society, we do that constantly, intuitively and routinely. In naturalistic inquiry, becoming familiar with these tacit attributions – both of those whom we see behaving *and* our own – is seen as an essential part of the research process. (Source: Heider & Simmel, 1944.)

Figure 4 A still from the Heider-Simmel experiment



(full clip at www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZBKer6PMtM)

1.3. Definitions of situations and social facts

How do acts (behaviour, talk, cultural products or artefacts) and meanings relate to one another? Naively, we often seem to assume that meanings are imputed to acts: first, there are acts, and second, meaning is added to them. Yet these very acts must also be considered as following from meanings. This insight has been formulated by William Isaac Thomas: 'If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas & Thomas, 1928:

571-572).[5] People act according to the meaning they impute in situations. Once enacted, these behavioural consequences or social formations have an impact on how people define new situations, on how they continue to think and act. If two people fall in love, they may marry. (With marriage of course being a tradition available to them, an institutionalized consequence of actions of earlier generations.) This will have consequences for their future selves. In fact, they may form a family and have children. These children will then be the very real, biological consequences of the earlier definition of the situation by their (then: future) parents. The consequences of definitions of situations of older generations appear to younger generations as established institutions, or as Émile Durkheim had it: as social facts.[6] Social facts can be as objective and sometimes even as hard – e.g. in the form of buildings, or bullets from a gun – as a rock or any other physical fact – hence Émile Durkheim's admonition that in the study of society, 'the first and fundamental rule is to consider social facts as things'. Note that Durkheim did not write that social facts *are* things (in the sense of physical objects), but rather that for the purpose of research they should be *considered as* things, as *equivalent to* things – precisely because people *experience* them as realities. A model of this dynamic relation between definitions of the situation and their consequences as social facts is presented in Figure 5.

What we can learn from Thomas and Durkheim is that acts and meaning continuously interact – there is a dialectical relationship between them (which applies to university departments too, as Box 3 shows). Therefore we should think of them in a time-perspective, as a process or as processes. Today's definitions of situations are tomorrow's social facts; and tomorrow's social facts precondition the-day-after-tomorrow's definitions of situations – perhaps not to eternity but surely as long as humans live and interact on earth.

To summarize: human understandings, and the actions that they spawn, interlock into social formations. The sum total of social formations we call societies. The force of the social is phenomenal: it works via the experiences of individuals. To understand *how* it works, you have to understand and interpret these experiences – therefore the label 'interpretivism'.

Interpretivism does not, however, imply voluntarism: the erroneous idea that the force of the social can be willed or wished away (Berger &

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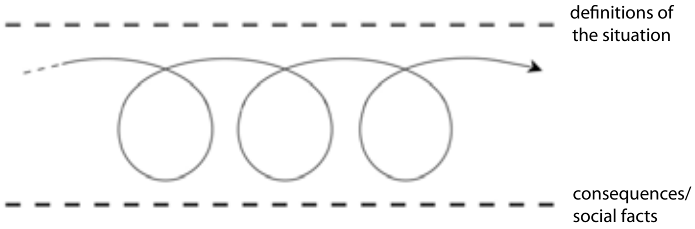
[5] Thomas in fact wrote: 'If *men* define situations as real, they are real in their consequences (italics ours). 'Men' in those days and in such a context meant 'people'. Today, the word 'men' tends to be read as denoting male persons. We have therefore replaced 'men' by 'people'.

[6] Durkheim (1982). Cf. Goudsblom (1977: 149): 'In the development of human societies, yesterday's unintended social consequences [of intentional human actions] are today's unintended social conditions of intentional human actions.'

Figure 5 Definitions of the situation and social facts



Luckmann, 1991). Once crystallized, societies exert pressures on people which may be infinitely stronger than their individual wills. As Karl Marx famously observed: 'The tradition of all past generations weighs like an alp upon the brain of the living' (Marx, 1897: 12). That explains why people do indeed often experience social facts as things. When asked, they will say: 'That is how it is.' And for good reason: each one of us is born in a 'second-hand world' (Mills, 1958: 71), i.e. in a world that has been shaped and that has crystallized before we were born. As we shall see, naturalistic inquiry tries to lift this veil from thing-like social facts; it tries to uncover how and why things have come to look as though they are what they are.

Box 3 Positivism and interpretivism as academic social facts

Merely identifying the presence of the two opposing positions of ontological positivism versus interpretivism or naturalistic inquiry risks caricaturizing them. Unfortunately, this happens all too often. Entire social research departments are sometimes locked in battles over which academic position should prevail in research and teaching. Those advocating either position often find it hard to find a shared language for meaningful communication. Such battles tend to culminate around the appointment of professorial chairs and departments which are in the process of new appointments (or renewing old ones) present fertile ground to see this in action. Also, most (if not all) academic curricula in social research are designed on the basis of either one of these positions. Very few professional academics have been groomed in both. Further, few funding boards are of a mixed nature, and research proposals must therefore confess to either position, or the proposal is likely to bounce – its possible brilliance or originality notwithstanding. In short, what may at first seem merely philosophical *Spielerei* (academic discussion about various definitions of a situation) has in social fact (Durkheim) – or in its consequences (Thomas) – a tendency to solidify in a particular organization of the social sciences that can make and break academic careers.

Nonetheless, we feel that positivism and interpretivism (and therewith naturalistic inquiry) are not necessarily incommensurable positions. This book subscribes to social pragmatism: the idea that social research should be evaluated by how effectively it explains social phenomena. Pragmatism advocates that the problems of society (including our intellectual struggles to come to terms with them) rather than a philosophical position adopted a priori should determine the selection of our research strategies (Mead, 2007: 21-36). Some social problems lend themselves to being studied in a positivist manner, whereas others may be tackled more successfully with naturalistic inquiry or some other interpretive approach. Generally speaking, positivism is useful when you are interested in properties of a society at a particular moment, as sedimented into social facts. If you are interested in information about, say, poverty figures at a given moment in time, then you could devise a scale that is taken to indicate poverty – perhaps monthly income or material attainment. Next, you can ask individual members of society how much money they earn, whether or not they own a car, and if so, what type of car. You can then rank them on the poverty scale and compute statistical indicators, such as the calculated mean or the standard deviation. In theory, you could include all members of a society, but usually a statistically representative sample is used, saving costly research effort. If you are interested in the historical development of poverty, the same questionnaire may be applied at different moments in time among the same sample: this is then called a longitudinal study. That allows you to identify particular trends in poverty and its distribution in society. If these trends are sufficiently robust, they can even be extrapolated for future prediction.

This type of study, although valuable in its own right, is usually not of central interest in naturalistic inquiry. The research problem there would be of a different nature. Rather than investigating the statistical distribution of poverty, you would be interested in poverty as a social phenomenon and as a social process; in other words, as a property not of individual attainment per se, but of the quality of social relations. Thus, you would be interested in appreciating the societal conditions under which poverty arises and under which it is experienced. For instance, are particular groups in society more vulnerable to becoming poor than others? And once they have been classified as poor, does this classification perhaps function as marker, or stigma, which contributes to reproducing the poverty status, for instance by limiting chances of the poor entering the labour market to get good jobs? That of course raises the question of what poverty actually 'is' – or rather: what poverty is understood to be by those involved (both the poor and the rich). The naturalistic inquirer would be inclined not to devise a scale based on outside criteria for that, but instead to depend on native classifications of the phenomenon. Which definitions of 'the poor' figure in a particular society, and how do these definitions gain clout in daily interaction? Also, social policies with regard to poverty would be of interest to the researcher. Liberal governments usually want to limit poverty and they intervene in society with their policies to alleviate it; but who defines the parameters of these policies, how do they work out in the daily practice of poverty alleviation, and how are their consequences appraised?

From the above-noted difference in the formulation of the research problem, it follows that positivism and naturalistic inquiry look for different types of information about society. Positivism regards the social world as a collection of individuals who are defined by particular properties like age, income, and educational attainment. These properties are measured as scores on a scale, as variables. This has two important advantages for social research. First, it allows abstraction from individuals and their personal situations. There is no need to collect information about them other than how they score on a scale. This greatly reduces the volume of the information to be collected and subsequently analysed. Second, collecting the same information about all those who are included in the research project allows data collection methods to be standardized. This reduces the costs per research unit, making it possible to carry out large-scale research projects, especially with the enhanced data storage and analysis capabilities of modern computers.

In naturalistic inquiry, attention is focused less on individuals and their properties and more on persons and their situation. Looked at from a macroscopic viewpoint, the term 'situation' refers to the position that a person occupies in a society – think of socio-economic status or ethnic affiliation or engagement with the prevailing value orientation. Equally important, however, are the microscopic considerations: a person's social network, past experiences, their propensities. Key in naturalistic inquiry is that the situation in which a person finds herself is thought to depend on her understandings of that situation. The first part of the Thomas theorem is highlighted here: '*If people define situations as real*, they are real in their consequences' (italics ours). Such understandings are not considered to be peripheral aspects, as merely individual quirks that diverge from one person to another and stand in the way of a clear view of the hard facts. Instead, it is believed that such definitions of the situation have very real consequences for action (see also Figure 4). Whether or not this defining is done continuously or only occasionally in case of a dramatic event; whether it has philosophical depth or remains of a practical nature; or whether it is manifested discursively or remains tacit – all this is open to academic debate (and naturalistic research). Innumerable studies have pointed out major historical and cultural differences between people's definitions of situations and between their consequences (Giddens, 1990). From a naturalistic inquiry point of view, a major task, therefore, is to establish the precise relation between definition and action.

1.4. Positivist and naturalistic designs

Positivism and naturalistic inquiry do not only look for different types of information, they also hold diverging ideas about the collection of that information. A major characteristic of positivist methods is that they seek to control the research situation. The term 'control' has a specific meaning here: it refers to reducing and standardizing the properties under study – for example by devising scales – in order to make them suited for statistical analysis and modelling. By thus looking for a great degree of control in the research design, the researcher in fact constructs her information. She specifies the properties to consider and devises the scales used to measure these properties. Further, the researcher devises criteria to select the representative sample and makes many other a priori decisions about who is to be included in the research and how. Thus, a major consequence of seeking to control data is the creation of an artificial situation (Mosse, 1994). As Nietzsche has said: '*Facta! Ja Facta ficta!*' ('Facts! Yes, facts are made!') (Nietzsche, 1988: 224.) This may be justifiable from the viewpoint of data processing and analysis, but it inevitably has a substantive impact on the findings of the research. For instance, if a question is phrased in a vocabulary that is not familiar to the research participant, this will influence her or his answer. It must further be considered that a positivist research situation engenders a set of expectations about how to behave. Some have argued that participants – routinely called 'respondents' – see their participation in research as a task or performance for which they must prepare in advance (Morris, 2009). Rather than being objective modes of data collection, positivist methods are social constructions. This must be acknowledged in order to better understand how they impact on social research outcomes.

The wish to control the research situation requires a high degree of standardization. Identical questions must be asked to all of the participants in the research, and their answers must fit in previously set answer categories. This standardization must be constructed before the data collection takes place. A substantial part of the research preparation, therefore, goes into calibrating the questions and their answers, as there is no room to make changes to them after the data collection phase has begun. Doing so would compromise the ideal of standardization, for instance making it difficult for the researcher to compare questions asked before and after the changes were made. The same can be said about research designs which depend on observations. In psychological experiments and animal behaviour studies, observational categories are usually constructed prior to the data collection phase. This has the advantage that research assistants can be trained to apply these categories to a population with which they hold no special relation, making it possible to scale up to very large research projects. The disadvantage is that only those behaviours will be observed that have been imagined and conceptualized in advance.

Interpretive or naturalistic methods do not share this concern for standardization. Rather than controlling the research situation, they seek to study social life as it presents itself to the members of a society under ordinary, everyday circumstances. Typically, they do this by carrying out fieldwork, i.e. by participating in the very social life they are studying. An important naturalistic ambition is that no a priori boundaries are set for the properties under study. Although the researcher begins the research with some preliminary conceptions about properties and their relations – the idea of a researcher entering the field as a *tabula rasa* is not only unrealistic but also discredits the fruits of academic training – these are intentionally not very well specified. The researcher instead formulates 'foreshadowed problems' – issues that she expects to be important in the studied society (Malinowski, 1978: 8-9). In the course of the research, these issues come more clearly into focus, enabling the researcher to gradually conceptualize more precisely the nature of the properties under study. In a sense, whereas a concern for standardization drives positivist methods, a readiness for constant adjustment is what characterizes naturalistic methods.[7]

The choice of research participants presents another distinction between positivist and naturalistic designs. In naturalistic inquiry, specifying criteria for the sampling of participants is expected to be part of the research process, rather than to precede the data collection. As indicated above, this has to do with the limited interest in statistical distributions. Naturalistic inquiry looks for other things, such as native classifications and their relation with social action, or for factors driving changes in the configuration of social relations. Consequently, a sampling procedure must be adopted that does justice to this ambition. Typically, it does not follow the rules of statistical sampling, in which informants from a previously delineated population are selected based on a known probability in order to later be able to extrapolate from the sample to estimate parameters in the population. In naturalistic inquiry, identifying informants usually takes the form of what is known as 'theoretical sampling'. This means that you first look for instances or situations that are relevant for the topic under study and only then select individual informants based on their relation with that instance or situation (Glaser & Strauss, 2012; Ragin, 1994). Drawing on the case of poverty, if you want to study the stigma that is associated with poverty, it means looking at a situation in which you can see relations between poor and wealthy persons in action, say a homeless beggar at the gate of a fancy shopping mall. Then you can observe what goes on in their social interaction that shapes and reproduces poverty-related stigma.

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[7] Of course, naturalistic inquiry 'constructs' data too, if only by jotting down observations and by transcribing interviews and conversations that otherwise would have remained unnoticed. However, contrary to the often highly artificial experiments of positivism, those constructions stay close to the life worlds of the people under study. They aim to be unobtrusive or 'unreactive'.

Thus, in a naturalistic design, the researcher responds to whatever pieces of information the research situation presents to her. These function as evidence in resolving the research puzzle, the contours of which come into focus gradually as more evidence is collected. Questions are raised as they seem appropriate or useful in furthering the researcher's understanding of the society under study. It means abandoning the ideal of asking identical questions to different, randomly chosen research participants, which is so central in positivist methods. This shift in approach builds on received sociological insights. It is increasingly accepted that societies present dynamic configurations of social relations that inform the experiences and projects of individual persons. To accommodate that meaningfully, it is a fruitful strategy to try to align the questions to the particular persons engaged in the research. Using naturalistic methods requires the researcher to subject herself to a process of learning to ask the right questions to different types of persons.

This means that meticulous planning in the sense that can be achieved with a positivist design is not of much use when adopting a naturalistic design. That is not to discredit the great value of preparation: naturalistic methods are not an excuse to adopt a sloppy *laissez-faire* attitude to social research. It has been suggested that a lot of time goes into thinking through the universe of possibilities encountered during the collection of information (Mills, 1959). That is frustrating work, especially at the beginning of a research project when it is difficult to distinguish this from making pure speculations. The management of a naturalistic inquiry rather revolves around a mental preparedness. A metaphor that comes to mind is that of a shopkeeper on a slow business day. The shop has to be kept open even without a customer in sight. The shop must look attractive, and so must the shopkeeper, in order to make sure that, once a customer shows up, she receives a favourable impression of it. Of course, this does not guarantee that the customer will make a purchase. Even when she does not, leaving the shopkeeper empty-handed, the shopkeeper, rather than showing disappointment, will wave her customer goodbye with a friendly smile. She never knows whether the customer will return and make a purchase after all.

1.5. Qualitative versus quantitative methods?

A conventional idea about social research suggests that naturalistic designs exclusively make use of so-called qualitative research methods, whereas those adhering to positivism invariably depend on quantitative methods (e.g. Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). However, that is not the stance of this book. Whereas it may be true that nowadays naturalistic researchers have developed a preference for applying qualitative methods and their colleagues from positivism feel drawn to quantitative methods, this is not a *necessary* relation. Nor is it a logical one. Quality and quantity are two logically independent dimensions of empirical research: one is about the qualities or properties or attributes of the object under study – like age, social class, or the colour of someone's dress – whereas the other is about the scale on which these properties are measured – like number of years; lower-middle-higher class; blueness. It is well to remember that the sentence 'She wore a blue dress' can be translated into 'Her dress scored value 4 on a scale of blueness ranging from 1 to 5', and vice versa. The first sentence, however, is often part of a more extensive description, like: 'She was young. She wore a fashionable blue dress with matching stockings, a Louis Vuiton handbag and high-heeled shoes. A pair of Dolce & Gabbana sunglasses were carefully arranged on top of her hair, which had blonde highlights. She clearly aimed to make an impression on us.' The latter description mentions at least twelve different attributes or qualities (young, fashionable, blue, stockings, matching, handbag, Louis Vuiton, high heels, sunglasses, Dolce & Gabbana, carefully arranged, blonde highlights) and one imputation of motive (aiming to make an impression). Theoretically, you could translate these into a series of quantitative statements. Practically, these would be difficult to handle. Also, they would not convey the surplus meaning that is provided by the extensive description as a whole: that we are looking at a particular type of person. It is for this reason – not a logical one – that qualitative and quantitative methods tend to diverge into two different practices. On the one hand, there are those researchers who try to take into account as many attributes as possible of the people, the situations, and the worlds they study. Often, they satisfy themselves with low levels of quantitative measurement, like absent versus present (so-called nominal scale of measurement) or less versus more (ordinal scale). Typically, they use words, i.e. language, to report their findings. On the other hand, there are those researchers who limit the number of attributes under study – for example to: sex, age, social class, and fashion preference – but who go to great lengths in order to measure these attributes or variables precisely (with gender necessarily on a nominal scale and fashion preference perhaps on an ordinal scale, but age in years, months, or even days, i.e. on a ratio scale, and social class in terms of income, equally on a ratio scale). Typically, they use both words (language) and numbers (mathematics) to report their findings. That these two practices have grown apart over time is a matter of academic division of labour – and perhaps of discussions on methods figuring as markers of distinction – but not a fundamental point in itself.

As stated, practitioners of qualitative research often use statements that, explicitly or not, do refer to statistical distributions, such as ‘some argue’, or ‘many agreed that’, or ‘it was frequently observed that’. Vague as they may seem from a mathematical viewpoint, they have some use in shedding light on the problem under study. In quantitative reports, one can observe a related phenomenon. Here, numbers and their relations and trends are often discussed in a narrative in which broader meaning is given to numbers. Numbers do not speak for themselves, but they acquire meaning in a process of interpreting evidence (Wuyts, 1993). This is not limited to social research. Studies on the world of stockbrokerage, another occupational category specialized in dealing with figures, show that stockbrokers treat the figures on their computer screens as if they possess human agency: they can be ‘hot’, ‘swift’, ‘unpretty’, and so on (Zaloom, 2003).

From this follows a point relevant for this book: quantitative methods *can* contribute to *Verstehen*, and their usage is not in fundamental contradiction with the unobtrusive ambition of naturalistic inquiry. It is perfectly conceivable, for instance, that several months of making patient observations in the field will result in a matrix with figures. This then constitutes a quantification of information that was collected in a naturalistic research setting – a practice that appears to have been common among classical anthropologists. Take the following example from a study of British anthropologist Audrey Richards, a former student of the important early ethnographer and anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. She made a study of the dietary practices in an area of the country today known as Zambia, East Africa. For a selected sample of informants in the villages that she studied, she kept track of what they ate during the day, from day to day. Next, she converted the food intake into calories and could thus establish that rural Zambians structurally face several hunger months before the harvest ripens. She also noted individual differences in calorie intake, which she could link to the status hierarchy that she had identified earlier. More prominent figures went less hungry than marginal ones. This then led her to formulate new questions about the meaning of hunger in the African countryside (Richards, 1939).

On the other hand, applying qualitative methods is not a guarantee that the principles of naturalistic inquiry will be respected. It is possible, and indeed sometimes the case, that a social researcher doing fieldwork resorts to asking leading questions, or to giving strong clues, thus steering the conversation in a particular direction, or to addressing the informant in a vocabulary that is not intelligible to this person, thus creating a sense of estrangement or even embarrassing this person. In extreme cases, field research can degenerate into an interrogation that yields little beyond mutual irritation and suspicion. Of course, there is a crucial difference between a researcher who uncritically superimposes her view of the world on the participants in the research hence generating a research outcome, and one who brings into the conversation insights acquired earlier on in the research. If all goes well, a naturalistic researcher gradually develops a tacit understanding about what can and cannot be asked and said in an everyday setting. As elaborated in the previous chapter, developing this ‘practical sense’ (Bourdieu, 1976) may be seen as a central aspect in the craft of naturalistic inquiry.

To wrap up this discussion, what seems to be an obvious distinction between qualitative and quantitative research methods becomes problematic when looked at more closely. Quantitative methods, i.e. those associated with numbers, can have their place in a naturalistic research design so long as deploying them does not contradict the ambition of naturalistic inquiry: to study a society as it presents itself to its members in everyday life. In the practice of social research, there is not, therefore, a fundamental distinction between recording information in words or as figures. Both are symbolic representations that can serve in the pursuit of uncovering the mental categories by which a society functions. The discussion above also advocates caution about claims that equate the use of qualitative methods with the pursuit of a naturalistic approach. It has been shown that this depends primarily on how the researcher engages with the members of the society under study: as individuals representing a score on a scale or as persons in a social situation whose point of view is worth exploring.

1.6. Validity and reliability in naturalistic inquiry

Measured against positivist criteria, the claim that naturalistic inquiry is a form of (social) science may seem difficult to credibly sustain. The reverse is also true: measured against interpretive criteria, the claim that positivist research is a form of social science may seem difficult to credibly sustain. Since this book is about naturalistic inquiry, we discuss only the claim of naturalistic inquiry here. The findings collected in a naturalistic inquiry are usually presented to the reader as a narrative; as a story about society. This raises the question of whether your story may be different from my story; in other words, naturalistic inquirers are frequently accused of subjectivism that bears more resemblance to fiction than to (social) science (compare Guba & Lincoln, 1982). The term 'subjectivism' must be read as synonymous to violating the principles of validity and reliability. Validity refers to the question: does the research measure what it claims to measure? Reliability refers to the question: can the results of the research be checked independently, i.e. will repeating it yield similar outcomes? These are reasonable questions with which naturalistic inquiry should come to terms if it wants to claim its place in the scientific Pantheon – albeit not necessarily in the way advocated by the canons of positivism.

This book adopts the position that naturalistic inquiry commands four powerful tools which, when best practices are adopted, can help to steer clear of subjectivism. These tools are further developed in the course of the following chapters, but to aid the discussion it can help to introduce them briefly here.

First, naturalistic inquiry builds on the principles of grounded theory (see also Chapter 2). Grounded theory is a systematic procedure to develop theoretical concepts about society from empirical research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The system in grounded theory revolves around the twin procedure of constant comparison and open coding. It is a comparative method, meaning that each piece of evidence (an observation, or an interview fragment, or some other shred of information) is compared to material already collected. This forces the researcher to make explicit statements about how these compare and, if not, how the new material should be classified. The comparison itself is given shape by attributing codes to empirical information, which is subsequently grouped into more abstract categories. In this way, a chain of evidence is maintained from raw empirical material via codes and categories to theoretical statements about the material. Such statements take the form of proposed relations between abstract categories, and, to further scientific debate, these can then be likened to existing theories. Pursuing this procedure consistently, naturalistic inquiry opens up to exposure to a broader academic community – and thus to outside verification.

Second, naturalistic inquiry promotes the simultaneous use of different data collection methods. In this way, empirical material is triangulated through various data collection procedures (Denzin, 1970). Triangulation means here: confronting the same empirical situation with different research methods. Triangulation is twinned to iteration: asking questions to already collected material, formulating these as new propositions in a new phase of data collection, which is then contrasted with propositions formulated earlier. In this way, the naturalistic researcher shuttles back and forth from description, via interpretation to explanation, gradually moving forward along the arc of naturalistic inquiry. At each step, the naturalistic researcher seeks the research method with the closest fit to the propositions at hand. Thus, at the beginning of a research project, the naturalistic researcher might identify important themes in a round of casual conversations, which are then checked against observations. The new questions following from that may then be developed into a structured questionnaire, which is complemented with a number of formal interviews. Thus, a strategy is developed as the research unfolds, wherein different research methods have their place and speak meaningfully (ideally) to the same research problem.

Third, to coordinate the iteration between the collection of empirical data and making theoretical reflections about those data, note taking, and diary keeping is essential. This has several functions, including the release of psychological pressure resulting from your presence as an outsider (Bleek, 1978). However, in the context of the validity and reliability of naturalistic inquiry, an important function of note taking and diary keeping is to confront your own predispositions and inclinations with what you have observed or heard in the field. You must consistently adopt a self-critical stance, also known as a reflexive attitude (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). It is increasingly accepted that social researchers are not impartial, outside observers of society. They are ordinary members of society and as such hold particular views about that society – views often informed by the elite circles to which many academically trained naturalistic researchers belong. Rather than ignoring this point, the naturalistic researcher must make these views explicit and treat them – in the vocabulary of positivism! – as testable hypotheses. Such testing is key to note making and diary keeping. In principle, only after this testing has been done and the process of self-reflection has become saturated, i.e. when new reflexive questions do not yield new insights in the position adopted in the field, has the moment arrived when you may safely consider telling others about society.

Fourth, naturalistic inquirers are in the privileged position, contrary to positivist researchers, of being able to check – and constantly do check – both their findings and their interpretations with the people about whom they are writing. This 'member check' happens countless times in the course of the research itself, when you check your progressive understanding of situations against the understandings of the people involved in them (Guba, 1981; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

An additional, overall test of the validity of your findings can be carried out at the end of the research process by explicitly discussing your findings and conclusions with your informants (for a short discussion on our choice of vocabulary – 'member', 'informant', and so forth – see Box 4). In a comparative study of six schools, one of us discussed the draft portrait of each separate school with key figures in that school before publishing the overall study. At every school, people recognized their own draft portrait (de Vries, Monsma, & Mellink, 1990; de Vries, 1993).

This does not mean that members' agreement or consent is the sole criterion for validity. Angry dismissal of a picture drafted may indicate that you have struck a raw nerve and that, although unwelcome, there is validity in your interpretation. Of course, the decision to uphold a particular interpretation against the overt denial of it by people may only be made with great care and for very good reasons. The more damaging, negative outcome of a member check may be a lukewarm reaction or no reaction at all from the people involved. If your findings do not speak to them at all, or if they find them irrelevant, you must seriously question the validity of your findings.[8] Positivist social research is sometimes accused of being irrelevant or merely proving the obvious; this may be because it lacks the possibility of member checking.

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[8] The same applies in a psychotherapist's consulting room: a patient must feel understood, challenged, or shocked by a therapist's interpretation, but not remain unaffected by it. The interpretation must make a difference. This is the pragmatist criterion of truth (Kaplan, 1964: 311-322).

Because naturalistic inquiry evolves as a dialogue between empirical findings and theoretical considerations, it is difficult to offer cookbook-type instructions on 'how to' mobilize these four tools, let alone summarize them. They must be developed in a concrete research situation, in response to the multiple challenges with which the researcher is confronted. However, essential in developing the craft of naturalistic inquiry is the ability – the sustained effort – to see theoretical problems in minute observations and fragments of conversations. You penetrate more deeply into that problem (hopefully) by constantly shifting between the desk and the field. Reading about your foreshadowed problem gives rise to asking new questions that are addressed in the field using a multiplicity of methods. Answers to these questions are rarely straightforward or fully satisfactory, summoning the researcher back to the desk for more reflection, including asking questions about your own role in the field. Field notes present the vehicle by which the naturalistic researcher navigates through these different spheres, and, from them, slowly a more comprehensive understanding emerges of the society that you are studying. This takes time and patience; when you are telling a credible story about society, haste is a bad counsel.

Box 4 The problem of terminology

In social research, a myriad of terminologies exist to refer to the members of a society under study. The choice made is not neutral, but one that reflects the view that the researcher holds of society, and how best to study it.

In social science jargon ('sociologese'), 'actor' appears to be the preferred term, but we feel this is too abstract and detached a term with too little empirical content. 'Respondents' is popular in positivist discourse, but we feel this reduces the breadth of human nature to a behavioural response to external stimuli: an interview question, an experimental choice problem, and so on. Among de-constructivist and postmodernist scholars, there is a tendency to speak of 'interlocutors' or even 'partners' – to emphasize the critical, decentred turn of the discipline. Yet these terms, while suggesting collaboration, tend to disregard that we as researchers want to find out about society, and not the other way around.

In naturalistic inquiry, we prefer terms that are important to people in their everyday lives. A key challenge in social research, therefore, is to develop or select a terminology that stays close to the terms that people themselves use. Developing such an 'emic' terminology is obviously not free of problems. Militant members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) classified themselves as freedom fighters, whereas the British government labelled members of that same group as terrorists. Here, we can see how terminology is part of a political struggle; yet, rather than feeling under pressure to commit herself to one or the other, the naturalistic researcher must see these terms in the first place as an entry, in this case into political life in Northern Ireland.

In the remainder of this book, we use the following terminology. When we speak about members of a society, the preferred term is people or persons. In line with current academic fashion, we use she and he interchangeably without discrimination. The term informant, sometimes also called research participant, applies to persons with whom the researcher engages actively for the purpose of finding out about society. The term interviewee is set aside for those we question, usually in casual conversation.

2. Theorizing society: Grounded theory in naturalistic inquiry

> *Those who do not claim to understand grand theory and who do not like it – if they retain the courage of their convictions – will feel that indeed the emperor has no clothes*
> – C. Wright Mills

This chapter explores the role of social theory in naturalistic inquiry. We discuss theory at a relatively early stage of the book, as we believe that it directs the entire nature of the naturalistic research enterprise. But let us begin with a reassurance. The word 'theory' easily evokes images of painful introspection and complicated language that only privileged insiders can understand. Theorizing, however, is something we do every day. It involves thinking in general terms in order to make sense of everyday experience. In naturalistic inquiry, theory plays a special role. Social theory can be thought of as a map – or rather a collection of maps – that helps the researcher to find her way in empirical research. Maps do not prescribe where to go, but they tell what can be expected on the way (Burawoy, 1998). Social theory functions likewise in naturalistic inquiry. It does not prescribe a particular method of inquiry; nor does it specify how to sample participants or dictate the questions to put to them; but it can help to identify parts of social reality that might be interesting to look at in detail. This works the other way around too: naturalistic inquiry aims to contribute to social theory. On your travels, you may discover a new feature in the landscape that does not appear on the map. Perhaps a new bridge has been built, or a forest has appeared where earlier there was pasture. Hence, the map must be updated in order to guide future travellers. A map is not necessarily a faithful copy in miniature of a landscape. It must represent those aspects of a landscape that a traveller needs in order to orient herself. The well-known, highly stylized and spatially distorted maps of the London underground and the New York subway do so much better than a realistic map could. For a traveller on foot, that is. The driver of a car will need another, differently stylized map. It is also important to realize that in social science we do not yet have good maps. The task of drawing them up is still mostly before us. In this respect, the metaphor of theory as map is somewhat premature. Naturalistic inquiry is often an exploration of previously unknown territory, with a map as the outcome rather than the beginning of the journey.

Whether as a beginning or as a result, social theory offers a general vocabulary to talk about society. Its aim is to abstract more general insight from the specific empirical cases studied (Douglas, 1970). For instance, it is possible to look at professional careers and consider how these change as a consequence of social stratification. Telling about society in such abstract, theoretical term helps to move beyond the particularities of the empirical cases that are examined – the individuals with their different work biographies – and look for structural regularities in them – their functioning in a broader process of stratification. It will be shown how this procedure promotes making comparisons between societies, not on the level of their particularities, but on the level of their abstract properties (van Velsen, 1967). It will further be shown that, thus looked at, the term 'theory' refers more to a process – the ambition to 'theorize' – than to a full-blown, hermetic system of conceptual categories and logical relations between them.

The theoretical ambition of naturalistic inquiry sets it apart from other modes of telling about society. Journalists and writers, for instance, are close cousins of social scientists when it comes to telling about society. Some journalists and writers are actually much better at it than the best and brightest of social researchers are. High-quality journalistic reportage published in non-fiction magazines such as *Monthly Atlantic* and *Granta* often tell more interesting stories about society than some dry sociological reflection on it. However, there are few journalists and writers who think of their practice as having some special relation to social theory (Boyton, 2005) – even though many of them received training in the social sciences. Journalistic reports and the work of writers can provide essential information to be used in naturalistic inquiry. Social theory, then, can be seen as a specific mode of telling about society in which the ambition is to identify abstract concepts and to formulate relations between these concepts. Doing that has a distinct place in social science discourse and debate; when done well however, it can contribute to something perhaps even more important: to aid to make society more transparent to its members (Hannerz, 2010).

The form of social theory that is closely associated with naturalistic inquiry is known as grounded theory. Grounded theory results from a procedure that revolves around the construction of abstract categories from observable phenomena. It stands in direct opposition both to abstracted empiricism – data collection unguided by an abstract understanding of society – and to grand theory – social abstractions unrelated to observable phenomena (Mills, 1959). This chapter first sketches the intellectual climate in which grounded theory was discovered: a point that deeply impacted on its subsequent development. Then it explores key principles and practices of it, subsequently applying this to a case study that was constructed for the purpose of teaching. The last part of the chapter looks at the problem of generalization and inference when the researcher adopts a grounded theory approach in naturalistic inquiry. There are certain practices to follow in order to maintain the chain of evidence from empirical findings to theoretical concepts that is essential in securing a place for naturalistic inquiry in social research.

2.1. Dissatisfaction with structural functionalism and grand theory

Grounded theory emerged out of dissatisfaction with a wave of thinking in social theory known as structural functionalism. During the middle decades of the twentieth century, structural functionalism dominated social science, and few of the leading academics of the time were not affected by it. There were a number of intellectual fathers to structural functionalism. Two American sociologists and their works were among the better known: Talcott Parsons's *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) and Neil Smelser's *Theory of Collective Behaviour* (1963). A brief survey of their thinking can help to elucidate the intellectual climate in which ideas about grounded theory emerged.

Structural functionalism considers society as a social system that is functionally integrated. Legal arrangements like property rights, the educational system, the labour market, the political system, and so on, are all attuned to one another. Together, they are governed by norms, customs, and traditions that serve to integrate the social structure. From this perspective, when a particular phenomenon is being researched, the paramount question to ask is: 'what is the function of this phenomenon for the social system as a whole?' A distinction is sometimes made between 'manifest' or visible functions on the one hand, and 'latent' or hidden functions on the other hand (Merton, 1968). Manifest functions of, for example, education are to prepare young people for adult roles in general and to sort them out for the labour market. Latent functions of education are to teach them to sit still, to propagate middle class norms and values, and to install in them the psychological habit of delayed gratification. These latent functions of education have been called 'the hidden curriculum' (Jackson, 1968). The message of functionalism remains the same: all human action is ultimately directed – whether manifestly or latently – at maintaining social integration. Particular actions must always be understood from that viewpoint. The normal state of a society, therefore, is equilibrium. That does not mean that a society remains forever locked in the same equilibrium. Changes external to a society – for instance, war or immigration – or internal to it – technological change, population pressure – will result in a new equilibrium. Structural functionalism believes that a society which is confronted with change responds to that by making old modes of integration obsolete and inventing new ones (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2003).

The ideas of Parsons and Smelser influenced American and European academic life deeply; for a long time, structural functionalism was, in the vocabulary of Thomas Kuhn (1962), 'normal' social science. However, gradually, critiques were voiced, eventually mounting to a point where structural functionalism was abandoned (roughly in the later 1960s). In these critiques, one can distinguish those attacking the very ontology of structural functionalism – its view on society and how society is supposed to develop – and those expressing concerns with how it handled social theory.

First, the portrayal of society as a system of integrated functions made it very hard to explain social change. Whereas the United States during the 1940s and 1950s, with some imagination, could have seemed to corroborate the idea of a society in equilibrium, that idea could no longer be sustained with the rapid emancipation of various groups in American society beginning in the 1960s. Social unrest deepened in the wake of the Vietnam War, and there was no indication of a new equilibrium in sight.

Another empirical weakness was functionalism's fixation with social order, ignoring social conflict and contradiction. That became an overriding theme in the Western social experience in the turbulent 1960s and 1970s. It had already been foreshadowed by European (mainly British) anthropologists studying African societies in the 1950s. These societies were at the time rapidly urbanizing and growing economically, rapidly producing a host of new social forms (such as labour organizations and urban clubs) and therefore new interactional patterns. Although initially influenced by Parsons' and Smelser's work, anthropologists eventually had to abandon a static view of society, instead directing their attention to understanding social change (van Donge, 1985).

As regards the implications for social theory, an early attack came from the American sociologist Herbert Blumer. In his widely cited article 'What is wrong with social theory?' (1954) he observed how structural functionalism rests on a highly etic and 'totalizing' idea of society, relegating the social experience of its members to a peripheral aspect of building theory. There was of course an important reason for that: behaviour in structural functionalism was seen as an automatic response following from the position that a person occupies in the social structure. Blumer instead advocated a view on social research concerned with empirical reality, and that reality is the 'natural social world of everyday experience' (Blumer, 1954: 7). He also advocated using theoretical ideas as 'sensitizing concepts', to be adapted to and moulded after the same everyday experiences of people, instead of imposing preconceived constructions upon the social world.

Dennis Wrong added to this that structural functionalism tends to 'over-socialize' persons: it recognizes motivational values only inasmuch as they contribute to the integration of the social structure. It thereby contradicts empirical evidence and ignores basic scientific rules of falsification (Wrong, 1961). C. Wright Mills (1959) had already pointed out how structural functionalism exemplifies grand theory: theory that tries to explain everything, but in doing so, becomes so abstracted from empirical realities that it does not explain anything at all.[1] To be fair, Mills also criticized the opposite tendency, of abstracted empiricism: the mindless collecting of endless series of facts without any serious theoretical ambition.

2.2. The intellectual pedigree of symbolic interactionism

It was in this climate of intellectual dispute that the American sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss published their *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). The book was a methodological reflection on their earlier, substantive book *Awareness of Dying* (1966), an insightful and moving study of how doctors, nurses, and family members cope with patients whose death is immanent. Here, too, there is an interesting story to tell about intellectual pedigree. In the margins of dominant structural functionalism, there nevertheless were social researchers conducting empirical research without worrying about the structural functionalist theoretical edifice. The European anthropologists studying African societies mentioned above were a case in point. Even more important for the development of grounded theory were American sociologists at the University of Chicago who built on the philosophical ideas of William Isaac Thomas, George Herbert Mead, and

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[1] In a similar vein, Abram de Swaan has recently criticized the widely read *Modernity and the Holocaust* by Zygmunt Bauman. He writes: 'The problem is that words like "modernity", "civilization" and "rationality" are so encompassing that they may refer to almost every aspect of contemporary society. In themselves they denote everything and explain nothing' (de Swaan, 2015: 46).

Charles Cooley. Thomas, Mead, and Cooley had argued that social reality is not a thing 'out there' that determines our actions, but instead is a web of sustained interactions. Social reality is constantly being created and recreated by people through their interaction. Remember Thomas' expression: 'If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.' Society consists of definitions of the situation and their consequences. These ideas – often referred to as 'symbolic interactionism' – contrasted with nineteenth century mechanistic views that had evolved in the wake of scientific discoveries in the natural world (in biology, chemistry, and physics in particular) and that had found their way in the social sciences – e.g. as behaviorism in psychology, and as structural functionalism in anthropology and sociology.

Chicago University sociologists were deeply influenced by the core ideas of Thomas, Cooley, and Mead, and they directed their energies to studies of everyday social interaction. This opened up an entirely different view of social reality, with society resulting from a myriad of symbolic interactions that, given the right conditions, solidify into more or less stable social forms. A flurry of influential studies followed from that, often exploring specific milieux within broader society, e.g. looking at marginal groups in society (Foote Whyte, 1993); at strikes in factories (Gouldner, 1954); and at hustlers at the pool table (Polsky, 1967). For the first time, social scientists were studying society 'in vivo', trying to reconstruct the 'natural history' of it – not through a biologist's microscope but instead though the eyes of its members.

