

The Methodological Application of Modern Historical Science to Qualitative Research

著者	Iwasaki Yoko
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Yoko IWASAKI*

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Abstract

Since the middle of the twentieth century criticism towards quantitative research tools in social sciences has gradually led to attempts to find a new methodology, called 'qualitative research'. At the same time, qualitative research has called for a reconsideration of the usefulness of many of the beneficial tools and methodologies that were discarded during the move to research based on the employment of quantitative research tools. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the essential elements of the qualitative research approach, and then argue for the possibility of introducing the old-established methodology of historical science into qualitative research, in order to raise the accuracy of the qualitative data.

Keywords: qualitative research, economics, historical science, field-work, Iran

* Researcher, Middle East Study Group, Area Studies Center, IDE
(iwsky@ide.go.jp)

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INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPING ECONOMIES (IDE), JETRO
3-2-2, WAKABA, MIHAMA-KU, CHIBA-SHI
CHIBA 261-8545, JAPAN

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Yoko IWASAKI

Introduction

The remarkable development of natural sciences for practical use which took place in the nineteenth century subsequently exerted a strong influence on other academic fields. In this regard, its most obvious outcome was the steady introduction of a series of ‘quantitative research’ tools into the so-called social sciences (and even into cultural sciences).

These tools principally needed to be based on the statement of a hypothesis, the collection of quantitative data, the statistical analysis of these data, the verification of the hypothesis, and the construction of predictive models. In this way, a theory is formulated and strengthened further through the addition of new quantitative data.

Initially, use of ‘quantitative research’ tools was opposed to the traditional method of social analysis that was ‘heavily descriptive’, ‘local’ and often ‘subjective’. The new methodology was enthusiastically accepted and spread rapidly, as it made possible the analysis of causal relationships among phenomena with measurable indicators, in other words, it promised more objective results. Quantitative techniques became the advanced equipment that enabled research to become scientific.

Among the non-natural sciences, the social sciences have been most heavily

influenced by this trend. Moreover, since the late 1990s, even in historical science, which used to be considered the most remote of the disciplines from this kind of methodology, 'quantitative research' tools have been introduced.

In order to improve the construction of theory, quantitative research tools have become more sophisticated (they have become more mathematical), but their shortcomings have often been pointed out, as well. These include an over-inclination to theory construction which alienates research from the complications of the real world. Quantification has received more criticism in fields such as sociology and psychology than in others. Since the middle of the twentieth century this criticism has gradually led to attempts to find a new methodology, called 'qualitative research'.

The purpose of this short paper is to discuss the essential elements of the qualitative research approach, and then argue for the possibility of introducing the old-established methodology of historical science into qualitative research, in order to raise the accuracy of the qualitative data.

The Apparent Characteristics of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research does not necessarily indicate a particular theme nor does it suggest a group of monographs, but is a generic name for various methodologies that have been invented in response to the problems of quantitative research¹. The apparent characteristics of the qualitative approach are as follows.

First, qualitative research places a high value on data collection in the form of

¹ For general information concerning qualitative research approach, see Flick(2006).

relatively long statements and narratives gathered from informants through interviews relevant to the research topics concerned. It aims mainly at focusing on the background of each informant's answer, an important consideration that is often missed in questionnaire-style data collection. It is generally pointed out that statistical data processing, which is the most powerful tool for bringing meaningful results from questionnaire-based research, tends to require a researcher to collect only those data that are suitable for statistical processing. For example, a research worker sometimes asks a question that is too specific for the answer to have any ordinary meaning, or he/she might avoid some kinds of question intentionally because the questions concerned may seem too difficult for a sufficiently large quantity of useful samples to be collected. In other words, the research worker never engages in a research theme that is unsuitable for statistical processing.

Second, qualitative research involves conducting data collection repeatedly according to a progression of stages. It requires the researcher to continually examine his or her hypothesis during the process of data collection, and might require a reconstruction of the hypothesis and a further attempt to collect necessary data. Research, in other words, is a step by step process in which the research worker is allowed to alter the questions, or even the way of sampling. Data collection through related literature and documents is also admissible.

