



Joost Beuving and  
Geert de Vries

# Doing Qualitative Research

## The Craft of Naturalistic Inquiry

Amsterdam  
University  
Press

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# Introduction: The arc of naturalistic inquiry

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

– C. Wright Mills

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

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

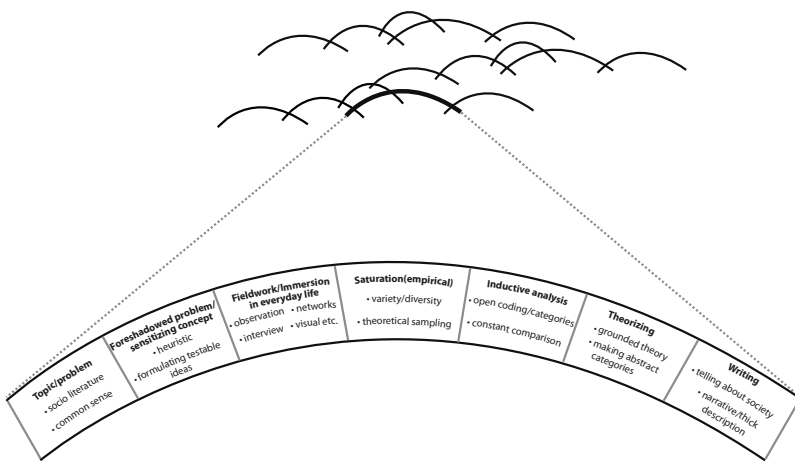
As we will argue, naturalistic inquiry can result in surprising and important insights into the working of society – insights that cannot be gained from surveys or experiments. It can also make these insights understandable and fruitful for many people. Of course, it has its own problems. The naturalistic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

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

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

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

Figure 1 The arc of naturalistic inquiry



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

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



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

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

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

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

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

It is important to stress that the arc, as we have drawn it in Figure 1, represents in a stylized and simplified way what naturalistic inquirers actually

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

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

### **Naturalistic inquiry and qualitative research**

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

Figure 2 Place of naturalistic inquiry in social research



## Genesis and audience of the book

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

Because it originates in teaching to a diverse audience, the book aims to speak to a broad readership of non-specialist readers. It does not depend on specific background knowledge, and its use in teaching is not confined to a

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

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

More informally and even more widely, students who have been trained in naturalistic inquiry benefit from it in the various professional environments that they encounter after graduating from university. Many of our students, for instance, reported that they could understand company meetings better because they had come to appreciate their symbolic aspects – a point to which naturalistic inquiry draws attention (Barry & Slocum, 2003). Outside such meetings, what is often negatively stereotyped as 'gossip' in fact turned out to be an important vehicle for the background rehearsal of views expressed in meetings. Also, our students began to see how seemingly

innocuous encounters at the coffee machine unveil important information about the network of interpersonal contacts at work; and they appreciated better the ritual aspects of encounters at the work place, for instance seeing how the yearly appraisal with the supervisor is a public way to reaffirm a difference in social status (see also Down & Reveley, 2004).

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

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

## Outline

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

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

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

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

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

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

to mobilize them in combination at the appropriate time, and the courage to deviate if need be from routines that may be 'technically' correct, mark the true craftsman or craftswoman. This goes for naturalistic inquiry as it goes for painting and sculpting.

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



Naturalistic inquiry is about studying people in everyday circumstances by ordinary means. It strives to blend in, to respect people in their daily lives, to take their actions and experiences seriously, and to build on these carefully. *Doing Qualitative Research: The Craft of Naturalistic Inquiry* offers guidance, combining thoughtful reflection with practical tips. It is written for undergraduate and graduate students in social science; for practitioners in social work, healthcare, policy advice, and organizational consultancy; and for all who have a genuine interest in society and its members.

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*'One of the best methodological treatments in contemporary social science literature. It is the type of book that students will remember as the text that moved them to serious study. I am a flat out admirer of this book.'*

– Professor Michael Lewis, University of Massachusetts