Glaser and Strauss succeeded in developing this insight into a methodology for developing social theory. They argued that 'theory' is not an abstract edifice providing a total description of society, but instead should refer to observable patterns of human interaction (Glaser & Strauss, 2012). Deeply influenced by the philosophical and social pragmatism mentioned in the previous chapter, their views have as a practical consequence that an entire 'society' cannot be studied – in structural functionalism, societies often tended to be synonymous with nation states – but situations, settings, or institutions smaller in scale (Suddaby, 2006). Glaser and Strauss never specified upper and lower boundaries; their own work, however, gives some indication of the problem of scale. In their earlier study *Awareness of Dying*, they had tried to figure out how the experience of dying is created in and through social relations between patients, friends, family, and those taking care of them professionally (nursing staff, doctors, and so on). That topic came from personal experience – both had lost a parent shortly before the research began – and from casual conversations with doctors they had earlier befriended. They surmized that 'dying' was not an isolated, biological phenomenon, but a socially constructed experience that entailed coming to terms with the ending of a social relation.

In a first round of inquiry, involving observations in a dozen hospital wards, they formulated as a preliminary idea that the degree of the patient's awareness of his or her imminent death influences how others treat them, in turn shaping the patient's experience of death. Next, they zoomed in on four different wards: a premature infant station (where patients may be assumed to be unaware of their fate), an oncology station (where dying is slow), an emergency room (where dying is unexpected), and a geriatrics station (where dying is erratic).

From this second round of focused observation, they succeeded in identifying four different types of awareness: closed awareness (common in the premature infant station and frequent in the emergency room), suspicion and mutual deception (both of which were typical of the geriatrics station, but also prevalent in the oncology station), and open awareness (occurring only in the oncology station). These findings are indicative of an important feature of grounded theory. Rather than aiming to theorize 'society' as a whole, or 'hospital', or even 'hospital society', it seeks to understand one particular aspect of it; in this case, the social construction of dying in hospitals. This presents quite a different ambition with regard to social theory from that displayed by Parsons and Smelser; an ambition that tapped into a broad sentiment at the time, and that spread rapidly through the social science community. It opened up a radically different way of thinking about social theory, a point to which we turn now.

Grounded theory is committed to remaining close to lived experience and situated social practice. It views these not as some psychological by-product of the socio-structure, but as constituting the core of social life. Theorizing is not done by deducting hypothesis from theory to be tested against some body of empirical data selected for the purpose of verification. Instead what is needed is to formulate propositions inspired by the empirical data themselves. As an aside, this ushered in a fundamental repositioning of social theories hitherto formulated by the founding fathers of social inquiry such as Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel. In the traditional, positivist approach, their theories were considered as potential laws, to be verified (or falsified) through ever more refined researches. In grounded theory, the same theories are not considered to be universal models of society, but rather as offering interesting ideas that can serve as a preliminary guidance in the selection of cases. Glaser and Strauss began with very broad ideas formulated by influential theorists such as Weber, Durkheim, Mead, Parsons, and Goffman of how symbolic interaction and social experiences are related. They then considered that dying denotes the ending of social interaction, which might change the dynamic of that interaction. And with this broad idea, they began their first round of inquiry.

Some of this may still sound rather removed from everyday hands-on naturalistic inquiry. From the previous sections it can be inferred that grounded theory is not an exercise in theorizing but in 'thinking with data' (Wuyts, 1993). Reading social theory remains of importance, however, because it is an invaluable source of inspiration to direct empirical research. To get a better sense of how that works in practice, in Box 5 we present a didactic case study, i.e. a case study formulated with a teaching situation in mind. It is loosely based on our own experiences. It hopefully can help to bring home better the message about the steps through which a naturalistic researcher building on grounded theory is likely to proceed.

Box 5 Grounded theory in practice: A didactic case study

Suppose you are interested in the topic of social relations in professional organizations. From the literature, you have come to understand that there is a connection between, on the one hand, how organizations change, and, on the other, shifts in the pattern of work relations. In order to understand organizational change, therefore, a study of changing work relations seems useful. For the time being, you leave the concept of 'work relations' open: you treat it as a sensitizing concept, directing your study but without coming up with a fully operationalized definition. Researching in the spirit of grounded theory, you are confident that, as the study evolves, the sensitizing concept will become clearer.

As a case study you select the university faculty with which you are affiliated, and then in particular the teaching staff working there. There are several reasons why your faculty would be an interesting case to study work relations. First, your experience as a student suggests that it is an organization in flux, with many changes in the composition of the staff, in which work relations presumably have not yet solidified and a degree of change can be expected. Second, at the faculty there appear to be teachers who are directly affiliated, and there are those indirectly affiliated, so that means teachers work under different conditions and may therefore have different ideas about working relations. Third, faculty staff are international and you surmise that perhaps there are aspects in the different backgrounds of teachers which influence work relations.

Thus, on the basis of a number of theoretical assumptions and preliminary ideas, you have sampled the faculty as a useful case study for the purpose of addressing your research problem. Next, you begin to make observations of places and situations where you can expect to see work relations in action. Because you do not know yet what to precisely look for, you begin to make observations there where you find large numbers of teachers together, and where you have easy access to them: the canteen. After many hours of observing teachers having their lunch, you begin to see a pattern of clustering: during lunch hours some of the teachers tend to sit together more than others, there are teachers who never seem to join one of the clusters, and so on.

You record the clustering pattern in your field notes, but obviously it is much too early to draw conclusions from the first round of observations. Instead, because you know some of the teachers a little from earlier courses they taught you and you have information about what they teach, you begin to see two patterns in the clusters: first, teachers from different departments in the faculty usually do not sit together; second, faculty management participates less in joint lunches, and, if they do so, they tend to sit apart from the other teachers. Further, you realize that the earlier ideas you had about directly and nondirectly affiliated teachers do not hold: it is not reflected in lunchtime clusters as these always include both types of teachers.

With your observations being saturated for the time being (additional observations do not yield additional information about the clustering), you now decide to interview some of the teachers with whom you have friendly relations. You have a double purpose for that: to see whether they recognize the same clusters that you observed in the canteen, and to find out more about the forces driving them. Bearing in mind the clusters that you observed, you decide to have separate interviews with teachers from different departments and with some of their managers too. You decide to carry out several open-ended interviews, in which you try to explore as much as possible the point of view of your informants. The interviews yield some interesting outcomes. First, they confirm that the clustering at lunchtime reflects an important aspect of faculty sociostructure: social interaction within departments appears to be more intense than between departments. Teachers emphasize similar-mindedness such as drawing on a common intellectual tradition and speaking the same intellectual language as explanations for that. Because of the similar-mindedness, they will say, it is easier to develop friendly relations within the department, occasionally leading to a joint visit to a local bar, which again contributes to improved work relations within the department.

Second, your interviews reveal that clustering became more pronounced following a recent round of restructuring. Whereas the departmental clusters were weakly developed earlier on (with many cross-departmental drinks and lunches), that seems to be disappearing in the new, reorganized faculty. Your interviews suggest that this coincides with a change in the composition of the teachers: more new teachers are being recruited, coming from different academic institutions and countries, whereas earlier recruitment was limited to a handful of institutions/countries. You explain this by arguing that, in the absence of prior relations and with departments growing bigger (a consequence of the restructuring), these become a natural common point of identification for teachers.

Thirdly, most teachers, irrespective of their departmental affiliation, experienced a larger distance from the management. The interviews suggest that teachers relate this to a form of specialization. In the olden days, they explain, managers were usually teachers with additional managerial tasks ('one of us'), but with the growth of the faculty institution, and the associated need to professionalize and bureaucratize, a new class of specialist managers emerges, who are not recruited from the teaching rank and who have little in common with the world of teaching.

For the moment, this outcome satisfies your research question. It confirms your earlier sensitizing idea, i.e. that there is a relation between organizational change and shifting work relations. But a discovery was made, pointing in the direction of an increasing departmental clustering as the faculty grows larger. Many more aspects of the relation between organization change and shifting work relations remain to be understood, of course. For instance, it may be hypothesized that the clustering has an effect on the work itself (teaching), which can again drive shifts in work relations, and so on. But you shall leave that for another study.

The objective of this exercise was to show a number of points relating to grounded theory research. First, it tries to generalize from individual experiences and specific situations, looking for broader patterns in those experiences and situations: the clustering and how it changes over time. Second, in a grounded theory approach, the ambition is to try to link those generalizations in an explanation of the phenomenon under study – in this case, changing working relations. These appear to be linked to growth, specialization, and professionalization – although in what way is still not so clear. Third, it shows that grounded theory revolves around a constant combination of data collection and making abstract statements: data collecting and theorizing are not separated in time. Fourth, that process begins with relatively open-ended sensitizing concepts inspired by theoretical debates and guiding the data collection.

2.3. Grounded theory in naturalistic inquiry: The problem of generalization and inference

Now that the contours of grounded theory have been specified, time has come to discuss its place in naturalistic inquiry. This book builds on the idea that grounded theory and naturalistic inquiry are natural bedfellows. Both subscribe to symbolic interactionism, looking at society as the outcome of everyday social interaction, and both take as a central point of departure therein the viewpoint of society's members; hence, they share a *verstehende*, i.e. an interpretive, or hermeneutic, ambition. Two points remain to be discussed before our approach with regard to grounded theory in naturalistic inquiry can be summed up: first, generalizing from empirical situations to theoretical ideas and how that relates to the problem of sampling; second, distinguishing different mental steps in making generalizations through theoretical inference

Theoretical generalization

A common mistake made by social researchers with little practical experience in grounded theory is that they evaluate the findings arrived at with grounded theory in terms of *statistical* generalization. Statistical generalization is the extrapolation of a particular result found in a sample to the larger population from which the sample was originally drawn. Depending on the way the sampling was done – e.g. purely randomly or according to a preconceived strategy to include important subgroups (called stratified sampling) –, more or less precise, quantitative estimates can be made regarding parameters in the population. In the case of Glaser and Strauss's study of dying in hospitals, statisticians might observe that the hospitals and wards were not selected randomly and that it is therefore impossible to claim that they represent the population of hospitals, or wards, in the United States (or some other country).

This observation however, echoeing the canons of positivism, misses the point of *theoretical* sampling in grounded theory. In naturalistic inquiry, cases and situations are not selected on the basis of a statistical principle, but on the basis of substantive criteria that are being formulated in the course of the research process. As Glaser and Strauss write: 'Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analysts jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges' (Glaser & Strauss, 2012: 45). Theoretical sampling is therefore driven by the wish to discover and fully represent all the relevant *qualities* of the phenomenon under study, rather than by the wish to estimate the quantities in which these qualities may or may not be distributed in some population. In the hypothetical case study above, the primary concern of the researcher is to cover the fullest possible variety of viewpoints and perspectives – tenured faculty versus temporary staff; teachers versus managers; and so forth – rather than statistical representativeness.

Another way of putting this is to say that grounded theory seeks to develop theoretically representative concepts, that is, ‘to build a theoretical explanation by specifying phenomena in terms of the conditions that gave rise to them, how they are expressed through action/interaction, the consequences that result and the variation of these’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 421). Thus, the ‘conditions that gave rise to’ whatever principle in which you are interested, determine the sampling procedure. And because these conditions typically become clear in the course of the research itself, you do not fix *a priori* criteria for sampling but, rather, you add cases to your sample as you proceed. To make this point more understandable, in Box 6 we briefly discuss the work of the anthropologist Miranda Poeze, who made a naturalistic study of the migration of young men from Senegal to Europe via the Canary Islands (her MSc thesis is published as Poeze, 2010).

Box 6 The case of Senegalese boat migrants

The journey from Senegal to Europe is perilous, many of the men die on their way, and it is very expensive, costing about an annual salary. Poeze therefore became interested in the decisions they make around their migration. She carried out fieldwork in an area of Dakar known for its high concentration of aspirant migrants. After familiarizing herself with their social world (most are young men with occasional, low-paid jobs in the informal sector), she began to collect case material from different informants. One of them, Ibrahim, comes from a migrant family – several uncles and more distant relatives live in Europe – and he has many migrant friends. They can help him to settle overseas. Further, Ibrahim is highly motivated to migrate because he wants to set up a profitable business and sees more opportunities for that overseas than back home: ‘I want to do the maximum to leave’, he explains. In Ibrahim’s case, Poeze argues, you can see how migrants benefit from social capital in the network of their contacts, and that they are driven by the prospect of making money. She shows that this corroborates a well-known theoretical model: the migrant as a rational actor.

Next, Poeze made a detailed case study of a second migrant, which offers contrasting evidence about migration decision making. Pierre, a young man living also in the same area of Dakar, does not come from a migrant family, and few of his friends live in Europe. Pierre is further not so confident about establishing himself overseas and would rather stay in Dakar. Poeze's observations show that it is not Pierre himself, but rather his family, who want him to migrate abroad. Pierre states that: 'It was my sister who told me to leave'. The family collected funds to finance this and made arrangements with boat transporters for him. Thus they put considerable social pressure on him, and, because he wants to avoid conflict with his family, Pierre complies. Poeze shows that, throughout the preparations for the trip, Pierre is dragging his feet, in fact trying to avoid moving out altogether. Poeze shows that Pierre's response is to some extent informed by the nature of his social network: not knowing persons overseas enhances the risk of failure. She also shows, however, that Pierre follows a different model of decision making than Ibrahim: in Pierre's case, conforming to kinship demands plays a central role. Poeze analyses this as a second model of migration decision making in which cultural expectations of migrants sending home money appears crucial.

Poeze's research speaks to the problem of making generalizations from naturalistic inquiry in several ways. In the first place, Poeze does not make a claim that her work represents all forms of migration behaviour in Dakar, Senegal, or West Africa. She did not sample Ibrahim and Pierre with a random procedure but deliberately selected them with the purpose of showing different forms of migration decision making. The study could be made statistically representative by administering a survey constructed on the basis of her findings, but that was not part of Poeze's research project.

Secondly, the procedure for generalization that Poeze adopted is one of theoretical inference (Wuyts, 1993). In the detailed empirical material that she collected, she discovered general principles governing migration decision-making that can be compared to other migration situations. Thirdly, reading Pierre's case led Poeze to ask sceptical questions about any study on transnational migration in which migrants are portrayed as rational actors. Poeze's work shows that this is indeed a possibility (Ibrahim), but not one that can be assumed *a priori*. In other words, it allows us to perceive contrasting patterns of decision making in other migration situations. Fourthly, Poeze's work points at the importance of studying diversity, in this case of migration decision making, with a view to learn more about the general pattern of transnational migration.

Generalizing through theoretical inference is thus a procedure with a modest claim as regards the quantitative distribution of persons and situations to which it pertains. That can be a counter-intuitive observation, because, as the fieldwork proceeds, you recruit more persons in the network of informants as you observe more social situations. The feeling that the findings from your naturalistic study have a broad reach therefore seems fully justified. However, the key point to keep in mind is: how were informants and situations selected for the case study (random – purposeful), what empirical regularities were observed, and how do they speak to other situations? Poeze's work shows that naturalistic inquiry can have very real theoretical implications. Because of its attention to social detail and difference with which other research methods have difficulties in dealing, naturalistic inquiry makes it possible to uncover aspects of social life that remain otherwise hidden. Thus, it is sensitive to making new discoveries, offering real opportunities to challenge well-established academic ideas about social reality. This may be achieved at the cost of statistical representativeness, but the question is whether social research really advances by a dogged conformity to randomized sampling, or whether new ideas are needed to understand a changing world.

Theoretical inference: Description, interpretation, and explanation

Generalizing through theoretical inference is thus key to grounded theory in naturalistic inquiry. A question remains as to how that is done. Part of the answer lies in the sphere of the analysis of naturalistic data, to be discussed at length in Chapter 7. However, a basic understanding of the steps which may be identified in theoretical inference is necessary to be able to follow the flow of the argument developed in the following chapters.

In its most radical formulation, grounded theory presents a purely inductive procedure, in which theory is built from empirical data only: no prior familiarity with theoretical debates is necessary. That clearly echoes grounded theory's historical point of departure: to move away from the grand theorizing that dominated social theory throughout the mid-twentieth century. Still, part of the training of any social researcher must be an exposure to theoretical debate in her line of inquiry. As previously argued, it would be naive, and also an insult to the hard work of our colleagues who went before us, to ignore the fruits of their work (commonly referred to as 'the literature'). In naturalistic inquiry, concepts from it enter the grounded theory procedure as a preliminary set of ideas, as 'sensitizing concepts' (Blumer, 1954) or 'foreshadowed problems' (Malinowski, 1978). They are not seen as hypotheses that have to be tested against data, but as interesting or challenging ideas to be further explored in the field. Merely applying concepts derived from social theory to empirical data is a labelling excercise that is not likely to spawn the type of discoveries that grounded theory can bring.

To build on the discussion in Chapter 1, it is helpful to identify different mental steps in the use of grounded theory in naturalistic inquiry: description, interpretation, and explanation. In the early stages of naturalistic inquiry, the emphasis is on description. Often this takes the form of a 'grand tour', an initial survey of stuff that is readily observable by anyone who takes the trouble to pause and look at a society (Spradley, 1980). Field notes recorded during this stage will contain vivid descriptions of the society's material organization, such as buildings and use of space, but also of people: what they do during a day, how they look physically, and so on. Often this resembles at first an explorer's portrayal, or *travelogue*: how a sympathetic, slightly puzzled outsider would describe that society to someone else not present. At this stage, it is not yet possible to attribute motives or values to what is being observed: that requires an understanding of the viewpoint of the society's members. Although such an outsider's description seems a straightforward step, it usually is not. Developing an eye for the intricate details of everyday life is a craft in itself. Reading good non-fiction reportage can be helpful to get prepared for immersing oneself in detail. But also walking up and down a street which you have passed down many times without giving it any thought, yet this time paying special attention to everything that meets the eye – regardless of whether it seems important or not – can help to develop observational skills.

Concepts used for describing that street (or, for that matter, the society in which you are interested) present an important way into the next step: trying to interpret what has been described. In Chapter 1 it was explained how key to 'interpretation' is an attempt to represent society in terms of the mental categories of its members: to present the 'native's point of view' (Malinowski, 1978: 25). This requires much more knowledge about the studied society than an outside description can provide. *Verstehen* or understanding does not spring up spontaneously but usually takes time, and a lot of patience, to build up. An indication that this is occurring is when your field notes begin to be filled up by reflections of persons participating in the research, and your earlier travelogue increasingly strikes you as an outsider's description.

Another indication is that you develop a sensitivity for diversity. At the beginning of a naturalistic study, society often presents itself to you as a homogenous, monolithic thing, but gradually more nuances begin to emerge. One of the key insights from the social sciences is that what people think about some aspect of society is in part determined by their position in that society. From this it follows that you can expect to encounter different opinions if you talk to differently positioned persons. Grasping the diversity of opinions, and linking these to an analysis of the social structure of the studied society, presents an essential step to move towards interpretation. Often such opinions contradict one another, and then the task of naturalistic inquiry is to show how these contradictions are worked out in everyday life. If persons with contrasting opinions are not interlinked, this is less likely to be problematic than when the opposite applies.

On an even higher level of theoretical abstraction, you can attempt to explain society.[2] That is the moment in social research most commonly associated with 'theory' – even though the preceding steps are essential in achieving that. Building social theory without first describing and then understanding society is like constructing a building on soft soil without caring for the proper foundation: bound to spell disaster. 'Explaining' here means: telling about society in terms of general processes and principles, that is, using a more detached language than the language used for interpretation and description. As a consequence, the words and syntax used for explanation are usually not the language in which members of a society describe themselves (unless, of course, you are describing a community of social scientists).[3] Using general, theoretical language has the advantage that comparisons can be made between societies without having to mobilize all the empirical particularities of each society. At the same time, because the language that is used for description (using words such as 'power', 'gender', 'stratification', and so on) is so abstract, there is a risk that it will become devoid of empirical meaning; i.e. that it will no longer connect to the experiences of everyday life. In that case, one would fall into the trap of grand theory again. A major task of grounded theory, therefore, is to maintain a 'chain of evidence' running from the viewpoint of members of a society (empirical data) to the abstract statements that circulate among social scientists. Only by doing that can naturalistic inquiry fulfil its twin task: to contribute to social science discourse and to remain faithful to reporting the native's point of view. And only by keeping these two connected can naturalistic inquiry contribute to making society transparent to its members.

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[2] Abraham Kaplan (1964) uses the expression 'semantic explanation' for our *Verstehen* or interpreting and 'scientific explanation' for our explanation. He stresses that semantic explanation is an essential step towards, and a necessary part of, scientific explanation.

[3] And unless certain scientific concepts have become part of the vernacular, like for example 'role', 'repression', or 'depression'. These concepts were originally coined within the scientific disciplines of respectively sociology, psychoanalysis, and psychiatry, but they have trickled down into ordinary language and are now routinely used in everyday conversations. Originally etic concepts, they have become emic.

2.4. Conclusion

In naturalistic inquiry, theories are not viewed as grand conceptual schemes of society that are waiting to be verified with 'data'. Instead, social theory as it exists at a particular juncture presents a rich source of cues and hints for field research. Its merits remain to be established, however, in dialogue with direct observations of some specified part of society. Social theories give suggestions about looking for instances that can be expected to reveal some theoretical principle in action. Rather than conceiving this as an occasion to label that principle with existing theoretical ideas however, the task in naturalistic research is to gauge the meaning of the ideas from the viewpoint of society members and to see how their opinions and viewpoints relate to their social practices. This raises new points that have to be explained in terms of the *verstehende* categories of that society. In this way, modifications in the original meaning of the sensitizing concepts can be expected to emerge, and this is a sure sign of advancing theoretical understanding. Naturalistic inquiry generalizes from empirical cases to theoretical ideas, and compares across cases through theoretical debate. It begins by describing society in outsider terms, but, as the researcher becomes familiar with the symbolic categories of that society, a step towards its interpretation can be made. Ultimately, theorizing in naturalistic inquiry is part of an iterative cycle in which the discovery of theoretical principles and the viewpoints of a society's members seamlessly merge with one another.

3. Looking at society: Observing, participating, interpreting

> *The eyes see only what the mind is prepared to comprehend*
> – Henri Louis Bergson

The following four chapters explore different strategies for the collection of information about society, and we begin our discussion by talking about observations. Observations hold a special place in naturalistic inquiry. This follows directly from the ambition of naturalistic inquiry to minimally disturb, or frame, social life in a research situation, but instead to look at how it unfolds under ordinary conditions. Looking around us – at our fellow humans, at 'society', and so on – is something we do all the time and is an important part of everyday life. We therefore subscribe to a broad definition of observing, see Box 7. However, our tacit familiarity with observation in everyday life may at the same time stand in the way of using it as a tool for explicit understanding. Looking at society is neither a self-evident nor a straightforward enterprise. There are pitfalls to consider and mental and practical obstacles to overcome. This chapter tries to shed light on those, inviting you to make observation a prime source for telling about a society.

After briefly exploring the Enlightenment roots of observations in social science, the chapter discusses this in the context of positivism and naturalistic inquiry. It will be shown that the term 'observation' has a different meaning in these two traditions, and thus it results in different ways of practicing it. The chapter further explores how the ambition of naturalistic researchers to get close to the members of a society that they are studying has consequences for how and what they observe: if they participate in society, are their observations then not filtered through the position that the researchers acquire or are attributed? This refers to a problem usually referred to as 'reflexivity' in social research discourse. It will be shown how writing field notes has a key place in naturalistic researchers' coming to terms with their role in the society that they are studying. In the concluding part of the chapter, that discussion is further developed into a series of more practical 'how to' considerations. The chapter elaborates a position known as focused observations, and it discusses the practical consequences of doing so for naturalistic inquiry.

Box 7 Observation broadly defined

Talking about observation is not the same as defending 'ocularism': reducing our registration of the world to what can be seen only. We observe across a much broader sensory spectrum: taste, smell, sounds, body language, and so on (van Ede, 2009). Often what we see with our eyes and what we register through other senses is difficult to disentangle. Our other senses may record something before we can actually see it. As one of us in a study on fishing was quick to discover, different parts of fishing villages smelled differently depending on the fish species in which resident fishermen are specialized. We could therefore literally smell where we were, even with eyes closed. Speech volume presents another example of a non-visible property of everyday life. For instance, Western elite children tend to be socialized into keeping their voice down, which is esteemed in their circles as 'civilized' behaviour. In lower social classes, on the other hand, speaking loudly is seen as perfectly normal. Sound volume can thus give information about class position. Hereafter, we assume a broad definition of the term 'observation', including all our various senses.

3.1. Enlightenment roots

Observations have played a central role in scientific practice since the days of the Enlightenment. The philosopher Immanuel Kant is credited as a major figure in making observations acceptable as a dependable source of knowledge about the world (Rockmore, 2010). Earlier debate had resulted in a deadlock between two positions: rationalism and empiricism. Rationalists, represented by prominent thinkers such as René Descartes and Gottfried Leibnitz, argued against observations on the grounds that valid knowledge about the world is not derived from sensory stimuli (the stuff than you can directly see) but from intellectual and deductive procedures. In their view, what we identify as 'the world' represents a constellation of logical principles, to be discovered through logic, ethics and, of course, mathematics. Empiricists, on the other hand, represented by thinkers such as John Locke and David Hume, argued that knowledge can only get to us via sensory experience and not through logic. The human mind is thus a *tabula rasa*; it is devoid of preconceived ideas about the world, and we can learn about it only by interacting with it.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant posited a new thesis, bridging empiricism and rationalism, by arguing that we understand the world through observations of it that are filtered through the frames of our mental dispositions, i.e. through what we already know about, or think of, the world. In other words, Kant revolutionized observation as a source of knowledge by claiming that our ideas about the world and what we observe in that world are intertwined: our minds construct what we see.

These ideas first gained traction in the study of the natural world. A similar debate sprang up in the social sciences later. Here the discussion split over the question of whether it is necessary to have access to the inner world of the members of a society to be able to study what they do (Schütz, 1967). As already discussed in Chapter 2, this resulted in two fundamentally different positions. Positivists, borrowing heavily from empiricism, argue that the social behaviour and practices of humans can be observed in much the same way as physicists study molecular interactions. Human action, they argue, is merely a response to external stimuli, and the task of social research is to establish regularities in stimulus-response. In this behaviourist view (associated with the work of the psychologists John Watson and Frederic Skinner), internal musings, and the sharing thereof with other people, are considered irrelevant. For instance, if a young woman is confronted with a man who makes threatening gestures, does she pick a fight or run away? Note that behaviourism is more interested in how the young woman responds than in what she thinks or feels about the threatening situation.

Proponents of naturalistic inquiry, on the other hand, claim that, whereas it is certainly possible to describe human societies on the basis of outsider observations, this presents merely an early stage in the arc of naturalistic inquiry (see Figures 1 and 2). The next, necessary step will be to go beyond observing stimulus-response relations and truly *understand* a response. It may very well not be – in fact it will typically not be – a direct reaction to a stimulus but rather emerge from the accumulated life experience of the human being in question. Behaviour cannot be understood – let alone explained – without understanding the meaning of that behaviour for the people involved. Hence observation in naturalistic inquiry always involves entering into the life world of your informants.

Before plunging into a more focused discussion on *verstehende* observation, the chapter first continues with a review of two common distinctions in observational social research. One, as regards the empirical setting of the observation, we may distinguish between experiments and field studies. It will be shown that there are mixed forms too – the natural experiment in particular – but most observational research can be categorized under either one or the other. Second, on the basis of procedures for recording and storing observations, we may distinguish between the use of a pre-

Figure 6 Observation in social research

		observational categories	
		emergent	prestructured
empirical situation	field study	*naturalistic inquiry*	*positivism*
	experiment	*positivism*	*positivism*

structured observation sheets and allowing observational categories to emerge during the observation process. These distinctions logically result in the following, simplified matrix that is further discussed below (Figure 6).

3.2. Observations in social research: Positivism and naturalistic inquiry

Observations in experiments

Observations in experiments have been a mainstream approach in psychology since the advent of experimental psychology in the late nineteenth century (associated with the works of Wilhelm Wundt), and to a lesser extent in economics and sociology. Characteristic of experiments is that their design dictates the sampling (see also Chapter 2). Participants are selected on the basis of previously established rules, usually taking the form of a randomized procedure. In this way, variations on the individual level are controlled, that is, not supposed to influence the outcome of the experiment. Further, participants are usually taken to a more or less artificial environment where the research or 'independent' variables can be highly controlled; researchers attempt to simulate a laboratory-type situation. This is done to rule out variables that are thought to be external to the behaviour or other response that is being studied, and this has the advantage that it minimizes the information to be analysed.

As regards the observational categories used in experiments, Figure 6 suggests two possibilities. The first possibility, which dominates psychology and related disciplines, is that observational categories are constructed before the data collection. These categories are usually based on previous studies that bear strong resemblances to the current study, and they are usually slightly modified in the light of what researchers expect to observe in their studies. What happens next is that observations are broken down into smaller observational units, which are then printed in an observation sheet. In this way, a high degree of standardization is achieved, with the benefit that observations collected by different researchers working on the same problem can easily be compared. Thus, teams of researchers can work at different times and locations, and their results can be brought together in a single analysis.

The infamous Milgram experiment presents a noteworthy example of this. In the 1960s, psychologist Stanley Milgram wished to test Hannah Ahrendt's 'banality of evil' thesis, suggesting that ordinary persons when placed in an authority situation can be brought to inflict harm on others, even to kill them (Milgram, 1962). In Milgram's experimental setting, people were invited to participate in an experiment in learning. They were asked by an experimenter (a man dressed in a doctor's white coat) to play the role of teacher and ask questions to a person (the 'learner') who was hidden from view but could be heard, and to administer electrical shocks if the answers did not conform to those printed on a sheet that the experimenter handed to the participant. Unknown to the participants, the learner was not a real person connected to electrical wiring, but a professional actor. The experimenter encouraged the participant to increase the voltage in response to 'wrong' answers in order to elicit the 'right' ones. A staggering 65 per cent of those participating in the experiment increased the voltage to near-lethal levels (450 volts).[1] The experiments were filmed, and, of importance for our discussions, the participants' responses were coded and recorded on standardized observation sheets (cf. Blass, 1999).[2]

Figure 6 suggests a second combination: conducting experiments without using pre-structured observation categories. The equally infamous Stanford prison experiment conducted by Philip Zimbardo in 1971 presents an example of this. A group of volunteers were randomly assigned roles of guards and prisoners in a mock prison, with Zimbardo overseeing the experiment in the role of superintendent. The idea was to study how these roles would structure everyday social interaction in the prison. The outcome of the experiment surprised Zimbardo (and many others with him). It appeared that the roles were quickly internalized by the participants and had real and detrimental consequences. In no time, the guards began to establish authoritarian measures, which eventually degenerated into psychological abuse of the prisoners, some of whom revolted. Their revolt was suppressed by the guards. Eventually the experiment was aborted prematurely because it was felt that it was compromising the psychological health of all the participants. It further raised questions about the validity of the information collected, especially because Zimbardo could not claim to have been a neutral observer.[3] Lessons were learnt from it and applied in contemporary experiments in which social interactions are observed 'naturalistic style'. A prominent example that comes to mind is the Mars-500 mission experiment in which crews of volunteers spent long stretches of time in confined areas in order to study the effect of psychological isolation comparable to what crews on a space mission to Mars would have to endure (see www.esa.int/Our_Activities/Human_Spaceflight/Mars500).

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[1] On the other hand, as Abram de Swaan observes, 35 per cent did *not*. De Swaan suggests that the 65 per cent obeying the experimenter's orders were playing a 'very serious game', rather than behaving naturally. He writes: 'The experiments are without doubt highly significant [...] but what they teach us remains an open question' (de Swaan 2015: 39).

[2] The Milgram experiment, in addition to raising fundamental questions on the nature of morality in humans, also spawned an ethical debate. It played an important role in the formulation of research protocols eventually adopted by the American Psychological Association.

Yet another type of experiment has recently been developed in the world of behavioural economics, called 'natural experiments'. In it, natural situations are selected *post-facto* in such a way that they conform to the principles of randomized sampling. Thus, groups of participants are reconstructed, not during the situations, but after them. One example is a study looking at the effects of military service on the life courses of young men when they are subjected to military draft lotteries (such as was the case in the United States during the Vietnam war). In voluntary military recruitment systems, young men from lower socio-economic status groups tend to be overrepresented, thus making it difficult to disentangle the effects of the military experience from life-course determining factors such as income and education. Once this bias is filtered out by randomly assigning military service across socio-economic groups, it is possible to study military service as if it were a treatment under laboratory conditions (Angrist, 1990). On the one hand, natural experiments resolve the problem of the laboratory presenting an artificial social situation: participants may prepare for it and at least bring to the experiment their own set of expectations of how they ought to behave. On the other hand, it is difficult to combine natural experiments with making direct observations, at least not without violating important ethical principles in field research, to which the chapter now turns.

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[3] Zimbardo later served as an expert witness in the trials following the revelations of prisoner abuse and torture by US service men in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. See Zimbardo (1972, 2007).

Observations in field studies

Moving from the laboratory to the field entails a shift away from controlling the research situation. In the field, social behaviour has to be observed as it presents itself. Intervening in the course of events would disrupt those events and constitute an obtrusion. Field studies are thus more suited to practicing a *verstehende* approach than experiments are, but that does not mean that all field research is necessarily naturalistic in the way it treats the data collected. As was discussed in Chapter 2, naturalistic inquiry explores data in order to construct abstract categories that form the building blocks of social theory. Initial theoretical ideas are treated as sensitizing concepts, but in order to make new discoveries, room is allowed for new categories to emerge from the data. This applies to all modes of data collection, including, of course, observations. This distinguishes naturalistic field research from field research based on positivism. We begin with the latter, working our way to the former.

Key to a positivist approach to field studies is the use of pre-structured observations sheets. As a method, this has been tried and tested extensively in the biological study of social behaviour, especially as regards mammals such as primates (Goodall, 1971; de Waal, 2007), dolphins (Pryor & Norris, 1998), wild cavy (Asher, Spinelli di Oliveira, & Schaser, 2004), and sperm whales (Whitehead, 2003). Usually, a small team of researchers establishes a *rapport* with a group of animals in the wild and then follows their movements over the course of the day. This confronts the researchers with considerable practical problems, in particular as regards the normal functioning of their own bodies (eating, relieving themselves, and sleeping). Also, identifying individuals in the group under natural conditions can present a challenge, as any zoo visitor who has paused in front of the chimpanzee cage (or island) can testify. During data recording, researchers usually focus on activities and interaction at a particular time of day, or follow a particular individual through the day. Box 8 presents a list taken from an observation sheet used in a recent primate study.

Box 8 Observational categories for the study of primates

- Interactions while getting food and eating
- Chasing/being chased (age and sex of pursuer and pursued?)
- Vocalizing (what causes them to vocalize? How do others respond?)
- Grooming (describe it. Self-grooming, pairs, multiple individuals? Do some get more than they give?)

- Adults carrying or caring for an infant (is the adult male or female? what does it do?)
- Dominance and submission behaviours (fights, showing canines, getting preferential access to water or food, taking something away from another individual with or without resistance, etc.)
- Forming coalitions (such as two individuals defending themselves against a third)
- Courtship or mounting
- Interactions with human primate visitors

(Eidem, 2010)

This requires transplantation to a natural situation of some standardized methods developed for a controlled research situation. Like standardized observations in experimental situations, this has the benefit of allowing the comparison of findings between researchers and identifying structural changes over time. It has the disadvantage, however, that outsider ('etic') categories are used to label the flow of observations, rather than allowing such categories to emerge from the data, as is key to naturalistic inquiry. What can be made of social behaviour, or a pattern of social interaction, that is observed in reality but does not appear on the observation sheet?

Field studies that depend on emergent observational categories are most closely associated with ethnography. As a research practice, anthropologists originally developed ethnography in the early twentieth century. Bronislaw Malinowski is usually credited as the first modern ethnographer, depending on so-called participant observation: staying with small groups of people and developing the closeness needed to make detailed first-hand observations of their social practices.[4] Since its first inception however, a wider range of social science disciplines, including development studies, sociology, and political science have adopted ethnographic research methods (O'Reilly, 2011). The current frequent use of the term 'ethnographic' in social research notwithstanding, ethnography has not converged into a mutually agreed research practice. In today's academic parlance, the term ethnography has become a broad container concept which may refer to making anecdotal observations, doing discourse analysis, analysing the use of space, conducting extended case studies, and other practices (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

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[4] Malinowski represents twentieth century British anthropology. However, it has been suggested that eighteenth-century German naturalists preceded him in the use of the term, in German called *Völkerbeschreibung*, see Vermeulen (2008).

Observations, however, are uniquely important to naturalistic inquiry. The next section provides a more in-depth exploration of the issues and debates regarding observation in naturalistic inquiry. This means that from now on our discussion will concentrate on what goes on in the top left cell of Figure 6 (field study with emergent observational categories).

3.3. Naturalistic observations: Looking at everyday life

Various prominent social thinkers have made contributions to the discussion on observations in naturalistic inquiry. Two of them are reviewed briefly here: the Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman and the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz. They were selected, not because they offer a final word on the matter, but because their works present highly evocative examples of looking at everyday life. What is more, in their work they display slightly different approaches to naturalistic observation and they also have different ambitions in mind with it. By comparing their work, you can therefore develop a more practical feeling for what it means to look at everyday life naturalistically.

Erving Goffman: Casually observing everyday life

Goffman was a master at making casual observations of everyday life and at reconstructing a worldview from that. For instance, he looked at how people enter rooms, and especially at what they do just before they go through a door. Doors, in Goffman's view, are not just openings in a wall, mere entries to a room, but instead present a liminal space, a threshold distinguishing one social reality from another one. Just before people enter a room filled with other people, Goffman noted, often something changes in their demeanour: they flex their shoulders, straighten their back, raise their chin, and then stride into the room. Another observation that he made at doors was what happens when two persons of different occupational status go through a door. They can carry on a conversation without being conscious of their status difference, until the necessity of having to pass single file through the doorway causes both persons to consider how to manage the problem of priority without giving offence. Mild confusion and feelings of slight embarrassment are often the result (Goffman, 1961: 32).

Goffman took such observations not as isolated incidents but integrated them in a so-called dramaturgical model of society. This model hinges on the metaphor of the theatre where actors perform their roles. Like actors, members of society play a role 'frontstage' in society and they rehearse this 'backstage'. In their behaviour, therefore, humans are guided by expectations as regards the role they perform in a given situation. The first observation demonstrates how a person moves from the world of private musings into the performance that belongs to the more public world of those who are in the room. In the second case, the doorway makes the two persons suddenly aware of their social roles, in this case defined by occupation status, and the order they have to work out is indicative of the social hierarchy that defines their roles.

Goffman did not consider making observations a special task that depended on a large research project. To him, observations could be made in everyday situations, and many of his observations were made in ordinary work situations, during staff meetings for instance, or while he was working with his students.

Although such observations may seem trivial, Goffman emphasized that their power depends on the researcher developing an intimate familiarity with the society that he is studying. Otherwise, you risk imputing representativeness to observational data where there is none. Without really knowing the place that you study, Goffman argued, 'you don't get the random sample, you don't get a range of unanticipated events, you don't get the familiarity' (Goffman, 1989: 130). Thus, the observation involving the two men entering the doorway became relevant only after Goffman had made numerous such observations and had developed a thorough understanding of the nature of the social relations involved. The power of observation, in Goffman's view, further depends on its relation to language. In today's social research practice, the recording of language through interviewing prevails (see also Chapter 4), but Goffman tones this down by making it part of an observation strategy. He argued that: 'I don't give hardly any weight to what people say, but I try to triangulate what they're saying with events' (Goffman, 1989: 131). This fitted his general view on individual persons, not as holders of particularly deep insights into society, but as vehicles in the constitution of roles.