Third, qualitative research depends on guaranteeing the credibility of the qualitative data collected by way of the various methods. Some people have called this 'triangulation'. 'Triangulation' is not a one-way process. For instance, a researcher may

put the same question to different persons and groups, may ask the question of the same person in different places and at different times, and may even arrange for someone else, other than the researcher himself, to ask the same question. These are only a few of many possible examples. In short, the researcher has to try as much as possible to guarantee the credibility of the statements given by his or her informants.

The above-mentioned features are the most evident characteristics of so-called qualitative research. They may give the impression that the qualitative approach denies the usefulness of 'quantitative research' tools, and that it emphasizes the importance of interviews instead. But in fact those who advocate quantitative research have a different aim.

The well-known Grounded Theory approach², as advocated by Glaser and Strauss, used to be considered synonymous with qualitative research, especially in the United States. In fact Grounded Theory became a kind of antagonistic term used by those who questioned logically deduced 'grand theories'. Grounded Theory involves discovering one's hypothesis by way of field work. According to this approach, the researcher should try to construct a new theory based on self-collected data, and should not engage in work that merely verifies existing theory with a few small modifications.

The Grounded Theory of Glaser and Strauss was used to question the situation in which American sociologists were inclined to devote their energies to collecting data just to reinforce existing 'grand theories'. The intention of Grounded Theory was to encourage sociologists to generate an original theory by using their own data. This

² See Glaser & Strauss(1967).

might be, from today's point of view, an old-fashioned advocacy. But by pointing out the dangers of over-estimating the power of quantitative research tools, Glaser and Strauss made a useful contribution, and one that was very significant for the social sciences in general.

The essential characteristics of qualitative research may be summarized as follows.

First, research should start from a question, not a methodology. When embarking on research, one must ask oneself what one wants to know, and what kind of methodology would best suit the research question. Glaser and Strauss were highly critical of the opposite approach, which at the time was characteristic of the academic community in the United States. Second, research should always be open, and should not closely adhere to a hypothesis that has been determined at the outset. Although it is not prohibited for a researcher to have some provisional premise in mind before conducting interviews, an informant should be given the opportunity to speak freely so that the researcher can pose more suitable questions during the very process of interviewing. Interviewing should be 'semi-structured' which means that a researcher should be free to rid himself or herself of pre-existing assumptions that might turn out to be inappropriate.

These are the essential features of qualitative research as the author understands them. The question posed by qualitative research is whether or not a researcher has successfully chosen a suitable methodology. At the same time, qualitative

research has called for a reconsideration of the usefulness of many of the beneficial tools and methodologies that were discarded during the move to research based on the employment of quantitative research tools.

Raising the Accuracy of Qualitative Research

It is obvious that the qualitative approach offers much that is meaningful and encouraging for social scientists who collect their research data by fieldwork, and by interviewing in the field. As long as research is conducted in the 'correct' way, qualitative data such as informants' statements and narratives can be successfully used as an alternative to quantitative research data. Obviously, the key requirement of 'correct' prosecution of qualitative research implies the use of 'triangulation'.

However, it is not entirely clear in what way triangulation should be achieved. While the only suggestion is to make sure as much as possible that informants' statements are fully credible by using several methods, the qualitative research methodology seems, in comparison with quantitative research, to lack an authentic and persuasive instrument for obtaining the necessary proof.

This problem also relates to the fact that in 'qualitative research', it is not always easy to obtain a large number of samples, since a researcher places importance on each sample's specific context and characteristics by collecting long narratives. At the same time, resources for research activity are always limited. Therefore when the number of samples is small, one of the solutions is to improve as far as possible the accuracy of the information which the qualitative data contain.

How can we acquire more accurate information from a few samples? Here, we can learn much from the long-established methodology of modern historical science. Historical science, needless to say, is the type of study in which a historian determines ‘historical facts’ concerning phenomena in the past by using the very limited materials that have survived to the present, and argues their historical significance. Sometimes the materials available are so scarce that the proving process requires extraordinary strictness.

