

Settings, data and intersubjectivity in qualitative research

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Unless more recent, the material in this seminar is mostly taken from Holliday (2016)

This material can be found at <https://adrianholliday.com/handouts/>

Note about approach

Postmodern - recognising and managing intersubjectivity - the implicatedness of the researcher as part of the data (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Holliday & MacDonald 2020)

Constructivist - less about reporting what people do and say - more about **why they do and say** - how they construct their worlds and themselves (Berger & Luckmann 1966/1979)

Ethnographic disciplines - making the familiar strange, **submission** to the **emergence** of unexpected meanings, **phenomenological** positioning

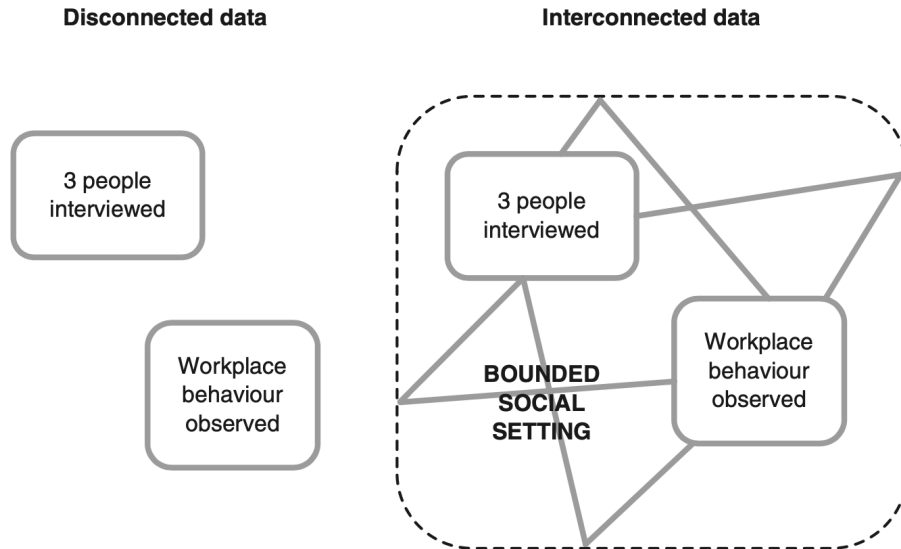
Thinking about writing

Sociologists should surely be concerned with how they construct and convey their arguments: not only in relation to historical and theoretical texts, but also in terms of how the 'facts' and 'findings' of sociological research are conveyed in monographs and research papers. For these are not matters of neutral report: the conventions of text and rhetoric are among the ways in which reality is constructed. (Atkinson 1990: 2)

Settings

The basis of **thick description** - finding out about whether two boys are winking or twitching by looking at what's going on among a group of onlookers (Geertz 1993: 6, citing Ryle)

As interworked systems of construable signs ... culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviours, institutions, or processes can causally be attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly – that is thickly – described. (Geertz 1993: 14)



Determined along with questions and methods as a result of initial looking around (Spradley 1980: 32)

What is going on between people

Criteria for selection

Access, convenience, and right for researcher positioning - Egyptian student

Sufficient richness of potential data - opening up rather than limiting variables

The staffing, recent programme changes, the charisma of the choral director, the working relationship with a church organist, faculty interests in a critical vote of the school board, and the lack of student interest in taking up the clarinet. In these particularities lie the vitality, trauma, and uniqueness of the case. (Stake 2005: 457)

Approaching and being in the setting

Gatekeepers

Always looking around - looking for every available clue about what is going on

Using existing systems and procedures - e.g. developing ethics (Holliday 2013; Mapedzahama & Dune 2017)

Being sensitive, polite and flexible with your plans

Researcher as visitor? How to behave and dress

The process of collecting data depends on meticulous time keeping and constant planning and re-planning, always looking ahead in order to be ready for diversions. ... The fact was that I felt privileged to be a researching artist, and since I had been given the permission to be at these institutions I wished to adopt strategies that would enable me to use my time in the best possible way. Making sure that I would arrive a few minutes earlier and leave when they [the teaching staff and students] did helped my status as a colleague, and a co-worker. (Honarbin-Holliday 2005: 47-48)

I sat discretely at the side trying to make as little impact as possible dressed somewhere between the teachers (smart but casual - e.g. for males chinos and shirt) and the students (casual - jeans and trainers). I considered that my dress fitted in and I was not aware that it affected my relationships with the participants. (Anderson 2003: 129)

Following a tip from an American journalist who worked at the China Daily office, while I conducted the interviews I kept my notepad on my knee, beneath the table. The interviewee was aware that I was taking notes, but because the notepad was outside her line of vision, she was less inhibited. Meanwhile, I maintained eye contact and gave verbal feedback, so that the exchange resembled a normal conversation. With practice I learnt to take notes without writing on my trouser leg. (Grimshaw 2002: cxxvi)

Adjusting roles

Shamim (1993: 96) and Herrera (1992: 15) negotiating their roles and finding out attitudes to teaching and professionalism

