

Confounding Issues in Comparative Ethnography (of Older People)

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- **Argument of paper:**
- **Despite the doubts of some quantitative analysts, there are important things that ethnography can do better than anything else.**
- **But recurrent failings in qualitative accounts undermine both these attempts and their reputation, making significant comparative analysis even more difficult.**



Significant methodological combinations commoner in theory than practice

- It is now common to argue that we need both qualitative and quantitative approaches in sociology.
- But in fact, the work people actually write suggest that there remains much mutual understanding between these approaches.
- This is partly because hardly anyone does both; the social and intellectual practices associated with the different methods amount to different worlds – with different audiences, interests, aims, criteria and networks of taken-for-granted knowledge.

Different methodologies: different social and intellectual worlds

- Familiar landscapes of shared standards and procedures associated with particular methodological approaches
- Methodological liaisons lead to roughly familiar parameters of standards and procedures - e.g. 'ECPR' style, APA style). Platt (1996) shows internal discord continues – but within approximately agreed frameworks.
- I.e. within academic territories, there are local rhetorical conventions establishing what is taken as reasonable –
- Sparing participants constant self-justification but making outsiders seem absurd.
- **WITHIN** these settings, debate tends to be confined to the denotative content of claims rather than the assumptions and relationships supporting them (Brown 1987). Thus the traditions which make approaches seem to make sense are 'encompassing but unnoticed' or 'transparent' (Bineham 1995).

Misconceptions about other methodological worlds

- Methodological divides don't run along exactly the fault-lines sometimes assumed –
- E.g. it is important in quant. work to be inventive and imaginative, e.g. in imagining and testing explanations.
- Quant. authors pay more obvious attention to reactions of audiences, and to seeking weaknesses and faults in their own work. Forced to defend measurement approaches, e.g. to establish that are comparing like with like.
(By contrast, 'social constructionists' seldom attend to social influences on their own interpretations.)
- Quant. work often strongly morally committed, not 'value-neutral' – e.g. Heath on social mobility or ethnic relations defends fairness.

- In comparative work, we do need combinations of approaches – e.g. need questions of both scale and culture for considering older people in Europe.

Since quant. approaches do show imagination and commitment, is this easier than we'd assumed?

- BUT people who do surveys (whatever about other quant. approaches) do tend to assume that we are trying to measure things where there is a known yardstick,
- Even though it may be hard to calibrate other cultural responses in its terms.



International comparative surveys – responses to culturalist arguments

- King et al. (2003) try to measure individuals' feelings of effectiveness about impacting on government; a question clearly relevant to older people.
- BUT they calibrate by starting from by what they think are 'knowns', and converting responses into this scale (as if differences between cultures only differed in terms of size).
- Their vignette: Alison lacks clean drinking water; she and her neighbours support an opposition candidate in elections who promises to address the issue, and he may well be elected.
- This is supposed to represent the highest form of citizen effectiveness.
- Of five possible answers, the lowest is 'Moses lacks clean drinking water. He would like to change this, but can't vote and feels no-one in the government cares about the issue.'
- These vignettes are intended to ANCHOR responses, so we can convert responses in other cultures to the scales we know in ours. [NB choice of names!]

Culturalist qualms...

- The point of a qualitative approach is to argue that we do not know these scales, or if there are scales, possibly not even in our own culture: King's vignettes are based on an oversimplified conception of social effectiveness and do not comprise a scale of knowns at all.
- If people in Western cultures often agree to several items on King's list, this would have been discovered in piloting. BUT if they don't, they might simply be accepting the terms of a discourse, as is usual in conversation. How people 'really' think about their political effectiveness might not actually take King's form at all. E.g. they might agree they can vote but be sceptical about impact on government.
- Quantitative interpretations, esp. of surveys, tend to proceed by extrapolating from sociologists' own experience. Qual. sociologists argue that people think and feel things we DON'T know if we haven't lived in their social worlds.
- Thus we need nuanced, embedded concepts reconstructing what e.g. 'effectiveness' could mean to older people, along what dimensions, with what connections and implications for other views and actions.

Qualitative work: there's no such single phenomenon as 'effectiveness' or e.g. 'loneliness'...