The historian may tend to be absorbed in the very contents of the material, or in other words in the written information that the material contains. But the contents themselves are something that the historian should deal with only after having completed the procedures of *Quellenkunde* (the examination of nature of the historical materials) and *Quellenkritik* (the verification of sources). In historical science, two successive procedures, *Quellenkunde* and *Quellenkritik*, must be undertaken before the historian can examine the actual contents of the material.

In these procedures we can find a pointer to the nature of ‘triangulation’, or in other words, securing the credibility of qualitative data. The details of these procedures are as follows.

Quellenkunde and Historical Materials³

In historical research, *Quellenkunde* determines what is to be selected by the historian and examined as historical material. When confronted by an array of evidence

³ Imai(1992) gives a full commentary on the methodology of modern historical science.

that has survived from the past, a historian must decide which materials to select, taking into account the objectives of his or her own research. In addition to documentary evidence, the things that can be considered as historical materials in historical science include ruins, inscriptions, legends and even folk customs. Several attempts have been made since the nineteenth century to classify the materials available to the historian. The reason why classification of historical materials is important is that it provides a criterion for evaluating the material's quality as research data.

Material that can be of interest to the historian might for example be physical evidence that has survived from preceding centuries, such as skeletons, buildings, or geographical features. Or it may be something made by somebody in order to convey information to someone else. Materials of this kind include public documents, letters and statistics. Or it might be something preserved by people who want to commemorate an event or a person - an object such as a grave, or a memorial building, or a monument. By examining the nature of the historical materials, a historian should be aware of the overall character of the material he or she is dealing with, and not only its contents. With adequate classification procedures, many possibilities for employing a variety of objects as historical materials can be found.

Quellenkritik in Detail

Quellenkritik is a German word meaning the verification of sources, and refers to the need to examine the genuineness and credibility of material selected as historical evidence. The verification procedures begin with the so-called 'external evaluation'

according to the following criteria.

As regards historical materials such as old documents, genealogical tables or works of art, one should first employ *Kritik der Echtheit*, which means examination of authenticity (that is, determining that the material is not a counterfeit) .

Herkunftskritik, or the evaluation of provenance, is also required. The material's exact date and its place of origin should be made clear. The people who were involved in its origin should be identified, as well.

Kritik der Ursprunglichkeit means to judge whether or not the material is original. A historian ought to know, for example, if a book is the one that the author actually wrote, or a copy. To find out the answer to this question, the words of the book, its expressions and its format all need to be investigated with meticulous care.

The next procedure is an 'internal evaluation' based on the following criteria.

As the first step, a historian should employ *Kritik der Glaubwürdigkeit*, that is, establishing the credibility of the research material from a historical point of view. When the material to be examined is a ruin and its genuineness is proven, this is not an issue. But when the material is a statement, the historian has to take great care in establishing its truthfulness. It may contain unintentional errors or deliberate falsehoods. The historian must confront these possibilities, and must try to resolve them to the best of his or her ability.

Moreover, while employing the above mentioned 'external evaluation', it is also important to question the research material comprehensively. For instance, a historian may select a letter. Amongst other things, he or she must determine who wrote

it, to whom it was written, the authenticity of the dates of the events mentioned in it, and the truthfulness of the writer, given the nature of the letter. Having investigated these issues, the historian proceeds to argue and prove that the contents of the letter represent the truth, and by this process, a so-called 'a historical fact' is authorized.

Another criterion for 'internal evaluation' is the assessment of the historical material. In historical science, the terms 'first grade' and 'second grade' are used to rank the material's scientific importance. In general, 'first grade' materials include, for example, a diary or memorandum, that is, something written by the person who is the subject of enquiry, at the time and place at which the event occurred. 'Second grade' materials are, by contrast, items such as memoirs written sometime later than the event, at the nearest place, by the person concerned, while legends, literary arts, or history books have the least value from historical science point of view.

