

Theorizing in Qualitative Research: A Cultural Studies Perspective

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This article discusses the interplay between empirical research and theory in constructionist or cultural studies qualitative research. In cultural studies, theories are seen as different frameworks, not as universal theories about social mechanisms. That is why instead of generalizing understandings, cultural studies and other constructionist approaches aim to particularize understandings of the social. The latter implicates the local, while the former indirectly aims to obviate the local. Instead of assuming that any corner of social reality leads to the traces of some universals to be pointed out in the final analysis, in cultural studies a case study is understood to reveal a local and historically specific cultural or "bounded" system. Because more generally applicable theories are seen differently in this framework, theorizing also assumes another form, which is discussed in the light of concrete examples from the author's own fieldwork.

This article discusses the interplay between empirical research and theory in qualitative research. Qualitative research is a means of generating social and cultural theory. I use the research process of my study on alcoholism as a cultural construction as an example (Alasuutari, 1992) to show the way in which empirical observations often lead to theoretical ideas, new empirical investigations, and finally to the formulation of a theory.

Theory building as an aspect and objective of qualitative research has previously been discussed, especially within grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), but in this article theories and theorizing are approached from a different viewpoint. I could call my theoretical framework social constructionist (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990; Shotter 1993; Shotter & Gergen, 1989) or discursive (Harré & Gillett, 1994), but for the sake of simplicity, let me call it the cultural studies perspective (Alasuutari, 1995), although there is no single, let alone authorized, cultural studies view.

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THE MEANING OF THEORY AND THEORIZING

By the concept of theory, one may refer to a formulation concerning some universal (social) mechanisms, the functioning of which the theory is supposed to explain. Thus, although qualitative inquiry usually deals with a singular case, within this notion of theory—and the underlying ontology—the case analysis is supposed to shed light on such a general system or mechanism.

However, in cultural studies a case example being analyzed in a qualitative investigation is conceived differently. Instead of trying to generalize understandings, cultural studies and other constructionist approaches aim to particularize understandings of the social. The latter implicates the local, while the former indirectly aims to obviate the local. Instead of assuming that any corner of social reality leads to the traces of some universals to be pointed out in the final analysis, in cultural studies a case study is understood to reveal a local and historically specific cultural or “bounded” system (cf. Stake, 1995). Before going any further, the task of the researcher is to figure out a local structure of meanings, to “crack” a case in such a way that it is possible to understand something that was odd or inconceivable at the outset.

To maintain that in a case study one is dealing with a local (no matter how historically “common” or geographically widespread) phenomenon means that structures of meaning are always considered as historically and culturally specific. Getting a grasp on a culture and its worldview or structure of meanings does not get us any nearer to understanding another culture, except for the fact that we may better realize how different cultures may be.

THE FUNCTION OF THEORY IN CULTURAL STUDIES

This is where theory comes into play. Instead of understanding theory as a set of generalized statements about some universal social mechanisms to be used as hypotheses in explaining local phenomena, cultural studies sees theories as different frameworks. Theories do not suggest how to explain this or that phenomenon, but they provide different viewpoints to social reality. In doing so, they enable a reflexive perspective to the “natural attitude,” which would otherwise provide the framework within which the researcher conceives of the phenomenon. In that sense, qualitative research is indeed a theorizing process, because the whole point in social research is to come up with new viewpoints to the mundane reality organized by the natural attitude, and in doing so to find out new things about it.

When we conceive of theory as a framework, not narrowly as a theory of a particular problem, it is obvious that a theoretical frame is embedded in any research design. A theoretical framework is not something that can be added

to an otherwise completed research design. Rather, the main task of the researcher is to dig out and reconstruct the framework implied in the questions asked and in the research design in question. Such a more or less explicit theoretical framework consists of ontological and epistemological premises, that is, of notions about the nature of the reality being studied and the ways by which one can study that reality. The main function of data collection and analysis is to make one's own underlying premises as visible as possible and to challenge and develop the initial framework. The results of such a research process are often twofold: one gains a better understanding of the phenomenon and simultaneously develops a theoretical framework that can be applied also in studying other things.

THE IMPLICIT PREMISES OF THE CODING PROCEDURE

Many qualitative research textbooks (e.g. Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) equate qualitative analysis, that is, the analytic and interpretive procedures that are used to arrive at findings or theories, with "coding," and it is equally often emphasized that data analysis should proceed inductively, from an area of study to theory rather than the other way around. Thus it is advised that one starts by coding the data, which then leads to inductively derived categories, and finally to a finding or a theory.

