

to construct hunches about the mechanisms which generate such regularities, i.e. he or she seeks to explain them. As indicated in Chapter 2, these hypotheses entail imagining mechanisms which generate observed patterns. This conception of scientific activity (which he calls 'realism') is then used as a blueprint for a genuinely scientific social psychology. The ensuing approach – ethogenics – aims to provide a framework for the examination of the genesis of human social actions.

A central feature of the ethogenic approach is the understanding of episodes in social life. 'Episodes' are sequences of interlocking acts by individuals. It is the task of ethogenics to elucidate the underlying structures of such episodes by investigating the meanings actors bring to the constituent acts. This approach is viewed by Harré and his co-workers as the analogue of the scientist's stance in relation to the natural order. A central methodological ingredient of ethogenics is the analysis of people's accounts of their actions within identified episodes; along with ethnographic research, the analysis of accounts 'is required to formulate hypotheses about the belief system which is being used by actors in generating typical episodes' (Harré, 1986, p. 103). In grasping the belief systems which underlie social episodes, the rules and conventions of social life from the subject's perspective can be derived. The understanding and analysis of such phenomena facilitate the construction of theories about the resources upon which actors draw when acting. It is the socially shared knowledge upon which actors draw that is the particular province of ethogenics.

One of the main pieces of research to emerge from the ethogenic approach is a study of disorder in classrooms and on football terraces by Marsh, Rosser and Harré (1978). The approach to data collection took the form of observation in both contexts coupled with intensive interviews designed to elicit accounts. Marsh *et al.* argue that trouble in schools and football hooliganism are frequently depicted as meaningless. By contrast, when examining disorder in classrooms, the authors

are concerned to explore the interpretation and genesis of disorder and violence in the schoolroom from the point of view of pupils. We are concerned with disorder as it is seen by our participants and as it is represented in their accounts. There is no way of telling how many of the episodes described are elaborations designed to impress, or how far they are accurate descriptions of action sequences on which both teachers and pupils would agree. Our interest . . . lies in the principles employed by the pupils themselves to fit the actions they describe into a meaningful framework. (Marsh, Rosser and Harré, 1978, p. 30)

The material collected on both schools and football terraces reveals that the apparently disordered events that often occur in these milieux 'can be seen as conforming to a very distinct and orderly system of roles, rules and shared meanings' (p. 97); in other words, people's accounts of particular episodes and the observation of their acts (as components of episodes) reveal a structure in the midst of apparent disorder.

The ethogenic approach is a further epistemological position which is associated with qualitative research. Unlike much writing about qualitative research (such as some works which have been inspired by the phenomenological position), the ethogenic approach is perceived by its advocates as providing a *scientific* framework for the analysis of social action. The growth of interest in qualitative research is often viewed as indicative of a reaction against the application of a natural scientific model to the study of society. It is clear from Harré's work that it is specifically the imposition of a positivist notion of science that the proponents of ethogenics object to, rather than a scientific approach as such.

The Characteristics of Qualitative Research

It should already be apparent that qualitative research, in both its underlying philosophical allegiances and its approach to the investigation of social reality, differs from the quantitative style of research. In Chapter 5 the contrasts between them will be the main focus. The present section will elucidate some of the chief characteristics of qualitative research.

'Seeing through the eyes of . . .'

The most fundamental characteristic of qualitative research is its express commitment to viewing events, action, norms, values, etc. from the perspective of the people who are being studied. There is a clear connection between this undertaking and the underlying philosophical positions outlined in the previous section. The strategy of taking the subject's perspective is often expressed in terms of seeing through the eyes of the people you are studying. Such an approach clearly involves a preparedness to empathize (though not necessarily to sympathize) with those being studied, but it also entails a capacity to penetrate the frames of meaning with which they operate. The latter may open up a need to comprehend a specialized vernacular, or even a new language, as is typically the case for the social anthropologist. In order to gain the necessary vantage point from which empathy may be feasible, sustained periods of involvement are required. While this predilection would seem to imply long periods of participant observation, as

noted above, other methods, most notably in-depth, unstructured interviewing, are also employed.