Of course these classifications are only rules of thumb. Whether historical materials have much value depends firstly on successful *Quellenkritik* (the verification of sources), and secondly on the theme of research. Needless to say any material whose source has been verified has value and, moreover, even a false statement can have value when a historian knows the identity of the writer and why he or she did not tell the truth.

In sum, to authorize 'historical facts' through examination of the material's credibility from various points of view is a most important procedure that must be completed before the argument can be developed.

Hermeneutik

Hermeneutik (interpretation of the material's context) comes next. Although *Quellenkritik* (the verification of sources) is indispensable in historical science, every historical fact is not always important. The further stage, *Hermeneutik* is where the real ability of the historian comes to the fore.

Generally speaking, historical materials are so fragmentary that of themselves, they do not suffice to fully explain the situation in which an event took place. *Hermeneutik* is the procedure for the interpretation of the material by clarifying the context of the data. Here a historian is first required to understand as exactly as possible the contents of a statement written, a ruin or a surviving legend. At the same time, he or she should consider to what extent the historical fact that has been authorized proves anything. For example, a published legal statement may have survived. This proves beyond doubt that the law was drafted, but it tells us nothing about its enforcement. Therefore to claim that this law came into effect is incorrect.

A historian, by referring to knowledge accumulated in other academic fields, should try to understand the situation in which various phenomena happened in the past so that the correct conclusions can be deduced. In other words, the historian is required to understand the common knowledge of the people at the time in question, and interpret the material in that context. In this way, the appropriateness of the material's contents can be properly judged, something that may not have been clear enough through mere *Quellenkritik*.

The historian then puts the fragmental facts together into a causal relationship

and delineates the historical process. As a final step, he or she is required to explain the significance of the process described for history as a whole, and how valuable the conclusions are for historical research. For example, it may be possible to clarify what Tokugawa Yoshinobu, the fifteenth Shogun of the Tokugawa Government, ate for dinner on the evening of 30th January 1867, but this fact did not determine Japan's destiny at the time. It does not have any meaning for study of Japanese political history, even though it is a 'historical fact'.

As mentioned above, the methodology of modern historical science consists of very strict *Quellenkritik* (the verification of sources) and as well as the employment of *Hermeneutik* (interpretation of the material's context), a procedure that contains almost every element which 'qualitative research' requires. Modern historical science and 'qualitative research' share many methodological directions in common, and these include the use of various types of data including statement and narrative, the avoidance of imprudent hypothesis construction in favor of allowing the data to speak for themselves, and the integration of all the data available so as to produce a comprehensive conclusion. Triangulation in qualitative research is also quite similar to the procedures of *Quellenkritik* insofar as it requires proving a fact by using different types of supplementary information.

Taking all this into account, it becomes clear that the methodological approach advocated in contemporary qualitative research is not particularly novel and has already been employed for a very long time. Qualitative research, rather, seems to be a

recurrence of an old-established and sophisticated methodology. In other words, the methodology of modern historical science can be very useful for raising the quality of qualitative research.

Qualitative Research in Practice

We now come to the question of how the above-mentioned methodology can be applied in qualitative research. The author's research activities, based on field-work in Iran, may serve as an example. The object of the author's study is economic institutions with particular reference to traditional shop-lease contracts which embody such elements as the formal legal system, informal customs, and people's behavior⁴. Questions of primary concern are the social context which yields such institutions; why the institution exists, what function it has at present, and what brought it into existence in the past. What is being dealt with here is an institution that appears and vanishes in a particular historical context, and which probably will never be observed again.

Basically, the deeper a researcher's concern with the context of the research, the less interested in theory construction he or she is likely to be, whereas a theoretical approach is often a requirement of quantitative research..

Of course if research not is to be merely 'fiction', finding proof of generalizations is important, and it is even desirable that the conclusions of the research should have some has some general application. But the fact that research has a provable conclusion does not principally mean that the conclusion is conformable with

⁴ See Iwasaki(2006&2007).

a theory. The data can be established facts, but they need not always be of general relevance.