Although qualitative research is always quite inductive in nature, one must not equate theoretical and methodological ignorance with an inductive approach. If a researcher is not informed about different perspectives to qualitative data, opened up for instance by semiotics, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, narratology and different trends of discourse analysis, it is obvious that he or she will not be able to see many things in the data.

Besides, to start qualitative analysis with coding the data is not a theoretically "innocent" move. Consider, for instance, narrative analysis as an option in approaching qualitative data. If life stories are approached from this perspective, coding the cases is not the first thing to do. Instead, each life story (and the data may in fact consist of a single life story) is analyzed in order to distinguish and point out the narrative structure of the story. Although the same story could quite well be approached by identifying and classifying (i.e., coding) different categories the storyteller uses, to start out that way would effectively annihilate the possibility for the researcher to find out that there is such a thing as a story line or a "narrative structure" in a life story, to be identified and perhaps later analyzed from, say, a social semiotics perspective. Similarly, consider the same, perhaps tape-recorded life story, from a conversation analytical perspective. Again, coding would be useless, because the angle on the data would be different.

To conceive of theory as different frames or lenses with which to perceive social reality and the data entails that one must be theoretically informed when entering the "field," gathering the data and analyzing it. This does not mean that one has to have a perspective on the data at the outset. Instead, being theoretically informed means that one is informed about different options in approaching it. I have distinguished four basic approaches—the factist perspective, cultural distinctions, narrativity, and the interaction perspective (Alasuutari, 1995)—but that division is not meant to be exhaustive. Being theoretically informed means that one is reflexive toward the deceptively self-evident reality one faces in and through the data, able to toy with different perspectives to it, and that one is open to new insights about everyday life and society. Theoretical frameworks should be considered as additional lenses enlarging and contextualizing the natural attitude, not as blinders that may systematize but nonetheless only amplify the everyday life view of the world. Theoretical frameworks should help us use our imaginative powers and break away from the confines of mundane reality.¹

If theoretical frameworks are something that one brings to qualitative inquiry "from without," and if qualitative inquiry must be understood as an interpretation of a local system of meanings, in what sense, then, does qualitative research give feedback to social theory? Although theories should not be seen as houses built of the bricks of empirical findings, qualitative research often has theoretical implications in addition to empirical results. By systematically working and toying with concrete examples of everyday life and culture, one often realizes such aspects of our mundane, self-evident reality as we have this far failed to see. Such findings may lead to new perspectives utilized in later research. To get a better picture of the place and role of theorizing in qualitative research, let me discuss qualitative inquiry as a process.

THE HOURGLASS MODEL

In the cultural studies approach, the gist of the qualitative research process is a case analysis of a local "bounded system," contextualized within a larger historical and cultural framework. Its objective is not to formulate a universal general theory, but rather to shed new light on a historical moment through the case being analyzed. That is why the research process could be depicted in the shape of an hourglass. One starts out with a rather broad theoretical and structural framework that places a particular research site in a large context and that also validates the choice of that particular case study. The actual fieldwork can be located in the epicenter of the hourglass: One analyzes in detail a very specific, closely defined object of study as a world of its own. The final phase of the study, where one assesses and discusses the results of

the case study within the broader framework, probably somewhat changed and developed during the study, forms the bottom of the hourglass.

In this process, theories and theoretical frameworks provide inspiration for the researcher, but during "fieldwork" and the case analysis, a particular theory or hypothesis should not prevent the researcher from gathering different observations about the case as comprehensively as possible. Different theoretical and methodological perspectives to the data should keep the researcher's eyes open to all kinds of observations instead of narrowing his or her vision. That is what Malinowski (1922/1961, p. 9) means when he says that "the field worker relies entirely upon inspiration from theory."

Hardly anyone would start out a laborious qualitative inquiry without any preconceptions about the "field" or the nature of the phenomenon of interest to the researcher. Yet inspiration from theory or previous research does not mean that one is burdened with "preconceived ideas," as Malinowski (1922/1961) also emphasizes:

If a man sets out on an expedition, determined to prove certain hypothesis, if he is incapable of changing his views constantly and casting them off ungrudgingly under the pressure of evidence, needless to say his work will be worthless. (p. 9)

To illustrate the hourglass model, let me discuss our study, *The Realm of Male Freedom* (Alasuutari & Siltari, 1983), and the follow-up to this study, *The Local Tavern* (Sulkunen, Alasuutari, Nätkin, & Kinnunen, 1985; see also Alasuutari, 1992, pp. 21-56). These projects were grounded in the view that the consequences of the massive movement of people during the 1970s into the urban areas of southern Finland were *crystallized* in the suburbs and most particularly (and even exceptionally) so in the local pubs. Within the local pubs, we focused on one exceptional group, a male community consisting of regulars. The ethnographic analysis of this group was a prism for studying the changing living conditions in the surrounding community.