- To reconstruct these embedded concepts, sociologists need to enact the practices concerned – or they cannot trace the tacit knowledge involved.
- Also they must take philosophical questions into account, tracing the practices and presuppositions which make up different conceptual / social / emotional positions.
- I.e. don't follow the advice of some textbooks on survey construction and not think too much!
- So qual. research is needed to explore issues that can't be approached in other ways -
 - e.g. because they cannot be described by respondents, perhaps because relevant languages don't exist, or because language itself is used differently in different settings....
- This means qualitative work is vital, but NOT necessarily that we can't set up some quant correlatives to measure.

BUT this implies qualitative sociologists understand the nature of informal social reasoning and how it works...

- **‘Confounding’ metaphor: terms such as ‘insight’ used without established meanings or criteria for criticism. ‘Insight’ is connected with what sociologists are doing, but unsystematically.**
- **It would be quite acceptable to give a paper comparing older people in Ireland and Germany by interviewing six in each country, describing salient aspects of predicaments, with striking quotations from interviews.**
- **BUT what is this trying to achieve, what are standards of criticism, what are points of comparison?**



Qualitative failings...

- Qualitative work rarely shows a consciousness of the audience or asks, why do I think this? How would I know if I were wrong?
- Cultural contexts often misinterpreted as a result, often because researchers project on them what they themselves are interested in – e.g. searching for oppressed victims, or power struggles.
- Egregious example – Scheper-Hughes' work on Ireland. She assumes lack of Californian-type communication among farmers means lack of any kind of communication; sees Irish families as pathogenic.
- But she has not learned 'how to go on' in Ireland (Winch 1958). This defeats the very point of qualitative work.
- We need to bear in mind that translation in comparative surveys isn't just between words and sentences (Heath et al. 2005) - but also between concepts and worldviews.
- But we don't know enough about comparing worldviews.

SOME aspects of comparability...

Claims I have made – e.g. about public/private distinction, nature of community in West of Ireland as compared with urban parts of UK / Germany.

- These are patterns learned in the course of long-term interaction. You only notice and begin to make sense of them after repetition / in response to puzzles. They are probably not made explicit by inhabitants and might not show up in a questionnaire.
- Still we should be able to identify SOME pieces of behaviour such that, if a is true, b happens...
- E.g. it is acceptable to speculate about neighbours' intentions on the road or on the bog; NOT to wonder who is in their sitting-room, if you see them through a window.
- It's acceptable to criticise teacher's views expressed in pub, not in classroom.
- Similar patterns in Finland, or in North Tirol – may these be aspects of rural culture, rather than Irish culture specifically?
- But qualitative TEXTS contain much MORE than speculations along such lines.

Further contents of (qualitative) texts...

- Quotations of eloquent remarks, small details of behaviour... authors may not be aware of textual functions of these items in their work.
- E.g. they select instances so as to make implicit ethical cases for subjects; or try to alter readers' expectations and reactions. These functions occupy large portions of work.
- Authors don't realise these are legitimate parts of informal reasoning, or why; hence can't justify them.
- They are approaches to assembling new concepts, and training audience in new cultural repertoires with new emotional and intellectual habits.
- Parts of rhetorical reasoning which can be assessed reasonably (Edmondson 2006).
- Qualitative work teaches how to go on, what to expect, what to feel for – this can be too complex and changeable to predict well. BUT the informal reasoning connected with 'understanding' social worlds is aiming to achieve other ends too – but they aren't well explored.

Quant. / qual. co-operation

- **Faults on both sides: Interpreting survey results too often involves imagining that respondents are ordinary people - like yourself, with ideas like your own.**
- **Ethnographic work should enable us to discover (and test?) explanations rather than projecting.**
- **To correct each we need to know**
 - **when concepts have demanding (theoretical) presuppositions**
 - **More about the informal reasoning contained in qualitative texts. ‘Verstehen’ is a whole-person operation and functions on multiple levels, which texts reflect – but confusedly.**
- **‘Reflexivity’ is supposed to help here but it is too often used psychologically or disingenuously. This is a matter of argument rather than biography.**
- **Qualitative writers are important: but they need to examine the rhetorical functions of their works in order to know what operations they are actually carrying out and which they can defend.**