Clifford Geertz: Interpreting symbolic drama

Geertz also looked at everyday-life phenomena, but, unlike Goffman, he appeared to be more interested in dramatic instances of it. He considered these instances in their own right but, more importantly, proposed an interpretive procedure to link these analytically to a broader, symbolic world. Drama in everyday life is thus not just a cultural phenomenon but presents a way into understanding the symbolic order of the society in which it functions. Geertz's observational *pièce de résistance* in which he explored this idea is a famous case study known as the Balinese cockfight. Such cockfights were and still are important: every village on Bali possesses at least one ring for the fighting – even though it was forbidden by the new Indonesian government at the time of Geertz' fieldwork in the 1950s. He endlessly observed such fights, and what immediately struck him was the intensity of the emotions they elicited: Geertz noted how the otherwise highly composed Balinese screamed and furiously gesticulated during the matches. Further, considerable betting went on around it that could result in serious money transferring ownership. Betting and emotional intensity appeared to be linked: bets placed on cock fights could be so high as to bankrupt a man when the bet was placed on the losing cock (Geertz, 1993: 412-454).

Having familiarized himself with the basic rules of the cockfights, (which took considerable time because, at first, the Balinese villagers refused to converse with Geertz), Geertz began to acquaint himself with the players, recorded key socio-economic data about them, looked at the grooming of the cocks in preparation for the fights, and took stock of the betting that surrounded it. Thus he made a number of interesting discoveries. First, losing money can have dramatic practical, financial consequences, but nothing is worse than no longer being able to participate in the fights. It reduces a male villager to the status of a non-person: to be a man in Balinese society is to be able to participate in cockfights (Geertz referred to this phenomenon as the 'deep play' of cock fights: the depth being symbolized by putting your social status on the line). Second, the social organization of the fighting follows a social hierarchy, running from kinsmen via lineage to village; running in the opposite direction are the solidarities cementing Balinese society together. Hence, men from the same lineage will never fight each other, and when an outsider comes to the fights, all those in the same village will support the candidate from their own circles. Third, the loans needed for the more serious betting are mobilized through that same social hierarchy; this is considered to be important because in this way you never become dependent on the mercy of your opponent (note that little capital accumulation goes on: the betting is not a redistributive mechanism).

From these (and other) points, Geertz succeeded in crafting an insightful perspective on Balinese society based on a detailed observation of one institution: cock fights. The essence of the interpretive approach whereby observations are abstracted to a more general view on society is aptly summed up in this sentence:

> The cockfight renders ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible by presenting it in terms of acts and objects which have had their practical consequences removed and been reduced [...] to the level of sheer

> appearances, where their meaning can be more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived (Geertz, 1993: 443).

The significance of cockfights goes beyond the arrangements and rules of the game that they embody. Such games process experience that is central to being part of Balinese society. Put otherwise, it presents a metaphor for arranging and reflecting on themes that are important to members of Balinese society such as death, masculinity, pride, status, and chance. Note that Geertz does not argue that cockfights are simply small-scale 'carbon copies' of Balinese society, but that the themes that the fights raise, and the way they are linked to each other, present an entrance to understanding important aspects of Balinese society.

3.4. The observer as participant

The ideal of naturalistic inquiry is to make unobtrusive observations so as not to disturb the flow of everyday life. Only then can naturalistic inquiry realize its ambition to the full: to study society through the eyes of its participants. But how is that actually possible when, generally speaking, the naturalistic inquirer also participates in the society in which he is interested? For Goffman and Geertz, this did not present a fundamental issue, but more a practical problem. That makes sense considering how they went about it. Goffman pursued a strategy of casual observation that he coupled with a covert role as researcher: those he studied were often not immediately aware of it. In today's world this tends to raise ethical and moral questions, but Goffman was never much inclined – nor forced – to doubt his unobtrusive presence. Things were different for Geertz, who, as an American Caucasian, clearly stood out in Balinese society: little chance of him going around unnoticed. Geertz resolved this problem by allowing the villagers to slowly get used to his presence and by not describing one particular cockfight, but by treating cockfights as a Weberian ideal-type: he collapsed countless observations of the fights into one composite description of them. This allowed Geertz to move between different aspects of the fights and to familiarize himself with the viewpoint of a diversity of players and betters and onlookers. Thus, he could reconstruct the symbolic universe of the cockfights, safely assuming that this did not depend on his presence.

Others were less confident, and their voices increased in volume after the publication of Bronislaw Malinowski's 1967 *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*. This showed that Malinowski, far from being the disengaged observer that he had long been taken for, actually held strong ideas about the Trobiander society that he studied. According to the diary, some of these views were rather negative, reflecting the Victorian cultural ideals of his time. This shattered the ideal of transparency between fieldwork practice and telling about society.

Coming from a different angle, the social thinker Pierre Bourdieu made a study of higher education politics in France, published as *Homo Academicus* (1988). It presented him with the pressing problem that he was observing a social world to which he himself belonged. As an insider in the field, he was confronted with the problem of how it is possible to observe oneself. Is that not contradictory to the spirit of observation, namely, that one can maintain some distance by observing the other? The anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano offers yet another point to the discussion, suggesting that, because a researcher engages with the members of the society that she studies, observations are structured in social relations with these participants. He (and others) point out that fieldwork relations are often of an unequal nature: the naturalistic researcher is more free to end the relationship, commands prestige because she is often recruited from Western elite circles, and as a writer can exercise control over the image that the outside world develops about a society (Crapanzano, 1980).

On the same note, but backed with different arguments, are those pointing out how naturalistic researchers increasingly risk ‘going native’ and becoming part of the political ambitions of emancipating groups that they study. Then, the balance of power – which the previous authors problematized – is shifting, with these groups dictating the conditions of access, in the process influencing the observing gaze of the researcher. In the wake of the ethnic rights movements, for instance, groups marginalized because of their ethnic background have come to realize how the presence of a well-connected Western researcher may be turned to the benefit of the community. Thus, the researcher is considered a useful cultural broker vis-à-vis the outside world, whose portrayal of the ethnic community might favourably contribute to their international clout, possibly resulting in the mobilization of outside forces for internal political projects (van Meijl, 2000).

In other cases, naturalistic researchers have strong ideological ambitions themselves. Their doing naturalistic inquiry then risks degenerating into casting a sympathy vote, in which case there may be a real risk of confusing ideological projection with empirically inspired observation (Escobar, 1992).

Across social science disciplines, these problems have been recognized as pressing ones, but responses to them differ sharply. At one extreme end, mostly associated with French postmodernism, one finds social researchers arguing that the problem of the social ‘constructedness’ of observations precludes making objective statements at all about the society that one studies (Fabian, 1983). As a form of telling about society, naturalistic inquiry is not very different from literary fiction, therefore: all claims to veracity are inherently problematic. When reasoned to its extreme, this makes any scientific claim about society impossible.

At the other end are the positivists who of old have argued for strict abstinence: social researchers should, if only figuratively, wear the white coat of a doctor or chemist and practice absolute objectivity.

Neither of these positions is adopted in this book. Clearly, 'objectivity' in the traditional and aseptic sense of the word cannot be reconciled with the empathic, *verstehende* attitude required in naturalistic inquiry. However, from an epistemological point of view, postmodernism is the night in which all cows are black. We are more sympathetic to a solution know as reflexive self-understanding. It concedes that observations are always embedded in social relations and that researchers bring into these relations their own biases and predispositions. These have to be acknowledged therefore, and researchers must become reflexively aware of their position in the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Minimally, this means that finding out about society consist of constantly raising the question of whether 'findings' are really representations of empirical patterns, or are actually projections of your own predispositions (see also Devereux, 1968, on 'countertransference').

It is difficult to give an indication of when your reflexive journey ends. To be able to say something meaningful about this, at a minimum it requires keeping a notebook with field notes reporting on this point. Once the field notes become saturated (and therefore a boring read), this may indicate that the reflexive cycle has been completed. Another indication has to do with the relational nature of observations. At the beginning of a field study, researchers are usually greeted with great enthusiasm or with great distrust. The 'first encounter' elicits strong emotions. If that is the case, chances are that observations will be biased through mutual, albeit rarely articulated, high expectations. After a while, things will settle down, socially speaking, and a particularly good sign is when participants in a study show indications of losing interest in the researcher. Although that seems to present a challenge for sustained fieldwork, it may in fact be the opening that the researcher needs to get close up to particular persons, and register what life does to them without his interfering in it (Goffman, 1989).

Synthesis

Before we move on to the practical side of making naturalistic observations, it may help if we try to synthesize the lessons learnt so far. First, the objective of naturalistic observation is summed up with Goffman as: ‘to be close to them while they are responding to what life does to them (…), and to see things the way they ordinarily are’ (Goffman, 1989: 130). Key to that is to avoid creating a formal research setting. Because a naturalistic researcher is a social person who aims to develop a special role relation – one that is driven by finding out about a society – high demands are put on her reflexive skills. Members of the studied society engage with the researcher and form their opinions of her. How that impacts on the observations is a key problem that the researcher must work out diligently. Note-keeping is an essential practice for that because, among other things, it keeps track of your progress in the reflexive process. Having casual conversations while observing is natural and important and it must be considered alongside note-keeping, but only in relation to what can be observed. Conversation often consists of received discourse, which tends to portray an ideal world. Yet, witnessing actual social practices and behaviours and contrasting those with language is a major task in naturalistic observation. From the viewpoint of naturalistic inquiry, an interview presents as much an occasion for observation as a source of insight into important aspects of society conveyed through language.

3.5. Practical methodology in looking at society

Key to making naturalistic observations is a focused gaze on society. The following story by Samuel Scudder, which took place around 1857 and was first reported in 1873, presents a good, preliminary introduction to this topic. We therefore recount it in full in Box 9.

Box 9 The student, the fish, and Agassiz

It was more than fifteen years ago that I entered the laboratory of Professor Agassiz, and told him I had enrolled my name in the Scientific School as a student of natural history. He asked me a few questions about my object in coming, my antecedents generally, the mode in which I afterwards proposed to use the knowledge I might acquire, and finally, whether I wished to study any special branch. On the latter I replied that while I wished to be well grounded in all departments of zoology, I purposed to devote myself specially to insects.

‘When do you wish to begin?’ he asked.

‘Now,’ I replied.

This seemed to please him, and with an energetic 'Very well,' he reached from a shelf a huge jar of specimens in yellow alcohol. 'Take this fish,' he said, 'and look at it; we call it a Haemulon; by and by I will ask what you have seen.'

With that he left me, but in a moment returned with explicit instructions as to the care of the object entrusted to me.

[...] In ten minutes I had seen all that could be seen in that fish, and started in search of the professor, who had, however, left the museum; and when I returned, after lingering over some of the odd animals stored in the upper apartment, [...] nothing was to be done but return to a steadfast gaze at my mute companion. Half an hour passed, an hour, another hour; the fish began to look loathsome. I turned it over and around; looked it in the face – ghastly; from behind, beneath, above, sideways, at a three-quarters view – just as ghastly. I was in despair; at an early hour, I concluded that lunch was necessary; so with infinite relief, the fish was carefully replaced in the jar, and for an hour I was free.

On my return, I learned that Professor Agassiz had been at the museum, but had gone and would not return for several hours. My fellow students were too busy to be disturbed by continued conversation. Slowly I drew forth that hideous fish, and with a feeling of desperation again looked at it. I might not use a magnifying glass; instruments of all kinds were interdicted. My two hands, my two eyes, and the fish; it seemed a most limited field. I pushed my fingers down its throat to see how sharp its teeth were. I began to count the scales in the different rows until I was convinced that that was nonsense. At last a happy thought struck me – I would draw the fish; and now with surprise I began to discover new features in the creature. Just then the professor returned.

'That is right,' said he, 'a pencil is one of the best eyes. I am glad to notice, too, that you keep your specimen wet and your bottle corked.' With these encouraging words he added:

'Well, what is it like?'

He listened attentively to my brief rehearsal of the structure of parts whose names were still unknown to me; the fringed gill-arches and movable operculum; the pores of the head, fleshly lips, and lidless eyes; the lateral line, the spinous fin, and forked tail; the compressed and arched body. When I had finished, he waited as if expecting more, and then, with an air of disappointment:

'You have not looked very carefully; why,' he continued, more earnestly, 'you haven't seen one of the most conspicuous features of the animal, which is as plainly before your eyes as the fish itself. Look again; look again!' And he left me to my misery.

I was piqued; I was mortified. Still more of that wretched fish? But now I set myself to the task with a will, and discovered one new thing after another, until I saw how just the professor's criticism had been. The afternoon passed quickly, and when, towards its close, the professor inquired:

'Do you see it yet?'

'No,' I replied. 'I am certain I do not, but I see how little I saw before.' 'That is next best,' said he earnestly, 'but I won't hear you now; put away your fish and go home; perhaps you will be ready with a better answer in the morning. I will examine you before you look at the fish.'

This was disconcerting; not only must I think of my fish all night, studying, without the object before me, what this unknown but most visible feature might be, but also, without reviewing my new discoveries, I must give an exact account of them the next day. I had a bad memory; so I walked home by Charles River in a distracted state, with my two perplexities.

The cordial greeting from the professor the next morning was reassuring; here was a man who seemed to be quite as anxious as I that I should see for myself what he saw.

'Do you perhaps mean,' I asked, 'that the fish has symmetrical sides with paired organs?'

His thoroughly pleased 'Of course, of course!' repaid the wakeful hours of the previous night. After he had discoursed most happily and enthusiastically – as he always did – upon the importance of this point, I ventured to ask what I should do next.

'Oh, look at your fish!' he said, and left me again to my own devices. In a little more than an hour he returned and heard my new catalogue.

'That is good, that is good!' he repeated, 'but that is not all; go on.' And so for three long days, he placed that fish before my eyes, forbidding me to look at anything else, or to use any artificial aid. 'Look, look, look,' was his repeated injunction.

This was the best entomological lesson I ever had – a lesson whose influence was extended to the details of every subsequent study; a legacy the professor has left to me, as he left it to many others, of inestimable value, which we could not buy, with which we cannot part.

The fourth day, a second fish of the same group was placed beside the first and I was bidden to point out the resemblances and differences between the two; another and another followed, until the entire family lay before me, and a whole legion of jars covered the table and surrounding shelves; the odor had become a pleasant perfume; and even now, the sight of an old, six-inch, worm-eaten cork brings fragrant memories.

> The whole group of Haemulons was thus brought in review; and whether engaged upon the dissection of the internal organs, the preparation and examination of the bony framework, or the description of the various parts, Agassiz's training in the method of observing facts and their orderly arrangement was ever accompanied by the urgent exhortation not to be content with them.
>
> 'Facts are stupid things,' he would say, 'until brought into connection with some general law.' At the end of eight months, it was almost with reluctance that I left these friends and turned to insects; but what I had gained by this outside experience has been of greater value than years of later investigation in my favorite groups. (Scudder, 1879: 450-454)

This little example suggests that, the more observations are focused, the more likely they are to yield interesting information. Fieldwork that is based on unfocused observation is probably going to result only in impressionistic, and therefore uninteresting, images of the society under study. But of course, as in Scudder's case, it takes time to find the right approach, the most promising focus. Especially in the early stages of the fieldwork, it may be worthwhile to explore various possible foci, to follow vague hunches, to accept a chance invitation from someone who appears to be an interesting person, and not worry too much about providing a credible justification for why you wish to talk to that particular person. Bringing focus to observations begins with thinking ahead about which individuals (or types of individuals) can be expected to be included in the research, and which aspects of their behaviour and social interaction will be concentrated on.

Key in that thinking-ahead, it seems to us, is that fieldwork revolves around a constant confrontation between your own ideas about the situation under study and the findings at which you arrive by making focused observations. This confrontation is the basis for learning about the social situations encountered in the fieldwork or, put differently, for reconstructing the puzzle that you construct during the fieldwork. There is discussion about whether this confrontation should be formalized according to some agreed-upon schedule, be left implicit and at the discretion of the naturalistic researcher, or made explicit and subject to the scrutiny of outsiders (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2005). This book has no intention to resolve that issue, though it seems that being self-critical is an essential requirement. The ability to doubt your own ideas while in the field is a great virtue in naturalistic inquiry. In the context of naturalistic observation, it seems relevant for three points: i) the formulation of questions in the fieldwork, ii) the selection of informants and situations for observation, and iii) the role of field notes in bringing together ideas and observations. In more detail, these look as follows.

Asking continuous questions

Few naturalistic researchers go into the field without specifying some sort of preliminary question they wish to explore; otherwise, there is little difference between doing fieldwork and going on a tourist trip. When approached from a positivist viewpoint, a research question is outlined only once and only in the beginning. This question is then developed into so-called sub-questions pertaining to some previously identified aspect of the society you wish to study. Empirical material is subsequently collected, and, based on this, the researcher answers the research questions. Research funding institutions tend to value this approach to fieldwork for its simplicity and clarity. Yet very few naturalistic researchers conduct fieldwork in this fashion, and many positivist researchers do not do so either. In practice, they tinker, both with the methods they use and with the questions they ask (Beuving, 2011).

Following the idea of naturalistic research entails beginning observational work with very broad questions in mind. Such questions are comparable to, and often deduced from, sensitizing concepts. They are broad lenses that guide the direction of the research but that are deliberately left underspecified at the beginning of the fieldwork. If broad questions are addressed first, your observations can become sensitized to particular aspects of social life in which you are interested; hence they begin to focus the observations. For instance, if you want to make a study of how social stratification in a local community is changing under the influence of the influx of migrants, you look for indications of stratification by striking up conversations with persons who are known to have changed position in the community recently, and by looking for observable indications of this.

Usually, naturalistic researchers not only formulate their questions at the beginning of the fieldwork, but also tend to reformulate them throughout their research. New questions arise the more you learn about the society under study. For instance, during a field study in northern Malawi, anthropologist Jens Andersson observed how many northern Malawians frequently migrated to South Africa to work. Some of them stayed for long stretches of time in South Africa, whereas others appeared to travel up and down more frequently. On the basis of this observation, Andersson surmised that there might be two different migration practices, a point that he subsequently explored by following the migrations down the migration chain to South Africa. There he observed how some of the migrants eked out a living by working as gardeners, making little money, whereas others moved into the transport of migrants and the goods that they carried on their return trips. This confirmed the existence of different practices. Andersson discovered moreover that these practices were linked in a social hierarchy: transporters were highly esteemed, and many of the Malawian migrants aspired to become transporters – even though few would eventually make it (Andersson, 2006).

The selection of situations and informants

Focusing observations implies choosing a limited number of informants whose behaviour and social interactions can be observed in some detail – a procedure technically called 'sampling' (Gobo, 2004). Returning to the example of Malawian migrants, once Andersson established that there were different migration practices, he began to look for individual migrants who were working as gardeners for wealthy South Africans, and for those who had moved into the transporting business. Andersson then was drawn to an analysis of their social networks. Careful observation of their social practices revealed that transporters usually commanded an extensive social network, whereas ordinary migrants were linked in smaller personal networks. This difference led Andersson to become interested in the social dynamics of these networks. He then selected two migrants for further inquiry: an ordinary gardener and a successful transporter. After more observation of their social practices, he came to understand how transporters were successful migrants whose social network included a wide circle of relatives, friends, and officials, both in South Africa and Malawi, whereas ordinary migrants usually depended on a limited circle of family contacts. In other words, migration success and the extent and functioning of social networks appeared to be highly intertwined – a point that began with the observation that different migration practices co-existed in northern Malawi.

Identifying criteria for selecting informants for further research is usually very difficult at the beginning of a study. Many naturalistic researchers find in the early days of their fieldwork that the people they meet look similar and that they seem to behave in the same way. This is of course (usually) not the case; there is a far larger diversity of persons in the field that you are studying than you think at first, but it takes a little time to be able to see that.

Carrying out a small survey at the beginning can help to better understand this diversity; and even though the results of that survey may be not so interesting in terms of concrete findings, doing survey work can be a good excuse to hang around those persons in whom you happen to be interested and to see what you can learn from observing their behaviour and social interaction. That is another indication of how using more methods expands the possibility of making focused observations.

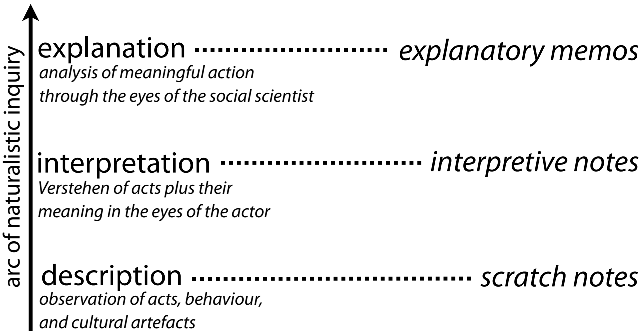
Another point concerns what is 'interesting' information, and what is not. Often at the beginning of a field study, much of what you see is new and therefore automatically looks interesting. Thinking of other people as intrinsically interesting is of course a very good attitude in naturalistic inquiry, but after some time a selection must be made of a limited number of individuals whose lives you feel are particularly interesting for further study. This can be done only meaningfully after an idea has been developed about the social diversity to be encountered in the field, for instance that there are different modes of social relation management and different types of migration practices. After a while, you will perhaps begin to see how the categories that you constructed from this are not so solid after all, because you observe all sorts of interaction across them (for instance, entrepreneurs move up, or recruit less successful colleagues), and you begin to see the social dynamics that structure your categories.

Field notes

Naturalistic researchers write down their observations in their field notes (Emerson *et al.*, 2005). Writing field notes is not only important to come to terms with your position in the field (reflexivity) but also has an important function in focusing observation. This begins with the making of descriptive scratch notes. Early on in the research, these are often raw, undirected impressions that resemble those made by a passing visitor – in the words of Chapter 2, as a travelogue. However, as you begin to familiarize yourself with the motivations and ambitions of the persons you describe, your field notes begin to fill with interpretations of your descriptions. This is an essential next step, as the field notes then gain in *verstehende* depth. It also points the way forward to making more directed observations that help to confirm or contradict those made earlier – this is essential to bolster your interpretations. To return to the Malawi example, Andersson's early field notes contained extensive descriptions of Malawian migrants' lives working in Johannesburg suburbs as gardeners. He also recorded their migrating practices to northern Malawi; but it was not until he met migrants working as transporters that it dawned on him that there might be different career outcomes, possibly organized in a hierarchy. This preliminary interpretation directed his attention to the broader, political-economic realities of post-Apartheid South Africa (the migration taking shape in the wake of major policy changes on migration), a point at which his field notes began to include more theoretical statements, or 'explanatory memos' (sometimes also called 'observer's comments'), relating the migration practices that he observed to broader regional transformations. Figure 7 illustrates these different textual levels within field notes, combining them with the triad identified in Figure 3.

The focusing nature of field notes has consequences for how they figure in the analysis of observational material. The analysis of qualitative material is the topic of Chapter 7, but we can say something about it here. An unresolved debate is whether field notes can be considered an important source for analysis, or whether they chiefly register your progress in the field. The viewpoint of positivism is that the scratch notes and interpretive notes themselves constitute 'data' that are collected, opening up the possibility for outsiders to analyse or re-analyse that data (a division of labour that is more common in positivism than in naturalistic inquiry). Not all naturalistic researchers consider their field notes as an information store that can be fruitfully analysed by others after completion of the fieldwork, however. Instead, they believe that writing field notes gives rise to certain conclusions, or reveals particular ambivalences that can be addressed during further observations. For instance, a Malawian migrant can say that he is anticipating his next trip to South Africa but that he is not looking forward to making that trip with a more experienced relative. Rather than taking this at face value, Andersson was motivated to formulate questions about the nature of kinship ties in international migration relations, a point that he developed further in the field research. Thus, there is a constant going-between doing the fieldwork and writing about this in your private

Figure 7 Textual levels within field notes


arc of naturalistic inquiry
explanation
analysis of meaningful action through the eyes of the social scientist
explanatory memos
interpretation
Verstehen of acts plus their meaning in the eyes of the actor
interpretive notes
description
observation of acts, behaviour, and cultural artefacts
scratch notes

retreat (or sometimes not so private, for an amusing account see Barley, 2000). Part of the analysis therefore already takes place while the field notes are being written. Seen thus, the notes function as a heuristic device in telling about society.

There is perhaps no need to take a principled stance here. Whether a naturalistic inquirer prefers to use her field notes as a repository of information or as a crowbar to tackle intellectual problems is a matter of personal taste. And of course it is perfectly possible to do both.

A final set of remarks regards the language for writing field notes. It is important to develop a neutral language that focuses in the first place on the descriptions of observable phenomena. This entails suppressing the inclination to write interpretively. That is a counter-intuitive step, because, as knowledgable and understanding human beings (homo *sapiens* after all), we process the flow of events around us in terms of meaningful categories – that is, meaningful in terms of our own cultural understandings. Yet key in naturalistic inquiry, as we have seen, is *not* to apply our own cultural understandings but rather to discover those of the society that we are studying. The grounded theory approach as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 offers a procedure for this. First, you must attempt to describe a society as an outsider. At this stage your knowledge of that society is limited, and as an observer you should avoid imputing your own cultural understandings to that society.

Once this stage has been saturated, usually when relations with members of a society are well developed, the observer can gradually shift to a language that incorporates the categories of meaning of those members. Hence, the field notes will begin to show signs of a more *emic* understanding of the society.

As a final step, when the observer has settled squarely in theorizing mode, observations may be coupled with explanatory remarks. This is a small step removed from telling about society as finished work, but a major leap from recording raw data, as is common in the earlier stages of note-keeping.

3.6. Conclusion

Making direct observations of society is central to naturalistic inquiry. It entails looking at society as it presents itself under everyday conditions. Human societies can be described in observational terms (in the sense that primatologists describe primate society). However, to tell a credible story about society – one that includes an interpretation in terms of the mental categories of the members of that society –observational data must be confronted with, and include, the members' viewpoints. A major problem for the observing naturalistic researcher consists of suspending the interpretive framework on which he usually depends in order to process the flow of sensory impressions in everyday life. Instead, he must attempt to shed light on the interpretive framework of the society under study. That is hard work, requiring constant formulation of new ideas about that society, which then need to be checked against observational data. Writing field notes is both a way of recording empirical findings and an important heuristic procedure to keep track of your progress in understanding these findings and in coming to terms with your own position in the field.

4. Talking about society: Interviewing and casual conversation

> *There were questions, of course. But they were casual in nature; the kind you would ask while having a drink with someone; the kind he would ask you. In short, it was conversation.*
>
> – Studs Terkel

Humans are talking animals; and naturalistic inquirers pay careful attention, therefore, to what they say. Humans are not the only animals to talk – dolphins for example produce clicks, burst-pulse sounds, and whistles. The burst-pulse sounds and especially the whistles function as symbols: they are auditory stimuli produced by dolphins, directed at other dolphins, standing for something else. Taken together, they form a system of communication, a language. If only we could speak dolphinese – and if we were much better swimmers – we would be able to understand dolphin society (see Herzing, 2013; Herman, 2002; and compare Midgley, 2005). However, many of us speak English or Chinese, some of us speak Dutch or Swahili, and almost all of us can choose to learn other languages. Through human language, we have privileged access to human society. We tend to take this access for granted. The interview therefore has become the preferred tool of social scientists. Perhaps too much so – the interview and especially the so-called survey interview or questionnaire has become the routine data collection method in sociology, in public opinion research, and in communication research, crowding out other methods and making us forget that survey interviewing is a highly artificial genre. Even the more naturalistic varieties of interviewing to be discussed below may in fact be more mysterious than we tend to assume. It is for that reason that we briefly alluded to the difficulty of decoding communication between dolphins: interpreting human communication may be more difficult than we assume. According to the psychotherapist George Grosz, decoding communication between people can sometimes be as difficult as decoding tapping on a wall (Grosz, 2013: xii). In this chapter, we briefly sketch the history of the interview in social science; we present three approaches to interviewing that are often used in naturalistic inquiry: the open interview, the life story interview, and the active or creative interview; we argue that the most naturalistic form of interviewing humans in fact is… having a conversation; along the way and at the end we provide some practical advice.

4.1. From workers' inquiry to social survey

Interviews were first used as tools of empirical social research in Western countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Enlightened members of the middle class, worried by the dangers of crime and contagious disease and by the rise of socialism, yet at the same time motivated by genuine empathy and commiseration, began to inquire into the poverty and misery of the working classes. For this, they periodically lived among the poor, they used information from school boards and friendly visitors, and they also systematically administered questionnaires. In England around 1900, Charles Booth, Benjamin Rowntree, Sydney and Beatrice Webb, and others demonstrated that approximately one-third of the population lived in deep poverty. In the Netherlands in 1887, a parliamentary inquiry delved deeply into the conditions of the working class by cross-examining both workers and their employers. In France, as far back as 1880, *La Revue Socialiste* (The Socialist Review) had published a list of 101 questions about the lives and the working conditions of workers, the so-called Workers' Inquiry, devised by none less than Karl Marx himself – although he was not mentioned as the author. In the United States, William DuBois studied the black population of Philadelphia, problematizing the notion of a single black community by uncovering several socio-economic strata in it. All these initiatives and their political repercussions contributed to the coming of the first old age provisions, of labor legislation, of inability insurance, and of state supervised social security in general. The 'Age of Reform' (Hofstadter, 1954) was fuelled by social research revealing the miserable downside of industrial society.

Contemporary social research, highly refined and strongly academic as it has become, still bears the birthmarks of this history (cf. Fontana & Prokos, 2007: 13-18). On the one hand, urban sociology and anthropology continue the naturalistic tradition of Charles Booth, who immersed himself in the world of the poor by living among them for periods of several weeks at a time. Below is a comment based on his own experience, an 'outside' or etic reflection on an 'inside' or emic understanding:

> The children in class E ["regular standard earnings – above the line of poverty"], and still more in class D ["small regular earnings – the poor"], have when young less chance of surviving than those of the rich, but I certainly think their lives are happier, free from the paraphernalia of servants, nurses and governesses, always provided they have decent parents. They are more likely to suffer from spoiling than from harshness, for they are made much of, being commonly the pride of their mother, who

> will sacrifice much to see them prettily dressed, and the delight of their father's heart. This makes the home, and the happiness of the parents; but it is not this, it is the constant occupation, which makes the children's lives so happy. They have their regular school hours, and when at home, as soon as they are old enough, there is "mother" to help, and they have numbers of little friends. In class E they have for playground the back yard, in class D the even greater delights of the street. [...] I perhaps build too much on my slight experience, but I see nothing improbable in the general view that the simple natural lives of working-class people tend to their own and their children's happiness more than the artificial complicated existence of the rich. Let it not be supposed, however, that on this I propose to base any argument against the desire of this class to better its position. Very far from it. [...] The uncertainty of their lot, whether or not felt as an anxiety, is ever present as a danger. (Booth, 1902: 159-160)

On the other hand, the same studies inaugurated the use of standardized questionnaires that have become routine in positivist reporting about society. As mentioned, Marx's workers' survey contained 101 separate questions. With hindsight, we can see that they correspond to his theoretical analysis of the political economy of capitalism. Consider for example:

> [...]
> 76. Compare the price of the commodities you manufacture or the services you render with the price of your labour.
> 77. Quote any cases known to you of workers being driven out as a result of introduction of machinery or other improvements.
> 78. In connection with the development of machinery and the growth of the productiveness of labour, has its intensity and duration increased or decreased?
> [...]
> (Marx, 1997: n.p.)

Marx at the time predicted that the profitability of capitalist enterprise would fall and that workers would eventually take over. Clearly, the questions quoted above covered part of Marx's theoretical concerns: the appropriation of surplus value by capitalists and the crowding out of labour by machines. But did they cover the concerns of the workers? We do not know. Even if the workers' answers had been duly reported – which they were not – we would still have had no way to ascertain whether they represented truly important experiences of workers' lives, or merely what workers thought they were expected to answer.[1] This is the core problem of survey research, and it is the central criticism levelled against it by naturalistic researchers: that survey research simply assumes to know the emic dimensions of the lives of its so-called respondents and narrows down its questions within those assumptions, rather than researching the emic dimensions themselves. This explains the discouragement we sometimes feel when answering the umpteenth questionnaire dished out by a government statistical bureau or market research company. We dutifully and perhaps truly wish to oblige, but become quickly disheartened by the opaqueness or even silliness of the questions. 'How often did you do each of the following things over the last sixth months? Please tick one box on the scale for each item.' One wonders: why those items? Why don't they mention playing with my grandchildren? And then: 'In my neighbourhood I feel: very safe / safe / in between / unsafe / very unsafe / don't know.' But what is my neighbourhood? Do they mean in daytime? At night? Safe from what or from whom: from hurricanes; thieves; kids hanging around; unwanted door-to-door sellers? And why don't they ask me what is *really* worrying me, like the insecurity of my job and the decreasing value of my house?

Survey research has expanded phenomenally since World War II. The telephone has made surveys simple and cheap to conduct; the possibility of administering digital surveys via the Internet is even more tempting for researchers. However, whereas in the 1960s and 1970s response rates were typically between 70 and 90 per cent – when asked, large majorities of people were willing to take part in social research – they have since declined dramatically. A response rate of 20 per cent is now considered normal. People have become overburdened by the barrage of questions with which they are routinely confronted in today's 'interview society' (Fontana & Prokos, 2007). People also feel many surveys are irrelevant to their daily lives, to their personal experiences, and to their inner feelings. Why then would they bother to answer to these interrogations?

4.2. The open interview

As mentioned, the workers' inquiries of the early 1900s did not solely or even mainly rely on questionnaires. Participant observation was part and parcel of William Booth's enterprise, and this approach has been kept alive in urban sociology and anthropology. We discussed the craft of participant observation in Chapter 3. The oral interview deteriorated, at least within the field of public opinion research, into the caricature of the written, the telephonic, and the digital questionnaire. Luckily however, it was also kept alive in psychotherapy, counselling, and social work – professions that have a vested interest in exploring the subjective life worlds of people. Sigmund Freud famously invented the 'talking cure' in which a patient lies on a couch and is encouraged to freely explore her or his inner feelings. The psychotherapist intervenes minimally and only to help the patient become aware of hidden meanings of what s/he is telling. This seemingly unusual set up – the psychoanalytic setting – had its historical predecessor in the confession; but whereas the confession was explicitly framed in terms of the story of Christianity – an etic, hegemonic, and highly normative discourse – psychotherapy aims to provide a non-judgmental atmosphere in which personal, emic meanings can be explored freely and the burden of official discourses can be lifted.[2]

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[1] Of course, if the concerns of workers had turned out to be different from what Marx expected, he would have had his answer ready: 'false consciousness'.

The fact that the patient invokes the help of the therapist to fully understand her own problems points to an important fact: people may themselves not always and not automatically be aware of the emic meanings of their actions. This holds true for those who seek help from a psychotherapist, but it most probably holds true for all of us. Naturalistic inquiry has to take this into account.

In the 1940s and 1950s, psychologist Carl Rogers devised a simplified version of Freud's psychoanalytic talking cure. It has become known as 'client-centred psychotherapy' and 'nondirective counselling'.

> This viewpoint lays great stress upon respecting the client's responsibility for his situation, permitting him to explore his problems in his own way, and doing nothing which would in any way arouse his defences. The function of the counsellor is analogous to that of a catalyst rather than to that of a chemical reagent. Without the counselor's understanding acceptance, the therapy would not take place; yet he enters into the therapeutic situation as little as possible and interposes none of his own opinions, diagnoses, evaluations, or suggestions. […] The major feature of this mode of discourse is the type of response we have described as reflection or clarification of feeling. The counsellor's endeavours to hold up to the client a verbal mirror which enables the latter to see himself

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[2] De Swaan (2003) stresses the originality of Freud's psychoanalytic setting. Grosz (2013) provides moving vignettes from his psychotherapeutic practice.

> more clearly and which at the same time indicates that he is deeply understood by a counsellor who is making no evaluation of him or his attitudes. (Rogers, 1945: 279)

Core ingredients of Rogers' approach were to become – and to remain: the approach continues to inform the practice of counsellors and social workers – threefold: the therapist's 'unconditional positive regard' towards the client; her empathy while 'mirroring' the client's feelings; and her 'congruence' or genuineness as a human being (Rogers, 1957). If a therapist or counsellor sticks to these principles, clients will cure themselves by exploring their life, sorting out their problems, and finding new solutions. Or so Rogers had it.

Rogers also realized the potential use of his method for research purposes and already in 1945 wrote a brief article entitled 'The nondirective interview as a research tool.' (The longer quotation above is from that article.) The sociologists Robert Merton and Patricia Kendall were quick to pick up the suggestion and elaborated it into an article and a book, both called *The Focused Interview*. According to them, a good interview must meet four basic criteria: nondirection, specificity, range, and depth (Merton & Kendall, 1946: *passim*; see also Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956). These criteria are discussed below, and some practical guidance is given in Box 10.

Nondirection

The person interviewed must get 'the opportunity to express himself about matters of central significance to him rather than those presumed to be important by the interviewer.' The focused interview 'uncovers what is on the subject's mind rather than his opinion of what is on the interviewer's mind' (Merton & Kendall, 1946: 545). The best way to ensure this is by asking 'unstructured questions'.

> An unstructured question is one which does not fix attention on any specific aspect of the stimulus situation [i.e. the topic in which the interviewer is interested] or of the response; it is, so to speak, a blank page, to be filled in by the interviewee.

A researcher may be interested in secret romantic relationships between teachers and students in senior high schools, but she will open the interview with an unstructured question like: 'Can you tell me about your time in high school?' Somewhat later on in the interview, she may follow up with the more focused but still unstructured: 'What about your teachers?' Ideally, a nondirective or open interview flows naturally from the opening question. The interviewee accepts the invitation, chooses her own starting point from which, and framework in which, to tell her story. The interviewer listens attentively, shows understanding, asks for clarification, and encourages the interviewee to go on. Different experiences and quite unexpected aspects of life in high school may show up. Sooner or later, the phenomenon of romantic relationships may pop up too. If not, the interviewer may decide to ask about them after all, preferably in a late stage of the interview when the emic perspectives of the interviewee have been thoroughly explored. 'Did you ever come across or hear about romantic relationships between a teacher and a student?'

Specificity

At the same time, to ensure that the interview does not remain stuck on the level of generalities – 'I mostly enjoyed my years in high school' – the interviewer must invite the interviewee to explore various significant aspects of her situation in detail. 'Subject's definition of the situation should find full and specific expression' (Merton & Kendall, 1946: 545) 'What did you like about high school?' 'Were there individual teachers who stood out?' 'What made Mr Lewis stand out especially?' This does not mean that the interviewer should force the interviewee to consider each and every separate detail of her high school. Rather, together they should explore the configurations or 'significant wholes' that were most meaningful to the interviewee. This may be done by inviting a mindset of 'retrospective introspection' and by referring explicitly to situations. 'If you go back to when you were 15, in high school, how did you feel?' And: 'What was it that made you feel lonely sometimes?'

Note the tension between the requirement of nondirection and that of specificity. Questions should be unstructured in order to avoid imposing a cognitive frame on the interviewee. Yet they also should solicit explicit reference by the interviewee to particular aspects of the situation. The interviewer must strike a balance between the two requirements.

Range

The interview should cover the broadest possible range of aspects of the topic in question (Merton & Kendall, 1946: 545). Whereas the interviewer above may be interested in secret romantic relationships between teachers and students and therefore will welcome any reports on those, she must not forget to explore other aspects of life in high school: relationships among students, sports, academic expectations, and many more. Ideally, the interviewee will tell about those too. The interviewer can encourage transitions from one area to another by listening carefully, picking up cues and posing a 'transitional question': 'You were mentioning your classmates. What about them?' If an important aspect somehow does not show up by itself in the interviewee's story, the interviewer may resort to a 'mutational question': 'You have not mentioned your parents in all of this. Were they important for you during high school?' Such a question is clearly a directive one, and it should, if necessary, be posed preferably towards the end of an interview, after the interviewee has had ample opportunity to present and explore her own frame of reference.