Being open to unexpected data

Spending time

During these weeks, I waited in lobbies and secretaries' offices for hours, for just moments of interaction fulfilling the procedures required by the study. However, I do not believe that those long hours and days waiting behind doors were wasted, exhausting though they were. They provided a process of socialisation and initiation into the field. It is probable that I consciously and subconsciously renewed and regulated my use of language, analysed degrees of formality as well as informality in social behaviour, familiarised myself with political and social discourses, and formed a deeper understanding of dress codes. I managed to work out an appropriate and personal dress code as I sat or stood in various spaces. (Honarbin-Holliday 2005: 46)

Going with the politics

I had just been to pay a courtesy call on the dean with the head of department and had met a lecturer from the curriculum department. They both escorted me to the lesson, after showing me the library, and then asked if they could come in and watch. They seemed sensitive to the situation ... and asked me to go and ask BE if it would be all right. I did as they asked ... and s/he agreed. We sat in the front, on the left, to the side. (Obs. 16, site 13, BE) (Holliday 1991: 259)

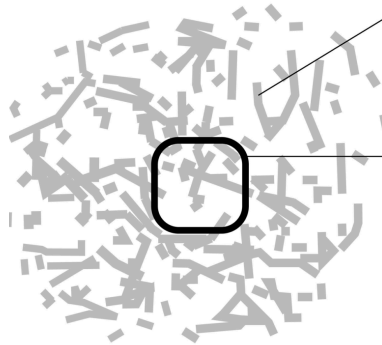
How people want to be seen - and the reason for carrying out the interview on the balcony

The issue of 'multiple personae' was problematic ... in relation to both the interviewee and the interviewer: ... I felt that I had to be clear about which personae of the politician I wanted to interview. ... Was I talking to the politician X, as Mr. X, the person or as Mr. X, the party leader or as the party itself? It was an arduous exercise. (Delikurt 2006: 160)

Whose realities?

Researcher-constructed boundaries in an existing mélange of social life (Holliday 1999: 255)

A culture as an arbitrary slice of human life



Let's consider a small shop in the high street. Its natural boundaries might seem clear – the definable space inside where the people who work there and customers and all the things for sale and advertising them reside, plus the window for display and the bit of street in front. More debatable might be the store room at the back or the place where the employees take breaks. The designations of these physical domains will be constructed differently by each of all the people involved, depending on what's going on and how they feel.

Engaging with any of this, whether we work there or pass by, is small culture formation on the go. Everyone needs to work out how to respond – to stay or leave, challenge or confirm. This positioning will depend on all the cultural practices and values that all parties bring from elsewhere.

(<https://adrianholliday.com/what-is-a-small-culture/>)

The danger of colonisation



The real worlds of the 'participants' could be elsewhere

Not really 'participants' at all

Disturbing the scene?

Digging necessarily disturbs the successive strata through which one passes to reach one's goal. But there is a significant difference between this human archaeology and its material counterpart: culture is pervasive and expresses itself in all acts of human beings, whether they are responding to customary or extraordinary stimuli. The values of a society lie as much in its dreams as in the reality it has built. Often it is only by introducing new stimuli that the investigator can peel back the layers of culture and reveal its fundamental assumptions. (MacDougall 1975: 121)

Is this in conflict or agreement with the image of settings being transient and shifting?

What are the implications for representativeness, sampling and triangulation

Data (or material) collection

Many possible choices of method

Going as far as we can or have to, to get to the bottom of things

Any devices we can find to help us to see things newly

All determined during the ethnographic process

Descriptions of places, events, interactions - photographs and drawings

Appropriate quantitative data

Recovered and reconstructed events

That same afternoon on the training course, a very competent, professional lesson was given by a French trainee teacher. One of her 'native speaker' peers said 'Well, I just have to say this, you sound your final consonants a lot and it is SO unnatural'. (Research Diary: Field Notes: July 2004) (Aboshiha 2008: 148)

Measuring just over seven centimetres high and standing in all its nakedness - was the most innocent little doll I had ever seen. ... I felt clumsy as the frailty of its limbs brushed against my fingers ... four thousand years after its original crafting its gentle fibres tugged at my heart strings with phenomenal strength. ... Who had cherished this little plaything so long ago? Had they felt as protective and caring as I? (Ovenden 2003: 42-43)

Then writing a whole fictional chapter about taking children to the museum to help understand further - interconnecting a memory of being a teacher with interview data

And more

Fictional literature - e.g. Layla Lalami's *The Moor's* account - 'a long and fully contextualised, inter-subjective journey to see ourselves from another place' (Holliday & Amadasi 2020: 30)

Reading *Madame Bovary* can tell us more than a 'survey of 472 married women' (Stenhouse 1985: 31)

Research diary entries

To make better sense of interview data it was important to go back to an earlier stage to read the research diary entries about what happened when the interviews were being set up. (Holliday & Amadasi 2020)