So the concern was with rather broad, structural issues. After several operations to narrow the focus, we proceeded to the epicenter of the hourglass, to analyze in detail a very specific, closely defined object of study.

Later on in the *Local Tavern* project, with three other researchers, we had additional case analyses to fill in the picture of local pubs and their cultures of drinking. A second ethnographic study was carried out to look at the clientele of one local tavern. This time I focused on a group where drinking was heavier and where many had been through a divorce. Additionally, our group studied the names of local taverns, the semiotics of their interior decor, the music that was played on the jukebox. We interviewed the local women of the suburbs, including the wives of some darts players studied in the first case study.

In this kind of qualitative inquiry, one does not conceive of the particular objects of study within the "sample logic" of surveys: In our case the local taverns did not "represent" the problems that were caused by the influx of

people from the countryside, nor do the regulars of the local taverns represent the drinking habits in the suburbs or among the regulars of local taverns in general. Instead, the particular objects of case studies are considered as closely analyzed *examples* of different discourses within which cultural groups conceive of their living conditions and organize their lives. An in-depth analysis of the cultural world of a group or an individual helps in grasping a more general picture. Strauss (1987, pp. 16-21) describes a similar kind of strategy for the selection of research objects as *theoretical sampling*, but in our case the objective was not to form a general theory. Instead, the *strategic selection* of the particular case study examples was to get a unified picture of different cultural logics within which the same historical structural conditions are viewed in people's lived experience.

The way in which the results of a case study are used in getting a handle on a phenomenon of more general interest will of course develop along with the advancing research process. For instance, in the case study dealing with the darts players, we ended up interpreting the particular attitudes and lifestyles of the men concerned as solutions to the tensions and contradictions flowing from suburbanization and other changes in living conditions. The next step was then to show how the specific solutions adopted by these men are comparable to the solutions that the more "ordinary" suburban residents have adopted. In other words, the case analysis was *related* to the broader population. Although the solutions adopted by the men could be regarded as isolated individual cases and, as such, exceptional, the living conditions and the conflicts addressed by the lifestyles of these men are the same for large numbers of Finnish people. This means it is possible indirectly (e.g., by referring to other research) to conclude in which respects and how exceptional the lifestyles of these men really are, in which respects they are comparable to other solutions or population groups, and what sorts of different solutions exist.

In short then, a narrow case analysis is broadened, at the stage of resolving the mystery, through the search for contrary and parallel cases, into an example of a broader entity. Thus the research process advances, in its final stages, toward a discussion of broad (but still historically specific) entities. We end up on the bottom of the hourglass. In this case it meant a discussion of the cultural logic that made understandable certain structural changes in Finnish society at the level of everyday life.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LOCAL EXPLANATION

As said, all sorts of theoretical frameworks provide inspiration for a person doing qualitative research. Unlike a hypothesis, a theory—as it is understood here—does not present a prediction of the results; it only suggests a particular,

explicitly defined framework within which the details of a case and the data can be assessed. One must make a clear distinction between a theoretical framework and the particular case being analyzed within it. A theoretical frame presents a general viewpoint and is applicable to a number of cases, whereas the object of a study is a particular case, whose details can only be given a *local explanation*.

Let me clarify this with my experiences from the local tavern project. Before entering the field, my colleague and I familiarized ourselves with the ethnographic studies of the British Birmingham school, especially those of Willis (1977, 1978). From the Birmingham school and other texts, we adopted a semiotic framework. The key terms were *meaning* and *meaning structures* (in a semiotic sense). As far as methodology was concerned, the focus shifted to the distinctions that people make in their speech as well as to the broader systems of distinction that provide the general structure and organization of their everyday life. We were especially interested in Willis's use of the concept of homology, the idea that the best way to get a grasp of a cultural group and a view of life is to study the homological relationships between the meanings of different aspects of everyday life.