Depth and personal context

Last but not least, the interview, whatever it is about, should explore how things are or were experienced. Merton and Kendall refer to this as 'depth and personal context'. What feelings did the interviewee have at the time particular things happened? How does she feel about it now? What did these things mean and what do they mean in the personal life of the interviewee? In Carl Rogers' approach, indebted to Freud and intended to bring about therapeutic benefit, the mirroring of feelings was particularly important. 'How did you feel at the time?' 'How does it make you feel now?' 'Am I right that it still makes you angry?'[3] The interviewer must be tactful, discerning and subtle here. She must be able to 'listen with the third ear' (Reik, 1948, after Friedrich Nietzsche), to detect unspoken elements in the interviewee's story, and to mirror emotional nuances by verbalizing them in a way that is acceptable to the interviewee. Feelings are generally considered to be more private than facts and opinions. Strangers may ask about your political opinions but not about your personal feelings. On the other hand, interviewees often report that they felt that they were being taken seriously when they were asked about their feelings and personal circumstances, and that being able to speak about them brought relief and clarity. A single mother living in a housing project with four children, interviewed by the great American broadcaster and social historian Studs Terkel, said: 'I didn't know I felt that way before.'[4] This would not have surprised Carl Rogers. Still, naturalistic inquiry is *not* psychotherapy. An interviewer must tread especially carefully in this respect. She must probe the extent to which the interviewee is willing to talk about feelings and emotions. She must respect the boundaries of her willingness or unwillingness, and she must make sure that, if the interviewee becomes upset, she regains composure and calm before the end of the interview.

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[3] As part of a series demonstrating three different approaches to psychotherapy, a film has been made of Carl Rogers counselling a client called Gloria (her real first name). Rogers had not met her before the shooting session. See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBkUqcqRChg for Rogers explaining his approach and www.youtube.com/watch?v=m30jsZx_Ngs for him counselling Gloria. Both urls accessed 30 December 2013.

[4] Reported by Terkel while being interviewed himself on *Democracy Now*, 13 November 2007. See: http://www.democracynow.org/2007/11/13/legendary_radio_broadcaster_and_oral_historian, accessed 29 December 2013.

Again, a tension may be noted between the requirement of range on the one hand, and depth and personal context on the other hand. The interview must cover a broad range of aspects, yet also gauge in depth the emotional context.

Box 10 Applying Merton and Kendall's four criteria

The above description of how to do an open or focused interview will probably seem convincing, perhaps even obvious. Of course an interviewee should be able to fully express herself. Of course we want to hear specific things from her about a whole range of aspects of her experience or life world. And naturally, we want to know her feelings. Yet, although it is easy to agree with all this in theory, it is difficult to practice it. We advise you to do one or two open or focused interviews, to record them on a tape recorder or MP3 player, and then to analyse the recording by measuring it along Merton and Kendall's criteria. Was I indeed nondirective? Did I succeed in asking unstructured questions? How much of the time did the interviewee speak? (As a rule of thumb, this should be at least 75 per cent and preferably as much of 90 per cent of the time.) Did I manage to elicit specific details and responses from my interviewee? Did the interview cover the full range of her experiences and reactions? And did I fathom the full depth of her feelings and the personal context – her life history – in which he had those feelings? Listening to our own recording, answers to these questions can turn out to be confrontational. 'How could I be so stupid as to first present my own view to her and not even be aware of doing it?' 'How could I be so superficial as not even to begin to explore that?' 'How could I ignore the evident cue the interviewee gave me?' 'And why did I not ask further about his youth when he explicitly mentioned that his father died at a young age?' Listening to such recordings can be a sobering experience. We can learn from it. As a consolation: interviews, even by experienced interviewers, are rarely perfect.

4.3. The life history interview

An open interview is a sustained effort to explore the subjective world of a person on her own terms. Initially, the person interviewed often shows surprise: 'Are you not going to ask me a series of questions?' Once convinced that the interviewer really wishes to hear *her* experiences and her *own* story, the interviewee sets off telling that story, encouraged by the interviewer to indeed tell it to the full. It is not unusual, however, for the story to develop into the story of a life. Both interviewee and interviewer may subconsciously seek the comfort of a biographical thread that can be followed further, be it tacitly or overtly. And of course, therapeutic interviews routinely tend to search for clues to present difficulties in a person's past. A life story seems to be a 'natural' thing for one person to tell to another person.

There are also more principled reasons to choose the format of a 'life history interview', as it has come to be known in the disciplines of history and social science. In an effort to get away from relying on mere documents – often official documents, written by literate people belonging to a political establishment – historians have developed the genre of 'oral history': history based on the spoken testimonies of witnesses, i.e. of people who have lived through a particular stretch of history, who have helped to make it, or who have suffered under it. Making history and suffering from it do not necessarily exclude each other, although they often do. History is made by powerful people and undergone by powerless people. Oral historians therefore tend to focus on the powerless, if only to compensate for the bias towards the powerful in written sources. They have developed the 'oral history interview', the 'life history interview' or the 'life story interview' approach into a fruitful tool. (More about the difference between 'story' and 'history' below.)

Social scientists have a high regard for people's life histories as they are aware that societies are always in flux, influencing the biographies of its members and in turn being influenced by them. 'The real object of sociological thinking,' writes Daniel Bertaux, 'is not only "sociostructures" but also *their historical movement*' (Bertaux, 1981: 34, his italics). Both society and its individual members should therefore be studied in time, diachronically. 'The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society,' according to C. Wright Mills. In order to grasp these relations, sociology should ask three sorts of questions:

> (1) What is the structure of this particular society as a whole? [...]
> (2) Where does this society stand in human history? [...]
> (3) What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and this period? (Mills, 1959: 6-7).

Life history interviews are a good way to answer Mills's third question, especially when combined with other types of information to answer the first and the second question. As Mills suggests, it is up to the social-scientific imagination to integrate the answers. Studies that have succeeded in doing so are now many. Examples are David Riesman's studies of the changing American character, *The Lonely Crowd* (1951, written with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney) and *Faces in the Crowd* (1952, with Nathan Glazer); and Richard Sennett's *The Corrosion of Character* (*1998*) and *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (2005), researched and written fifty years later.

Preparation and focus

Many good introductions to the craft of the oral history interview are available, and we merely summarize some main points here. First of all, the interviewer should be well prepared. Like the open interview, the life history interview usually has a focus. As elaborated in Chapter 1, the interviewee is not selected randomly but invited to contribute because he has participated in the demonstrations against the war in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s; because she works as a prostitute in the Amsterdam Red Light District; or because she has risen through the ranks of a labour union from being shop steward to serving as its first female president. The interviewer should know as much as possible about the anti-war movement, the Amsterdam Red Light District, or the union in question. This is a matter not only of courtesy – it is discouraging to be asked by a stranger about things he should already have known – but also of being able to ask relevant questions, to understand the particulars of the interviewee's experiences, and to seek the right sort of clarification at the right junctures of her story. On the other hand, the interviewer cannot know everything. If he did, why would he want to interview at all? Some genuine naivety can be inviting and even stimulating to the interviewee. As a rule, the interviewee should know publicly available facts and circumstances beforehand and should bring to the interview a genuine curiosity and willingness to learn about the personal life, the insights, the experiences, and the feelings of the interviewee.

Interview guide

The interview guide for a life history interview is usually structured along the lines of a 'typical' life course within the society at hand: the interviewee's birth; parents, siblings, household, and wider family; childhood; schools and other forms of education; important friendships; first job after leaving school; adult work; romantic relationships and marriage; own children;

family life; third age, retirement, possible loss of partner, dependence, and perhaps even institutionalization. See Thompson (1988: 296-306) and Atkinson (1998: 41-53) for examples and suggestions. However, a 'typical life course' is a tricky concept, and much oral history research is precisely about that. You should take care not to enforce stereotypical conceptions upon the interviewee and instead provide room for her individual life history and the particular, perhaps unusual transitions in that. To name but one obvious possibility: separation and divorce are quite common nowadays in Western societies. You may expect these to turn up as important thresholds in many life histories and life stories, both of the divorcees themselves and of their children. New relationships and second marriages bring stepfamilies and other atypical experiences. Although the interview guide for a life history interview thus may be structured according to life stages, these should be taken as sensitizing categories. Their validity is to be gauged in every new interview and if need be they must be dropped.[5]

A second dimension along which you can structure an interview guide is domain of life. Many people experience their lives as compartmentalized, for example into home, school, after school, and weekends (among young people of school age), into family, work, friends, sports, and leisure (among working adults), or into home, children and grandchildren, friends, travelling, other leisure (among retired people). Much is being made nowadays of the supposed blurring of boundaries between work, family, and leisure in postmodern society. Still, most people tend to draw boundaries like the above mentioned. Such domains (and others like religion or spirituality) can be used as areas to be explored in a life history interview. Combined with the stages mentioned earlier, an interview guide then becomes a two-dimensional grid, with age brackets or life stages in the horizontal dimension, possible life domains in the vertical dimension (or vice versa, see Figure 8). No general rule can be given here, as societies, age categories, social classes, ethnic groups and individuals differ from one another when it comes to the domains into which they cut up their lives. On the other hand, such subjective compartmentalizations do reflect the objective institutional structures of the society in question – in fact they are effects of those institutional structures. As far as we know, hunters and gatherers did not differentiate between home, school, work, and leisure, as their societies knew no separate institutions for reproduction, education, production (work), and relaxation. A life history interview with a hunter-gatherer might

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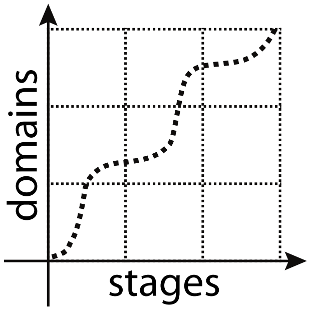
[5] An older but still inspiring taxonomy of eight successive stages of psychological development over the course of a life is that of Erik Erikson (1993).

Figure 8 Domains and stages in a life course and focus of interviewer



require a different interview guide than one with a modern civil servant. In both cases, though, the interviewer should not assume beforehand that the schedule is valid.

A particularly fruitful way to explore both successive stages and various domains of the interviewee's life is by exploring the corresponding social networks. An individual life history can be viewed as a movement through networks of people. At first there is (usually) the close network of the nuclear family. Then there is the broader network of school, of other children with their parents and siblings. Then there are the networks of friends and peers. After school, there comes the dramatic enlargement through the world of work. And so on, and so forth, until the gradual shrinking of networks sets in somewhere around retirement. Note that the networks in which people live tend to correspond to the domains of their lives. In fact, 'network' can be an alternative conceptualization for 'domain of life'. We will discuss the analysis of networks in naturalistic inquiry at length in Chapter 6.

Last but not least, there is the focus that inspired the researcher to conduct life history interviews in the first place. If she is interested in motives behind protests against the war in Vietnam, she will insert various questions about those at various places in the life history interview. When discussing parents, family, and early childhood, she may ask: 'Were your parents democrat or republican?' or: 'Were you brought up in a liberal atmosphere?' When discussing high school and friends: 'Were your friends politically active? How?' And so on, and so forth, until finally: 'You are now almost 70. How do you feel at this moment in your life about what happened then during the Johnson presidency?' Thus, the core focus of the interviewer's interest is carefully woven into the broader fabric of the life history interview, as a recurrent theme but without dominating the entire interview.

With reference back to the open or focused interview approach, a life history interview might be viewed as a series of miniature focused interviews. At each successive stage of life and in each separate domain, the interviewee is invited and actively encouraged to explore the focus of interest. 'When you were young and still in high school, did a career in the world of organized labour cross your mind?' And later in the interview: 'Did you like being a shop steward? (If yes:) Why?' 'Did you have career ambitions at that stage?' And so on.

History or story?

We have postponed a thorny question until now. What comes out of an oral history interview: history or a story? Much fuss has been made about this question by radical constructivists and postmodernists arguing for the latter answer (Fontana & Prokos, 2007). Strictly speaking, or theoretically, the answer must indeed be: a story. Without a death certificate, an interviewee informing us that her husband died in 1987 is only telling a story. Yet, in most cases it would be callous *not* to believe her. So in practice we accept his death as part of history, as something that has 'actually happened'. Only if we find conflicting evidence elsewhere – the husband comes to visit the interviewee in her nursing home while we are still there interviewing her – do we revert to calling the information a story. A general rule of thumb can therefore be: consider what an interviewee tells you not only as a story but also as history, unless you have reasons to doubt it.

The above example was simple. How about the accusations of satanic ritual abuse (SRA) of children that flared up in the United States and elsewhere in the 1980s? To this day, there are some who believe that those practices actually occurred. Most experts, however, feel that they were almost all stories, contributing to a so-called moral panic that spread through the Western world in the 1980s and subsided in the late 1990s (see Richardson, Best, & Bromley, 1991; Anonymous, 2014; on moral panics, see Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). It was a mistake to accept these stories at face value as many at the time did. (In a similar development in the Netherlands in 1988, fourteen young children were taken from their parents after an employee at a medical day care centre had accused their fathers of sexually abusing them. Police and juvenile courts initially believed the accusations. Only after many years were the parents at last found innocent. Families had been destroyed, lives had been wrecked.) Still, the rule of thumb above has worked here too, if too slowly. Eventually, serious doubts have undermined the credibility of the stories and accusations.

In another famous case, Sigmund Freud initially believed the stories that some of his female patients told him – or at least the repressed memories they seemed to harbour and that he read as their stories – that they had been sexually abused by their fathers. He held those seductions responsible for his patients' hysterical symptoms and obsessions. Only on second thought did he conclude that these stories or repressed memories must be imaginary, unconscious phantasies rather than memories of events that had actually taken place. Again, the rule of thumb of reasonable doubt seems to have worked. Still, these unconscious phantasies remained a *psychological* reality, both for Freud and his patients. In fact, psychoanalysis, like nondirective counselling and cognitive behavioural therapy, works through that very psychological reality. It helps people to overcome their fears, to change their conceptions of self, to know and accept their feelings, and to finally change their behaviour. In a very real sense, psychotherapy helps people to change their story of self and thereby to change their history. Viewed in this perspective, the controversy over story versus history loses its sharp edge.

Like Freud, each oral historian and every social scientist will have to make up her mind about what each interviewee tells her. It may be social and historical reality; it may be psychological reality; it will most likely be a mixture of both. Stories people tell about their 'inner world' usually also refer to a world 'out there', a world of historical facts that have been created by their predecessors, by other people; but they are also the stuff from which new worlds 'out there' are created, historical facts for their successors, again other people. After all: 'If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.'

4.4. The creative or active interview

What comes out of an interview can thus be both story and history. That still leaves one more question unanswered: who has produced it? Until now, we have assumed that interviewers seek to gather information, recollections, insight, experiences, and feelings from interviewees. The outcome of the interview is the interviewee's story and her part of history. This view has been questioned by methodologists of the symbolic interactionist, constructivist, and postmodern creeds (see Gubrium & Holstein, 1995; Fontana & Prokos, 2007). Their reasoning starts simply. If an interview is a form of communication, and if communication is interaction, whatever comes out of the interaction is a joint production. As James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium (1998: 121) write: 'Interviewing itself is a concerted product for producing meaning.' They elaborate this viewpoint into a methodologically highly reflexive approach to interviewing which they call 'active interviewing'.

> Interview participants are practitioners of everyday life. [...] Meaning is constituted at the nexus of the hows and whats of experience, by way of interpretive practice – the procedures and resources used to apprehend, organize and represent reality [...]. Active interviewing is a form of interpretive practice involving respondent and interviewer as they articulate ongoing interpretive structures, resources and orientations with what Garfinkel [...] calls 'practical reasoning'. [...] Respondents' answers and comments are not viewed as reality reports delivered from a fixed repository. Instead, they are considered for the ways that they construct aspects of reality in collaboration with the interviewer. (Holstein & Gubrium, 1998: 121, 127)

There is a danger here of methodological navel-gazing. Studying 'procedures and resources used to apprehend, organize and represent reality' and 'ways that [informants] construct aspects of reality in collaboration with the interviewer' is not the same as studying that reality itself. As Erving Goffman (1974: 12) has warned:

> Methodological self-consciousness that is full, immediate, and persistent sets aside all study and analysis except that of the reflexive problem itself, thereby displacing fields of inquiry instead of contributing to them.

We feel that this is not the way a naturalistic interviewer should go. Participating in the daily lives of people, talking with them, and sharing their experiences will always require some pre-reflexive genuineness, innocence, and if you wish naivety – otherwise it would not be naturalistic. This naivety should include the convention that a story belongs to the person who tells it, even if he has been helped by an interviewer. This holds even more for a life history. In fact, who does a postmodern interviewer think he is, to claim co-ownership of someone else's life?

Still, some of the advice given by Holstein and Gubrium (1995), partly based on earlier suggestions by Jack Douglas for 'creative interviewing' (Douglas, 1985), is worth heeding. If we want the interviewee to share her intimate experiences and inner feelings with us, we will have to disclose some of our own. This is typically what people do in ordinary life. Therefore, an interviewer should know herself and reveal some of it to her interviewee. The interviewer should be genuinely and personally interested in the life of her interviewee. She should be 'driven by [...] friendly, caring, and adoring feelings' and have 'an endearing, wide-eyed sense of wonderment at the mysteries unveiled before her' (Douglas, 1985: 29). Remember that Carl Rogers had stressed that, besides showing an unconditional positive regard and mirroring the feelings of his clients, a therapist had to be – and arguably first of all – a genuine human being. Merton and Kendall somehow dropped that ingredient in their more technical and slightly anaemic treatise on the focused interview. The requirement returns here in the gently romanticizing words of Jack Douglas.

In Chapter 5, we will speak, among other things, about filmed documentaries. In the present context of 'active interviewing' and 'creative interviewing', two contemporary documentary filmmakers come to mind: the American social critic Michael Moore and the British journalist and broadcaster Louis Theroux. Good examples of their work are Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and Theroux's *Law and Order in Lagos* (2010). Each of them displays a highly active, spontaneous, at times interventionist, style of interviewing. Moore is sometimes criticized for what people see as his leftish political stances, yet both Moore and Theroux are routinely praised for their genuineness, their openness, and for the amazing insights into social situations and human lives they gain with that. From the point of view of naturalistic inquiry, their approach to interviewing seems highly commendable precisely because they display such a genuine and wide-eyed 'sense of wonderment'.

4.5. Practical methodology in interviewing

There are as many styles of interviewing as there are researchers and interviewees. Often what is needed of the interviewer is modesty: a gentle encouraging of the interviewee to speak her mind by using cues or non-verbal gestures, raising new topics when the occasion for that presents itself. In other cases, some more encouragement may be needed, for instance when the interviewer is aware of a particular episode or problem in the interviewee's life which she seems hesitant to discuss. What works well, and what does not, depends on the situation in which you find yourself: there are no universal rules for it. Hence it is a matter of judgement and, as with other aspects of naturalistic inquiry, this can be cultivated through practice but not learnt from reading a book. It is a matter of trying your hand: developing your craft as an interviewer and seeing which questions elicit interesting answers, and which do not. Nonetheless, our own experiences, the literature discussed in this chapter, and teaching to and practicing with our students over the years suggest several practical points. For the sake of clarity, we have separated them in three different stages of the interview:

Before the interview

Before starting the interview, you have to think about to whom you would like to talk, why this person is important for your research, and which topics you would like to discuss. Usually you will have prepared an interview guide to fall back on if needed. Ideally, this guide should be in your head rather than on the table between you and the person interviewed. It should never rigidly dictate the conversation. After all, key to naturalistic inquiry is that we have – we *want* to have – limited control over the research situation. Keeping an eye open for the unexpected is important too. One of our students once planned for an interview with a retailer on a day market in Amsterdam. For a study on professional careers, she wanted to talk about how the retailer had entered his profession. The student had prepared her questions, made an appointment and was asked to pass by the market stall from where the retailer worked. During the interview, the retailer's colleagues became curious, and they began to interject into the conversation. Rather than drawing the interview to a premature end, our student found that listening to the group discussion that developed actually unveiled important aspects of everyday life at the day market. The interview she had originally planned for never materialized, but she returned home with something much more interesting.[6]

It is also important to make the interviewee privy to your considerations. He has probably not reflected on your research problem to the extent that you have – although he might surprise you! – but as a participant in your research he is entitled to some background information. It is also good to agree on the terms under which you will work. Your research project may not be much more for your interviewee than a short distraction in the ordinary flow of events. Possibly your visit is competing with your interviewee's busy schedule. It is essential, therefore, to make clear what you want from the interviewee. Why is he being interviewed? How long can he expect the interview to last? Is it OK if you record the interview? And what will you do with the interview material once you have typed it out? Part of developing a *rapport* (a technical world denoting a meaningful, entrusting contact; see Punch, 1986) is to state your motives as clearly as you can. Whether or not your interviewee decides to play ball according to your rules is up to her.

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[6] Merton & Kendall (1946: 135-170) elaborate on focused group interviews.

If an interviewee loses interest, or is interrupted during the interview so that it must be suspended, you will have to accept that.

During the interview

The question of recording remains a thorny one, although less so than before. In the old days, recorders were lumpy and unreliable machines that tended to direct the attention away from the actual interview. This has changed: recorders are now small, even most smartphones have a decent one built in; they function reliably and can produce high-quality recordings. Although this increases possibilities for covert recording, that is not the message here. When recording, you should always seek consent of your interviewee. After all, she is the owner of her own voice and words! But recording the interview must not replace note-keeping. Writing during the interview has considerable advantages. It gives you essential backup should the recording fail after all, for instance if the recorder picks up background noise. Written notes help to speed up the transcription of the interview later on. And, even more importantly, writing during the interview itself buys you essential time. In naturalistic inquiry, interviewing usually takes the form of a conversation. You often need time to briefly reflect on what has just been said and to formulate an insightful next question. And writing also conveys an important message to your interviewee: 'What you say is so interesting that I want to put it to paper.' It is a form of reciprocity: it does justice to your interviewee's effort to spend time with you.

During the interview, you ask questions and listen to the answers. You also try to read the interviewees' faces and body language. That takes time and patience. Confronting your interviewee with a barrage of questions usually does not help. The importance of instead allowing a silence in the conversation is underestimated. In an open or focused interview, remaining silent is one way of being nondirective, of inviting the interviewee to take the lead and to frame the subject. In most societies, silences produce a slight social discomfort. At times (not always) something special then happens: an interviewee decides to share a confession that she had not anticipated beforehand, or critiques a higher-placed person with a half-witty comment. A silence also gives you some room for reflection and thought, and it presents an occasion to actually look at your interviewee and try to read her face. All the while you should control your own discomfort too. Rather than running away from that by asking new questions, you should instead encourage the interviewee to carry on. A slightly perceptible nod or a barely audible 'aha' by way of encouragement can sometimes work miracles, more than some cleverly formulated question. Even the faintest association with an interrogation should be avoided.

After the interview

The closure of an interview is a liminal moment in which the roles of 'interviewer' and 'interviewee' end and each goes back to her own everyday life. During closure, something special can happen, therefore. Often right after the recorder is switched off and the interviewer starts preparing to say goodbye, an interviewee makes additional and highly relevant remarks. Sometimes more important stuff is said 'off the record' than on it. The fact that the remark has not been recorded does not, of course, mean that it should not be part of your research. It is, but it must be treated as qualitatively different information. The reasons why the conversation continues after closure vary. The interviewee may have felt slightly hindered by the presence of the recorder (even though that usually tends to slip into the background); or the interviewee may want to ask questions back to the interviewer, which must not be seen as nosiness but as healthy, human interest. The return questions asked can reveal important information about the interviewee. In the case of one of the present authors, in a study in Uganda, it permeated to him that many interviewees thought that he was working for the Ugandan government (which he was not; trust-building efforts were therefore doubled in the following weeks). As off-the-record remarks and questions are by definition not captured on the recording device, they must be written down by the interviewer as soon as possible after having taken leave from the interviewee.

Once the interview is done, you need to work with it. To make it accessible for future reference, it is imperative to write it up – a practice called 'transcribing'. That is hard, and not always exciting, work. Shortly after the interview ends, it is tempting to procrastinate. The interview seems still fresh in your mind, so why bother to write it up? However, writing up is essential, even when the interview has been recorded in full. Your short-term memory of an interview will quickly fade, and it is impossible to remember several, let alone many, interviews for any longer period of time. If on the other hand you write up an interview immediately or as soon as possible after conducting it, the same short-term memory will still largely be there. This will make the writing up much more efficient and pleasant, as you will have to consult the audio recording less often. Another reason for writing up quickly is that you will still remember nuances and observations that were not directly recorded. How did the interviewee look, were there other people present, which objects were present in the room where the interview took place? Avoid self-censorship by skipping over such details. They can prove to be essential pieces of information, even though at the time of the interview itself you were not aware of it. Thirdly, the typing up is a fruitful occasion for reflection and formulating subsequent questions, to be addressed at a later point. Rarely do an interviewee's answers satisfy all your questions, even though you were not necessarily aware of that during the interview. During the writing up of an interview, the process of coding and analysis already begins. It is of course important to clearly distinguish in the transcript what an interviewee has said from your own reflections during the process of writing up. (Compare the disctinction between scratch notes, interpretive notes, and explanatory memos or observer's comments in Chapter 3.)

Reporting back the results of the interview to the interviewee is a final practical step. That is in the first place a matter of courtesy. The interviewee has committed herself to the interview and may be curious to know what has happened with her words. This is not the same as seeking consent. It is possible for an interviewee not to recognize herself in her own words, but this can be resolved easily by checking the recording or handwritten notes. It is quite another matter if the interviewee does not recognize herself in the interpretations drawn from the interview. That should be an invitation to some more thinking. Is my interpretation premature or even wrong? What is it in the interpretation that elicits this particular response? Rather than unconditionally revising the interpretation, it is often better to see this as an occasion to learn. A person holding a privileged position may not like to see herself described thus, but if others speak about her as privileged, there is no reason to revise your interpretation. Instead, you have learned something new: how exposure of privilege can elicit resistance. Of course, reactions by an interviewee to a transcript should always be taken seriously. Like during the interview itself, the naturalistic inquirer should be open, honest, and tactful. If need be, the interviewer and interviewee may decide to agree to disagree.

At the risk of stating the obvious: it is important to carefully file both the audio recordings and their transcripts. (The same of course goes for field notes.) Losing them is one of the most painful things that can happen to you during your research. A particular interview with a particular person can never be replicated. After all, how would we ourselves react if we had shared our feelings and thoughts with someone who then messed things up and asked us to open our hearts to her again? Most of us would flatly refuse and, anyhow, the repeat interview would never be naturalistic again. Losing only a transcript is less catastrophic – you could transcribe the audio recording again; but usually a lot of time has gone into the original transcription so it is still a serious loss. Regularly make back-up copies of your field notes, your recordings, your interview transcripts, other materials, and file them safely.

4.6. Conclusion: Casual conversation

By now, you may have guessed where this chapter is going to end. Is not everyday casual conversation the most naturalistic way of interviewing, or rather of not interviewing, but talking about society? Many years ago, that was the conclusion drawn by a Polish refugee in England, trained as an economist and philosopher, from his own experiences when researching poverty in London. In the Introduction to his *Labour, Life and Poverty* (1948: 1-7), Ferdynand Zweig reported:

> I tried a new and unorthodox technique [...] I dropped the idea of a questionnaire or formal verbal questions [...]; instead I had casual talks with working-class men on an absolutely equal footing and in friendly intercourse. These were not formal interviews but an exchange of views on life, labour and poverty. I made many friends [...]. Some of them confided their troubles to me, and I often heard the remark: 'Strangely enough, I have never talked about that to anybody else.' They regarded my interest in their way of life as a sign of sympathy and understanding rarely shown to them even in the inner circle of their family. I never posed as somebody superior to them, or as a judge to their actions, but as one of them, although a foreigner. [...] The inquiry became to me one of the greatest experiences in life.

In 1993, Pierre Bourdieu looked back on a collective study of poverty and other social ills, *La Misère du Monde* (The Misery of the World, translated and abbreviated in English as *The Weight of the World*, 1999). Like Zweig's book, the study was based on many interviews and conversations, in this case contributed by a team of around twenty different researchers. In his reflection, called 'Understanding', Bourdieu stresses the difficulty of not intimidating your interviewee; your partner in conversation. Whatever the type of interview practiced, there is always the danger of imposition, of 'symbolic violence', if only because it is built into the very situation of an interview. Bourdieu and his collaborators tried to reduce this danger as much as possible by what he calls 'active and methodical listening'

(Bourdieu, 1996: 19; this article is an earlier translation of the reflection at the end of the book). Interviews may resemble everyday conversation, but precisely if and when they do there is the danger of paying only distracted and routinized semi-attention to what is being said. It may all sound too familiar. In fact, asking questions, listening carefully, and truly understanding what another person is saying, all at the same time, is quite difficult (Driessen & Janssen, 2013).[7] It requires energy, focus, and attention. Bourdieu invites us to see it as a spiritual exercise.

> The interview can be considered a sort of spiritual exercise, aiming to obtain, through forgetfulness of self, a true reversal of the gaze we turn on others in normal circumstances. The welcoming disposition, which leads one to share the problem of the interviewee, the capacity to take her and to understand her as she is, in her individual necessity, is a sort of intellectual love: a gaze which consents to necessity in the manner of the 'intellectual love of God', i.e. of the natural order, which Spinoza held to be the supreme form of knowledge. (Bourdieu, 1996: 24; we have made small changes in the translation from the French.)

Compare this to what Zweig reported. He never felt superior to his London workers, he felt he was one of them, and as a consequence he had one of the greatest experiences of his life. Like Zweig, Bourdieu reports that interviewees tend to react positively to this attitude of their interviewers. They are grateful for being truly listened to and welcome the opportunity to express their feelings and to explain themselves. The researcher's love, if genuine and expressed well, is being reciprocated.

If the most naturalistic way to interview people seems to be to have a genuine conversation with them – talking about society – this does not mean that 'anything goes'. We have surveyed three broad approaches to interviewing in order to show various difficulties of the genre, to demonstrate pitfalls, and to sensitize ourselves in order to become better craftswomen and craftsmen. The open or focused interview teaches us not to impose our own frames of reference on interviewees. The life history interview helps us to maintain a sense of natural direction in the conversation. And the creative or active interview reminds us of the importance of our own contribution as interviewers.[8] We do not accept the postmodern stance that an interview would be merely an intellectually interesting effect of contexts, positions, and grand narratives over which neither interviewee nor interviewer have much control. Luckily they do, and so do we.

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[7] This is one reason why, when playing back a recorded interview, you are sometimes baffled by your own inadequacies.

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[8] If you read French, you may fruitfully consult Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *L'Entretien Compréhensif* [The Comprehensive Interview] (1996). Kaufmann has written a series of inspiring books on the intimate life of the French, based on interviewing people on delicate matters.

5. Reading society: Texts, images, things

Everything beckons us to understand it
– Rainer Maria Rilke

In the previous two chapters, we have reflected on participating in the daily lives of people and observing their actions (Chapter 3) and on interviewing them (Chapter 4). Often, these activities blend into one another naturally, or rather: naturalistically. Yet people do not only interact and speak, they also make things, or as they are sometimes called artefacts. Archaeology has of old focused on objects humans make, especially on tools. It used to be said that humans are unique because they are tool-making animals. We now know this is not true: chimpanzees use stems, twigs, branches, leaves, and rocks for various purposes (Goodall, 1971), and crows do similar things (Hunt, 1996). Still, humans seem indeed to be unique in the extent to which they make things and in the vital role those things play in their lives. Whereas chimpanzees and crows might survive if their capacity for tool making was somehow taken away from them, humans would be utterly helpless without the things they themselves produce, like clothes, axes, bows, and ploughs. They would soon die out. Another way of saying this is of course that humans are *cultural* animals. Culture is 'what people learn from one another' (Goudsblom, 1989: 110). A good deal of learning occurs by handing over and receiving 'things', often but not always including instructions as to their use.

In this chapter, we discuss a loose catalogue of things humans make and hand over to one another. We discuss them from the point of view of 'telling about society'. What can we learn about the everyday life of people by looking at what they produce: documents, books, poems, paintings, photos, films, dances, buildings, and many things more? Our treatment is not exhaustive. Various other categories of things might be suggested; and also different ways of looking at them. The aim of this chapter is to sensitize you to the fruitfulness of studying human artefacts in general as important sources of information in naturalistic inquiry. We discuss texts first, then images, and then things in the sense of objects.

5.1. Texts

Writing is talking preserved in time and projected over distance. The first human societies to develop writing thereby deepened and extended their capacity to collectively 'define situations as real' and make them 'real in their consequences' in the way William Thomas' theorem suggests. They could forge together writers and readers over larger distances than before, both in time and geographically.[1] Also, written text could gain independence from its individual authors and their intentions more easily than oral information could: 'It is written that…' Writing is an important form in which humans coordinate, externalize, and objectify what they teach to, and learn from, one another. It is *not* the earliest form; human-made tools were externalizations and objectivations of culture long before writing emerged. The German sociologist Georg Simmel spoke of 'objective culture' (1950). (Note that, likewise, the tools of chimps and crows should be considered objective culture. An important question is how and to what extent chimps and crows transmit the use of their tools to their fellow animals and their children.) Conventionally however, the writing of 'history' is supposed to have begun with the invention of writing, maybe 10,000 years ago. Whatever went before is declared 'prehistory'. It has proven to be more difficult to reconstruct and to understand than history, precisely because we lack written sources. Thanks to modern archaeological techniques, we know a lot about Neanderthal people, but we do not know how it was to be a Neanderthal woman, man, or child.

Non-fiction

For a naturalistic researcher today, luckily, an enormous array of written materials suggests itself that may shed light on the everyday lives of people. If we study private or family lives, there are shopping lists, postcards, letters, e-mails, Facebook pages, and sometimes diaries, autobiographies, memoires, or even family trees. If we study work situations, there are company guidelines, organizational blueprints, speeches by the CEO, job-related instructions, minutes of various meetings, business cards, annual reports, corporate websites, company audits, official corporate histories. And of course nowadays: tons of professional e-mails – a weightless mass. There may also be e-mails of a less professional nature ('X is a jerk'); information leaked to the press by a disgruntled former employee; or a sketch performed by the same CEO at a New Year's reception for employees.[2] If we study a school, there are the brochures used to recruit pupils; reports to the educational inspection; minutes of parent-teacher meetings and many other gatherings; school reports of individual children and of classes; the excuses pupils hand in for being late; the statistics the deputy headmaster compiles of these very absences, including her private thoughts on them scrabbled in the margin; the graffiti sprayed on the outside of the school by pupils. And so on, and so forth.

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[1] Of course, humans had successfully handed over practical knowledge, creation stories, gossip, and many, many other types of information *orally* for hundreds and thousands of years (Vansina, 1985). The far reach and the enduring stability accomplished though this mode of cultural transmission is difficult to imagine for modern-day people, brought up in a world of print (both traditional and digital) and relying heavily on print. We tend to underestimate the impact of oral information. Still, the invention of writing must have pushed information through human networks on an unprecedented scale, and standardized and fixated the same information.

And there are the reports written by our partners in crime, our fellow craftsmen and our competitors in telling about society: grand reporters, travel writers, journalist-reporters, bloggers, citizen journalists, and others. They can be an invaluable source of observations, interviews, interpretations, and commentaries regarding the lives and worlds we are studying. The ancient Greek writer Herodotus was a reporter, a historian, and a commentator all in one. The genres of travel writing and of journalism owe him much. George Orwell reported on the Spanish Civil War in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). Martha Gellhorn did the same; she also described the impact of the Great Depression in the United States and reported from the frontlines of various wars in the twentieth century (anthologies are: *The View from the Ground*, 1988, and *The Face of War*, 1998). Caroline Moorehead portrayed the plight of refugees in today's world in *Human Cargo* (2005). A famous modern grand reporter was Ryszard Kapuściński (1932-2007) who first reported on communist Poland but then travelled to many parts of the world. Like Gellhorn, he witnessed revolutions and civil wars. He followed in the footsteps of Herodotus – literally and mentally – whom he greatly admired. His work has great literary qualities. It has been described as 'magical journalism' (Hochschild, 1994). Sometimes, however, he seems to have crossed the boundary between reportage and fiction (Monoslawski, 2013). This brings us to some important caveats when using non-fiction in general.

When studying documents for the purpose of understanding people's everyday worlds, the naturalistic researcher must ask two questions. Both have already been raised earlier in this book, and they are closely related. One is: should we read the document as history or as a story? Does the document re-present a reality independent of the document? Or does the document present a reality in itself? Or does it perhaps do both? Did the family have a happy holiday in Brighton, as their postcard to their neighbours back home suggests, or was the postcard a conventional message masking an enfolding crisis that would eventually lead to a divorce? In the latter case, the postcard was a reality *in* itself, namely an effort both to conceal and to drive off unhappiness. When discussing life history interviews in Chapter 4, we took a naturalistic position. We advised the researcher to assume that the interview refers to an independent reality – to a part of history – unless there are reasons to assume otherwise. When it comes to written materials, we would suggest doing the same, but with more caution. As Erving Goffman has argued throughout his work, much human communication involves 'presentation of self'. People, whether individually or as a group, have an interest in portraying themselves in a positive light by stressing likable characteristics and downplaying less likable ones. Collectively, they have an interest in sustaining a joint definition of the situation. People are like actors, and Goffman's approach has become known as a 'dramaturgical' approach to social life. Perhaps this is even more true in written than in oral communication. After all, a conversation may be brief and ephemeral. A life history interview is given to a relative stranger who has pledged to protect your anonymity and whom you may never see again. Yet what has been written, let alone printed, stays. These are good reasons to approach written or printed documents with even more caution than interviews. Although they may refer to objective facts and to things 'as they really have happened', there is a good chance that they represent a particular angle on them and that their aim is in fact to advocate that angle, rather than to report the things. In fact, the best approach is to read documents on two levels simultaneously: as histories, reports, descriptions of a presumed reality, *and* as stories, transactions, efforts aimed at bringing something about.

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[2] In January 2014, the chairman of the Dutch bank ABN Amro and former Minister of Finance of the Netherlands, Gerrit Zalm, performed as a drag queen before his banking staff in the Netherlands. They felt this was a normal thing for a chairman to do and appreciated his performance. In international banking circles, though, some eyebrows were raised. See: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-25773271 (accessed 18 January 2014).

Which brings us to the second question, related to the previous one: *whose* perspective is being presented or represented in a particular document? (See Box 11 for an intruiging case of mass observation in which this problem is particularly salient.) When interviewing people or sharing their lives by participating and by observing them, we typically and naturalistically assume their perspective. If we ask an interviewee how it felt to be a first-generation immigrant or 'guest worker'[3], we get an answer in the first person singular and may safely assume this to represent the feelings of the interviewee. He is speaking *from* himself *about* himself. If we read a text about guest workers, we can be less sure of this. Has it been written by a journalist and does it show the political stance of her newspaper? Is it a report by social workers, eager to enlarge their clientele? Is it a literary writer's bid for fame and immortality? If an immigrant worker is quoted at all, can we be sure the selection of the quote was not biased? It has been shown repeatedly that societies tend to discuss social problems 'from above'. When it comes to poverty, many more experts are quoted than poor people. When the discussion is about prostitution, the opinions of prostitutes are rarely asked. And when it is about raising children, children themselves are routinely overlooked. Often, therefore, it is best to read documents as presenting perspectives *on* the people that you are studying, rather than as re-presenting the perspectives *of* those people. To put it otherwise: documents often represent etic rather than emic perspectives. This does not necessarily make them less valuable in trying to understand a complex social situation – social complexity after all comes with a variety of perspectives – but it is the task of the naturalistic researcher to sort out this variety and to try to understand what particular people within the situation do from their own, particular perspectives.