I cannot therefore claim that the reconstructed autoethnographic accounts which are the mainstay of my empirical material are a true account of what actually happened. This is not just because they relate to events that took place more than 40 years ago. Even if the memory was from days after, it would still be my construction of what happened dependent on the narratives most influencing me at the time - a construction that would change from day to day. Even the few journal extracts which I wrote near to the time were constructions. Even if they had been written on the day of the events, they would still have been constructions influenced by other events. Indeed, the distance of 40 years enables a greater maturity of understanding of how these narratives operate, given that, since then, with a further ten years living and working in Syria then Egypt as an implicated Western English language curriculum developer, I began to understand the nature of the Orientalist grand narrative. (Holliday 2022: 17-18)

Making intersubjective data convincing

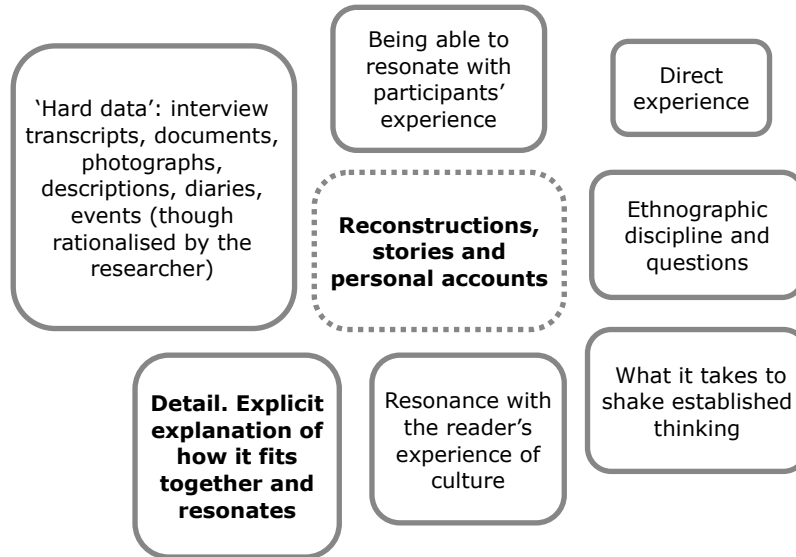
Thick Description

Examiner: What you say about the university meeting is just your personal opinion

Student: No, it's not. It connects with other data from interviews with colleagues and ...

Examiner: Can you show us where?

Convincing networks of intersubjectivity



Communicating with a community

[1] I wrote the following (Holliday 2005: 25):

... a presentation I attended at the international TESOL conference some years ago. The whole audience seemed to be English-speaking-Western teachers who were working as expatriates in an East Asian country which I will call Ex to protect the identity of the participants.

Anonymised ethnographic description (Conference notes 1999)

[2] My colleague questioned my data (Waters 2007: 357):

Holliday 2005 describes a TESOL conference presentation explaining the culture of an East Asian country, attended by what were assumed to be 'English-speaking Western teachers'. ... The participants in the session were assumed to have used it to construct a racial stereotype of the members of the culture in question. However, despite the very negative nature of this interpretation, no empirical evidence (for example, interview or questionnaire data) is provided to support it. The analysis appears to be based entirely on the author's own presuppositions.

[3] This was my response (Holliday 2007: 361):

The conference event must not be seen in isolation, but as part of a thick description which extends across the whole book within which it is presented. ... The analysis of the event is thus made in the light of a broader picture emerging from email interviews with 36 colleagues from 14 countries, descriptions of professional behaviour in conferences and other events, two ethnographic studies of teaching and training in British ELT (Anderson 2003; Baxter 2003), and my own personal narrative of professional experience as depicted in documents and reconstructed events. ... The role of personal narrative was particularly important in seeing the conference presentation as a critical incident within the thick description.

Interviews

Intervention and co-construction

Sites where all parties jointly co-construct meanings and make sense of the world (Block 2000; Miller 2011; Talmy 2011)

Where the researchers themselves 'cannot, in a sense, write stories of others without reflecting' on their 'own histories, social and cultural locations as well as subjectivities and values' (Merrill & West 2009: 5)

'A potentially creative space between people' (Merrill & West 2009: 114)

Narrative negotiation within small culture formation on the go, searching for deCentred third spaces (Holliday & Amadasí 2020)

Choices about conduct

Equipment - audio and video recorder, camera, pencil and paper - research diary (separating description from interpretation)

Recording in public spaces has projected some additional sounds such as the muezzin's call to prayer ... and the roar of the traffic. These are of particular interest to me personally, reminding me of the moments of interaction. (Honarbin-Holliday 2005: 50)

The softness of transcripts

Grand narratives

about nation, culture,
language, gender,
'us'-'them', global
positioning & politics,
.....

Splintered personal narratives

about university, class, culture,
gender, status, age, research,
interviews, academics, language,
.....

Instructions, clarity,
putting at ease,
talking time, turns

Room, furniture,
physical positioning,
lighting, equipment,
spacing, lighting

Privacy, safety, power,
image, identity,
expectations, anxieties,
positioning, personal
histories



Clothing, demeanour, eye
contact, voice volume,
communicative ability

Small culture formation on the go

That day: recent &
upcoming events,
relationships, mental
health, time to think

How the event
was set up,
approach,
politeness, timing

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