A widespread misunderstanding to the effect that these two aspects are always synonymous with each other seems to have been diffused by the prevalence of quantitative research tools. This misunderstanding is rooted in a way of thinking which holds that human society should be analyzed part by part to obtain the most suitable solution for each problem, an approach that might be called science for prescription. Although this is of course a very well-meaning endeavor, its excessive inclination toward theory has tended to divorce the social sciences from reality.

Be that as it may, themes that concern economic institutions are quite difficult to deal with by way of the quantitative research approach. This is because firstly, the entire image of an institution cannot be drawn with tools such as the questionnaire in most cases because of lack of literature which describes the real situation as regards the customs or the routines concerned. Secondly, the questionnaire is not suitable for investigating the historical context surrounding an institution because a longer time-span of research activity is needed.

Therefore, the author has employed another qualitative research approach for pursuing his research themes. Let us consider the research methods that have been utilized so far.

They are based on field work in Iran by conducting interviews and by carrying out close inspection of circumstances. Research has been conducted repeatedly from 2001 until 2007 in Tehran city. Methodologically, different tools have been combined

for investigating the historical formation process of the economic institutions concerned.

The details are as follows.

The first tool is the collection of qualitative data including interviews and inspection of historical records. Qualitative data have had to be collected by field work as there is no literature that systematically describes the institutions especially as regards the actual way in which they function.

In interviews, informants have been required to freely expound their views in response to questions, within a set length of time. The reason why oral statements through interview have been favored is as follows. First, in this way, an interviewer, listening to an informant's statement, can readily ask about something that he has come across for the first time, or that he hasn't understood. Even if the time needed for an interview is not short, the interaction between interviewer and respondent enables the researcher to pursue an additional inquiry at the same time and in consequence makes research more efficient.

Second, if a standardized questionnaire were used, the form of the answer would also be standardized. In such cases, it is difficult to obtain information that is new to the interviewer and that he doesn't expect.

The questions to be put are listed in advance but never shown to the informant. Moreover care is taken to see that each question is designed for the purpose of the research. When the question is about the general state of an institution, it is desirable that each question should not be very abstract and should be asked in a such way as to give the informant an opportunity to offer a general view about customs commonly

shared in his society, rather than personal behavior of his own. For example, an interviewer must not ask 'Do you ...?', but ask 'Do people...here?' so that the respondent will refer to the general practices of the people around him. When for purposes of understanding the institution, the interviewer asks about the informant's personal experience, the interviewer has to be very careful that the informant is not disadvantaged, or made to feel disadvantaged, by answering it. A researcher may ask, for example, how much money an ordinary businessman needs for a certain trade in that district at the moment, but a direct question about income should be avoided.

An interviewer should try not to give an informant an incentive to tell a lie or to show off, and should design his questions to elicit responses that are of more general relevance, and that are credible.

Sampling ought not to be carried out at random. Informants should be chosen from a group of people who possess specialized and technical information relevant to the study. This is a kind of interview method called *Expert Inneninterviews* in German. Thus the author has conducted interviews with shop-lesers, shop-lease holders, estate agents, estate appraisers, tax specialists, public notaries, and lawyers.

Interviews conducted in Persian are principally recorded by tape recorder with the permission of informants. The contents recorded are transcribed in their entirety in Japanese translation and are carefully preserved so that the whole context of the statement is not lost.

Some of the data recorded, which are considered to be important and which suit the intention of the research, are selected and tested for their credibility by

supplementary interviews and literature investigation. In the author's research, legal codes concerning related matters and taxation, and the dockets of civil suits, have been referred to.

The second type of tool is based on qualitative data extracted from the Iranian National Parliament proceedings between 1930s and 1960s. Changes in the Iranian legal system related to shop-lease contract, discussions on law bills concerned and speeches and proposals of members of parliament have all had to be analyzed. By this method, the past state of the institution has become apparent, and this has greatly helped to clarify the process of historical change within the institution.