When studying and later interpreting the darts players' cultural group, the concept of homology became our key concept. Our explanation of the subculture was based on the homological relationships between the meanings of the darts players' different spheres of life. Analyzing the speech of these men, we showed how the local tavern represented a "realm of male freedom"; a closed milieu with its symbolic counterparts in other domains of everyday life. Darts playing had its parallel in laboring, and the doorman, in the boss down at the factory. However, an important difference that makes the tavern a far more exciting place than the rest of the everyday world is that our darts players were much better placed to mold and shape their lives within this local culture of leisure, to actually have some control over matters. Through their activities they could highlight and develop their relationship to wage labor as well as create a life-orientation to which they could anchor their self-esteem and their identity. Darts playing served as a means for highlighting one's skills and common sense as a skilled worker, but without the seriousness that is necessarily involved on the job; it was just a pastime, an amusement they could enjoy whenever they wanted to. There were also differences between the life-orientation of their generation and that of their parents and between the life-orientation of the regulars and other people living in the suburb. Gender relations were displayed in the tension between the local tavern and the home.

Even though the Birmingham theory of subculture and the semiotic approach drew our attention to the life of the darts players from a particular viewpoint, this theoretical framework did not provide us with ready-made hypotheses to be tested, nor even with key questions to be asked in interviews or group discussions. A process of fieldwork mainly entails watching, listen-

ing, and learning, and occasionally asking about things one does not understand. There are not any preformulated questions that are derived from a theory, because the researcher normally doesn't know much about the local object of study when entering the field.

The first task of a person doing qualitative research is to make sense of a particular, unique phenomenon, to come up with a local explanation of matters. There were no sources that would have told us that darts playing (in this particular group) symbolizes the craftsman's relationship to his job or that the management of the local pub has its parallel in management at the workplace. Of course, it may be possible to extract such clues from earlier research and in this way to get support for the task of local explanation. A good example is provided by the interpretation that Willis (1977, 1978) suggested, and Corrigan and Willis (1980) repeated, that the "rejection of mental work" is a distinctive characteristic of (male) working-class culture. This characteristic was clearly evident in our darts study, and having read about it we were perhaps even more keenly aware of it. But we are still talking about a comparatively general idea; how it was concretely reflected in the life-orientation and discourses of the darts players and how it made the cultural forms of the darts club understandable required local explanation, not a deduction from explanations.

Local explanation of the empirical material always forms the hard core of research. Its role is perhaps least significant in a study where, for example, an empirical result obtained in earlier research is tested as a hypothesis against survey data. However, even in this case the hypothesis will normally be tested in a setting that in one way or another differs from the original one, or the aim will be to establish whether the explanation applies to some other sphere of life or to a related phenomenon.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF EMPIRICAL OBSERVATIONS

To recapitulate, local explanation is at the heart of qualitative analysis in cultural studies. By applying the hourglass model, one then discusses the relevance of the results in a larger (but historical and culturally specific) framework, a process that is comparable to generalization in survey research. All this requires that the researcher is theoretically informed, but the process itself cannot be called theory building. Theorizing comes to play after all this, or "on the side" with the case analysis.

A local explanation may sometimes directly lead to a new theoretical idea. Although the particular features of a local phenomenon are unique, it may be that the way in which they are explained can be developed into a more general model to be applied in other cultural settings. Willis's (1978) idea of socio-symbolic homologies to describe how a way of life is organized is a good

example of that. He developed it when studying youth subcultural groups, and then, as a theoretical conclusion to his study, formulated it as a theory of cultural groups.

However, a theoretical idea may be based on a single empirical observation or event in the field. It may even be an obvious mistake that starts to bother one afterward, which once happened to me. Many field researchers have had a similar experience.

In the darts study and during the interviews we did with the darts players, we were not seriously interested in the theme of alcoholism. We were doing a study of the role of the local tavern in the life-orientation of working-class men, not a study of alcoholism. When one of our interviewees raised the possibility that he might be an alcoholic, we immediately veered to other topics, to themes that we thought formed the object proper of our study. Implicitly, we thought that our chief concern was with the darts players as a cultural group that had its own shared conceptions and ways of thinking, that any deliberation at the individual level was wholly irrelevant. This was an obvious mistake in view of the fundamental principle of open-mindedness in fieldwork.