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[3] Note that using the term 'guest worker' would not make a good, unstructured question. It would repeat the official and patronizing message that the worker was not to be a burden on

To summarize: when using documents in naturalistic inquiry, we should always estimate their self-presentational or 'dramaturgical' degree and try to separate that from their descriptive content. And we should have a clear idea of *whose* perspective is (re)presented in them. Of course, the same questions should be asked about what interviewees tell us. As we argued before, somewhat more naivety is only naturalistic there.

Box 11 Mass observation in Great Britain

A rare experiment in mass naturalistic inquiry was conducted in Great Britain. It started in 1937, continued throughout WWII, and petered out in the early 1950s. It was resurrected in the 1980s. In 1937, Charles Madge, Humphrey Jennings, and Tom Harrison decided to call on volunteers to contribute photographs, diaries,

his hosts and was expected to leave in due time. If an interviewer used these words, he would be guilty of (re)imposing an official and etic frame on the experiences of the interviewee. Putting the term 'guest-worker' between inverted commas is still steering, inviting the interviewee to react to that term instead of allowing him to choose his own words. See the highly perceptive discussion by Sayad (2007) of 'the weight of words'. A more neutral interview question would be: 'How was it for you to have come from Mexico to the United States in those days?'

answers to survey questions, and first-hand observations of everyday life in Britain. Their idea was to gather materials for 'an anthropology of ourselves'. Contributions flooded in and fascinating selections of those have been published, like for example *The Pub and the People* (1943). They tended to remain highly descriptive. Later and to the present day, academics from various disciplines have based more in-depth studies on mass observation materials. The project is an early example of gathering and archiving qualitative material that may be useful, e.g. as a background, baseline, or addition to hands-on naturalistic inquiry. (See http://www.massobs.org.uk/index.htm).

Fiction

There is a special class of documents that traditionally was called literature. It is nowadays called fiction, democratically including both highbrow and lowbrow prose, poetry, and drama. We use the two terms interchangeably here. Literature is about fictive, imagined worlds. If naturalistic inquiry is about understanding everyday lives of ordinary people, people of flesh and blood, how can literature or fiction possibly help?

One answer starts by pointing out that fiction is usually condensed, distilled from the flesh and blood realities of many people. That is why we are able to call a novel by Charles Dickens, Lev Tolstoy, or Naguib Mahfouz 'true to life'. They succeeded in portraying in a highly convincing way the lives of poor people in London, of aristocrats in Moscow, or of middle-class families in Cairo.[4] Most of us feel that, besides painting truthful portraits, they also succeeded in conveying acute insights into poverty, love, social change. We tend to admire Dickens, Tolstoy, and Mahfouz for the 'deep truths' they convey about humanity. It is significant that we choose the terms 'portrait', 'true to life', and 'deep truth' here. Clearly we feel that their way of telling about society is important and that we can learn something from their works. Dickens, Tolstoy, Mahfouz, and many other great writers did not call themselves social scientists but, with hindsight, we may very well say they were. (Or rather: they were too, to take nothing away from their calling as writers.) The 'true to life' side of their novels attests to their craftsmanship in describing social worlds; the 'deeper truth' side attests to their talent in understanding and explaining the same social worlds. Their explanations do not use the professional vocabularies of present-day anthropology or sociology and are implied, rather than spelled out. They emanate from their emic understanding of their fictional characters, but these characters were modelled after flesh and blood people; hence, literary texts are a continuation of people's lifeworlds, belonging to different times and places (Goudsblom, 1979).

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[4] We have in mind Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877), and Mahfouz's *The Cairo Trilogy* (1956-1957). Other examples abound. From the world of drama, we would like to mention *Betrayal* (1978) by Harold Pinter.

One more example of how great fiction can contain social-scientific truths is the 1901 novel *Buddenbrooks* by Thomas Mann. It is the fictional (but thoroughly researched) story of the rise and fall of a North-German, Protestant trading family. Four years after *Buddenbrooks* was published, Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) appeared. Thomas Mann immediately recognized the strong parallels between the two books – one literary, the other historical and sociological (Ridley, 1987).

Another answer to the question of how literature can help in naturalistic inquiry reasons the other way around. People of flesh and blood read novels and poetry and they go to theatres, concert halls, cinemas. They listen to radio plays and watch television series. They may have various motives to do so, and social science offers many different explanations. It is, however, safe to say that people seem to recognize themselves in the fictive worlds enacted for them on paper, on stage, and on screen. Like we do as social scientists, they, as laypeople, recognize the truths contained in fictional worlds. They applaud them, they admire them, they fear them, or they hate them. They relate to them in all various ways possible. They also, and importantly, model their own lives after them. Fictional characters provide cultural models or molds for real people to fashion their own lives after. A Dutch vascular surgeon interviewed in the course of our own research remembered that he had chosen the profession after having read the 1917 novel *Vie des Martyrs* (Life of Martyrs) by the French writer Georges Duhamel. Duhamel had himself volunteered as an army surgeon during WW I. Another example: the father of one of the present authors sometimes used to have a particular, slightly inscrutable expression on his face. As an old man, he one day mentioned that in his youth he had greatly admired a particular French film actor. After some googling by the son, the resemblance struck home: the father's expression looked exactly like Jean Gabin's in the 1937 film *Pépé le Moko*! When we come to think of it, each one of us has internalized parts of fictional worlds – be they characters like Pépé / Jean Gabin, scripts like the romantic happy endings we all love, or landscapes like those from *A Room with a View* (an 1908 English novel by E.M. Forster, romanticizing Italy and set in Florence, and made into a highly successful film in 1985). 'That is who I'd like to be!' 'I wish I could fall in love that way!' 'That is where I'd like to live one day!' What this means for our naturalistic enterprise, is that literature may be fictional, but it can and often does become reality. ‘If people define fictional situations as real, they are real in their consequences.’ This is not even an addition to the Thomas theorem but merely an application of it within the boundaries of Thomas’ original intention.

In both ways explored above, ‘the life of art illuminates the social life of man’ (Coser, 1963: 7). It is a challenge to the naturalistic researcher to explore how particular works of art (fiction) may help to illuminate particular lives of particular people. In Box 12, we illustrate how the play *Death of a Salesman* (1947) by Arthur Miller sheds light on the plight of people in modern, capitalist societies. *Death of a Salesman* is one of the most often staged, read, and discussed plays of the twentieth century. Our treatment here can only be brief and superficial.

Box 12 ***Death of a Salesman*, by Arthur Miller**

Death of a Salesman was written in 1947 and first performed in New York in 1949. Its main protagonist, salesman Willy Loman, is in his 60s and approaching the end of his working life. He struggles to make ends meet. He has difficulty re-paying the very last instalment of the mortgage on his house; the house itself has over the years become surrounded by huge tall buildings, taking away sunlight and breathing space. Willy’s two sons Biff and Happy are socially less successful than he had hoped them to be. He struggles to keep faith in their careers. For their part, they struggle to retain some respect for their father as they watch him in his ever more pitiful condition. Their mother, Willy’s wife Linda, serves as a buffer, both between Willy and the fiendish outside world and between the father and the two sons. In doing so, she colludes in maintaining Willy’s increasingly unrealistic, almost delusional mental state. Hoping to be relieved of his physically demanding travelling schedule as a salesman, Willy asks his boss for a job at the office. Instead, he is being fired. In his very last bid to have financial success by cashing in on a life assurance policy, Willy commits suicide (Miller, 1949).*

The play may be read from a psychological angle. We then see a man dedicated to the ideal of a self-made man, both for himself and projected onto his sons. If he cannot succeed, he should at least keep up the appearance in the eyes of his sons, so that they can succeed on his behalf. The sons subscribe to the same ideal. They would love to succeed in their father’s eyes, but they badly need their father’s example and wrestle with its gradual implosion. To make things worse, Biff has caught his father having a brief affair with another woman, making it impossible for him to admire him. To thwart his father, he makes a mess of his own career. As mentioned above, Linda's contribution to the psychological misery of all is her sustaining Willy's delusions instead of allowing some reality check. One might also say that she tacitly denies any responsibility for what happens to her family, expecting the three men to take care of her.

The play may at the same time be read from a sociological angle. The genius of Arthur Miller laid, among other things, in dovetailing the two angles. Sociologically, we see the individuals believing in the American Dream, and we witness the excruciatingly painful but unstoppable process of it being shattered. As Richard Sennett later explained in sociological terms, full-fledged market capitalism without stable employment and without some sort of social protection gradually undermines one's sense of self, one's pride, one's craftsmanship, one's character. Hence the title of Sennett's book: *The Corrosion of Character* (1998). The corrosive formula is: 'If everybody can make it in America, and if I do not make it, it must be my own fault.' There could not be a better illustration of Sennett's thesis than the fate of Willy Loman and his family, imagined and written by Arthur Miller half a century before Sennett's book.

Reportedly, at the end of the very first performance of *Death of a Salesman* in 1947, there was a long and deep silence. People in the audience sobbed, some wept. Then, gradually, rousing applause erupted. The same often happens when a new audience sees the play for the first time. Clearly, many people feel that the play illuminates their lives, even today. By close-reading it, a naturalistic researcher of living and working precariously in a globalizing world can sensitize herself to important dimensions of the anguished lives of those she is researching. This may make her a better observer and interviewer. Also, she may be able to build her own explanatory hunches on commentaries by Arthur Miller himself and by others. There is an extensive secondary literature on *Death of a Salesman*. One of the recurrent questions discussed is whether we may interpret the play along Marxist lines: is it a critique of capitalist America *tout court*? Miller himself has said it is not. And indeed, towards the end, Biff finds redemption in a hopeful way, reminiscent of nineteenth century American transcendentalism.

* In our brief discussion, we focus on the four main protagonists. Currently available on DVD are film versions directed by Alex Siegel with Lee J. Cob as Willy (1966) and by Volker Schöndorff with Dustin Hoffman as Willy (1984).

A play or any other work of fiction can never replace participant observation, interviewing, having casual conversations, reading postcards and diaries, and tracing the networks of people of flesh and blood. It is important to draw a clear line between the imaginations of literary authors on the one hand,

and the experiences of ordinary people on the other. If there are parallels to be drawn, this must be done in a careful and transparent way. Fiction can help us, though, to understand the lives of people we are studying in a better informed, more sensitive, and more incisive way, and to tell about these lives with more empathy and insight.[5]

5.2. Images: Drawings, paintings, maps, photographs, film

The image is older than the written word. The famous cave paintings of Altamira, Lascaux, and elsewhere tell us something about the lives of prehistoric people between 27,000 and 15,000 years ago, although there is little agreement on what the paintings mean. They are, obviously, about hunting. They quite probably express magical views of the world. According to some, they also reveal astronomical observations of the humans who made them (McNeill, 2006; Whitehouse, 2000). They have fascinated modern humans from the moment of their rediscovery until now – the Altamira paintings were rediscovered in 1879, the Lascaux ones in 1940 – and they continue to do so. As mentioned before, we can no longer interview Stone Age people or observe their daily activities. The emic meaning of the cave paintings may forever escape us. The same goes for drawings and paintings of a younger age, although the availability of written materials, from the beginning of historic times, can help us to get nearer to emic meanings of images. And sometimes the prehistoric cultures have persisted until modern times, like the culture of the aborigines, the original inhabitants of Australia. By interviewing 'modern' aborigines, we can try and approach the meaning of the paintings of their ancestors. A.P. Elkin (1964) has famously done so. His book *The Australian Aborigines* was subtitled *How to Understand Them*, but Fred Myers (2002) has shown the dangers of such an approach. 'Aboriginal art' after WWII is to a large extent an invented tradition, a kind of crossbreed between Australian aboriginal productions and Western avant-garde art.

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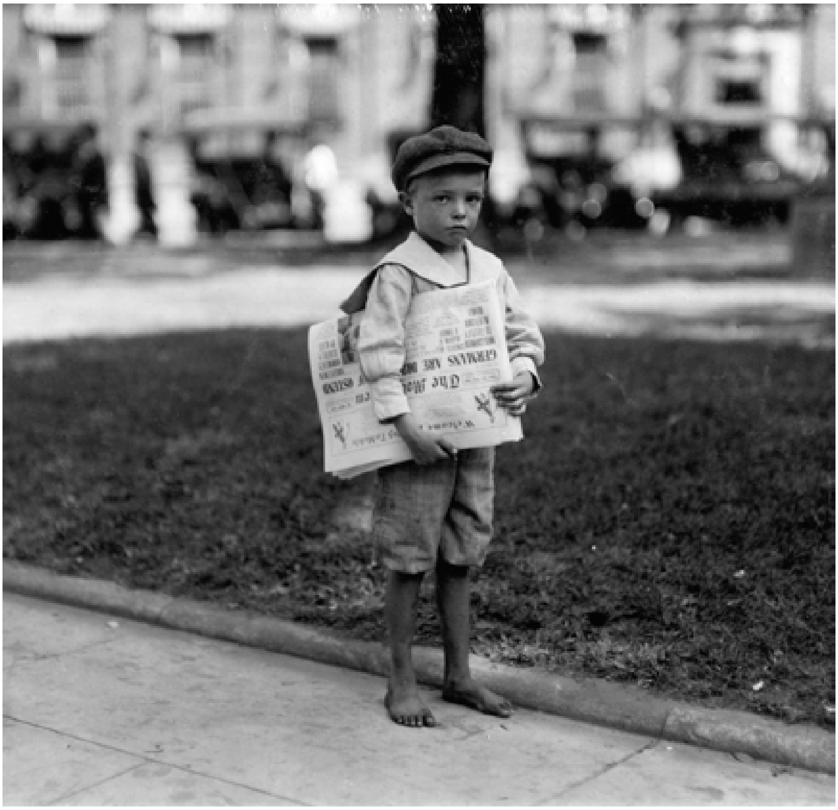
[5] A beautiful example of how non-fiction and fiction can feed into each other and how they can inspire naturalistic inquiry is a report on homelessness in London and Paris by Emma Jane Kirby, called 'On the Trail of Orwell's Outcasts'. Having read George Orwell's semi-autobiographical *Down and Out in London and Paris* (*1933*) on poverty in London and Paris in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Kirby interviewed and observed homeless people in the same two cities in the early 2010s and compared their experiences with those of Orwell and his friends. They turned out to be very similar. Kirby looked at the lives of her interviewees through Orwell's semi-fictional lens.

Figure 9 Non-fiction image: young child at work



Lewis Hine's note: '7 year old Ferris. Tiny newsie who did not know enough to make change for investigator. Mobile, Alabama, 1914'

The nearer we get to the present, the better the chance that we can use drawings, paintings, photography, and film as additional sources for naturalistic inquiry. Like documents, they may be divided into non-fiction (paintings of ancestors; album pictures of family and friends; news photography; photo-reportage; television newsreels footage; in-depth documentaries; and so forth) and fiction (from relatively 'realist' drawings like Goya's war scenes and van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters*, via so-called docudrama: dramatized renderings of things that 'have really happened', to *Tokyo Story* by Yasujiro Ozu or *Bridget Jones' Diary* by Sharon McGuire and Helen Fielding).

Telling examples of non-fiction images are the early twentieth-century pictures by Lewis Hine, who captured young children working in coal mines, factories, and as 'newsies' selling newspapers from early in the morning on the streets (see Figure 9). Hine had been trained as a sociologist, and his work has contributed to anti-child labor legislation in the United States (Hine, Nordstom, & McCausland-Hine, 2012).

Other examples are the great documentary films made by Frederick Wiseman, like *Hospital* (1968), *High School* (1970), and *Ballet* (1995). Each of them condenses hundred or more hours of footage into two to three hours of 'thick depiction' – to vary on Clifford Geertz's 'thick description' – of daily life in a hospital, a high school, and a ballet company, respectively. Wiseman does not narrate, nor does he interview. He attentively records what people do in situations, how they interact, and what they say to one another. His films give the viewer a sense of having witnessed scenes first-hand, of having been there and having lived through what happened together with the subjects of the films. Obviously, Wiseman has selected scenes and chosen their montage. Still, the films strongly convey an emic perspective.

While trying to sort out angles represented or presented in material, the researcher may herself be drawn in controversies she is studying. The architect and social critic Malkit Shoshan has produced a fascinating book that largely consists of maps (*Atlas of the Conflict – Israel-Palestine*, 2010). By presenting series of maps in their historical order, she shows how borders between Israel and Palestine have shifted, how populations have moved, shrunk, and grown, how claims of ownership have changed, how settlements have expanded, and how the Wall around the West Bank was erected. The book provides carefully researched, faithful descriptions of geographical and demographical realities, of 'facts' as they have materialized. It at the same time reflects political claims that remain hotly contested between Israelis and Palestinians – the emic perspectives of the two strongly opposed parties in the conflict. As was perhaps unavoidable, Shoshan's own perspective tends to be perceived as an emic, pro-Palestinian one. Her book has been favourably received in circles sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, but coldly in pro-Israel circles. This should remind us that not only can the various emic perspectives of the people we study clash, but also our own, presumably etic, perspectives can be controversial and remain 'essentially contested' (Gallie, 1956).

Commercial advertisements come somewhere between non-fiction and fiction. They tend to depict situations and people that could be real – after all, the products and services advertised should be bought by real people – yet are contrived, staged, and acted. Irving Goffman has looked at the way in which the relationship between men and women is choreographed in advertisements. He has characterized advertisements as 'displays', as 'conventionalized portrayals' of how men and women were supposed to interact in American society at the time. Discussing advertisements from the 1960s and early 1970s, he observed that women were portrayed as delicate, precious, smiling, being protected by men, receiving courtesies from men, and being endearingly irresponsible – in fact as being 'on holiday', much like children (Goffman, 1979: 2-4 and *passim*). There was some validity to that in the 1960s, although it is hard to say how much or how little. Some, perhaps many, American men and women did treat each other accordingly. It is, however, more interesting – and sociologically more realistic – to read such advertisements as conventionaliz*ing*: as active projections of traditional gender images, by advertising agencies and their corporate sponsors, onto prospective buyers, speculating on the romantic appeal of those images.[6]

A good example of how 'non-fiction' and 'fiction' can blend into each other and how photographic reality can be a consequence of photographic enterprise is the rise of society photography. In the 1930s, Jerome Zerbe started photographing well-known people in nightclubs, originally by way of generating publicity for these nightclubs. By doing so, he contributed to the dynamics of 'celebrity society' (van Krieken, 2013).

> I invented this thing that became a pain in the neck to most people. I took photographs of the fashionable people, and sent them to the papers. […] The social set did not go to the Rainbow Room or the El Morocco, until I invented this funny, silly thing: taking photographs of people. The minute the photographs appeared, they came. […] So people would come in to the El Morocco and I would get a note saying: 'The Duchess of Sutherland has arrived and would love to have her photograph taken.' […] You know? They were the top, top social. […] These were the dream people that we all looked up to, and hoped that we or our friends could sometimes know and be like. (Zerbe, quoted by Terkel, 1997: 132-133)

When it comes to overtly fictional drawings, paintings, photographs, and films, much the same can be said that has been said earlier about novels and poetry. On the one hand, such images draw upon the life experiences of their makers and people whom they know or have known. On the other hand, people who view the images can identify with the protagonists. *Tokyo*

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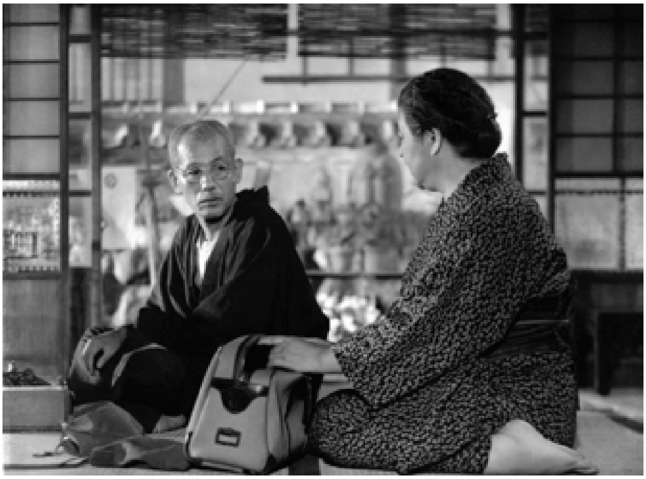
[6] A documentary on the history of the public relations and advertisement industry in the twentieth century, showing some remarkable footage of its movers and shakers and of their motives, is *The Century of the Self* by Adam Curtis (2002).

Figure 10 Still from Yasujiro Ozu, *Tokyo Story*



Story is a moving portrait of an aging couple, increasingly feeling that they are a burden to their children and grandchildren – a universal theme in human history (Figure 10). *Bridget Jones' Diary* is a hilarious history of a young woman in her early thirties and her desperate efforts to find Mr.Right. The setting is *modern* and the film has less philosophical depth than *Tokyo Story*, but its theme is arguably, if not universal, certainly topical in modern society. It is easy for viewers to identify with the protagonists and the situations in which they find themselves. *Tokyo Story* can be a great source of inspiration for a naturalistic inquirer studying the worlds of elderly people; *Bridget Jones' Diary* can likewise be helpful for someone exploring the world of young adult women – all the more so as there is a good chance that her informants will have read the original book or seen the film.

Also, the same two caveats we invoked regarding written documents seem in order here. Even if we consider presumably documentary images like the photographs of Hine or the films of Wiseman, we must try and distinguish between their historical and story-like qualities. They may at the same time be pictures of previously defined reality and new definitions of reality. And we must carefully disentangle *whose* realities are being presented: of the people pictured, or of the people doing the picturing? The photographs by Lewis Hine clearly conveyed important aspects of the lives of the children captured: their young age, their poverty, their fatigue, and their long working hours. Yet, they also were part of a campaign against child labour run by the National Child Labor Committee, founded in 1904, who hired Hine to take the photographs. They therefore were also part of an effort to establish a new version of reality in which child labour would no longer exist.

5.3. Things

A third category of things that can help us to tell about society are… things. Note that in this chapter we are tracing the course of human history backwards, by discussing first writing, then images, and only then things in the sense of material objects. Phylogenetically of course, objects like stone axes were the earliest externalizations of human lives. Archaeologists and anthropologists have always studied the 'objective culture' of societies in order to learn about them. Their basic hunch is that societies order things according to their social structure, so that you can 'read' that structure from things. If spears and axes belong to men and hoes to women, you can infer from that a gendered division of labour. Obviously, household utensils, clothes, buildings, vehicles and many, many other objects are interesting materials for naturalistic inquiry. The French sociologist Jean-Claude Kaufmann has studied in great detail how couples do their laundry, how they handle the toothpaste tubes in their bathrooms (to squeeze or to roll?), and how they cope with other everyday objects. Struggles around things can forge a stable couple or undo it (Kaufmann, 1998). A house itself can be studied for how it expresses the habits and the feelings of its inhabitants, as Abram de Swaan has done, interpreting materials gathered by historians like Jules Flandrin and Michelle Perrot. The modern family home, with its carefully laid-out ensemble of hall, living room, kitchen, bathroom(s), bedrooms, and WC(s),

> permits the family as a unit to withdraw behind the wings […] and stage an appropriate performance for those outsiders who are allowed in. Equally, each grown-up family member is allotted some 'backstage area' […] where he or she may take care of bodily grooming, prepare for acting out a suitable part in the family proceedings, or join with someone else in some exclusive activity such as parental intercourse or teenage sociability (de Swaan, 1990: 188).

The physical layout of the family home thus tells us about contemporary intimacy, its rules, and its boundaries.

Likewise, larger buildings, architectural ensembles, entire cities, and even landscapes can be considered as 'texts', to be deciphered or decoded for their meanings. 'We commonly do experience architecture as communication,' observes Umberto Eco, 'even while recognizing its functionality' (quoted by Whyte, 2006: 153). The great public library buildings and universities of the nineteenth century have often been characterized as 'cathedrals of learning'. They tend to impress people in a way similar to medieval Roman Catholic cathedrals. Yet, how buildings should be read in general and what precisely is the meaning – or are the meanings – of each one of them remains a matter of debate. There is no simple recipe (Whyte, 2006: *passim*).

One further example: for a comparative study of schools, one of us – among other things – interviewed school headmasters. At one school, the office of the headmaster turned out to be accessible only via the office of his secretary – the same secretary through whom the appointment had been arranged. The interview was duly conducted in the headmaster's office. Only during the interview did the researcher note that the headmaster's room did in fact have a door directly into the corridor, but that it had been blocked by a large bookcase. When asked, the headmaster explained that he had so arranged it in order not to be disturbed by pupils knocking at his door. This contrasted sharply with another headmaster at a different school, who interrupted his interview to step out into the corridor. On his return, he explained that, as a matter of principle, he would always mingle with his pupils during their breaks.

We will not dwell at length on the use of objects or 'material culture' for naturalistic inquiry (see also Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 2009; Webb, Campbell, Schwartz & Sechrest, 1966: 35-52). The earlier discussions of texts and images have hopefully conveyed the message that a naturalistic inquirer may fruitfully use all kinds of sources in order to better understand the everyday lives of ordinary people. Household utensils, living arrangements, buildings, clothes, and innumerable other objects should be among those sources. So-called actor-network theory even holds that objects should be considered as social actors in the very same bracket as human beings (Latour, 2005). We do not subscribe to that view, or at least not to that vocabulary. Equalizing objects to human beings creates semantic, epistemological, and moral confusion. Objects do not act. They do influence human actions, though, by conditioning, facilitating, or hindering those actions and by communicating – that includes: imposing – meanings of the people who originally made the objects to the people who are acting. People live in 'second-hand worlds' (Mills, 1963: 405.) One could of course say – and it has been said – that the Berlin Wall 'acted' to keep the communist Berlin separate from West Berlin, but that statement is a metaphor for saying that the communist authorities retained their population by building a wall. As long as it remains clear that objects can act only metaphorically, we have no strong objection to the expression.

Participating in people's lives, observing them in their daily routine, having casual conversations, asking what things mean to them, and taking note of those things – all these activities shade into one another. It makes no sense to naturalistically study a street musician's life without taking into account his accordion, the street corners and underground carriages where he plays, the night shelters where he sleeps, and other objective coordinates in his life.[7] To call these things 'objects' or 'artefacts' is to suggest a break which may be epistemologically sound, as in fact we ourselves have just argued. Yet, in people's lives there is none. From a naturalistic point of view and emically speaking, 'things' is therefore the better word.

5.4. Practical methodology in reading society

The basic, practical advice we can offer is to open up mentally to all texts, images, things, and other stuff that people produce. Read novels and journalistic reportage when you feel this has some relation to your topic. Likewise, look at documentary films, news clips, photo books, paintings, plays. Do not self-censor: virtually anything goes. To be effective, this requires in the first place a mind that is prepared to look for information beyond what your informants tell you (in an interview or casual conversation) and what your eyes register about their social behaviour. A good exercise for that is to go to a busy public place, say a market, and make a list (mental or on paper) of all the objects that you can see around you. You will be surprised by the sheer quantity of the items on your list and the length of it. From a naturalistic viewpoint these are not merely spatially organized things, but important carriers of meaning. For practical purposes, we limit our focus here to three classes of such carriers that are you are likely to encounter in a field study: ego-documents, pictures, and space.

Ego-documents

Many of us produce ego-documents.[8] For instance, we keep diaries in which we note important events such as meetings with noteworthy persons, or important episodes in our train of thoughts. Also, few of us can live without an agenda, keeping track of appointments, important events, and to-do lists. These documents are thus part of the symbolic order of everyday life, guiding our actions and thoughts. Occasionally, such documents are published, especially when they once belonged to someone important, but for ordinary persons this is usually not the case. That does not mean they should be disregarded. Asking someone what happened during a particular day is perfectly acceptable, and why then not ask this person to consult his diaries and agendas as an *aide memoire*? The same can be asked with reference to a person's network of social relations (see also Chapter 6). In the olden days, there was the Rolodex – a fist-sized rotating device used to store business cards – and card-index boxes used to register contact information. In today's world, similar information can be retrieved from electronic address books such as those used by most e-mail programs.

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[7] A beautiful documentary on street musicians in Paris is Heddy Honigmann's *The Underground Orchestra* (1998); a gripping documentary about five paraplegic street musicians in Kinshaha, Congo, is Renaud Bannet's *Benda Bilili* (2010).

[8] The term 'ego-document' was coined in the 1950s by the Dutch historian Jacques Presser. One definition he gave was 'those documents in which an ego reveals itself – or hides itself – whether intentionally or unintentionally' (quoted by Dekker, 1993: 103).

A new genre of ego-documents emerged not so long ago with the spread of the mobile phone. Mobile phones are fitted with a memory that allows for the storage of numbers and texts – an important source in the reconstruction of particular events. Text options on simple mobile phones are limited. Nonetheless, they can reveal important information about social relations, or changes therein. For instance, an interesting study could be made in the shift of vocabulary when a relationship goes sour: from hypocrisy to scolding. Smart phones and tablets have larger memories and more extensive functionalities. Programs such as Whatsapp and Telegram have fully fledged word editors, and the string of conversations they store can shed light on the life world of its owner. Incidentally, mobile phones offer new possibilities for the *in vivo* registration of information during fieldwork, for instance as scratch notes during or right after an interview (Beuving, 2014).

Even more recently, the Internet – especially social media – is an invaluable source of social information. Facebook presents a case in point. In its most extreme version, it makes it possible to forge a completely different (digital) identity. However, the ambition of most Facebook users seems more modest and does not stretch beyond presenting polished versions of themselves. Few of us take the trouble of updating our profiles when we feel low, so that Facebook as a whole tends to be biased towards the positive – in itself a cause for feelings of anxiety and depression for many (especially young) Facebook users, as the psychologist Sherry Turkle discovered (Turkle, 2008; see also Miller, 2011). LinkedIn is geared towards a more professionally minded audience, combining the presentation of biographical and professional information with information about a person's social network. As with Facebook, information derived from LinkedIn is highly skewed towards a favourable presentation of the self, and it must be seen as an invitation for further research rather than as material that can be taken at face value.

Photos

Often we keep photos in our house, for our own enjoyment as well as to show them to our visitors. Also, many of us keep a framed picture of our loved ones (including non-humans such as pet animals!) on our desks. Likewise, we can often see an interesting collection of photos as screen savers appear on our colleagues' computers when they are allowed to idle, say, during their coffee break. These may be merely ornamental beautifications of their work environment, but often they are more than that and convey messages about how we think about ourselves, or like to be seen by others. As the saying goes, 'one picture can say more than a thousand words.' To understand *what* they say, questions have to be asked.

One obvious set set of questions: who and what are in the picture, and what are their relations? That is rarely self-evident. One of us once made a study of fishing communities at Lake Victoria (East Africa), looking at social relations between boat owners and their crews. One boat owner with whom we had friendly ties once shared with us pictures from his private collection. Prominently featuring on all of them was our boat owner; however, most pictures showed a diverse collection of young men too. As it turned out, many of these were fishing crews who had worked for the boat owner at one time or another. When prompted for details, such as their names and place of origin, the boat owner had to admit that he had absolutely no clue. This showed the social relations between them to be thin and ephemeral – a condition which turned out to be an essential feature of the social organization of the local fishing sector.

What is not in the picture might reveal crucial information too. For instance, a study of family photos of early twentieth-century British aristocracy showed that few of them included servants (Canadine, 1990). That is striking when you realize how servants in those days and circles were essential in the upkeep of the aristocracy's privileged lifestyle. What is more, servants were part of the intimacy of everyday life: they prepared food for their masters, dressed them, and tended to their children. In many cases, servants served their families for a number of generations. Looking at their photographic absence through modern, emancipated eyes, you can easily come to a negative, normative judgement of aristocratic master-servant relations. It is, however, more interesting to ask analytical questions; for instance, how is the paradox between everyday intimacy, and the servants' absence on the photos resolved socially? And how were social relations between both classes actually constituted? These are important questions to understand elite society that find their origin in paying close attention to such ‘missing persons’ and more generally, ‘negative facts’.[9]

Space

Space is a dimension we move through, but we do not move through it freely. Our movements are to a large extent regulated by the spatial organization of our surroundings. This is as true for the natural world occupied by hunters and gatherers as it is for the manmade world inhabited by modern men. Khoi-San travel across the Namib Desert of southern Africa according to an established network of tracks, tailored to meeting prey and avoiding predators. The citizens of a modern metropolis travel from home to the train station from which they commute through an equally established network of streets and metro lines. Looking at travel routines is therefore an interesting angle to look at how people organize their everyday lives.

But not all space is equally accessible for all. Space can also be an expression of distinction. In its most extreme form, you see this as segregation. Think of the pass system under apartheid, making most public buildings practically inaccessible for South Africa’s blacks. A similar situation has emerged in Israel where Palestinians and other non-Jews cannot come and go as they please: only those with the right documents are given right of access to Israeli-dominated areas.

Also, in a less severe form, space denotes distinction. In a prestigious concert hall such as the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, the best – and most expensive – seats are more easily affordable by affluent members of society. At the back of the hall, on the balcony, there are seats reserved for members of the royal family whenever they attend a concert. When they do not, other people can try and reserve the same, obviously prestigious, seats.

Space also regulates our behaviour. As indicated in Chapter 3, the classical case is looking at doors, or other points of entry: two persons of unequal social status who approach a door at the same time often express their status difference through their order of entry. Just before entry, a short moment of ambiguity arises: how to resolve the order? This refers to a broader phenomenon, that of the liminal aspect of space. Marlene Werner observed in a swingers' club how couples first take off their clothes in dressing rooms, and then walk through a corridor before entering a larger space where the swinging takes place. She discovered that couples disengage from each other while walking through the corridor into the communal area – to prepare mentally for the swinging – and re-engage while walking back through it (Werner, 2011). She noted that it was not the space itself but the use of it as for mental adjustment that was important, but she would not have discovered such if she had not paid attention to the dimension of space.

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[9] On the other hand, photographs of colonial families in the then Dutch East-Indies in the same period often *do* show servants and nannies, next to the colonists’ children and for example the family dog (Breton de Nijs, 1961). This suggests that indigenous servants were, like the children and dogs, considered ‘non-persons’. Although physically present, they were socially absent.

5.5. Conclusion

The main thrust of this chapter was to encourage naturalistic inquirers to use whatever can help them to understand and explain the lives of the people they study. With that proviso, really anything goes. The important question to ask is not: 'What is it?' but rather: 'What does it mean?' This question should be carefully unfolded ('unpacked') into sub-questions. What did it mean to the people who made it? Why did they make it? To what extent does it represent the understandings of the people it is supposedly about? What does it mean to people who are confronted with it now? And what does all that tell us as naturalistic inquirers? There are no simple recipes of how to do this; we have therefore giving somewhat less practical advice than in earlier chapters. In reading society, the challenge is to be as attentive, as critical, and if necessary as unintimidated, yet also as mindful and as empathic, as we possibly can.

6. Disentangling society: The analysis of social networks

One does not study networks; one uses network methods to answer social questions
– Roger Sanjek

The previous three chapters considered different strategies to find out about society. The present chapter on the one hand suggests one more strategy for finding out: exploring social networks. On the other hand, it provides a particular perspective *on* what you may already have found out: looking at it *through the lens* of social networks. Because social interaction in the world today often takes place beyond traditional boundaries of family, village, state, or social class, this chapter shifts the focus to one that looks at society as a collection of social networks. New forms of social interconnections are emerging, inviting metaphors such as 'the human web', 'network society' and 'the connected world' (McNeill & McNeill, 2003; van Dijk, 2006; Castells, 2010). The widespread use of these metaphors suggests that old conceptual models no longer suffice and that new models may be needed which do justice more fully to the relational nature of society. Naturalistic inquiry's contribution to this relational perspective is to look at how society is made up of social networks, how power and prestige structure networks, and how networks create opportunities for some people but exclude and marginalize others. Approaching networks from the viewpoint of ordinary members of society, this chapter focuses explicitly on how society looks to those in networks and to those outside of them. It shows how an analysis of social networks is crucial in the task of 'disentangling' society, and how, building on the ideals of naturalistic inquiry, this task begins with an understanding of social relations in everyday life.

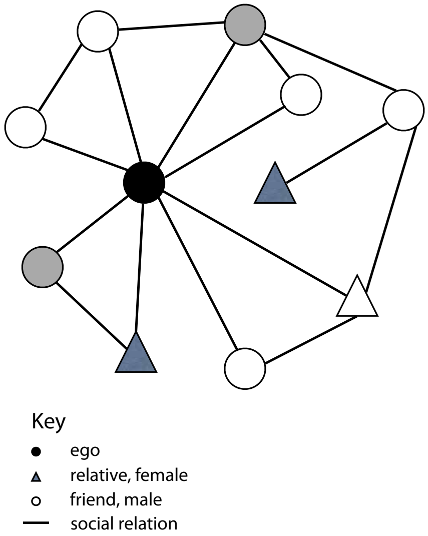
The chapter continues first by clarifying important differences between the analysis of social networks and social network theory. These are often used as synonyms; however, it is argued that, whereas naturalistic inquiry has of old embraced the former, it tends to be critical of the latter. To better appreciate how social network analysis may be applied in naturalistic inquiry, the chapter then looks at three key thinkers credited for their contribution to a relational view on society. From their ideas, the chapter synthesizes a naturalistic approach to social network analysis, subsequently applying it to two classical empirical studies in the field. By way of conclusion, the chapter discusses a number of practical points to take into consideration when using social network analysis in naturalistic inquiry. The analysis of social relations is something we do every day and we can build on that for the purpose of social research.

6.1. The analysis and theory of social networks

Whereas social thinking is of old concerned with the study of social contacts, thinking about society as a network is of more recent origin. Social contacts have long been credited for their impact on people's behaviour, on decision making, and even on mental conditions (Borgatti, Mehra, Brass & Labianca, 2009). Placing these contacts at the centre of a truly relational view of society, however, changes the nature of social research in a way that can be expected to yield new insights into key social problems. With the ever-wider interweaving of the human web – i.e. with globalization – both the causes and consequences of for example poverty reach further than ever. From a social network point of view, we can see that poverty is a consequence of a division of labour within a global economy, leading to exclusion from job opportunities for categories of people within rich countries – the so-called underclasses – and for entire countries – the poorest countries in the world. We can also see how, at the same time, through global networks of television and the Internet, poor people can witness the affluence of rich people while rich people can witness the misery of poor people. Understandably, underclasses in rich countries feel tempted to procure some of the affluence for themselves by connecting to criminal networks. And equally understandably, people from poor countries try to get access to rich countries by moving geographically, for example via chain-migration. Thus, more than ever, looking at social networks seems an essential tool in social thinking.

However, the analysis of social networks does not have an established place in naturalistic inquiry, like interviewing people, participating in their lives, and observing them do (see previous chapters). This is largely because of the recent upsurge of a particular brand of network analysis: the mathematically inspired, formal 'network theory'. Network theory is strongly associated with quantitative work in social research. It took off once it was discovered how social relations could be represented as a collection of nodes, usually persons, and linkages or their relations between those (Scott, 1991). This made social networks suitable for graph theory, a branch of mathematics used to model pair-wise relations between objects

Figure 11 **Example of a simple social network**



(Lorrain & White, 1971; Granovetter, 1973). When personal computers began their march into social research, researchers started to feed social network data in their models, resulting in new relational representations of society. Although the strong point of these models is their capacity to handle large volumes of social network data and to visualize them (see Figure 11 for a simple example), the resulting theories have been critiqued for both their superficiality and their determinist tendencies. Presumed explanations tend to remain basically descriptive; and they tend to reduce human action to structural positions in the network (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994).