At the same time, oral evidence is collected from people who used to be engaged in the estate rent market during the 1960s and 1970s for the purpose of checking the evidence obtained from statements in parliamentary proceedings. Informants are asked to speak about the customs that were followed in the past.

In this way, the old system is compared to the present one so as to clarify the real condition of the institution in the past.

These combined tools, which are composed of collecting interview records supplemented by investigation of the literature, enable us to draw a vivid picture of an institution and to trace how the institution has changed over time.

Application of Quellenkunde and Quellenkritik

Let us now consider how the above mentioned data can be carefully qualified from the point of view of modern historical science.

So far as *Quellenkunde* (the examination of nature of the historical materials) are concerned, the materials selected are nothing but ‘qualitative data’ collected by the author, that is, data consisting of interview and inspection records, parliamentary proceedings and related literature. Among these, inspection notes taken in the field may be classified as physical evidence along with photographs and pictures. Other materials may be classified to something made for the purpose of conveying certain information, partly by researchers and partly by the government.

As for the *Quellenkritik* (the verification of sources), in order to obtain a valuation of the data, we should apply *Kritik der Echtheit* (evaluation of authenticity) *Herkunftskritik* and *Kritik der Ursprunglichkeit* (evaluation of provenance and origin), and *Kritik der Glaubwürdigkeit* (evaluation of reliability of the evidence).

As regards *Kritik der Echtheit* and *Herkunftskritik*, the data can be qualified by giving a detailed record of the research date, the place where the information was collected, and the identity of the informant. So far as *Kritik der Ursprunglichkeit* is concerned, the researcher should have no doubts concerning the source of each of the items of information that he has mentioned.

In *Kritik der Glaubwürdigkeit* the credibility of the data is important. In the case of interview records, as we have already seen, reliability can be assured by careful design of the questions and by conducting the interview in ways that prevent the informant from telling lies. In the case of parliamentary proceedings, speeches of members of parliament should be analyzed in their political context, so that we may grasp objectively the conditions in which the speeches were made.

Valuation of data has already been enforced since the author picked up meaningful answers on process of repeatedly conducted research activities to be qualified, and finally reflected to the research result.

In this way, the methodology of modern historical science, and especially the emphasis placed by historians on *Quellenkritik*, can be adopted in contemporary qualitative research. Put another way, the above-mentioned criteria clearly show how ‘triangulation’ can be achieved in qualitative research. .

The Remaining Problem

As we have seen above, the concept of *Quellenkritik* (the verification of sources) can be easily applied to the preservation and usage of each item of qualitative data gained by field-work and by supplementary research. Nevertheless, there remains a problem that we must face squarely. That is, since the materials that a historian uses are not ones that have survived accidentally but are items that have been deliberately selected - in other words they would not probably not have been preserved without the author’s research activity - arbitrariness remains as a problem in research based on the collection of ‘qualitative data’ by field-work.

This arbitrariness problem in research is troublesome. However, here again, *Hermeneutik*(interpretation of the material’s context) can be very helpful. *Hermeneutik* refers to the interpretation of the historical significance of an item or an event according to the historical context in which it existed, and an approach based on *Hermeneutik* can be of considerable assistance to today’s researchers who are working on the present era.

A researcher can choose a theme which might be considered important during times to come. He can also try to ensure that his field notes constitute the kind of data that might belong to 'first grade' evidence at some future date. He may employ *Quellenkritik* towards his interview records, but if he does so, what will be the character of the data? Can the data be considered as physical evidence, or will they also constitute a statement of some kind? Are the contents of the informant's narrative original and unique? It is indeed possible to record data while bearing these points in mind. At the same time, there are available huge amounts of supplementary data and materials for triangulation within the reach of the social scientist, since he or she pursues the various strands of his or her research work simultaneously.

The concept of *Quellenkritik* in qualitative research enables us to raise the accuracy of any discussion based on qualitative data. The arbitrariness problem, however, does not go only with qualitative research. It is clear that arbitrariness can exist even in quantitative research, as well.

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