There may often be the problem for the researcher of knowing through whose eyes he or she is supposed to be seeing. School ethnographers have to be sensitive to the different perceptions of teachers, parents and pupils. Diversity of perspective *within* these three groups may also be expected. In his ethnographic study of a secondary school, Woods (1979) was able to draw out the different ways in which various groupings made sense of the institution and their own positions within it. For example, the process of subject choice revealed a contrast between the predominant perspective of working class pupils – one of relative indifference – and their middle class peers, in which a marked concern for careers and prospects was revealed. Similarly, Jenkins's (1983) research on working class youth in Belfast revealed three different groupings – 'lads', 'ordinary kids' and 'citizens' respectively on a rough-to-respectable continuum – with divergent frames of reference for looking at the worlds of school, leisure, work, and the like. In other words, the injunction to take the perspective of the people you are studying may mean needing to attend to a multiplicity of world-views. This commitment may cause the ethnographer a number of difficulties, which derive from his or her age or gender. For example, participant observation with children is likely to be a difficult undertaking for the school ethnographer, so that interviews may have to be used in order to gain access to their world-views. Woods (1979) derived much of his understanding of teachers' perspectives through participant observation, but relied on unstructured interviews with pupils and parents (because of the inaccessibility of the latter). Jenkins (1983) recognized the problem of a male carrying out participant observation with girls and relied more extensively on interviews for access to their interpretations of their social environments.

It is not easy for ethnographers to sustain the constant recourse to seeing through the eyes of their subjects. Indeed, taken literally the injunction would seem to imply that researchers would be totally subservient to the people they study for all facets of the enterprise of ethnography – it would even have a prerogative over what should be researched. In fact, most ethnographers operate with their own foci of interest, albeit with a commitment to retain a fidelity to the subject's viewpoint. It is worth returning to the passage from Measor (1985) quoted above on p. 46. She reflects the concern of the qualitative researcher to see events from the interviewee's perspective in that 'rambling' is not to be suppressed as it may reveal matters of importance to the individual. But equally her reference to making 'a note about what is missed' implies that the

researcher has a focus which the interview has not adequately covered, and so a further session is deemed to be necessary. Further, confessions by ethnographers of their field-work lacunae occasionally point to an awareness that they are not always able to recognize everything that is important to their subjects. Hammersley (1984) has written that he now realizes that his omission of an examination of the reorganization of the school he was studying was an error. He had failed to recognize that the reorganization was important to the people he was studying. Hammersley attributes his failure to attend to the issue of reorganization to his theoretical and political leanings at the time of the research.

This facet of qualitative research – its avowed aim of seeing through the eyes of the people studied – is a *keynote* of the tradition. However, there is a hint in this discussion that it is an orientation which entails certain difficulties, which will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter.

Description

There is a clear recognition among most ethnographers that one of the main purposes of their research style is to provide detailed descriptions of the social settings they investigate. Adler (1985), for example, portrayed her research on drug dealers as 'an ethnographic description and analysis of a deviant social scene' (p. 2). Qualitative researchers advocate that such description should be at the very least consistent with the perspectives of the participants in that social setting. This emphasis on description entails attending to mundane detail; the apparently superficial trivia and minutiae of everyday life are worthy of examination because of their capacity to help us to understand what is going on in a particular context and to provide clues and pointers to other layers of reality. Qualitative researchers often display a certain defensiveness in recognizing the descriptive slant to much of their work. For example, Rist (1984, p. 161) has written: 'Asking the question, "What is going on here?" is at once disarmingly simple and incredibly complex.' This statement contains an element of defensiveness, because the scientific ethos that pervades much thinking in the social sciences sees analysis and explanation as the real stuff of research; consequently, mere description is often demeaned and portrayed as lacking intellectual integrity.