The analysis of social networks on the other hand precedes formal or mathematical social network theory, and it has a distinct naturalistic pedigree. Anthropologists and historical sociologists were among the first scholars to formulate ideas about the relational nature of society. Although recognizing structural aspects of social networks, they seemed more interested in their symbolic aspects. Examples of these are: expectations that persons harbour towards one another; behavioural norms that guide social behaviour; or social status and its functioning in a social hierarchy. Hence, social network analysis resonates of old with the *verstehende* ambition of naturalistic inquiry: to understand societies in terms of the mental categories of its members. In that sense, social network analysis looks at different things than social network theory does. It is less interested in a mathematical description of social networks and focuses more on the stuff that flows through them. Rather than quantifying formal network characteristics such as size, density, degree of connexion, centrality, and degree of clustering (Boissevain, 1974), in naturalistic inquiry the social network is used more as a heuristic device, asking what social relations mean for members of society. Thus, in naturalistic inquiry, markedly different questions are asked as regards the functioning of social networks than in research inspired by formal network theory.

Now that this preliminary distinction has been explored, the chapter continues with a brief historical sketch of the genesis of social network analysis. This is done to better appreciate some of the dilemmas with which naturalistic social network researchers struggle. Before doing that however, we first give a short example in Box 13 that may help to demonstrate the contribution of network analysis to telling about society.[1]

Box 13 An example of naturalistic social network analysis

Picture the scene at a party where, for lack of good company, you decide to pass the time looking around at what is going on. After some time of looking about idly, you begin to notice that there is one particular person who seems to be at the centre of attention: a well-dressed young man. You decide to concentrate on this person and wonder: what does this 'being at the centre of attention' actually consist of? A first observation that you make is that the young man hardly moves about. After some thought, you realize that this is because other persons attending the party are moving towards him and not the other way around. Occasionally, he is offered a drink, saving him the trouble of heading for the bar.

A second observation is that, at any one point in time, several persons attending the party seem to want to talk to this young man at the same time; you begin to notice how the other partygoers are occasionally casting an eye towards him, as if waiting for a suitable moment to part with their company and move towards him. In other words: there appears to be a degree of competition for this young man's attention.

A third observation suggests that many of the young man's remarks seem to elicit a smile, laughter, or other positive response from his audience. They seem to enjoy his attention, and, if their interaction comes to an end, they look around to the onlookers, as if to make sure that the experience was a positive one: chin up, striding away. As you follow them in the course of the evening, you can see how they continue to occasionally look in the young man's direction, even when they are engaging with another person altogether. Occasionally, the young man excuses himself, presumably to go to the lavatory. You can see how some of those present break off their conversation and begin to look around. His return evokes an immediate response, as many eyes are cast in the direction from which he re-enters the room and interrupted conversations are continued again.

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[1] The example is a hypothetical one, formulated for the purpose of teaching. It is loosely based on the authors' personal experiences, and many may recognize the situation.

These observations present an example of social network analysis 'naturalistic style'. Obviously the 'findings' thus arrived at should be treated with caution. They cannot be taken as social facts without further validation. To be admitted as evidence in a story about society, these observations would have to be specified as hypotheses about social relations. As hypotheses, they would then have to be checked against the perspectives of those involved, for instance by including them as topics in informal conversations with other partygoers. Further, the observation would become more reliable and convincing when placed in a series of observations on comparable situations.

Nonetheless, our example points at three interesting aspects of the underlying pattern of social interaction. First, the person is special by virtue of the attention he attracts. The direction of the social interaction is one-way: towards him. Also, it is a repetitive form of interaction: it is not an engagement between complete strangers; rather, it involves individuals with some previous contact. Second, stuff passes through the social interaction: material ones, such as the drinks, but also immaterial stuff like attention. Third, the interaction is imbued by meaning: the laughter and smiles are indicative of a symbolic framework that structures the behaviour. It raises questions such as: what is the nature of the language exchanged, and why is it understood as funny?

Before further exploring several areas of social research in which this type of social network analysis can be used fruitfully, with two empirical examples, the chapter first continues by exploring the genesis of social network analysis. It is not our ambition to provide a fully fledged historical overview. However, some appreciation of the historical conditions under which attention for social networks emerged, and the direction that its analysis has taken since, may be helpful in understanding its place in social research today.

6.2. A note on key thinkers: Roles, sociogenesis, and transactions

The term ‘social network’ is so common in everyday parlance today that it seems difficult to imagine a world without it. Yet the term is relatively new, and it has at least three intellectual predecessors: i) Georg Simmel’s sociological work in Berlin, Germany at the turn of the twentieth century; ii) Norbert Elias’ figurational sociology, begun in the 1920s and matured in the following decennia; iii) the work of social anthropologists in southern Africa during the 1940s and 50s. All adopt, in one way or another, a relational perspective on society in which social networks are seen as the ‘basic atom’ of society (Arnold, 2013). However, their respective works were not a joint project. Categorizing them under the header ‘social network analysis’ presents a *post hoc* construction, therefore. Nonetheless, each of these key thinkers made a distinct contribution to the analysis of social networks.

Georg Simmel: Ties and role relations in social networks

Georg Simmel’s interest in social networks originates in a famous paper with the title ‘How is society possible’? In it, Simmel argued that society as such is not a useful object for social research. Society he saw as the outcome of a myriad of social interactions that interlock and together produce complicated networks. These networks are not *per se* enduring structures as they often fall apart. However, eventually some networks crystallize into more stable social forms such as religious associations or labour unions. From this insight it follows that there can be a little bit of society or a lot, depending on the intensity and scale of social interaction. According to Simmel, social interaction between three persons presents the smallest unit of society: associations with more than two persons create the possibility to form a coalition that can overpower the other one (Simmel, 1950). The upper limit of a society in terms of numbers of interacting persons is in principle unbounded, even though with increasing numbers their social distance will increase thus diluting the intensity of the interaction.

Key in Simmel’s ‘tie theory’ is further that the structure of social interaction determines the quality of that interaction. This can be readily seen, he noted, by looking at what happens to a two-person social interaction when a third person joins them. Simmel refers to these as *dyadic* and *triadic* relationships, respectively. Once this happens, Simmel argues, ‘you’ and ‘I’ can redefine ourselves as ‘we’ and the third person as ‘the other’ (Frisby, 2002). In other words, a shift in social structure produces new social roles, and these roles, in turn, structure social interaction by preparing the minds of those interacting. That is, once ‘you’ and ‘I’ have defined ourselves as ‘we’, ‘we’ begin to think as ‘we’ and will soon behave as such too. The same applies to the ‘other’, who is, by definition, not part of ‘we’. Although Simmel did not further develop this interesting idea, it is not difficult to see how role differentiation is promoted by expanding social network size. A larger network makes more roles possible. Moreover, in Simmel’s world, roles are not fixed properties of the social structure: they are an emergent property of social interaction.

Simmel further pointed at how social structure impacts on the intensity of social interaction, in particular on the perceived distance between one person and another. He argued that distant relations usually exert a weaker social influence than closer ones. For instance, the opinions of a vague acquaintance matter less to most of us than those voiced by a close relative. At the same time, if one person entertains a strong relation with another person, who in turn has a strong relation with yet another person, then that third person may be able to influence the first person via the second person – even if person one and three are only vaguely aware of each other’s existence. Put otherwise, that same vague acquaintance may in fact be a very dear friend of, say, your brother. Suppose for a second that you turn to your brother for a word of advice because of some psychological problem with which you are struggling. In turn, your brother decides to consult his dear friend – to come to terms with your problem, he feels it is necessary to share his thoughts with someone else. It is then possible that this third person’s ideas impact on your brother’s advice, even though it may not be immediately apparent how. (Did your brother share this with you? Was his best friend genuine? And so on).

Brokerage occupies a special place in Simmel’s relational ideas. Brokerage is a social role in which social control is central. Simmel argued that in some social situations it is possible for one person to position himself between two others, and benefit from it. Returning to the example above, your brother can try to make use of the social relation that he holds with both you and the acquaintance. Suppose now that the acquaintance is in fact a highly qualified psychologist. Your brother succeeds in soliciting from him sound advice as regards your problem, which he then passes on to you – of course presenting it as his own fabrication. Thus, you may come to esteem your brother more than you did before, and when the time comes to reciprocate, your brother may therefore decide to ask for a larger return-favour than he would (and could) have asked otherwise. What your brother has just done is to position himself as a broker, making cleverly use of two of his personal relations. The example is only a small one, but it illuminates a larger point:

that brokerage is an everyday social practice, and that looking at it can shed new light on how social relations function.

Norbert Elias: Sociogenesis and the transformation of social networks

Norbert Elias also developed a relational theory of society but, unlike Simmel's microsociological view, Elias was concerned with the problem of explaining the long-term transformation of human networks. He approached this by looking at social forms, called 'figurations'. A figuration is a network of interdependencies between individual persons. Because these persons interact socially, figurations are usually not static social structures but are in continuous flux. To understand the forces driving this flux, Elias argued that the social sciences must study processes of social development and transformation historically, i.e. study the 'sociogenesis' of particular figurations and mentalities (Elias, 1978; van Krieken, 1998). Looking sociogenetically directs the attention to how past social experiences structure current social practices and how current practices structure the experiences of future persons. His focus is on the historically situated causation of social behaviour (Baur & Ernst, 2011). Social order, in Elias's thinking, is an emergent and unplanned consequence of human interactions, setting the conditions for future social interaction. Human agency does have a place in Elias's analysis of social change, for instance in understanding which opportunities are seized in social interaction, but at the same time agency is thought to be bounded by those acting elsewhere in the figuration.

One advantage of looking at figurations is that it presents a scale-free model to look at society. A figuration may be so small as to include only a few persons in a family setting, and so large as to encompass millions of interdependent persons participating in an economy, or being members of a nation-state. In the analysis of social networks 'naturalistic style', the former typically prevails more than the latter. The key question that Elias advocates in the study of figurations is: under which social conditions do networks transform, and how does this transformation set the stage for future social (inter)actions? Elias likened the social processes in figurations to dancing: dancing partners respond to each other, but in their dance they follow patterns or rules that have been established by previous dancers. The rules for dancing fix the interaction, but each dancing couple varies a little bit as to the rules (as anyone with practical dancing experience knows). Over time, the rules may change, in the process altering the dance itself (Elias, 1978). Hence, describing the rules of the dance and observing the actual interactions between dance partners presents an entry into the analysis of the dancing figuration.

Of what do the interdependencies constituting figurations consist? This question does not have a single answer: people depend on one another in manifold ways (de Swaan, 2001). According to Elias however, in their most basic form, relations in the figuration present combinations of competition and collaboration – competition and collaboration for valuable goods, services, and opportunities. Relations may be mobilized to achieve a common goal, but often relations are antagonistic too (van Krieken, 1998). To make this understandable, Elias often used the model of a game. Take soccer as an example: scoring a goal brings prestige and fame for the scorer, but only one person can score, and the members of a team compete with one another to be that person. However, to be effective, it is in the interest of the team to bring forward a specialized striker. The positioning of a striker right in front of the goal and his opportunity to score depend on the skilful delivery of the ball by a midfielder who, in turn, is protected from ball turnover by the defenders. Thus the midfielder, not to mention the defenders, must withstand the pressure to score themselves and instead act as ‘part of the team’. Further working against this collaborative organization is, of course, the competitive pressure from the opposing team’s counteractions, but even this competition is bounded by collaboration. For the game to be played at all, both teams must stick to the same rules. Following the rules of the game, in the case of soccer supervised by the referee, serves a collective interest by making the behaviour of all the players accountable.

Jeremy Boissevain and Clyde Mitchell: A transactional perspective

Simmel and Elias, although they were influential social thinkers, did not systematically confront their ideas with empirical field data. Simmel’s writing makes use of anecdotal and generalized observations, whereas Elias’s work mainly builds on historical sources. A group of social anthropologists working in southern Africa in the 1940s and 1950s made a new inroad into social network analysis by applying social network thinking to their fieldwork data. Affiliated with the so-called Manchester School of social anthropology (see Gluckmann, 1961), their ideas were originally inspired by the kinship diagrams that anthropologists had used for decades to systematize classificatory kinship terminology and practices. At the time, mainly in discussions about the classification of entire societies in terms of their kinship structures (for instance, Bohannan & Middleton, 1968), Manchester scholars revolutionized its systematics in order to map not kinship structures but ongoing transactions in social relations.

Of particular importance for the analysis of social networks is their focus on the stuff that flows through social relations: the transactional content.

One of them, Clyde Mitchell (1973), developed a distinction between communicative content (information/knowledge), exchange content (money, labour), and normative content (expectations, prestige): a distinction that was developed in an abstract model for social network analysis by Dutch anthropologist Jeremy Boissevain. We find this distinction useful for our discussion and wish to further explore it in the following pages.

Information about the world around us is communicated through interpersonal networks. We find out about persons with whom we do not have a personal relation via those with whom we do. Or when we look for an apartment in a part of town that we have never been before, most likely we will consult an acquaintance or friend who happened to have lived there recently. Typically, the quality of the communicated information (or knowledge) is affected by the social status and position of those in the network. For instance, learning from an important person at work that a mutual colleague is not performing well is more likely to change your opinion of that person than when, say, the caretaker entrusts the same information to you. Likewise, an esteemed friend's opinion about the housing situation in a part of town in which you're interested is probably more relevant for your apartment search than some vague acquaintance's idea about it. Another observation Manchester scholars made is that information does not flow evenly through communication networks. Knowledge is power, and those who are 'in' the network (or occupy a central position in it) have access to superior information, and this can offer a strategic advantage.

A slightly different, but equally important, way of conceptualizing social networks is to look at their exchange content. In this approach, individuals (or organizations, or whatever the nodes in the network represent) are linked through sets of transactions that have wider implications than the act of exchange itself. To make this more concrete, Boissevain advocates looking at flows of money and labour (but stuff like food, shelter, and protection could equally be considered). In Western capitalist societies, the procurement of money and labour is often associated with formal institutions such as banks and labour agencies, but it is increasingly appreciated that, for personal projects, social actors draw on their network of interpersonal contacts. Thus, we solicit money from our relatives to make possible the purchase of a private car; or when we move house, we ask our friends to lend us a hand. Often, exchange networks are driven by a principle that anthropologists have labelled with the term 'reciprocity': asking for a favour creates the expectation of a return favour (Mauss, 2000). What that expectation looks like is of course a matter of the empirical situation. In some cases, people will keep tabs and seek ways to break even in the short run ('immediate reciprocity'), whereas in others, exchanges are part of a general sociability, carried out in a spirit of friendship ('generalized reciprocity').

Networked flows of information and exchange are in their turn structured by the normative content of social relations that result from humans developing affective ties with others. For instance, with the exception of one-off interactions (taking place only once, between perfect strangers), meeting another person is imbued with an expectation of that person because of some social characteristic he may possess. We approach other persons not as strangers, but instead frame them in normative categories, such as 'dependable colleague', 'sympathetic friend', and so on. These categories guide our behaviour in the sense that they give clues as to how we ought to behave when meeting that person. In many instances, it would be considered asocial, for instance, not to ask politely about your colleague's health if it is common knowledge that he is struggling with it. In fact, what we experience as sociability looked at from the viewpoint of norms denotes an alignment of behaviour expectations with actual social behaviour. In other words, seeing your expectations of another person reflected in the social interaction with that person is a social process that can contribute to a sense of affection.

Saying that norms are important is not the same as claiming that norms actually *determine* social behaviour. In the practice of everyday life, Manchester scholars argued, norms are frequently violated, sometimes giving rise to no more than mild irritation, but occasionally degenerating into fully fledged conflict. Social conflict from a naturalistic approach is relevant for the analysis of social networks. First, it demonstrates how norms governing social interaction work in practice. Researching the realm of norms is notoriously difficult, as asking direct questions about them tends to result in socially desirable answers. Talking about norms can be quite another thing than observing how a person actually deals with the violation of some norm: carried away by moral outcry, or keeping her cool? It further makes it possible to see how persons respond to conflict, in particular how they draw on (or fail to do so) their network of personal relations in order to grapple with it. Power plays an important role: more powerful figures are more likely to mobilize a following to achieve the upper hand in the conflict. However, power is not an unlimited social resource: it builds up in networks of prestige that must be negotiated situationally (Turner, 1957).

Synthesis: The analysis of social networks in naturalistic inquiry

The previous discussion has suggested three key concepts in the analysis of social networks: i) role relations, ii) figurational change, and iii) transactional content. How do these concepts relate to one another? And can we synthesize them into a tentative conceptual framework for social network analysis in naturalistic inquiry? In social network analysis 'naturalistic style', one looks at social interaction as a relation between social roles. Social roles can be thought of as bundles of mutual expectations. They have a strong impact on how we deal with one another and on how we think about ourselves. They are not carved in stone but are conditioned by and through the social network. This means that change in social networks is an important topic for research. Change results from two forces: collaboration and competition (for valuable goods, services, and opportunities). These represent strong interdependencies that can become activated by building up a following, but the outcome of competition and collaboration is mostly unpredictable because of the unintended consequences that they produce. The eventual figurational change, in the last analysis, results from an *Eigendynamik*: an autonomous dynamic generated from within the figuration as a whole. Thus, social change is change of figurations.

Under the influence of these forces, roles change. Many examples come to mind in the sphere of work relations. In Western countries, many people used to define themselves as peasants (and used to be addressed as such by others). Today, due to modernization, up-scaling, and automation in agriculture, there are few peasants left in the West. Or, to give another example: in a class that one of us taught recently, students asked what a 'typist' was. They were unaware that, throughout the twentieth century, millions of young women had typed away at mechanical and electrical typewriters – in fact just until the years these students had been born, the mid- and late-1990s. Then, within the space of perhaps fifteen years, consequent to the spread of ICT and automated word processing, the occupation of 'typist' has almost completely vanished. Thus, the transformation of networks can be gleaned from the transformation of roles. With roles, patterns of social interactions are shifting. It is difficult to predict when this will happen and in what direction the change will be. In tightly woven social networks, the disappearance of one key figure (through death or migration, for instance) may result in a dramatic reconfiguration of roles and role relations, whereas in loose networks, the mobility of persons can be large without altering roles.

Changes in roles and role relations usually impact on the stuff that flows through the network of interpersonal contacts: their transactional content. For instance, when acquaintances become friends, the exchange of polite conversation typical of acquaintanceship may turn into borrowing money, or asking some other special favour that is accepted within friendship ties.

Especially in situations of rapid social change, mutual expectations may no longer be aligned with social practice, so that irritations and tensions may develop. Say your new best friend oversteps the boundaries of friendship (from your viewpoint) by not repaying the money that you lent her earlier. Such frictions bring to the fore the working of behavioural norms in social relations. When these irritations go unchecked and degenerate into full-blown conflict, opponents can be expected to mobilize a following to gain the upper hand in the conflict. Power is then played out, and differences in social prestige become important resources in the conflict.

6.3. Applications of social network analysis in naturalistic inquiry

Now follows a review of two classical studies that make use of the insights of social network analysis. Whereas one is more sociological and the other more anthropological, both draw on a naturalistic analysis of social networks. The two studies were selected from what is truly a universe of possibilities for which social network analysis 'naturalistic style' may be fruitfully deployed. Other studies could have been selected to convey a similar message, however.

The analysis of life histories: French artisanal bakers

In the 1970s, the French sociologist couple Daniel and Irene Bertaux made a study of the artisanal bakeries that dominated France's bakery sector at the time (Bertaux & Bertaux-Wiame, 1981). Originally, the Bertaux's were trained as quantitative sociologists in the field of labour studies, and they became interested in why artisanal bread making had survived for so long in France when in surrounding countries it had been replaced by industrial bread production – as modernization theory would predict. Initially, they set out to administer a large-scale survey. However, this yielded limited success because most bakers were not willing to participate: they saw surveys as a step-up to paying more taxes. Informal discussions with some of them in the Pyrenees region, while the couple were holidaying, uncovered interesting patterns in the bakers' life histories. This accidental finding motivated them to adopt the principles of naturalistic inquiry, and they sat down with bakers to listen to their stories, particularly focusing on life courses.

When looking at the figuration of the artisanal bakeries, they noted two important shifts in the prevailing pattern of social relations. One, whereas in the past sons usually took over the bakery following their father's retirement, increasingly apprentices working in the bakery took over the business. A major reason for that, they found, was that the sons of bakers became less interested in the business as it entails long working hours and very little time off, and so they preferred to study in the city. Bakery workers were usually recruited as apprentices from among poor rural families, where youngsters had little prospect of going to town for studies. Rather than sell their business to a stranger, the bakers preferred to sell to another baker – even if this was an apprentice. A major reason for this preference is that selling to another baker constituted their only chance to realize the goodwill that they had built up; that is, their network of bread-buying clients. (Often though, the bakery workers lack the means to finance the takeover. Instead, the bakery was handed to them as a loan, which they then had to repay in a specified number of years.)

The second pattern is in the sphere of marriage relations. Artisanal bakers always work as couples: the husband handles the artisanal side of things (the baking), whereas the spouse acts as shopkeeper. However, with more work options opening up for women at the time of the research (note this was the 1970s), fewer women were willing to endure the hardship that comes along with a baker's wife's life (long hours, little pay, and so forth). Tragically, there is no replacement for this. A wife is a cheap worker and can be expected not to be paid when business goes down. (Marxist-inclined scholars presumably would qualify this as a form of gendered exploitation.) Further, wives can be trusted to a greater extent than a hired hand. Since the baker works mostly at night and the shop is open during the day, there is limited possibility for direct supervision, making trust an essential requirement for running the business profitably. As women lost interest in a life as a shopkeeper, fewer aspiring bakery workers succeeded in establishing themselves, making room for factory-produced bread. This downward trend almost eradicated France's artisanal bread sector, until recently when it was reversed in the wake of a growing demand for local products in France and elsewhere in Europe.

The French artisanal bakeries' case suggests a number of points. First, whereas the analysis is grounded in the life trajectories of a selected sample of bakers and their relations, it abstracts away from that, instead trying to analyse changes in broader networks and in the consequences of these for changing role relations between bakers, bakery workers, and bakers' wives. It further notes a shift in transactional content: solidarities were diluting between, on the one hand, bakery sons and their fathers and, on the other, (aspirant) bakers and their wives. Such changes obviously do not appear in a void but rather are influenced by a changing French society, which, at that time, underwent an phase of accelerated modernization and emancipation. Hence, from an exploration of a limited number of interpersonal relations framed in life histories, the Bertaux succeeded in specifying transformations in the sociostructure – or institutionalized social relations – shedding new light on social transformations in France.

The analysis of brokerage and entrepreneurship

Manchester school anthropologist Norman Long studied entrepreneurship in a part of the Peruvian Andes where mining prevails. Long became interested in this topic as he observed a pattern of economic diversification in the area: urban workers and peasants who combined independent business with temporary wage-earning opportunities (mostly in the mines). In conventional interpretations, such diversification is often seen as a response to the inability to make sufficient money with either activity; or to structural poverty. Long, however, noted that, whereas macrostructural context obviously influences the rise of such mixed enterprises, little work had been done to document how individual people or particular groups go about building the necessary networks of relationship that make it possible to switch between different economic activities or occupations (Long, 1979, 2001). Surmising a relation between key decisions in the management of the multiple enterprises and the social networks that are mobilized in the process, Long made a detailed study of the personal network of one local entrepreneur, called Romero. Romero began working as a jack-of-all-trades for a close relative who peddled cattle to rapidly expanding mining towns in the area. After some time, and aided by the relative, he set up his own business, opening a canteen to feed mine workers. Romero continued trading cattle, while his newly wed wife oversaw the canteen. Once the mines went into a slump due to price falls on the world market, Romero succeeded in purchasing a plot of agricultural land from the local Catholic Church. He was one of few locals who did so – incidentally, they all had worked as migrant workers and had accumulated sufficient money for the purchase. In a world marked by small-scale farming, this placed Romero in a special position. He began building a patronage network, mainly by making arrangements with cash croppers. He was known as a ruthless landowner and never well liked locally. Aided by produce from the farm, Romero built and opened a restaurant strategically located near a busy rural road, which one of his daughters (fifteen years had passed since the land purchase) ran. Around this time Romero had built up a network of relations among larger landowners (the local elite), and when one of them assumed political office, Romero seized the opportunity to procure a concession to run a petrol station in the area. Because motorized transport was on the increase, this brought a growing profit. It also brought him into contact with petrol sellers in town, and through these contacts he purchased a lorry, which he operated many years successfully as a haulier.

From the case material, Long teases out three structural shifts in social relations. First, kinship contacts appear important in the early stages of Romero's career: he gains essential professional experience that he then builds on in establishing his business and securing some financial aid. Also, he expands his kinship network through marriage. Next, he builds up a clientele in the local community, but not without difficulty. He meets with local envy, and sometimes downright hostility, because of his rapid rise through the social ranks. Nonetheless, by virtue of his sizeable landholding, he becomes a necessary passage point for many locals in search of land and work. The new opportunity to establish a restaurant, and later a garage, comes at a time of mounting local hostilities, resulting in a series of lawsuits. Incidentally, this brought him into contact with lawyers living in the city, who later helped him to navigate the administrative procedures that were necessary to obtain the petrol concession. Thus, Romero moved out of a set of problematic relations into more promising ties. Some of these relations became godparents to his children, and in this way he developed strong, strategic ties within his network.

The Romero case suggests in the first place that his mixed career is not a response to poverty. In fact, he ranks among the well-to-do elite and could have retired long ago. It suggests further that developing his multiple business enterprise went together with establishing a set of ties with more prestigious persons, associated with the city. That was not the consequence of calculation alone: the people in his network exerted as much an influence on the course of his career as did Romero's own strategic considerations. This suggests looking at some contacts as springboards which propel a person into a new set of opportunities to get access to, and to control, valuable human and material resources, and looking – at the same time! – at other contacts as impediments blocking other courses of action (as when Romero's soured local contacts prevented him from further expanding the agricultural enterprise).

6.4. Practical methodology in disentangling society

Thus far, this chapter has discussed social networks from a theoretical and an empirical point of view. To conclude the chapter, we suggest a number of practical concerns to take into account in naturalistic social network analysis. Naturalistic inquiry is highly responsive to the empirical situation that is being investigated. One cannot, therefore, prescribe a cook book type of procedure. The most general, practical advice than can be given is to keep your eyes open for the social relations of those in whom you happen to be interested. Social network analysis is not very difficult to begin with: 'It asks questions about who is linked to whom, the nature of that linkage, and how the nature of the linkage affects behaviour' (Boissevain, 1979: 393). Spending time with someone helps you to get a sense of his or her everyday social contacts. Join in festive occasions or in mourning: weddings, baptisms, and funerals.[2] These are essential occasions to see an entire social network in action. In line with the ideals of naturalistic inquiry, social network analysis should not be an isolated 'research method'. It is one specific method beside others, but it is also a perspective on all of your materials as a whole. Looking at social practices, engaging in casual conversation, reading texts, interpreting images, decoding things, and keeping track of who knows who (and in what way) is a seamless operation in the field. Consequently, it may be only after the fact that the naturalistic researcher can actually make the claim of having carried out social network analysis.

Finding the contacts: Size and scope of the network

A practical problem when you are looking at the network of social relations is that the members of the societies under study are not only 'embedded' in them (socio-jargon for the influence that one person has on another person's decision making; see Granovetter, 1985), but usually have their own ideas about them too. Some of them may not be charmed at all with the researcher's interest in their contacts, as they feel these are private to them. It has, for instance, been noted that persons who are considered to be successful (or who regard themselves as such) can have cultural reasons to mystify the source of their success by presenting themselves as self-made persons, achieving their goals without depending on others. That of course is not an aberration on their part, or merely a nuisance to the researcher. Rather, it invites study of the tension between frontstage performance as a self-made person and backstage social practices. It may take time and patience to be allowed a glance backstage, but, without it, the researcher risks adopting a prevailing ideology of individualism, whereas closer study would most likely point at interesting forms of social relations management.[3]

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[2] Attending funerals is especially valuable because they give a longitudinal overview of social relations, bringing together a person's network as it has developed at different stages in his or her life. Funerals are further valuable venues for social research because they can offer a glance into social conflict, often with regard to inheritance problems. Funerals also have a semi-public aspect. Obituaries published in newspapers say something not only about the extent of the network but also about the deceased person's prestige.

A second piece of practical advice, following from the earlier discussions, is to look for those who are not there (compare 'missing persons' as negative facts). This may take two main forms. First, the person in whom you are interested may be tied to persons that are important to her but who are not present in the situations you are observing. By the same token, the person in whom you are interested may be important to others whom you do not see or know. In naturalistic inquiry, you should try to keep an open eye for these so-called second order contacts. These may impact key decisions taken by the person(s) in whom you are interested.

Second, persons who have been important in the past may have lost their significance at the time of the fieldwork. This is a common problem in the study of biographies. The social network in which a person is embedded today presents only a snapshot in a continuously changing figuration. Tracing a social person's contacts back in time can be an arduous task. There is loss of memory to consider but also reluctance to talk about a person who once was a friend or a close colleague, but not anymore because of some deep-running conflict. Foes deserve special mention. Many people have enemies, or at least harbour hostile feelings towards particular persons. The impact of enmity on everyday life may be as influential as, say, a close friendship. For the naturalistic researcher, it is therefore essential to develop a sensitivity for these darker aspects of social relations. Because it concerns stuff that many people usually would rather not discuss, making direct observations may be more fruitful than asking direct questions.

The spread of the Internet has opened up a whole new dimension of 'invisible but present' social contacts. Social media such as Facebook are especially useful, as these keep track of a person's social network. Of course, this cannot be taken at face value. Facebook and other social media are examples of ego-documents, meaning that they are by definition biased (Turkle, 2008). It helps to think of both the composition of a person's digital network and changes therein as topics in a broader discussion. In a sense, it can be compared to visiting a person at home, and striking up a conversation about the pictures that you find on display in the living room. Obviously the pictures do not represent the entirety of a person's social network. Choices have been made to include particular persons and not others. Had you visited the same living room a few months earlier, perhaps you would have encountered a different arrangement of pictures. This should then be treated as an interesting puzzle that needs to be resolved. Perhaps there has been a deep conflict concerning one of the displayed persons. Or maybe one of them died, and your informant has difficulties in coming to terms with that. None of these possibilities can be inferred plausibly without further inquiry, but formulating these as foreshadowed problems at least provides some direction.

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[3] On a grimmer note, in studies on illegal or criminal activity, intimate knowledge of social networks may come at the risk of exposure. This may obviously dampen the enthusiasm of those on the margins of the law to participate in a research project, but also this can present a real danger for the researcher as he may come to be seen as knowing too much (Zaitch, 2002).

Transactional content: Roles and conflict

In addition to getting a sense of the scope and size of a person's social network, a next step in naturalistic inquiry is to develop specific ideas about the type of relations that are involved. It would be contra the spirit of naturalistic inquiry to present a full list of possible relations. In a Western context, a distinction is often made between friendship, kinship, occupational relations, and leisure contacts, but that is a categorization that may be different in another culture. A step towards concretization was suggested in the previous discussion: to think of relations not as ties connecting nodes, but as representing particular social roles. Hence, finding out about relational categories that appear in everyday social life presents a key task in naturalistic social network analysis. The meaning of these categories does not come automatically: they are constructed in everyday social interaction and may therefore vary from one case to another.

Questions with regard to family relations play a special role, as the terminology for family is known to vary from one society to another (Ingoldsby & Smith, 2006). Western societies may be said to have a limited kinship terminology in comparison to those found in African and Asian societies. Few Western societies will recognize relatives beyond third order relations: second cousin, great uncle, and so on. In many African societies, kinship terminology will easily include fourth order and sometimes even fifth order family relations. In everyday parlance however, these are not always applied and then members resort to first and second-order terms, such as 'sister' or 'auntie', whereas closer inspection of these relations reveals a far more distant kinship relation. On the other hand, in Western societies, self-chosen, 'intimate' others to some extent function like kinship ties but they are often more volatile – 'achieved' rather than 'ascribed' – and have different dynamics.

As they embody roles, network categories come with their own sets of expectations and commitments: they operate under particular norms. Finding out what is considered to be 'normal' behaviour in and towards a particular social role is an important task in naturalistic inquiry. This can be approached by asking direct questions about them, but a more fruitful inroad into the symbolic meaning of networked roles, one that also does more justice to the ambition of naturalistic inquiry, is to observe social conflict. Conflict can be provisionally defined as the violation of behavioural norms. It presents a situation in which a person displays social behaviour that others do not expect. The outrage that surrounds such norm violation helps the naturalistic inquirer to better understand the pattern of expectations that surrounds it. Rather than asking direct questions about norms, the researcher thus reconstructs their significance with regard to the functioning of role relations (Garfinkel, 1999).

A special problem is to understand what happens when so-called multi-stranded ties – those in which several social roles overlap – develop into single-stranded ties – those defined by one role only – and the other way around. Such development usually entails changes in expectations and commitments, and therefore presents interesting arenas for the study of social conflict. For instance, in many Western societies, colleagues are expected to interact professionally, whereas this expectation is typically absent from friendship. What does that mean, then, for co-workers who develop a friendship relation? Another, more dramatic, example is presented by co-workers who engage in a love relation. Then the shift from single-stranded to multi-stranded tie can have profound consequences, not only for the new love birds, but also for the network of relations that surrounds them. The reverse pattern is significant too. For instance, relations between siblings are multi-stranded in the beginning, but can degenerate into a purely biological one over time, for instance following a feud over their parents' estate. Or think of a couple whose relation ends in a divorce, yet they remain connected via custody of their children. Thus, looking at social conflict can yield many important insights about what makes networks tick.

Analysis: From the study of interpersonal relations to telling about society

A final practical point is: what should be done with the mass of relational data once you have completed the collection of social network information? To get a preliminary overview, it may be helpful to tabulate or graphically plot the collected network information. Although there is a dearth of software around to aid in that, the possibilities these offer are often too advanced for naturalistic inquiry as they are tailored to the processing of large-scale network data (for a useful introduction, see Bruggeman, 2008). Nonetheless, a picture is worth a thousand words, and graphically plotting social network data can certainly help to present a quick scan of it. This can be done with relatively simple means, such as the graphics generator of Microsoft Word or a conventional simple drawing program such as Paint. Nonetheless, however useful the drawing of a network picture may be as a heuristic device, intellectually speaking, a step beyond that is required for meaningful analysis.

From the previous discussion it follows that interpersonal relations are not unique properties of a person's life, but instead represent positions in historically changing sociostructures (Bertaux, 1981) or figurations (Elias, 1978). Social network analysis thus should seek to abstract from observable social practices to the underlying pattern of sociostructural relations. The analysis of social networks is on the one hand a process of learning about how the interpersonal social relations under study work out in everyday social lives – including all the nitty-gritty detail level of information this engenders. On the other hand however, it requires a story to be told of how these relations are embedded in broader social processes and transformations of the society of which they are a part. It also means being able to formulate how these macro processes present opportunities for, and set limitations to, social interaction. For instance, in a society dominated by a kinship ideology, for a young man to break away from his relatives and set up a circle of social contacts beyond kinship is not an easy task, yet one that will considerably impact on his future.

Telling about society working along the lines of social network analysis also contributes to the quality of the story. A consequence of the methodology is that it directs the sampling of participants in the research. In the case of the French bakers, the life history of one baker led to a new set of contacts, which were followed in a snowballing fashion. Lessons learnt or gaps identified were then introduced as conversational topics with them, and so on. After several rounds of conversations, new questions did not result in new insights, and it was concluded that the material was ready for reporting. In the case of the Peruvian entrepreneur, a preliminary sketch was made of this person's first and second order network, and persons associated with key moments in Romero's life were then identified for further inquiry. Hence, by talking to a considerable number of persons, Romero's career history was gradually reconstructed. The reconstruction was then discussed again with himself, but also with several of his key contacts. In sum, these examples show that key to the analysis of social networks is to patiently build up an image of society by moving up and down social networks. Asking questions about social relations is an important way to do that, but it is equally important to make direct observations of social practices. The network is explored to the point of saturation: additional research does not add to the image of the society in which you are interested.

6.5. Conclusion

Because social interaction is no longer confined to traditional boundaries of family, social class, or nation, a relational view on society is more than ever needed. Formal social network theory offers the advantage of standardization that promotes the processing of large volumes of relational data, but at the price of superficiality. The analysis of social networks adds to that a focus on what social relations mean to the members of a society. Understanding change presents a major challenge to the relational view. Looking at competition (conflict) and collaboration presents a fruitful entry into that: these interlock in a myriad of ways, and change is often the unplanned outcome of that. Human agency has a place in the analysis of social networks; however, it must be appreciated that the individual is bound by others in the network. Relations in the network (between individual persons, or organizations, and so on) are shaped in social roles, impacting profoundly on the stuff that flows through the network. These are held together by sets of expectations and commitments, but they are also often contested and therefore the study of conflict plays a special role in the analysis of social networks. There is not one standard way to study all of this. By presenting a series of theoretical reflections and empirical examples, this chapter hopes to have given food for thought and to have stirred interest in social networks in naturalistic research practice.

7. Not getting lost in society: On qualitative analysis

The function of scientific concepts is to mark the categories which will tell us more about our subject matter than any other categorical sets.
– Abraham Kaplan

Having acquainted ourselves in the previous four chapters with different strategies for collecting information about society, we must now discuss what to do with this information. It is important to reiterate from Chapter 1 that in naturalistic inquiry the analysis of information is typically not postponed until the end of a research project. Analysis forms an integral part of the arc of naturalistic inquiry: it is continuous work-in-progress. One observation leads to another one and then to further ones after that. Their succession helps to increase focus. 'What should I explore next?' Similarly, one informant may suggest another one. After casual but extensive conversations within a particular circle of people, the naturalistic inquirer may become aware that she should also explore a different circle. 'But what is the perspective of their opponents?' Also, if she happens to study the world of medical doctors, she may realize that some people (like the surgeon mentioned in Chapter 5) choose to become a doctor for romantic reasons and that it therefore may be worthwhile to explore idealized stereotypes of doctors in literature and film. 'What *is* the cultural stereotype of a doctor in our society?' And so on. Hence the term: 'theoretical sampling'. Each time, the researcher bases a decision about how to further proceed on an analysis – sometimes cursory, sometimes highly systematic and reflexive – of her material up to that moment. After more observations, interviews, and studying of images, she may also go back to her earlier materials and look at them in the light of insights derived from materials gathered later. Thus, she shuttles back and forth within her own materials and she moves up and down 'iteratively' between those materials and the ideas she is developing. In the long run, she may decide that she neither finds new materials nor can think of additional ways to interpret them. She then is approaching empirical saturation and theoretical closure.

Naturalistic inquirers vary in how they go about in this respect. Some of them proceed as above. Others prefer to separate their fieldwork on the one hand, and the interpretation and possible explanation of their findings on the other. They feel it is useful to first immerse themselves in the fieldwork, letting themselves be guided by hunches, intuition, and luck, and only *then* to look at the materials gathered with more detachment. They separate the stages of fieldwork and analysis on purpose. Or we should say: at least to some extent. Most naturalistic inquirers have an approach to analysis that lies somewhere in between.

Purely for the purpose of exposition, we will here discuss the analysis of material gathered through naturalistic inquiry from the latter point of view: *as though* we have first gathered material and are only now going to analyse it. This hopefully will help to further clarify the emergence, or we should say the building-up of grounded theory that is truly rooted in our material. We discuss the craft of doing that as a sequence of six steps. Before doing so, we briefly outline our epistemological position in relation to the interpretation of texts.