That mistake bothered me afterward because noticing it made me think about alcoholism from a new viewpoint. Besides, it was not the only time the members of the darts club weighed the fun, company, and friendship related to their hobby against alcohol addiction as alternative ways of accounting for their habit of going to the local tavern several times a week. Normally, one conceives of the former as a sociological and the latter as a psychological and physiological explanation, thus drawing a categorical difference between them. But here both the social and the medical explanations are ways of giving an account, a justification or an excuse for an individual's behavior.

On a bright day the men would be convinced that they just enjoy the hobby and company, whereas on a dark one they would have lingering doubts about an alcohol problem. And they were not alone in this business of interpretation and definition. On the contrary, their own thoughts and ideas about their life and condition were a response to the labels and accusations of their spouses, family members, relatives, and neighbors. This made me realize that, although it is of course true that all activities of living people also have their physiological side, as a phenomenon, "alcoholism" is a frame we use in everyday life (including the research literature) to explain, justify, condemn, and classify individuals and forms of behavior somehow related to alcoholic drinks.

This led me to a series of case studies where I studied people with and without a drinking problem, the way they organized and made sense of their lives, and how their relationship to alcoholic drinks could be understood in that larger context. At that point I thought that by studying people at different "stages"—in ordinary life, alcoholism treatment institutions, or in self-help groups—I could grasp alcoholism as a process of identity transformation.

However, practical problems made me give up that idea. Because of securing the privacy of their clients, the treatment institution I had chosen could not give me the names of the clients. Neither could I interview the clients myself, because the therapists thought that it would have interrupted the therapy relationship. However, we agreed that at the first encounter with the clinic, some of the clients could be interviewed by using a narrative interview method in which they told their life story. Thus, instead of following up these individuals, I decided to conduct similar interviews among "ordinary" people in other settings.

New thoughts provoked by empirical observations also made me realize that with my initial idea of an "alcoholization process," I was still very much in the spell of alcoholism as a taken-for-granted category or disease, and of alcoholization as a modern myth (as self-criticism, see Alasuutari, 1992, pp. 49-56). Instead of retelling the myth, picturing it with new details provided by the case studies, I wanted to spot the myth of alcoholism in the material itself and in the way people talk about drinking and drinking problems; I wanted to understand how notions and theories of drinking problems are part of social reality and structure it.

When writing the final report, I realized that I could formulate the main argument in these studies into a cultural theory of alcoholism (Alasuutari, 1992). The key idea was that we can talk about two perspectives to drinking situations: a routine, self-evident understanding of an occasion as opposed to reflexive attention paid to an occasion. When drinking is a routine aspect of a situation, we can talk about the *everyday-life frame*. In the everyday-life frame, drinking is taken for granted. The everyday-life frame focuses attention on the place and functions of drinking in social interaction. On the other hand, we may pay particular attention to drinking in speech or in a social situation. For one reason or another, alcoholic drinking may become the object of reflexive attention, and as such it is isolated or seen apart from its particular social contexts. Oftentimes on such occasions, drinking is perceived as a personal characteristic. In such cases, we could talk about the *alcoholism frame*. The alcoholism frame shifts attention from the situation to individuals and their drinking style or habits, assessing them within the normal/abnormal distinction.

The idea in distinguishing these two frames is not to imply that frames are grids or lenses through which "reality" is more or less accurately perceived. Rather, the idea is to emphasize that frames constitute and organize social thought and social situations. As with any frame, the alcoholism frame is, in part, a self-fulfilling prophecy. When it is applied to a person, it generally structures social relations and situations and gives them new meanings. It may form the basis of the identity of an active or former drinker. The role of the alcoholism frame in structuring social reality is not even confined to the production of "alcoholics." It is applied not only to extreme situations or to deviant drinking habits. People use it commonly in interpreting and evaluat-

ing their own and others' drinking habits. That is why it structures, to a certain degree, all drinking situations. This also means that theories of problems related to alcohol use must be seen as an integral part of these problems and not only as observations or theories of some illness. Finally, we have to remember that the alcoholism frame is materialized also in institutions. The "true nature" of alcoholism can be challenged and speculated upon, but the alcoholism treatment institutions and other existing societal and legal arrangements set up to handle identified patients impose very concrete and practical limits and conditions for the formation of subjects and identities.

My conclusion that alcoholism can be seen as a particular frame is a good example of the way theory building often takes place in a qualitative research process. The initial inspiration came from an insignificant mistake in an interview. It led to a research design that turned out to be theoretically lacking and technically impossible. When the revisions to the original plan for conducting the study are taken into account, we can say that there was no prefixed plan that the process followed. The theoretical framework was formulated as a final outcome of critical reflection on the case studies results, instead of being a theory proven correct by them. Yet I argue that the research process was not just a badly designed study brought to a happy ending under lucky stars. Although the project plan could certainly have been better, it is characteristic of qualitative inquiry that the questions and the initial framework change or develop during the project.