Qualitative researchers invariably seek to go beyond pure description and to provide analyses of the environments they examine. None the less, there tends to be a substantial attention to detail in such research. Burgess's (1983) ethnographic study of a comprehensive school reveals in great detail such topics as: the physical and social structure of the school, the curriculum, patterns of

relationships among the teachers, and the headmaster's conception of the school. One of the main reasons for the ethnographer's endorsement of such descriptive detail is to allow a backdrop whereby events and situations can be viewed within a social context. For example, Burgess (1983, p. 238) writes: 'By focusing on the teachers in houses and departments it was possible to see the way in which different versions of the school were being presented to the school.' An awareness of the social structure of the school – houses and departments – provided a framework for the understanding of the different perspectives teachers offered on the school and its aims. Thus an important contribution of descriptive detail for the ethnographer is to the mapping out of a context for the understanding of subjects' interpretations of what is going on and for the researcher to produce analyses and explanations which do justice to the milieu in which his or her observations and interviews are conducted. This theme is the focus of the next section.

Contextualism

As the previous section has prefigured, qualitative research exhibits a preference for contextualism in its commitment to understanding events, behaviour, etc. in their context. It is almost inseparable from another theme in qualitative research, namely *holism* which entails an undertaking to examine social entities – schools, tribes, firms, slums, delinquent groups, communities, or whatever – as wholes to be explicated and understood in their entirety. The implications of the themes of contextualism and holism, particularly in connection with the others delineated thus far, engender a style of research in which the meanings that people ascribe to their own and others' behaviour have to be set in the context of the values, practices, and underlying structures of the appropriate entity (be it a school or slum) as well as the multiple perceptions that pervade that entity.

An extended example allows these different keynotes of the qualitative research approach to be revealed. The example draws on Cohen's (1978) discussion of his approach to studying people's sense of 'community' in the Shetland island of Whalsay. First, Cohen argues that it is crucial to have understood the chief categories of referent used by the islanders – kinship, neighbouring, and fishing crew – in order to appreciate the bases of their allegiances to different segments of the community. This scheme is in effect a 'cognitive map' which provides a foundation for the understanding of social relationships. Further, Cohen's failure to recognize at a sufficiently early stage the significance of the fishing crew as a basis for allegiance led to a premature (from his point of view) identification with a particular boat when he went on a trip

with it, thereby making other boats less accessible to him. Thus the patterns of social relationships needed to be understood within the framework of the prior depiction of the context in which they are grounded. Secondly, Cohen points to the preparation of peat as a lengthy, technical procedure with numerous stages. There is much scrutinizing of the practices relating to each stage and any departure from the orthodox method is the source of much discussion and argument. In fact, Cohen eventually found out that the peat would burn irrespective of how it was treated. Consequently:

one comes to understand that the argument and disputation which goes on about the 'right way to do it' has very little to do with peat at all. It has to do with who is engaged in the debate – that is, who can be shown to be correct and who can be shown to be wrong; who can present himself as the guardian of traditionally-hallowed knowledge and skills and who can be shown to be lacking them . . . Casting the peats, then, is a mundane task; yet one which is only properly understood within the context of the whole culture. (Cohen, 1978, p. 15)

The emphasis here is on the need to interpret what is going on in terms of an understanding of the whole society and the meaning it has for the participants. The basic message that qualitative researchers convey is that whatever the sphere in which data are being collected, we can understand events only when they are situated in the wider social and historical context.

Process

There is an implicit longitudinal element built into much qualitative research, which is both a symptom and cause of an undertaking to view social life in processual, rather than static terms. Participant observers have been very attuned to the notion of viewing social life as involving interlocking series of events and so tend to place a much greater emphasis on the changes that the processes which provide its bedrock are responsible for inducing. The emphasis on process can be seen as a response to the qualitative researcher's concern to reflect the reality of everyday life which, they tend to argue, takes the form of streams of interconnecting events. Further, qualitative researchers argue that this is precisely how people experience social reality, so that the inclination to emphasize process is in part a product of the qualitative researcher's commitment to participants' perspectives. The general image that qualitative research conveys about the social order is one of interconnection and change. This emphasis has been attractive to students of policy, for example, since such research can be much more con-