7.1. Text and interpretation

Throughout, we have stressed that naturalistic inquiry is about participating in peoples' lives. It is about experiencing what it is like to share these lives; observing what people do; and exposing oneself to the romances people read, the television series they watch, and the images that saturate their lives. A modern way of saying the same is: naturalistic inquiry is an 'embodied practice' (Hopwood, 2013). Still, paradoxically, what a naturalistic researcher eventually analyses is mostly text. Field diaries typically consist of hundreds or even thousands of pages of writing. These pages are filled with the scratch notes that have served as initial mnemonic support; with the descriptive notes that the researcher tapped from her memory each day after leaving the field; with many and various interpretations of these same field notes; with observer comments that presented themselves; with reflexive memos that came up; with musings about emotions experienced; with theoretical hunches; and so on. If there are photographs in a diary, these will typically be annotated with details about when they were taken, who the people on the photos are, the situations they were in, and often some reasons why they were taken. Casual conversations will often be recorded within the field diaries. If, however, the naturalistic researcher has collected a series of life histories through interviewing people, there will be a separate corpus of interview protocols, again hundreds of pages of text, carefully transcribed from audio files or even from hand-written notes.

As we have stressed in the earlier chapters, it is essential that a naturalistic researcher records, usually by writing down, whatever he encounters and holds to be relevant in the course of his research. Without the fullest possible record of the naturalistic experience, there is no basis for interpretive analysis, for building theory, for validating insights by discussing them with the people they are about, for telling about society. Without a record, there is nothing to tell from and nothing to tell about.

Taken together, field diaries, interview protocols, and other records of naturalistic inquiry add up to large, often very large, quantities of text. It is not uncommon for the naturalistic inquirer – in fact it is quite common – to feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the material he himself has eventually amassed: ‘How am I ever going to make sense of all this?’ As we mentioned earlier, a naturalistic inquirer must have a high tolerance for ambiguity throughout his enterprise. He must be able to have many different and even conflicting ideas in his head without yielding to the temptation of prematurely ‘making a clean sweep’. He must be able to withhold judgment even when dramatic things happen or when powerful persons – among whom may be fellow academics – try to impose *their* definition of a situation. Also, at the analysis stage, he must *not* impose a predefined frame of reference on the material merely to escape its massiveness and to ward off the sense of chaos that he may feel creeping up inside him.

And it is not only the sheer quantity of material that may intimidate the researcher; there is also the immense historical weight of the hermeneutical task. The problem of interpreting text is older than language proper. After all, if messages – natural, oral, or written – are communications from inscrutable forces beyond and above us, how can we be sure of their meanings? How, for example, if the messages are delivered by animals circling above our heads, by trees falling over our paths, by bolts of lightning hitting our neighbour’s hut? The earliest human societies subscribed to animistic views of the world; almost anything could be read as a sign, and many things were in fact routinely read as a signs. In fact it has been argued that this reading of the natural world is the root of modern inquiry (Liebenberg, 2012). The question of interpretation thus posed itself to humans from the very beginning. Language proper, whether oral or written,[1] did convey messages from gods, but from other humans too, of course. How to be sure of their meanings if the senders are far away on earth ('strangers'), or far removed in time because they have died generations ago ('ancestors')?

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[1] Lest we forget: oral tradition bridges large distances in space and time like writing does. Many of the oldest stories of humanity have been preserved and handed down – with variation – orally over hundreds and hundreds of generations, and they continue to be handed down orally (cf. Goody, 2010).

In a process of specialization and professionalization, the art of hermeneutics seems to have emerged from the explication of divine scriptures, of juridical texts, and of literary sources. Compare the Talmudic, Biblical, and Islamic scholars commenting endlessly on the sacred books and the best way to understand them. Compare the various juridical professions; and compare the contemporary art critics, often proclaiming to know better what a particular book conveys than the author of that very book – the theory legitimizing this is called 'The death of the author', after an essay by Roland Barthes (1968) – and usually well-versed in postmodernism and de-constructivism. What subscribers to 'the death of the author', postmodernism, and de-constructivism have in common is a hegemonic claim on truth: they claim, through their esoteric intellectual capital, to have a privileged understanding of texts, an understanding that is superior to that of rank and file members of society and even to that of the original authors of the texts. In this they are direct descendants of shamans, of priests, and of biblical and legal scholars.[2]

Whereas one can perhaps doubt the use of searching for the intentions of the original authors of the *Bible*, *Iliad*, or *Odyssey* – after all: we are not very sure of who they were – we feel that, in naturalistic inquiry, authors' intentions and social actors' meanings should always be central. We usually know very well who the people are whose lives we shared and whom we have interviewed. We should therefore be able to understand on *their* terms and from *their* perspectives the text we have produced in order to record *their* lives. As E.D. Hirsch argued in a classic rebuttal of 'death of the author', de-constructivism, and postmodernism: 'The reader should try to reconstruct authorial meaning, and he can in principle succeed in his attempt' (Hirsch, 1976: 8). Of course, this does not imply that we may not *add* to authorial meaning by viewing it in a larger context. This is the task of explanation proper, of discovering the social scientific *significance* of authorial meanings.[3]

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[2] A perceptive and critical analysis of the socio-historical background of postmodernism (its 'sociogenesis') is Wilterdink (2002); see also Butler (2002).

[3] We are here combining separate suggestions of Abraham Kaplan (1964) and E.D. Hirsch (1976) to use the word 'meaning' for emic meanings, viewed from the point of view of the actor(s), and the word 'significance' for etic meanings, viewed from the point of view of an observer, a third party. Kaplan uses the terms 'semantic explanation' for the effort to understand emic meaning, and 'scientific explanation' for the effort to attribute etic meaning or wider

The primacy of 'authorial meaning' – the principle that we should find out what things mean to the people who live and do them – does not force us to consider only meanings of which people are conscious. We are only dimly aware of many of the things we do. We step back from a road half a second before a bus, coming round the corner, could hit us. We must have heard it coming but we did not know it. We flirt with a boy or girl long before we realize we are falling in love with him or her. Or we struggle with our father for many years, only to realize later that we both hate *and* love him. Unconscious motives can very well be authorial. In fact, the genius of Freud was that he showed that the realm of intentionality was far greater than the realm of consciousness. This of course creates special difficulties for naturalistic interpreters. Can and may we be sure of a particular meaning if the person in question cannot confirm it? Provided certain criteria are fulfilled, we feel we can. The core of these criteria is that, with a particular interpretation, the life of an individual or group becomes easier to understand than without that particular interpretation. We understand someone's flirting better if we interpret it as the beginning of a crush. In fact, the flirting person may be able to confirm our interpretation later. On the other hand, the same flirtatious behavior could have been part of a strategy to merely solicit some favour: help during an exam, or a drink at a bar. Or it could have been a narcissistic habit. Some boys flirt with any girl, just to show off their own popularity. (And some girls flirt with any boy, of course…) In each of these three cases, the person may not be aware of the meaning of her or his own behaviour. In the latter two cases, she may not be willing to confirm our interpretation. Still, we may be able to reconstruct that meaning from the broader context of meaningful behaviour in which it is embedded. This is a difficult craft of course. Practiced without restraint, psychoanalytical interpretation is every bit as hegemonic, totalitarian, and aggressive towards authorial meaning as the 'death of the author' approach. Practiced with reserve and respect, it can help us understand people and, through that, help those people understand themselves.[4]

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significance to emic meaning. Hirsch writes: '"Meaning" refers to the whole verbal meaning of a text, and "significance" to textual meaning in relation to a larger context, i.e., another mind, another era, a wider subject matter' (1976: 2-3). Both would agree that the latter will always have to include the former. Significance in social science is *about* meaning. Confusingly, some etic scientific concepts trickle down into the vernacular, thereby becoming emic. One example is Freud's concept of repression. Nowadays, laypeople routinely accuse one another of being 'repressed' or 'in denial'. 'Repression' has taken on both emic and etic meaning.

[4] From the vast literature on psychoanalysis, two books referred to earlier may be helpful here too: Reik (1948) and Grosz (2013). Each gives an inside account of what happens in psychoanalytic

7.2. Practical methodology: Qualitative analysis in six steps

Having researched and written *Awareness of Dying* (1965), a qualitative study of the interactions between terminally ill patients, their relatives, nurses, and doctors, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss decided to reflect on the methodology they had used in that study and on the role of theory in qualitative research more generally. The result was *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for qualitative research* (1967). In Chapter 2 of our book, we have already sketched the historical background to Glaser and Strauss's approach, their basic understandings, and we have elaborated some of them. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* has become highly influential, especially through its argument that you can build theory inductively from qualitative data in a systematic way. You should not 'apply' theory to data but rather discover theory in and from them – a process comparable to making wine from grapes and distilling cognac from wine. Below we follow their approach in relation to analysing qualitative material, arguably the very core of crafting grounded theory (see Box 15 for a short exposé on the aid of computer software in qualitative analysis). Most subsequent textbooks on qualitative data analysis owe their primary inspiration to Glaser and Strauss (see e.g. Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Silverman, 2010). Our own version, apart from being rooted in our own research experience, also borrows from Erlandson *et al.*, 1993.

Unitizing

The first thing to do to analyse qualitative material is to cut it up or 'unitize' it (Erlandson *et al.*, 1993: 117). This is the act of distinguishing and delimiting meaningful units in the material. These units may be incidents you have witnessed, scenes in which you participated, situations of which you were part, particular episodes in people's lives that they shared with you, stories or parts of stories they told you, fragments of film you felt to be significant, and so forth. Unitizing seems a simple thing to do, yet it is very important from a taxonomic and theoretical point of view. Our own lives are concatenations of meaningful episodes, and we can recognize them in the lives of others.

Often, and perhaps even usually, smaller units, if taken together, also make up larger units. This reflects the multi-layered nature of our lives. Walking the dog may be just walking the dog and perhaps catching a breath

therapy. Psychoanalytical interpretation derives its legitimation from therapy, wherein it should always remain rooted.

of fresh air, but it may also be part of an evening of the cosy family life of an informant, belonging to a larger unit together with curling up on the couch, putting out the light in his son's bedroom, and falling asleep in bed together with his wife. He may have described it as 'cocooning' and even have mentioned that this cocooning is part of his 'happy marriage'. As a naturalistic analyst, you thus may have to duplicate the smaller units by copying them and assembling the copies into the larger unit(s) that you wish to distinguish alongside the smaller units. In that way, both the separate smaller units and the larger unit as a whole become available for inspection, coding, and reflection. Practically, it is wise to start unitizing on a single, relatively low level, e.g. keeping the walking the dog, curling up on the couch, putting out the light, and falling asleep episodes separate. You can copy and combine them into a larger unit later. In principle, you should unitize the entire corpus of your material.

Emergent category designation or coding

The second thing to do is to make categories; this is called 'open coding' or 'emergent category designation' (Erlandson *et al.*, 1993: 118 ff.). The naturalistic analyst starts sorting the units she has distinguished in the material into meaningful categories and labelling these categories (coding). The first one is not yet a category but a single unit, for example an episode: 'walking the dog'. The second unit can resemble the first one: 'feeding the cat'. One then has one category with two units in it. Or it may not resemble the first one, if, for example, it is 'calling up a friend'. In that case, there are two categories, each containing one unit. Note that in both cases (!) a surplus of meaning has emerged: of and within the single category (something like: 'daily chores/taking care of the animals'), or between the two categories (like: 'doing domestic chores' versus 'maintaining friendships'). This may sound like a semantic trick, but that is precisely the point: describing and understanding what people do (and what they tell) is a semantic enterprise.

Obviously, when thinking up categories, you do not have to go by your inductive and on-the-spot intuition alone. Any idea you have in your head – a sensitizing concept, an observer's comment in the margin of your field notes, a memo written at some stage, a theoretical concept from a learned book, plain common sense – may become a category. Anything goes as long as it makes an interesting category into which to sort units of material – as long as there are clippings to be sorted, of course. To give you an idea of how a coding exercise can proceed, we include in Box 14 a well-known example from another book co-authored by Anselm Strauss, called *Basics of Qualitative Research*.

Box 14 Coding example: The lady in red

Suppose you are in a fairly expensive but popular restaurant. The restaurant is built on three levels. On the first level is a bar, on the second a small dining area, and on the third, the main dining area and the kitchen. The kitchen is open, so you can see what is going on. Wine, liquors, and appropriate glasses in which to serve them are also available on this third level. While waiting for your dinner, you notice a lady in red. She appears to be just standing there in the kitchen, but your common sense tells you that a restaurant would not pay a lady in red just to stand there, especially in a busy kitchen. Your curiosity is aroused, so you can decide to do an inductive analysis to see if you can determine just what her job is.

You notice that she is intently looking around the kitchen area, a **work site**, focusing here and there, taking a mental note of what is going on. *You ask yourself, what is she doing here? Then you label it* **watching**. Watching what? **Kitchen work**.

Next, someone comes up and asks her a question. She answers. This act is different than watching, so *you code it* as **information passing**.

She seems to notice everything. You call this **attentiveness**.

Our lady in red walks up to someone and tells him something. Since this incident also involves information that is passed on, *you also label it*, **information passing**.

Although standing in the midst of all this activity, she does not seem to disrupt it. *To describe this phenomenon* you use the term **unintrusiveness**.

She turns and walks quickly and quietly, **efficiently**, into the dining area, and proceeds to **watch**, the activity here also.

She seems to be keeping track of everyone and everything, **monitoring**. But monitoring what? Being an astute observer you notice that she is monitoring the **quality** of the service, how the waiter interacts and responds to the customer; **the timing of service**, how much time transpires between seating a customer, their ordering, the delivery of food; and **customer response and satisfaction** with the service.

A waiter comes with an order for a large party, she moves in to help him, **providing assistance**.

The woman looks like she knows what she is doing and is competent at it, **experienced**.

She walks over to a wall near the kitchen and looks at what appears to be a schedule, **information gathering**.

The maitre d' comes down and they talk for a few moments and look around the room for empty tables and judge at what point in the meal the seated customers seem to be: the two are **conferring**. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 63-65)

In principle, you must continue the process of sorting your units into categories until all units of material have been sorted into one or more categories. Each and every part of your material must be scrutinized and sorted. Practically, there will be leftovers that do not seem to make sense at all and/or that do not seem relevant. Do not discard them too quickly. After all, your material consists of things that you felt to be relevant at the time of writing them down and of things that people have told you because they felt them to be important. If an informant has constantly strayed towards football in spite of your repeated efforts to bring him back to the topic of his marriage, he actually may have told you something important: that he felt embarrassed to speak about his marital life.

To give another example: the same vascular surgeon who had been inspired by a novel on WW I (see Chapter 5) was reticent to talk about his bedside manner with his patients – the very topic that interested the interviewer. Despite the researcher's repeated efforts to get him talking about his interaction with his patients, the surgeon kept coming back to the technical aspects of his work. He compared it to plumbing: replacing a broken pipe by a new one and making sure that the welding would not leak. On analysing the interview, the researcher thought that most of it was useless for the purpose of the research: understanding doctors' bedside manner. *Until* it finally dawned upon the researcher that the surgeon had actually *demonstrated* how he behaved towards his patients: by reassuring them that he was an expert plumber he conveyed the message that they were in safe hands! What seemed like irrelevant material turned out to be most valuable. The lesson to learn from this is that you should never discard material unless you are sure it is truly irrelevant. Even then, you should be able to account for why it ended up among your materials.

More difficult is the solitaire-like character of the sorting and categorizing enterprise. Like solitaire (patience), qualitative analysis sometimes simply does not seem to square. You feel like you are getting lost in it. Your brain creaks and cracks. To some extent, that is necessary and even good. Creative effort hurts, but you must not really get lost. How do you find an optimal solution to the problem of categorization, a solution that allows for the most meaningful conceptual ordering of your material? That is where Glaser and Strauss's so-called constant comparative method comes into its own (Glaser & Strauss, 2012: Chapter V). It is a heuristic in four additional phases or steps.

Comparing incidents applicable to each category

Your first unit or clipping from your material cannot yet be compared to anything but your second unit can: to the first one. With every next unit to be categorized, you have more, earlier ones with which to compare it. Each time, compare all incidents and episodes within a category, and compare between the categories. That is the core of constant comparison as proposed by Glaser and Strauss. In this process, theoretical meanings of your categories will start to emerge, to thicken, and in due course to saturate.

Generally, two types of meaning will offer themselves. First, there are meanings to those whom you have observed and talked to, native or emic meanings. They are the stuff of *Verstehen*, of interpretation. For example, compare, among students, the expression 'That looks good on your CV.' As a qualitative analyst in the process of sorting your material, you may decide to use 'Good on CV' as a label for a category. Second, there are labels coined by you or some other outsider, etic meanings or significances. They are candidate concepts for explanation. You may for example decide to subsume the entire emic category of 'Good for CV' under a more general heading of 'Building social capital as career strategy'. Note that emic and etic categories are not mutually exclusive and that etic categories may include – in fact, typically do include – several emic categories.

While going through your material, comparing constantly and allowing ever new categories to emerge, discursive ideas also will spring up, i.e. longer chains of thoughts, hypotheses, reflections, more complex arguments. A label like 'Building social capital as career strategy' already implies a small theory. Write down such discursive thoughts in explanatory memos, like you have done earlier in the phase of data collection. Think about and with your memos. If you work in a team, discuss these memos among yourselves and see what comes out. Then again, let them rest. It is too early for analytic closure. Continue going through your material.

Integrating categories and their properties

At first, categories multiply like rabbits. Later on, the pace slows down. You gradually need to make fewer new categories and you increasingly succeed in subsuming units of material (incidents, episodes, stories) under existing labels. Some categories spontaneously merge (Eureka!) into new, higher order categories. Sometimes this is referred to as 'axial coding' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 123-142). Other categories remain distinct but develop a close relationship with one another. Otherwise put: theory is emerging and crystallizing. After all: a theory is a coherent system of general statements about reality aiming to interpret and explain that reality. It is a positive sign if separate categories or concepts develop a dynamic relationship with one another. You may for example have come to distinguish three different perspectives that people in your research may have on their own poverty. They may accept it as a fact of life; they may blame themselves; or they may blame politicians. Once you have discovered that, it comes as no surprise that people's strategies for coping with poverty tend to co-vary with these perspectives (e.g. acquiescence; depression; crime). In other words, emotional-cognitive perspectives and action tendencies go together.

Delimiting the theory

For some time, your theory or theories will continue to develop or even proliferate. Allow this to happen. Sooner or later, one single, increasingly clear theoretical perspective will crystallize that organizes the remaining categories, and the episodes and incidents subsumed under each one of them, into a meaningful whole. The theory solidifies. It must be both broad in scope and parsimonious. It must encompass most – ideally, all – of your findings and be efficient at the same time. You must be able to summarize the core of it in a few simple sentences.

In this phase, you will usually be able to reduce the number of categories even further while simultaneously saturating their theoretical meaning. You should now also be able to link all remaining categories (theoretical concepts) through dynamic propositions. 'Building social capital as career strategy' turns out to be subsumable under 'Life as a project', which in its turn is a dynamic part of 'Individualization of life courses'. (Sociologist readers will recognize etic concepts coined by Anthony Giddens here. See Giddens, 1991.)

Reflect on the theory as crystallized. Discuss it among your team, this time with the aim of theoretical closure. Is this indeed the best intellectual framing of the theoretical issues at hand? Does it truly do justice to the richness of the material? Are last-minute amendments and elaboration needed? As Abraham Kaplan (1964: 52) has said, 'the function of scientific concepts is to mark the categories which will tell us more about our subject matter than any other categorical sets.' Does *this* particular theory – the one you have carefully distilled from your field diaries, interviews, and all the rest – indeed tell us more about the people your research is about than any other theory possible could? Reaching this point, where – finally – everything seems to become clear and coherent, is one of the most gratifying experiences that naturalistic inquiry can offer. Still, we should not forget that theory always remains work-in-progress. The theoretical closure that you have found is provisional closure, for the purpose of *this* research project, of *this* article, of *this* book.

Writing theory

Now write. Write on the basis of your last and best theoretical insights, the memos you wrote, the categories you made and retained, and the individual clippings within them. We have more to say about writing in the next chapter.

Interestingly, the method or heuristic of constant comparison usually results in process theory, in theory of how human interactions and experiences develop (Glaser & Strauss, 2012: 114). It also tends to result in theories of the 'pattern' model rather than of the 'deductive' model (Kaplan, 1964: 327-345). A pattern theory interprets and explains phenomena by fitting them within a wider pattern or network of social relationships, as opposed to a deductive theory, which explains phenomena by deducing them from general laws.[5] An example of the latter is rational choice theory, assuming individuals to be self-interested, rational actors and trying to explain specific human behaviours – like falling in love – from that. Thus: People are self-interested and rational actors. Person A will fall in love with person B to the extent that person B can fulfil the needs of person A better than any other person available to A at time x. If another person C does become available at time y to fulfil the needs of A even better, person A will fall in love with person C. And so on. An example of the former is Norbert Elias's figurational theory, starting from the broad historical figurations people form and trying to explain specific behaviours – including falling in love, but also: the very tendency to act rationally – from these broad figurations (see also Chapter 6). Thus: Romantic love develops with modernity, social mobility and the extension of market relations. Only under those conditions can people afford to fall in love with anyone, i.e. over the barriers of social estate or class. Yet the very same conditions force people to act strategically and rationally on the marriage market, as more depends on its outcome than ever before. (This is one theme in Illouz, 2013.)

An advantage of process theory and of the pattern model of explanation is that, in their light, the experiences and interactions of people and their developments are readily told as a story. The art of writing up qualitative or naturalistic research consists of presenting it in a naturalistic way to our readers. The most naturalistic way is… telling a story. Rather than a just-so story or an artificial construction of scattered empirical facts, it is a real story. It is grounded in the reality of people's lives and it will be infused with both the self-understanding of people and the reflexivity of social scientists – who are people too, of course (see also Davis, 2012).

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[5] This sounds abstract, but Kaplan provides an illuminating example: 'There is a figure consisting of a long, vertical straight line with a short one branching upwards from near the top, and a short curved line joining it on the same side near the bottom; the figure is meaningless unless it is explained as representing a soldier with fixed bayonet, accompanied by his dog, disappearing around the corner of a building (the curved line is the dog's tail). We understand the figure by being brought to see the whole picture, of which what is to be explained is only a part' (Kaplan, 1964: 333).

Box 15 The use of coding software

The analysis of qualitative material can nowadays be done with the help of special computer software programs such as Atlas.ti (Friese, 2011), Kwalitan (Wester & Peters, 2004), and NUDIST (Richards & Richards, 1991). It is often expected that, by applying 'hard' computer algorithms to 'soft' qualitative data, qualitative analysis becomes more rigorous. Our position on this is sceptical. Without doubt, these programs can be an amazing aid in sifting through large amounts of text and keeping a grip on emergent system of codes and categories. However, in lazy hands, they can also lead to superficial outcomes. We would like to point out two possible problems in using coding software.

First, it may induce and promote an academic division of labour in which the collection of information is regarded as one thing and its analysis as another thing. It is not difficult to see the attraction of that. For instance, it promotes the scaling-up of research projects and the shortening of research cycles. This risks reducing the analysis of qualitative data to a mechanical procedure. From a body of data of which the analyst has no first-hand experience, categories are constructed based on superficial hunches or even merely based on academic literature (the latter is sometimes also called 'indexing' or 'closed coding'). In the latter case, the analysis becomes a positivist exercise in hypothesis testing rather than a serious effort to generate grounded theory. As we argued in Chapter 3, field notes – and, if annotated, interview transcripts – are both a body of data gathered and an intellectual diary. It is imperative that the two functions should always remain wedded to each other and that the further and deeper analysis of the data should follow naturally from the intellectual journey undertaken by the researcher from the very beginning of the research project.

Second, the software is sometimes used to generate a quantitative overview of textual data by computing frequency tables, distances between clusters of words, and so on. Resonating with positivism, this is confusing frequency and meaning. Surely there may be a relation between how often a particular word occurs in, say, a conversation, and what it says about the life world of the informant, but this relation should be established through interpretation – not through counting. As one of us discovered, West African second-hand car dealers in their conversations will repeatedly mention how 'car business is good business'. When reasoned from the viewpoint of frequency, this indeed points to the fact that there must be some money in the business – why else would the traders assign so much of their conversational space to it? After careful observation of social practices however, it transpired that the statement reflected a worldview in which getting rich through an unexpected windfall gain is prominent, rather than an economic reality. And sometimes the rarity or absence of a particular word in your material is more telling than the abundance of other words. In one interview, a teacher casually dropped that in his school, everything was done 'to the Honour and Glory of the pupils'. This turned out to be a slip of the tongue, revealing a resentment that was carefully suppressed by his fellow teachers in other interviews.

A practice reflecting both dangers mentioned above is using the software to construct indexes to field data. This may resemble (open) coding: fragments of text are identified and labelled, but a major difference from open coding is that the list of terms indexed is constructed before the actual analysis. This allows for the analysis of vast amounts of data (sometimes entire teams of indexers are recruited for larger research projects), but instead of letting new categories emerge from the data, a preconceived conceptual framework is applied – or, as some will have it, enforced – on them. It is closed rather than open coding.

In fact, the dangers of laziness in using software for qualitative analysis are similar to the dangers of laziness in using statistical software. The global success of a statistical package like SPSS, and the deceptive ease with which this may nowadays be applied, paradoxically constitutes a threat to deeper statistical understanding and numeracy. By those with a shallow knowledge of statistical theory, selective samples are treated as if they were random; assumptions of specific tests are neglected; regression analyses are computed without an underlying theoretical idea about the causal order of independent variables included.

Like statistical packages however, *if* used seriously, with care, and with numeracy and literacy, software for qualitative analysis can be a great help. Both Kwalitan and Atlas-ti have been developed with a firm eye on Glaser and Strauss's *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* and if you stick to their principles, the computer can serve you well.

7.3. Conclusion

Qualitative analysis is sometimes frowned upon as an art more than a craft. The procedures followed seem opaque to some, and the outcome therefore difficult to replicate. In this chapter, we have proposed epistemological principles that seem sound to us: the primacy of authorial meaning, and the importance of keeping separate authorial meaning and scientific significance – meaning in a broader context or meaning for the researcher and her tribe. Also, we have outlined a practical procedure that has become more or less standard practice among serious naturalistic inquirers: the stepwise approach of distinguishing units of material; categorizing or coding those; comparing within and between categories; integrating categories into higher order categories or theoretical concepts; delimiting theory; and writing. (Writing is also the subject of our next chapter.) It is our experience that, if you stick to those principles and follows those steps, the analysis of qualitative material becomes both a fully transparent and a highly gratifying stage in naturalistic inquiry. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, for didactic purposes we have pretended that the fieldwork had been done and that analysis was a separate phase. Many naturalistic researchers in fact intertwine doing fieldwork and analysing their material. Preliminary analysis pushes forward further fieldwork, in its turn sparking off further analysis, and so on.

8. Telling about society: On writing

The art of writing is to explain the complications of the human soul with the simplicity that can be universally understood.
– Alan Sillitoe

Having collected information about society, having analysed it through open coding and constant comparison, and having distilled it into grounded theory, you wish to share your understanding of society with an audience. Writing is central to all social research, but it has a special place in naturalistic inquiry.

A conventional view of writing in social research is that it is simply the reporting of the findings of research, of writing up once the other phases have been completed. This view, connected to positivism, advocates keeping the language of reporting descriptive and factual in order to avoid ambiguities and using a scientific, detached vocabulary to ensure objective reporting. Ideally, the language of mathematics is used, but when this proves to be impractical, it is recommended to use a conceptual apparatus that has been tried in previous studies and that has been connected at the outset with the data in a procedure known as 'operationalization'.

That is not the approach to writing in naturalistic inquiry. Writing therein is seen as flowing from analysis, as the final stage of the arc of naturalistic inquiry, and as a capstone put on the entire research process. It encompasses coming to terms with the complex relations between description, interpretation, and explanation in a coherent master narrative.

Naturalistic inquiry does subscribe to the ideal of reporting though, but that is not the same as sharing raw data with our readers. Writing entails a process of careful selection of the most meaningful (emically) and most significant (etically) parts of those data and organizing them in a single, coherent theoretical framework. This is not a subjectivist procedure, nor an arbitrary one. The selection is based on a thorough familiarity with the society under study – a familiarity built up over months or even years of fieldwork,[1] and it is guided by the careful and systematic analysis of all the materials. Eventually and necessarily, those events and situations are selected that are the most telling. Still, and ideally, they also represent the rest of the data. It is precisely for that reason that they can be considered the most telling. Thus, a large suprastructure of data supports the smaller superstructure that is selected for and presented in telling about society. The parts selected for telling are the tip of the iceberg.

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[1] No simple formulas can decide on how long a naturalistic researcher should remain in the field. As explained in previous chapters, the researched should thoroughly immerse herself in the world she is studying and not leave it before she experiences a true sense of saturation: no new information shows up (empirical saturation) and no new ideas suggest themselves (theoretical saturation). This usually takes at least many months and sometimes several years. Although the criterion of saturation sounds simple, in practice it is rarely fulfilled. Full intellectual closure is

8.1. Thick description and social theory

Writing in naturalistic inquiry usually takes the form of 'thick description'. The expression was coined by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1993) and denotes an empirically rich narrative that is presented with both a *verstehende* and an explanatory ambition in mind. Thick description aims to present the mental categories of a particular society in such a way that they become transparent to another society – to social scientists and to the general public. In doing so, it also promotes the self-understanding of the original society.

Thick description provides a condensed yet detailed portrayal of the most important aspects of the everyday lives of particular people (of a group or of an entire society). The portrait should include the actions of people, the meanings of those actions to themselves (the emic perspective), and the significance of those actions and meanings to the naturalistic inquirer and her readers (the etic perspective). Thick description thus goes far beyond mere description.

Critics of qualitative research sometimes complain about endless empirical expositions that seem to lead nowhere. It is true that some qualitative research remains under-theorized and therefore incapable of moving beyond a mere immersion in the empirical record (van Maanen, 2011). But if practiced well, thick description can make society transparent by including people's own understanding *and* adding to that social-scientific explanation through grounded theory. A first example is the way in which Paul Sillitoe has described cargo cults, the millenarian movements among indigenous

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of course an ideal that never can be reached – nor *should* be reached. The naturalistic researcher should be aware that an article or book can only represent closure *for the time being*. Still, there is a worrying tendency in modern universities for fieldwork to be constrained for budgetary reasons. This is totally contrary to the spirit of naturalistic inquiry, which should always be 'slow' in the sense of 'slow cooking' and other 'slow' movements.

peoples of Melanesia that predict and expect 'cargos' of manufactured goods to arrive shortly and inaugurate a new and paradisiacal life for them.

> Cargo cults are a rational indigenous response to traumatic cultural contacts with Western society. [...] The newcomers have material wealth and technical capabilities beyond local people's understanding and imagination and – for tribal society – irresistible political and military power emanating from incomprehensible nation states. Europeans apparently do no physical work to produce these goods, unlike the politically subjugated local population, many of whom they put to hard labour for paltry returns. Neither do Europeans share their fabulous wealth with others, a direct assault on a cardinal Melanesian value, where giving and receiving is an integral aspect of social life. Clearly, Europeans know something, and the problem for the Melanesians is how to gain access to this knowledge. Unable to comprehend Western society [...] or the worldwide capitalist economic system [...] they turn to millenarian cults. A recurring feature in these cults is a belief that Europeans in some past age tricked Melanesians and are withholding from them their rightful share of material goods. In cargo cults, the Melanesians are trying to reverse this situation, to discover the ritual formula that will facilitate access to their misappropriated manufactured possessions. They conclude that material goods come from the spirit world and that the wealthy Whites are stealing their share; so it is a case of manipulating rituals to reverse the situation and get access to them. An oft-repeated aim is to secure the cargo of the ancestors, who some cultists believe will return at the millennium. They will come to right current injustices. [...] These cults allow Melanesians who find themselves in a confusing and inexplicable world invaded by technically superior outsiders to cope with the changed situation, even manipulate it. (Sillitoe, 1989: 93-94)

This is quite a condensed (admittedly very 'thick') description, but it is one that both includes the emic perspective of the Melanesians – it is saturated with emic meaning – and builds anthropological or etic insight on that. In writing thick description, the challenge is not to provide to our readers as much information as is possible, but rather to share with them what is relevant in order to understand people's lives and to build social theory. Sometimes it may be relevant to describe in detail the colours of someone's shoe laces, but in most cases that information will be be irrelevant to your story about society.

In discussions on thick description, there is the relation with journalism and non-fiction writing to consider: the closest cousins to naturalistic inquiry when it comes to writing. Its empirical richness in telling about society notwithstanding, what sets journalistic writing apart from writing in naturalistic inquiry is the absence of theoretical ambition. Few journalists and non-fiction writers aim to build social theory; their ambition is to get close to the particular aspect of society in which they are interested and to mirror this as best they can for the rest of society. Still, as we argued in Chapter 5, some of their work is so rich empirically and demonstrates such an intimate and empathic familiarity with society that it is highly relevant for building social theory. Otherwise put: it has theoretical implications.

To make things even more complicated, many journalists and writers were trained in the social sciences, and ideas from social theory seep into journalistic work and non-fiction literature. What distinguishes naturalistic inquiry from such 'theoretically informed' non-fiction is the ambition to create *new,* grounded theory.

If building social theory is the name of the game in thick description, then how is it accomplished? Writing, like many other aspects of naturalistic inquiry, is a craft, making it difficult to teach from a book. To convey a sense of what is implied here, there now follows a second, somewhat more elaborate example: an excerpt from the work of Jens Andersson, an anthropologist studying social change in Zimbabwe. It comes from a study wherein Andersson follows the chain of events in the wake of the unexpected death of a relative. As is often the case with such a puzzling event in this part of Africa, his led to an accusation of witchcraft, pitting parts of an extended family against each other. This is how Andersson describes the arrival of two of the elders of the family at the hospital where the relative is located:

> On an early November morning two elderly men stand silently among the usual crowd of people awaiting the visiting hour at Murambinda hospital. The two men, brothers of the Mujiri house of Murambinda [a house denotes all descendants of the same parents], are not usually seen together, although they are neighbours in a village some twenty kilometres away. Their distinct appearances reveal their different orientations life. The elder, Tapera, is a slender man wearing a badge that reveals his membership of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC). The beer-belly of his younger brother, Kwirirai, reveals that he is not a member of this alcohol-renouncing church. The illness of Kwirirai's son Chanda – a recently married migrant worker in his late twenties – has brought the brothers together. Months previously, Chanda returned ill from Harare,

> where he was a factory worker in a tobacco processing company. A few days before, he had been hospitalized. According to his 'fathers', his condition is serious [the term father may include paternal uncles]. Two of Chanda's 'brothers' [may include paternal cousins] have come to visit their sick relative. Chanda's wife, Janet, is also there. She is carrying their first-born son on her back. Although she is living at her father-in-law's, as is common practice for newly married couples, she has arrived with her mother. They do not talk much with Changda's 'fathers' and 'brothers'. (Andersson, 2002: 427)

Hidden in what seems purely descriptive prose on rural Zimbabwean society lies important interpretive and explanatory information about it. First, it foreshadows the cleavages that are about to open up following the death of the son: between those drinking alcohol and those refraining from it. It further indicates the importance of urban migration in Zimbabwean rural life: many young men out-migrate to the city, but they continue to maintain rural ties. That the wife arrives not in the company of her new paternal family, but with her mother, is indicative of the strained relation between the migrant son and his rural father. However, rather than telling these points, Andersson shows them by offering an empirically detailed description of a focused observation – characteristic of thick description. In the remainder of the description, Andersson traces how witchcraft accusations evolve following the death of Chanda. He shows that such accusations do not follow customarily defined lines, but rather an erratic pattern that is determined by the contestation of the accusation. Thus, he shows how witchcraft is not an inescapable discourse (the conventional idea in social theory on witchcraft), but an aspect of social life that evolves in social interaction.

The fragment of Andersson's work reflects the craftsmanship that went into it. Rather than constituting 'just' a description, it is a theory-laden narrative. That is, it seeks to combine three interconnected procedures: a description of a situation (as the term suggests), an interpretation of the events that take place in it, and an explanation of it to those who were not part of the society wherein this occurred. For instance, the physical appearance of the two men – the one slender, the other with a beery belly – is a description that is followed by an interpretation of that in terms church membership, which is framed in terms of a social opposition within a broader kinship structure. Hence, in a very brief space, we can see here the emergence of a theoretical idea.

8.2. Writing as *Verstehen*

Thus conceived, writing presents a form of *Verstehen*: an interpretive act to 'sort out the structures of signification' (Geertz, 1993: 9). As with all other aspects of naturalistic inquiry, there is not a standardized procedure for that. The cultivation of sensitivity to the historical conditions in which people find themselves for their everyday action and behaviour seems to be key. For instance, poverty places material impediments on what can be achieved in life. Poor people spend a large part of their day making sure that they have enough to eat, can dress their children, and so on. This directs energy and time away from personal development: reading a book, reflecting on the world.

A major challenge is that *Verstehen* requires a type of familiarity with society that is unusual in everyday life. Most of us have a broad, albeit tacit, understanding of those around us; in fact, such background knowledge is an essential lubricant to make interaction work. When we encounter a colleague who has been home ill for some time, we ask about his recovery. These, however, are implicit and situated forms of knowledge, not systematic and explicit understandings of society. Further, what we know about those around us is often driven by opportunistic satisficing: we usually develop an interest in another person inasmuch as that person has relevance for us in everyday life (compare Simon, 1956). *Verstehen* in naturalistic inquiry serves quite another purpose: it entails developing a systematic, empathic understanding of people with whom we would not, or do not, otherwise interact.

To better grasp the nature of writing in the form of thick description, we refer once more to the distinction introduced in Chapter 1 between description, understanding, and explanation. Description aims to pin down a society, a situation or a person in terms of observable behaviours. We may also call it thin description (Collins, 1986). A good example comes from the work of Marlene Werner, who studied so-called swingers' clubs.

> We went further into the club area through a little corridor, and sat on bar chairs next to the dance floor. People were sitting on chairs next to a bar, talking in little groups of mixed gender, some were sitting in their primary couples alone on benches next to the dance floor, observing the four dancers. The music during the evening was mainly electronic mainstream and some 'party' pop, overall a more 'tacky' kind of music. Nevertheless, the music was intended to trigger a party mood rather than pseudo-erotic atmosphere (Barry White?). The couple we had talked to

> in the locker room entered the clubbing area, and the lady invited my boyfriend to dance with her while indicating to me that I should pair up with her boyfriend. (As I noticed throughout the evening, the dance floor seemed to be the primary area to 'pick-up' couples, either by invitation to dance – in contrast to our first invitation, mostly from men to women – or by gradual approaching and touching on the dance floor and hoping for non-rejection. After 'successful' dancing, people usually talked and some went off to the designated areas.) (Werner, 2011).

Note that while Werner uses a observational vocabulary, a small interpretive touch inserts itself in her report: people are 'hoping for non-rejection'. Interpretation aims to understand behaviours in terms of the meanings people attach to those behaviours. Let us call that thick description. Note that thick description necessarily includes thin description.

The meanings people openly attribute to their behaviours must not be taken at face value. The anthropologist Bourdieu, though sympathetic to a *verstehende* hermeneutics, was critical of taking what people told him in casual conversation as a factual representation of their motives (Jenkins, 2002). A useful distinction to account for that is between stated motives and revealed motives, i.e. motives as they are revealed through social practice.[2] A person may complain to you how he lost his job and is now struggling to make ends meet financially, but at the same time you may see how he wears expensive clothing. That points to an interesting tension between stated and revealed motivations. A major task in writing then is to come to terms with that tension. Perhaps the person is lying through his teeth (which might be too easy and too judgemental an explanation), or perhaps he is trying to keep up appearances out of a deep-felt sense of shame.