QUALITATIVE INQUIRY AS THEORIZING

At the beginning of this article I argued that qualitative research is a way of developing social and cultural theory. I hope that the concepts introduced and the examples from my own studies have illustrated what I mean by theorizing in this instance.

The tradition of grand theory building—along the lines of, say, Parsons, Habermas, and Luhmann—conceives of theory as a sort of map or model of society, a model that distinguishes and names the parts of a social system. In this kind of theorizing, one often distinguishes institutions that are more or less equivalent with those we talk about in everyday life: the family, the state, the educational system, religion, and so on. At other times, grand theories introduce concepts and models that compete with "lay theories": for instance, civil society or the public sphere. In time, some of these concepts may become part of ordinary language.

Qualitative inquiry can also be used in that kind of theory building. The functioning of a family or a small number of families analyzed as case studies may be thought to represent families more generally, so that the research results are used in formulating a theoretical model of the mechanics of family life. One would construct concepts—such as openness or balance of the family

system—to account for the observations and introduce new concepts or variables to account for incompatible cases or findings in previous research.

In the cultural studies approach discussed here, the theories being developed on the basis of qualitative research are understood in a more constructionist and ethnomethodologically informed fashion. In ethnomethodology, one refrains from interpreting what people really mean or think in interaction; rather, one studies the “ethnomethods” by which participants interpret each other’s speech and thus achieve a shared understanding of the situation. The ethnomethodological emphasis can be seen in cultural studies as the researcher does not compete with or try to outwit practical reasoning (Garfinkel, 1984) or lay theories. Instead, one studies the rules of interpretation “members” use, or the frames (Goffman, 1974) or discourses (Foucault, 1980) within which they (and we) make sense of situations and phenomena. This means that one takes a one-step distance from the members’ perspective, not by arguing that it is narrow or incorrect, but by studying how it works in constituting social realities. Theories are thus deconstructions of the way in which we construct realities and social conditions and ourselves as subjects in those realities. They cannot compete with lay thinking, because their very objective is to make sense of it in its various forms and in different instances.

Gubrium and Holstein’s (1990) book *What is Family* is a good example of this approach. Instead of trying to achieve a generally valid definition of the family and its role in society, it studies the role of language in the social construction of family, the ways in which family members themselves define family through ongoing discourse about roles, rules, and daily activities.

By subscribing to the ethnomethodological point that a researcher should not compete with “common sense,” I do not mean that cultural theory should provide us with a divine perspective, detached from the petty concerns of ordinary life. Instead, the whole point in cultural theorizing is its potential for self-reflection in society, and qualitative analysis is particularly suitable for such a purpose (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995, p. 219). Social theories do not tell us what society is really like, but they may provide us with new viewpoints, new elements in assessing our lives. As Foucault (1986, p. 9) puts it, the aim of a close, reflective, and self-reflective reading of empirical materials is to “free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently.” Of course, social and cultural theory is not alone in such self-reflection. For instance, art and mass culture have similar functions, and self-reflexivity is a constant feature of all social life, where conditions often change rapidly, thus forcing us to rethink our self-evident perspectives and notions.

Analyzing empirical materials qualitatively, approaching them from different perspectives, is basically a means of reflection and self-reflection aiming at new insight about the cultural premises of social life. That is why any qualitative inquiry, even a study whose design turns out to be ill conceived, may provide valuable hints, food for thought for cultural theory building.

NOTE

1. Mundane reality or everyday-life conceptions are not "false" when compared to theoretical perspectives. Practical knowledge and understandings are valid "for all practical purposes," as Schutz puts it. Social theoretical perspectives are not somehow out of the world, results of divine "scientific" research, and thus better than tacit knowledge. Instead, they are an example of reflexivity that is always an aspect of human life. When the routines and self-evident notions of everyday life are for some reason shattered, we always take reflexive distance from them and consider an event or encounter from other perspectives to figure it out. Some institutions, such as art and sciences, are specialized in such reflexivity. Perhaps the specificity of the social sciences in this respect is its attempt to create systematic methods by which such reflexivity is maintained; but quite often it is itself caught in its own routinized lines of thought.

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