How stated and revealed motives are related must be established in a research situation; it cannot be surmised *a priori*. If stated motives and revealed motives are at odds (and they often are), that is an invitation to develop a more complex understanding and explanation of society. The previously mentioned empirical work of one of the present authors can perhaps make this more concrete. In a study of second-hand car dealers in West Africa alluded to earlier, a frequent comment was that 'car business is good business'. This represents a stated motive. However, taking this as an accurate and full description of a motivation for business fails to explain why so many car dealers go bankrupt. Digging deeper, it appears

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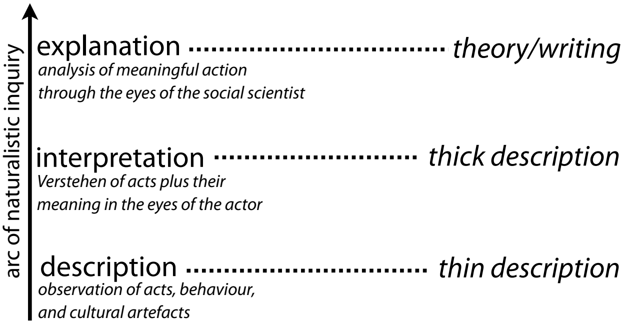
[2] Compare Goffman (1959) on 'signs given' versus 'signs given off'. See also what we wrote in Chapter 7 about authorial meaning that may be conscious but also unconscious.

Figure 12 Thin description, thick description, and theory writing


arc of naturalistic inquiry
explanation
analysis of meaningful action through the eyes of the social scientist
theory/writing
interpretation
Verstehen of acts plus their meaning in the eyes of the actor
thick description
description
observation of acts, behaviour, and cultural artefacts
thin description

that the statement is not a statement of fact but an expectation. Cotonou second-hand car dealers experience their business as a gamble, much like gold diggers delve for gold. There is an expectation that, one day, they will strike gold, and hence reap a windfall gain (Beuving, 2004). This dream of making a fortune, one that cannot be predicated but is fully subject to chance, is an example of revealed motives.

Explanation finally seeks to include both the subjective experiences, intentions, and motivations of the people involved *and* the history and context of those intentions and motivations. To put it otherwise: it seeks to explain why people have the very intentions and motivations that make them behave the way they do. Explanation thus necessarily includes interpretation but adds another layer to it, of historical and contextual information. The people involved may not be aware of the impact that historical and contextual circumstances have on their lives and their subjective experiences. Yet that is precisely what good naturalistic inquiry – good social science in general – adds to what people know about themselves: insight into the larger scheme of things, in the structural determinants of their (and our) life worlds.

Description, interpretation, and explanation are three successive steps in naturalistic inquiry. They are also three consecutive levels of abstraction. In the writing, you move from a concrete, observational vocabulary (thin description) to an interpretive terminology that is meaningful to the members of a society that you are studying (thick description), and then to a theoretical vocabulary that makes sense to academic professionals and outsiders (explanation). See Figure 12.

An additional heuristic may be helpful. The British social theorist William Outhwaite (1986) identifies four different forms of knowledge that we can claim to have about other persons, which is convenient to direct the writing. First, Outhwaite argues, there is the universe of physical facts: whether a person develops a limp, or wears tattered shoes, or has had a recent haircut. We are clearly on the level of thin description here. It is surprising how many details you may notice after making focused observations for a length of time. Although writing naturalistically entails developing an eye for details, at the same time you must not drown yourself in them. A useful question to keep in mind is: how do the details of my description speak to my special problem of research? Providing information about people's states of mind presents a second form of knowledge, Outhwaite claims. This is the first step into interpretation. As stressed before, you should never impute your own psychological model onto another person. Findings from cross-cultural psychology suggest that emotional states have cultural roots and may differ from one society to another. In a society wherein openly showing anger is frowned upon, you do not see much anger, but that does not mean there is none. A key task in naturalistic inquiry, therefore, is to understand how emotions look, and in naturalistic writing to convey this to an audience that is not part of that society. In relation to the imputing of emotions, in the world of African second-hand dealers, cheating and being cheated by a business partner evokes a curious mix of feelings that includes admiration. Cheating is taken not as a sign of disloyal behaviour that is frowned upon (as would be the case in many Western contexts), but as denoting good entrepreneurship; a consequence of framing the business as a zero-sum game.

What a person is doing and what she means by that presents a third level of knowledge, which should find its way into the naturalistic narrative, therefore. (We are taking a second, parallel step into interpretation here.) This is the world of explicit statements about a situation, and of how people evaluate their own intentions and those of others. It draws on knowledge derived from casual conversation and other research methods that revolve around language as their primary entrance into society. Even though this constitutes a *post hoc* rationalization, taking seriously the Thomas theorem – if people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences – suggests that it is still a form of knowledge. It must be admitted in the narrative, therefore, and be treated not as a factual statement of intent, but as part of a discourse; as language that acquires meaning in a particular social figuration. Understanding that language thus entails coming to terms with the figuration in which it is used, including the dynamics of power and prestige that constitute this.

The high point of writing naturalistically, and the fourth form of knowledge according to Outhwaite, is to be able to convey a sense of why people do things; what motivates them, and how and why it motivates them. To be able to write about this is the most advanced form of insight. It is at the level of explanation, of theorizing. It requires both a close familiarity with what Outhwaite calls the 'facts of the situation' and a helicopter view of the larger social structure of which the situation is a part. It entails describing persons not as autonomous agents who act out of their own interests, but as individuals interacting through social roles within a larger structure and as part of a historical development. It further entails conveying a sense of how expectations and norms built up in social network find their expression in a situation.

Taken together, good naturalistic writing conveys a sense of 'being there'; of being taken to a scene and being shown what happens there, and seeing that through the eyes of its members (Geertz, 1988). Ideally, the ultimate proof of its validity is provided by a field visit. After reading a solid piece of finished naturalistic writing, visiting the field where the study was conducted can result in an 'Aha!' experience by the visitor: that person seeing what was first learnt through reading about it. It further makes understandable the dilemmas and challenges that the members of a society face on an everyday basis. Through naturalistic writing, these become more readily recognizable to an outsider because they are transposed in a vocabulary that does not require the habituation and socializing that is necessary to be considered a fully functional member of society. And last but not least, as mentioned above, good naturalistic writing tells about society in an explanatory voice. It links observable behaviour and specific human experiences to the particular historical and structural conditions that gave rise to them, making that society more transparent both to its members and to an audience of outsiders.

8.3. Contested issues: The 'I', literary technique, composite cases

You have now, we hope, developed a good understanding of what writing naturalistically entails. Now is therefore a good time to consider some of the problems with which naturalistic inquirers struggle in their writing. We highlight three important ones here: the presence of the researcher in the text, the use of literary techniques in writing thick description, and using composite cases.

The 'I' of the researcher

If you accept with Malinowski that naturalistic inquiry attempts to 'grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world', building up a rapport with the people that you are studying is essential. Throughout the chapters on observing people, interviewing them, using materials that they write and make, and tracing the networks in which they live, such a rapport was assumed. As a naturalistic inquirer, you should have a genuine empathy with and respect for those whom you bother with your nosiness. As mentioned in Chapter 5, Pierre Bourdieu even spoke of love, albeit intellectual love. A major, unresolved issue remains whether this rapport and empathy have to be acknowledged in finished naturalistic writing, and if so: how. Currently, the pendulum is swinging towards a resounding yes. Many an author makes herself, as researcher-*cum*-writer, central to finished naturalistic writing. This is a response to a discussion first raised by critical anthropologists in the 1970s. They began to dispute the claim that anthropological fieldwork is the collection of ethnographic data in which the anthropologist is a neutral observer. Instead, they argued, fieldwork is a struggle for meaning, in which the anthropologist actively partakes. Minimally, it was argued, the anthropologist is a social person and thus in the field she engages in a social relation with his or her informants (Mosse, 1994). In some cases, anthropologists become activists in their fieldwork. Some identify with underprivileged groups in society, thus contesting a particular power configuration. This discussion, though unresolved, has had a profound impact on writing. Field researchers are nowadays expected to include 'reflexive' considerations (their place in the field, the relations developed with informants) in the writing of thick description (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Increasingly, that has taken the form of writing from a first person perspective: The author narrates an event through his or her eyes.

At first sight, this strategy appears to indeed resolve the problem of reflexivity: it makes transparent the position that the researcher has in the field, often by writing from a first person perspective. Thus emphasizing the presence of the researcher can also be criticized. First, it remains an open question whether thick description without the researcher present in the text has a less important or interesting message to tell. The proof of the pudding in naturalistic inquiry is not whether you succeed in being present in the writing, but whether you manage to tell a valid story about society by representing the emic categories of your informants. Second, by exploiting the I-perspective zealously, you might very well end up forcing your own perspectives onto the empirical material. There is sometimes a spurious sense of self-importance involved: 'being there' makes you feel privileged, but your informants may not necessarily feel likewise. Often they are busy people, minding their own affairs and hoping that you will not stand too much in their way.[3] Key to either position – the detached third-person observer versus the engaged first person raconteur – seems that *both* should remain committed to avoiding an obtrusive presence while in the field. The terms 'glass presence' or 'fly on the wall' has been suggested, i.e. becoming invisible to those whom you study (Winkler, 2009). But this can be a chimaera too. After all, most fieldworkers stand out in the field: they are richer, better educated, more travelled, and so on. Overcoming the complexities of the ideal of unobtrusiveness proves a far more challenging task than either a vocabulary of neutrality and detachment, or the obligatory insertion of the pronoun 'I' in appropriate portions of a report can fulfil. Neither the mask of the scientific observer nor the navel-gazing of the 'I' are of much help here.

A possible way to circumvent this is to insist that particular analytical viewpoints, biases, and personal positions have to be acknowledged and worked through, not in the final reporting itself, but on the way towards that, at earlier stages of the arc of naturalistic inquiry. There are several ways to do this. First, during the fieldwork, you should adopt and sustain a self-critical stance. You should never cease to track down your own preconceptions, ideally by recording them. (Malinowski's, 1967, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* presents a case in point.) That is difficult, as many of us like to think of ourselves as unprejudiced free thinkers. However, as researchers we are also moral beings. It is quite normal for the political ideas of your informants, the food they eat, or the ideas they have about raising children, to differ dramatically from your own views. Exploring that as a source of information, rather than feeling under pressure to confess to either morality, seems key in developing a reflexive stance.

Second, at certain points during the fieldwork you may invite colleagues or other trained professionals on field visits, in order to compare observations, and then discuss your research findings.

Third, you may discuss the research findings with your informants. Erlandson *et al.* (1993: 31) call this a 'member check'. If the people you study recognize themselves in what you are writing and find your conclusions helpful and revealing, you may have confidence in your findings and reflections. A member check does not necessarily produce consensus, nor does it always have to. If you hit a raw nerve and reveal things members would have preferred to remain secret, you must expect mixed reactions. Whether agreeing with your interpretations or objecting to them, members' responses may help you to gain a further and deeper insight into their particular social and cultural order. Of course, as a researcher you must always ask yourself whether objections from your informants might not reflect true weaknesses of your own research. And as suggested earlier, a lukewarm or politely disinterested response to your work by members is a very worrying outcome. It suggests that you have missed important points.

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[3] Compare Devereux (1968), who considers countertransference – the projection of your own feelings and cognitions onto others – to be the core problem in ethnographic research.

Literary technique

Another contested issue in naturalistic writing regards the use of literary techniques. Naturalistic reports are written in the form of a narrative. They use techniques commonly associated with literature: perspective, plot, and personage. There is sometimes a thin line between writing thick description and writing literary fiction. That line of course is the empirical record. As one famous Dutch literary author, and also a physical geographer, noted: 'Writing fiction is practicing science without evidence' (Hermans, 1964: 108). Hence, writing in naturalistic inquiry may be seen as practicing fiction with empirical evidence. Literary fiction and naturalistic inquiry both describe events and persons, but only in naturalistic inquiry have the events really occurred and are the persons alive and kicking. Yet, literary techniques do have a place in thick description (Geertz, 1988). They serve as analytical techniques. Words are carriers of referential and symbolic meaning and also express relations. These relations, enshrined in our language, are the first step towards theorizing. As Abraham Kaplan writes,

> we explain by instituting or discovering relations. [...] These relations may be of various different sorts: causal, purposive, mathematical, and perhaps other basic types, as well as various combinations and derivatives of these. The particular relations that hold constitute a pattern, and an element is explained by being shown to occupy the place that it does occupy in the pattern. (Kaplan, 1964: 334)

The variety of possible relationships between people, situations, and things that our language suggests to us are the basic stuff from which the naturalistic inquirer weaves his interpretations and his grounded theory.

Of course, in doing so, he uses words and expressions that are familiar to the non-specialist reader. This may evoke disappointment: 'Is using ordinary words all there is to your work?' Yes, in a way, that is all there is to it, but very much depends on *how* these words are used. A major task in writing naturalistic reports is to use language to the maximum of its potentialities and with the greatest possible precision. Of course, that is precisely what great fiction writers do and what their readers recognize that they are doing. It is what naturalistic inquirers can learn and should learn from fiction writers. In 2008, the Dutch sociologist, political scientist, and psychoanalyst Abram de Swaan, earlier having been the recipient of several social-scientific prizes, was awarded the most important *literary* prize for writers in the Dutch language, the *P.C. Hooftprijs* (P.C. Hooft prize). 'Although [de Swaan] does not underestimate his readers and does not try to simplify complex matters,' the jury observed, 'there is not a single obscure sentence to be found in his work. He writes on both simple and complicated matters in a language that is crystal clear and flexible, sparkling with the pleasure of writing' (Anonymous, 2008). This illustrates well the importance of mastery of language in social science. Arguably, language is as important a modality for naturalistic research as mathematics and statistics are for quantitative research. As a naturalistic inquirer, you may borrow from the novelists' toolbox whatever seems suitable for your task – provided that it helps you in telling about society as it really exists 'out there'.

Composite cases

So-called composite cases have a special place in writing naturalistically. It is possible and sometimes advisable to describe an event based on multiple observations of several events, whereby elements of each observation are brought together in a single description. This seems to contradict the claim to veracity, to describe only what has 'really happened'. Sometimes however, after careful analysis, you may wish to select those parts from the material that best illustrate a more abstract principle you are trying to convey. This is for example helpful when the description pertains to events involving two or more persons who are geographically separated (as is common in multi-sited fieldwork; compare Hannerz, 2003). In that case, the researcher can never be in their presence at the same time, but, during her successive presences at each separate site, observations are made that can only be understood in and through their connectedness. Describing them as separate events would in fact distort reality by obscuring their very connectedness. The researcher may then decide to make a composite description on the basis of a series of related, but geographically separate, observations.

Another reason for working with composite cases may be that you wish to construct a typology. In educational research, often different types of pupils are distinguished. Laurier Fortin and co-authors (2006), for example, distinguished pupils who were 'not interested', had 'behavioural problems and learning difficulties', were 'hidden delinquents', and were 'depressed'. They were all at risk of dropping out of school, albeit for different reasons. The types thus distinguished are ideal-types (Weber, 1978: 90), composite pictures, each separate one distilled from the biographies of a number of similar yet not identical pupils. What the typology conveys is that there may be four quite different problems or causal figurations behind what superficially looks like one single problem: school dropout.

Whenever a naturalistic inquirer uses composite cases in her reporting, she should of course explicitly acknowledge this and explain how she has gone about it.

8.4. Practical methodology in telling about society

To round off the discussion on writing, we would like to offer some practical advice. We found inspiration for this in many sources, but the following three deserve special mention: C. Wright-Mills' 'On intellectual craftsmanship' (in Mills, 1959); Clifford Geertz's 'The anthropologist as author' (in Geertz, 1988); and William Strunk and Elwyn White's *The Elements of Style* (Strunk & White, 2013). We strongly recommend prospective naturalistic writers to read each one of them. For the present purpose, their advice on writing must be condensed to three points.

Structure

The reader is entitled to a well-structured text. Ideally, form follows function and the structure of the story (article, book, documentary…) should be self-evident. Still, it helps to tell the reader at the beginning what you are going to do by providing her with an outline or advance organizer (the introduction). Then, tell him what you have to tell (the body). This will usually be the bulk of the article or book. Conclude by summarizing what you have told (your conclusion). The reader will in this way always know where he is in the text and feel motivated to carry on reading.

Write in paragraphs. They are the building blocks of your writing. Build paragraphs from a limited number of sentences, rarely more than seven to nine, and discuss one topic per paragraph. If you feel that a paragraph actually discusses two or more topics, cut it up into separate paragraphs. Keep your sentences short and to the point. No one likes to read meandering sentences that lead nowhere. Only occasionally, just for a change, insert a longer sentence. Organize paragraphs in sections, sections in chapters, and chapters in your book. It all sounds simple and it *should* be simple. That is precisely the point.

Vocabulary

Avoid 'sociologese', 'anthropologese', or any other social-scientific jargon that only insiders can understand. Often jargon masks vague or immature ideas or ideas that, when translated into plain language, are so pedestrian as not be worthy of reporting at all. Social research is not rocket science and if you cannot explain in plain language what you have discovered, it is probably not worth the trouble of writing it up. Proponents of professional jargon argue that ordinary language is charged with multiple meaning, but so is jargon. Therefore, try to control multiple meaning by clarity of language. Mathematics has the reputation of being precise, but let us not forget the expressive precision available in our everyday language.

Avoid the passive voice: 'It can be argued that…' If it can be argued, use the active voice and argue it! The passive voice often serves merely to suggest scientific neutrality that is in fact spurious. And never write more than three pages without at least having in mind a solid example.

Audience

Aim for the right audience. Write for intelligent, generally informed, but non-specialist readers. You may assume that your readers have attained some form of higher education (or are busy getting it) and that they know the ways of the world: they read newspapers, they know the world of work, and perhaps they have (grand)children. Many of your readers occasionally travel abroad and can thus imagine places beyond where they work and live. Of course they are computer literate and use (smart) phones as a matter of routine. But they do not know your academic discipline, or your special topic. Thus you must take them along by explaining both your academic point of view ('My approach is inspired by the view of society as a theatre, the so-called dramaturgical view') and your substantive interest ('Studying how people behave on train and metro platforms is fascinating because…'). Test your ideas while writing and share your writing-in-progress with a small group of trial readers: their responses are important clues as to whether you are on the right track. As said, they should include people who are not in the know of your discipline and topic.

8.5. Conclusion

We are approaching the end of this book. In the present chapter, the last one before the Epilogue, we have once again discussed problems and challenges – this time those of the last stage of the arc of naturalistic inquiry, the writing. In naturalistic inquiry, writing flows from previous analysis. It is the last step of that analysis, and it is a capstone put on the entire research process. It is the phase in which everything comes together: the grounded theory solidifies and its centre proves to hold. This is an immensely rewarding experience, first for the author and then for the reader. It is an intellectual experience that may perhaps be compared to Friedrich Schlegel's poetical experience:

> Resounding through all the notes
> In the earth's colourful dream
> There sounds a faint long-drawn note
> For the one who listens in secret
> (Schlegel in Perrey, 2007: 93)

It is as if, after all your toil and effort, you have at last discerned that 'faint, long-drown note' that explains 'earth's colourful dream' and you can now announce this to the world. That is of course only an ephemeral experience, and so it should be. Doing naturalistic inquiry is social science, not religion or mysticism. You may experience intellectual closure but that can only be provisional and temporary. As your study, your particular arc of naturalistic inquiry, is but one in a mosaic of studies, intellectual closure is an ideal than cannot and should never be reached. Still, we hope and wish that you will briefly experience something like it in the final stage of writing up your naturalistic inquiry.

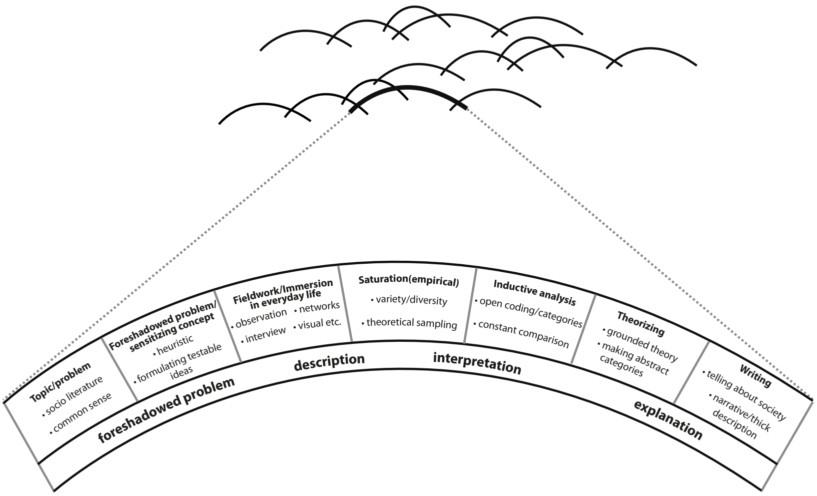
Epilogue: Present and future of naturalistic inquiry

Making the world transparent
– Ulf Hannerz

This book began by defining naturalistic inquiry as the study of people in everyday circumstances by ordinary means. Drawing on the tradition of philosophical pragmatism, which looks at societies as webs of interaction and meaning, we proposed a model of naturalistic inquiry that follows an arc: the arc of naturalistic inquiry, consisting of a series of consecutive hermeneutic steps (see Figure 13). Naturalistic inquiry begins down the arc with a loose collection of ideas, often a combination of ideas from scientific literature and common sense acquired in the course of your own life. These ideas coagulate into a foreshadowed problem that you wish to explore in a field study. During the field study, you draw on a broad register of data collection techniques (observations, interviews, and so on) and armed with them you begin to collect empirical material. Initially, your descriptions of the material are relatively thin and resemble a travelogue. As your material becomes saturated – when gathering more material does not yield additional insights – you gradually move into an inductive analysis of it; the descriptions become thicker, more *verstehende* or understanding. You then begin to theorize your *verstehende* interpretations of a society by distilling and abstracting explanatory ideas about them from your empirical data. Eventually, you become capable of telling about this society in both indigenous (emic) and social-scientific (etic) terms. You can describe, understand, *and* explain in a coherent fashion what goes on in that society, and you are able to convey all of this to outsiders. You have arrived at the end of the arc. Hopefully, the experience will inspire you to begin yet another naturalistic inquiry.

Or will it? Is naturalistic inquiry really up to the task? Does its focus on everyday life experience not reflect some long-lost romantic ideal that has inevitably (and some would say: fortunately) been replaced by more modern – read: better – research practices that deal with real, hard facts? Is the road ahead not the positivist one after all, the one nowadays advocated by the analysts of 'big data' who suggest that studying what people mean by listening to what they say and observing what they do has become

Figure 13 The arc of naturalistic inquiry, with hermeneutic steps


Topic/problem
• socio literature
• common sense
Foreshadowed problem/ sensitizing concept
• heuristic
• formulating testable ideas
Fieldwork/Immersion in everyday life
• observation
• networks
• interview
• visual etc.
Saturation(empirical)
• variety/diversity
• theoretical sampling
Inductive analysis
• open coding/categories
• constant comparison
Theorizing
• grounded theory
• making abstract categories
Writing
• telling about society
• narrative/thick description
foreshadowed problem
description
interpretation
explanation

obsolete in the face of the huge masses of data that governments and private parties such as Internet providers nowadays routinely collect and that can be crunched with immensely powerful computers in order to finally reveal the hidden yet objective truths about people's lives (Boyd & Crawford, 2012)?

Throughout the book, we have argued against this positivist discourse, chiefly because it severs social research from social experience. We hope to have demonstrated how social research that does not acknowledge social experience is sterile and irrelevant for our daily lives and for society at large. Now, more than ever before, we need relevant social science. We live in times of accelerated globalization in which global society has grown into a staggering level of complexity. Arguably, the higher the level of social complexity in society, the greater the need for transparency among its members. Naturalistic inquiry, with its commitment to incorporating the emic viewpoint of society's members *and* adding an etic or explanatory insight to that, is particularly well equipped to provide transparancy. We must not forget that Bronislaw Malinowski, famous for his advocacy of 'the native's point of view', *also* wrote:

> What appears to us an extensive, complicated, and yet well ordered institution is the outcome of so many doings and pursuits, carried on by savages, who have no laws or aims or charters definitely laid down. They

> have no knowledge of the *total outline* of any of their social structure. They know their own motives, know the purpose of individual actions and the rules which apply to them, but how, out of these, the whole collective institution shapes, this is beyond their mental range. Not even the most intelligent native has any clear idea of the Kula as a big, organized social construction, still less of its sociological function and implications. [...] The integration of all the details observed, the achievement of a sociological synthesis of all the various, relevant symptoms, is the task of the Ethnographer. [...] The Ethnographer has to *construct* the picture of the big institution, very much as the physicist constructs his theory from the experimental data, which always have been within reach of everybody, but needed a consistent interpretation (Malinowski, 1978: 83-84).

What goes for Malinowski's 'savages' – he used the term descriptively, as kind of etic shorthand, and the gist of his book was that the Trobiand islanders maintain a highly complex and integrated way of life – of course goes for all of us. We are all 'savages' and 'natives'. We think we know our own motives and the purposes of our own actions, yet we have only a very limited view of the total outline of our social structure. Naturalistic inquiry can help to understand the motives and purposes of ourselves and others *and* to grasp the larger scheme of the institutions that make and sometimes break us. Or as C. Wright Mills had it: the sociological imagination consists in connecting people's personal troubles with the public issues of their society (Mills, 1959: *passim*).

Still, naturalistic inquiry is not uncontested, and in this epilogue we discuss forces working against it. First, we consider a counterforce that, perhaps surprisingly, comes from within the interpretive tradition. Then follows a reflection on the ever greater demand from outside for 'accountability', to be met by all institutions, including universities and other research institutes. We argue that current discussions suffer from a confusion about whom naturalistic inquiry is accountable to, about what, and on what terms.

Having acknowledged these counterforces, however, the chapter ends on an optimistic note. Looking ahead, the future of naturalistic inquiry, of its practitioners, and possibly even of the people it is about, seems promising.

Naturalistic inquiry in social research

At first sight, naturalistic research seems to be blossoming. The number of academic journals specializing in naturalistic or qualitative research is steadily increasing (review journals such as the *International Review of Qualitative Research* offer good overviews of that). Specialist conferences on naturalistic inquiry abound. Ever more publishers produce book series on it (a trend that the publication of our own book reaffirms). And on the Internet there are active communities of naturalistic practitioners who communicate through blogs and on-line fora.

But not all that glitters is gold. First, budgets for field research – an indispensable aspect of naturalistic inquiry – are shrinking. One cause of this is that grants are increasingly made available at a supranational level, typically for large-scale, comparative, quantitative studies in which researchers from several countries (for example within the European Union) join hands. These studies require efficient and highly standardized methods of data collection. Naturalistic inquiry cannot easily provide for this type of data collection and therefore tends to lose out in the competition for grants – if it can apply for funding at all, because often the criteria in the tenders exclude small-scale one-researcher projects. If proposals for naturalistic inquiry do succeed in surviving the competition, it may be because expensive fieldwork has been strategically cut back in the proposal. A consequence of this development is that social researchers, once in the field, are exposed for a briefer period of time and less thoroughly to the cultures and society they study. One example of this trend is that the standard period of fieldwork routinely funded for qualitative (ethnographic, naturalistic, anthropological, qualitative) PhD projects in the Netherlands went from a full year in the 1990s to less than half a year in the 2000s. The same trend is visible in curricula in (under)graduate student fieldwork. Reduced exposure comes at the expense of the depth of the interpretation, and one sees this in published results: studies that are fully saturated (both empirically and theoretically) appear to be on the decline (compare also Zussman, 2004).

Second, a response to this pressing problem has been the development of specialized rapid appraisal methods. Such methods try to make more efficient use of limited fieldwork resources, but these too tend to come at the cost of interpretive depth. Volumes such as *Finding Out Fast. Investigative Skills for Policy and Development* (Thomas, Chataway, & Wuyts, 1998) have been embraced massively in the field of development studies and public policy research. They aim to keep up the *verstehende* ambition of naturalistic inquiry, which is good news; but they sacrifice the time needed to establish rapport with members of a society. These new methods speed up data collection, but seen from a naturalistic viewpoint they are positivist. The research setting is determined by the demands of the methodology: to bring a preselected group of persons together with the purpose of making visible the sociostructure of a society, uncovering its major dilemmas, and so on. Rapid methods thus tend to reproduce objectified realities and to reaffirm existing power hierarchies in a society, thereby reiterating elite discourses and concerns (van Donge, 2006).

A third problem can be seen in association with ethnography. In principle, ethnography and naturalistic inquiry are very close cousins: they share a *verstehende* ambition, try to minimally disturb the research situation, and combine focused observations (also called participant observation) with casual conversation and the study of things (artefacts, objective culture). However, since the 1980s, ethnography has taken an increasingly introspective turn. It has become focused – some would say: fixated – on the relation between the researcher and those who are being researched. Themes such as 'co-constructing the field' (Amit, 2000) and 'othering the other' (Fabian, 1983) thus determine ethnographic discourse, with at its most extreme so-called auto-ethnography: using oneself as an object of study (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). Naturalistic inquiry has benefitted from this discussion in coming to terms with the thorny question of reflexivity. Luckily, at the same time, naturalistic inquiry has kept a steady eye on understanding other societies, rather than seeing other societies as mirrors in which to understand oneself.

To some extent, the points outlined above relate to the place that naturalistic inquiry occupies in the pantheon of interpretive approaches and traditions in social inquiry. Over the years, this pantheon has become increasingly crowded, leading to some narcissism of small differences between intellectual traditions or disciplines. Differences between anthropology, ethnography, qualitative sociology, oral history, and other varieties of interpretive research are overaccentuated. None of these differences is fundamental however, and, with some genuine interest in what other disciplines have to offer, they can easily be overcome. As argued in the Introduction, naturalistic inquiry can be seen as the artisanal core they have in common. The following section deals with an altogether more difficult problem – that of accountability – which affects all interpretive work. For the purpose of this epilogue, we limit ourselves to discussing its impact on naturalistic inquiry.

Accountability in naturalistic inquiry

Social research is increasingly subjected to the managerial discourse of transparency, accountability, and verifiability. This is part of a broader movement in late-modern society towards what Michael Power has called the 'audit society' (Power, 1994). In the name of their constituencies and under the banner of efficiency, politicians increasingly demand control over the performance of hospitals, schools, prisons, and other institutions. However, by imposing narrow and bureaucratic criteria, audits often have dysfunctional consequences for the audited institutions. The quality of services provided by hospitals, welfare agencies, and universities is undermined by the constant pressure towards more output measured in economic terms.

In the Netherlands, discussions on academic accountability recently flared up following two high-profile cases of academic fraud. A renowned psychologist working in the positivist tradition turned out to have fabricated his own data and those of his PhD candidates on a massive scale (Callaway, 2011); and a well-esteemed anthropologist within the historical-interpretive tradition turned out to have made up at least two of his elaborate case studies (Baud, Legêne, & Pels, 2013). The public reaction to those two scandals appears to be that social research and researchers have lost their moral authority and that a serious effort must be made to restore its eroded status. The prevailing response of senior university managers has been to instruct their research staff to make field notes accessible for peer scrutiny, to design verifiable research protocols, and to otherwise intensify auditing procedures in an attempt to make scientific practice more accountable to both peer and outsider scrutiny.

This turn towards ever more auditing may seem a recent development but in fact fits into a long-term trend. Since the 1960s, universities have witnessed a fundamental change in their position in society (for an insightful discussion, see Engwall & Scott, 2013). Until the 1950s, universities were seen as privileged vestiges of calm, scholarly reflection by esteemed professors and their small, elite circle of student followers. Their uncontested position changed following the democratization of knowledge and technology (accelerated more recently with the spread of the Internet) and the advent of mass higher education from the 1960s onwards. Since then, universities have come under public scrutiny – first and perhaps most of all financially. In today's world, university staff increasingly have to demonstrate their money's worth and the cost-efficiency of their teaching and research to the outside world. Principles of public accountability are now routinely applied to universities.

Managers, not necessarily experienced scientists themselves, play an important role in organizing the auditing of academic activity; the work of university staff is increasingly brought under their control (see Enders, 2013).

With many fellow scientists, we have reservations about this development, not because of some innate academic anarchism, opposing whatever form of authority is bestowed upon us, but because this particular managerial regime is inimical to the principles of naturalistic inquiry. Naturalistic inquiry is 'slow' social science, requiring time, intuition, creativity, flexibility, and reflectiveness. It is a craft. These requirements cannot easily be speeded up or formalized into standardized research procedures. Nor do standardized procedures in general guarantee fruitful research outcomes. In positivist research also, many an important discovery results from serendipity, rather than from dogged clinging to 'normal science' (Kuhn, 1962). Current political ideas on managing social science and furthering the so-called valorization of its outcomes in economic terms rest on a misguided conception of the nature of academic understanding of society and of its use to society.

We reiterate Howard Becker's (2007) fortunate expression that social-scientific understanding is a form (one form) of telling about society. Academic story-telling characteristically draws on a variety of sources such as tabulated figures, ethnographic description, interviews, and historical accounts. A naturalistic inquirer should never forget that her story (her form of knowledge) exists alongside (and sometimes competes with) the stories that ordinary members of a society tell about themselves. The role of the social researcher is a modest one. Rather than being an omniscient spectator who generates specialist knowledge about society, she builds on people's stories and abstracts from them in an attempt to make society more transparent to the same people, to society's rank and file members (Hannerz, 2010).

This does not mean that we advocate a 'democratist' view of social research in which the question of what constitutes valid knowledge would be determined by popular vote. Part of telling about society is to account for inequalities and injustices, themselves often the result of dominant groups exercising power. These groups do not necessarily or even usually want to see themselves placed in the limelight of scholarly attention. Part of telling about society is telling inconvenient truths. As the Dutch sociologist Johan Goudsblom likes to say: 'Sociology is better knowledge, but it is bitter knowledge' (Goudsblom, personal communication). A similar argument applies to less glorious aspects of cultures. Few societies like to see themselves in a negative light, and they may resist interpretations and explanations by social researchers that point in this direction. The power of naturalistic (more generally: social-scientific) explanation is not measured by the applause it elicits but by whether it offers food for thought for members of a society – including of course scientists.

Furthermore, accountability is a matter of intellectual attitude rather than of procedure. Naturalistic inquiry is sympathetic to the idea of social research as organized doubt. Proper naturalistic inquiry questions the relation between, on the one hand, the empirical materials and, on the other hand, theoretical understandings that draw on those. It invites rival interpretations rather than insisting on an *a priori* conceptualized line of thought. That in no way means that naturalistic inquiry is a form of subjectivism. As we have argued in this book, rival interpretations must be continuously confronted with data in order for the researcher to be able to weigh up their merits and to reject them it they cannot fully explain the data. That takes time and a considerable effort. More often than not, it means that you will entertain several, often contradictory, interpretations for a protracted period of time. For naturalistic inquiry, it is essential to develop the stamina to deal with intellectual uncertainty and ambiguity. Such stamina, rather than a slavish following of some pre-agreed procedure, makes naturalistic inquiry genuinely responsible and accountable.

Intellectual attitude cannot be trained in the way that students train for an exam. It can be cultivated, and we advocate a view in which the teacher-student relation constitutes the fundamental matrix to do just that. As teachers, we should encourage our students to express their doubts on received theoretical ideas and inspire them to confront these with their own empirical work. Granted, the current emphasis in teaching research methods at universities seems more conducive to the opposite: to look at social research as a toolbox to be taught in a standardized methods and techniques curriculum. Restoring genuine accountability therefore requires a fundamental rethinking of the organization and place of methods teaching, creating space for independent student research. This also depends on teachers' dedication to fostering a trusting and trusted environment in which the expression of intellectual doubt by students is seen as a valuable asset, not as a character flaw. The capacity to doubt your own interpretations without losing courage and integrity is crucial.

The future

The challenges outlined above notwithstanding, we firmly believe that the future of naturalistic inquiry in social research is promising. For one thing, other developments in society are favourable to this. We live in times of accelerated globalization: 'the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa' (Giddens, 1990: 64). With it comes accelerated international migration, bringing many new cultural contacts, with people from different backgrounds and walks of life meeting in their everyday lives. Academic discourses tend to welcome this development as the coming of the 'multicultural society'. Academics, highly educated and themselves members of the new, cosmopolitian middle class, indeed have many reasons to celebrate. They can move around the globe freely, they speak English (the new *lingua franca*), and they can find jobs and houses wherever it pleases them. Yet, Jonathan Friedman has thrown a critical eye on them and called them 'champagne liberals' (Friedman, 2002). After all, less educated people either are forced to migrate or are on the receiving end of the immigration of others. In both cases, their on-the-ground experiences are much less smooth than the ideology of the multicultural society suggests. Lacking jobs, affordable housing, and other resources, their prospects are poor. They risk becoming the new 'dangerous classes' (Friedman, 2002).

Also, much of this mixing of people is concentrated in cities. Extrapolations of current urbanization rates suggest that by the year 2050 more than 70 per cent of the world's population will be living in cities (UN, 2011). What is more, the most rapid urbanization will occur in the so-called new cities, the majority of which are located in the global South. Large swells of migrants, both from the countryside and from other cities, move to these new cities. How new social forms are created under such conditions (and *what* forms) is a fascinating question. Often, things initially develop in an unorderly and dynamic fashion. Conventional academic research models are poorly equipped to catch such processes. Naturalistic inquiry, however, does not assume society to be a pre-ordered configuration. Instead, it begins and ends with an interest in how social life is enacted in the practices of everyday life. Drawing on its symbolic interactionist pedigree, naturalistic inquiry sees social order as the outcome of a myriad of social interactions. Thus, it advocates looking at concrete social interactions, rather than starting with an analysis of institutions and social structures – aspects of social life that are usually in flux where human life is being rapidly transformed.

Societal developments like globalization and migration are thus favourable to naturalistic inquiry. But so are certain developments in academia. Especially in those disciplines which in earlier times routinely embraced positivism, there appears to be a turn towards understanding 'the everyday'. The study of international relations (IR), a prominent branch of political science, for instance, is of old concerned with the analysis of powerful states and large economic institutions. However, attention is increasingly being focused on how everyday actions of seemingly subordinate social actors shape the world economy (Hobson & Seabrooke, 2007). The field of microeconomics likewise demonstrates an opening up to everyday economic decision making. Whereas earlier models of economic decision making drew on laboratory and simulation studies (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981), proponents of the new behavioural economics increasingly resort to studies conducted under real-world conditions (Ariely, 2008). And in psychology, there is of old a small but prominent undercurrent of scholars conducting fieldwork along the lines advocated by naturalistic inquiry (Willems & Raush, 1969). Their work is now being re-appreciated and features prominently in discussions on what is known as 'qualitative psychology' (compare Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002).

A naturalistic revolution is far from imminent. Societal and academic developments may be favourable, but a major counterforce to naturalistic inquiry remains the burgeoning existence of abstracted empiricism, often cloaked in the language of the 'valorization' of scientific practice. Advocating valorization seems convincing at first. Scientific practice (and training for it) is funded with public money; why should not the general taxpayer get something back for that? However, the call for valorization is being made in the context of a political-administrative-industrial complex (after Eisenhower, 1961) in which commercial interests increasingly encroach on the public sphere and on politics (for a more elaborate formulation, see Scott, 1998). 'Science', including social science, is viewed as a tool for problem solving and furthering economic productivity, the problems and tasks being formulated by society's administrative and economic elites.

Of course, we emphatically subscribe to the ideal of 'public social science' (Burawoy, 2005), of social science that makes a difference to society. Naturalistic inquiry is a genuine effort to escape from both the aloofness of grand theory and the mindlessness of abstracted empiricism – academic forms of what C. Wright Mills called 'higher immorality' (Mills, 1963: 19; see also Mills, 1959: *passim*). What the taxpayer may expect from social science, and what naturalistic inquiry can provide, is enlightenment. It can make society transparent to its members. The message of naturalistic inquiry is an emancipatory and a liberating one. As Pierre Bourdieu wrote: 'Every further step towards understanding necessity is a step towards freedom. […] Sociology defatalizes' (Bourdieu, 1993: 29-30). Through naturalistic inquiry – through good social science in general – people can gain insight into society. Through insight, they can broaden the possibilities that they have in their lives. Ultimately, the message of naturalistic inquiry is a humanistic one: to make us all more aware, and hopefully more understanding, of our place in the world, including our relationships to others.

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