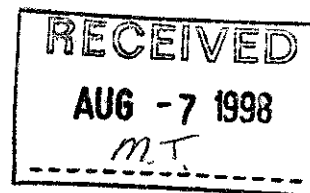


"Are You Retarded?" "No, I'm Catholic": Qualitative Methods in the Study of People with Severe Handicaps

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Qualitative research methods generally depend heavily on good communication between researcher and informant. When qualitative methodologists study informants with severe retardation whose use of language may be limited, what do they do?

If the researchers plan to study the world of the informant, then traditional participant observation guidelines are useful. But when the researcher wants to interview the informant, some modifications need to be made. The authors suggest several guidelines to follow.

DESCRIPTORS: interviewing, participant observation, qualitative research

As outsiders, people who have not been diagnosed as severely mentally retarded may assume that the presence of this disability is the most salient feature of a person's identity. People with severe retardation may not view themselves in that way, preferring to identify with members of particular religious groups, as certain kinds of workers, employees of particular companies, or as fans of particular sports teams. Asked directly, in other words, individual people with severe retardation have preferences about how to present themselves to others. As outsiders, researchers cannot take for granted the views or positions of insiders unless we study these perspectives directly.

Qualitative research methods study perspectives. They can document the patterns of people's lives and reveal how research subjects construct meaning around these patterns. Prominent qualitative methods such as participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and life history also allow researchers to study the construction of meanings. In particular, qualitative methods are used most frequently to examine this process of making

meaning, or the perspectives of various categories of people such as teachers (Grant, 1988; McPherson, 1972; Spencer, 1986), students (Cusick, 1973; Everhart, 1983), parents involved in busing (Cottle, 1976), medical students (Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961; Bosk, 1979), marijuana users (Becker, 1963), corporate workers (Kanter, 1977), and people with mental retardation who live in the community (Bogdan & Taylor, 1982; Edgerton, 1967).

A rich tradition of discussing methodological considerations has developed in education and in other fields. In this article we examine the contributions of qualitative methods to the study of a particular category of people, those with severe disabilities. What specific issues arise for the researcher studying people with severe handicaps? Are there certain types of research questions that seem particularly suited to the use of qualitative methodologies? In addition, do qualitative methods have to be adapted in any way for the study of people with severe disabilities? Here we offer some guidelines for the application of qualitative research methods to such a study. We will first briefly share our interpretation of the qualitative approach and will then focus upon some strategies for adapting the qualitative approach in the field as we have learned about them through fieldwork.

The Qualitative Approach

By qualitative research methods we mean strategies such as participant observation (McCall & Simmons, 1969; Spradley, 1980), ethnography, the study of a group's culture through first-person immersion in that culture and hence the presentation of one culture through the lens of another (Geertz, 1973; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Metz, 1983; Wolcott, 1975), interviewing and life histories, which bring the researcher into the places where people actually live their lives (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The phenomenological basis of the qualitative approach means that the researcher studies how informants make meaning out of their

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situations. Hence, the informants' own interpretations of their lives assume a prominent place. The qualitative researcher describes what the research subjects (informants) do and the meaning they make of it (Biklen & Bogdan, 1986). To do this, researchers typically cast themselves in the role of students to let informants teach them about their lives.

Basic to the qualitative approach is the belief that people act on the basis of interpretations that they make about the world; the role of the researcher is to discover the nature of these interpretations and how they are contextually situated (see, for example, Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Blumer, 1969). The purpose of the research is not to prove a particular hypothesis or test for the effect of a set of variables, but rather to come to understand the experience from the perspective of the individual involved. Language, whether in oral or written form, is central to most qualitative research because of the emphasis on symbolic understanding and communication. Qualitative data take the form of narrative rather than numbers.

The emphasis placed on language by qualitative traditions such as in-depth interviewing raises questions about how these methods might have to be adapted to study people with severe disabilities. But qualitative methodologists have studied talkative and nontalkative people and groups and have found ways to communicate with them. When anthropologists traveled to distant lands to study indigenous peoples, it often took a long time to learn a language with which to communicate. Hence, qualitative methods are labor-intensive, because they demand that the researcher spend substantial time in the environment to be studied in order to gain informants' trust and to understand the individuals' lives.

Background

Qualitative researchers have studied people with both physical and mental disabilities (see, for example, Biklen & Bogdan, 1978; Bogdan & Taylor, 1976, 1982; Brightman, 1984; Edgerton, 1967, 1984; Edgerton & Bercovici, 1976; Edgerton, Bollinger, & Herr, 1984; Ferguson, 1987; Foster, 1987; Goode, 1979, 1984).¹ They also have examined social issues generated by civil rights concerns for people with disabilities including integration in public schools (Biklen, 1985; Sutton, 1988), deinstitutionalization (Rothman & Rothman, 1984), and group homes (Biklen & Bogdan, 1978). Scholars also have discussed the uses of qualitative methods for investigating general research problems in

¹ Here we use the term "severe intellectual disabilities" to refer to those "who function intellectually within approximately the lowest 1% of a naturally distributed general population" (Albright, Brown, VanDeventer, & Jorgensen, in press). We also use the term "severe disabilities" to mean those persons who have disabilities and need many support services.

special education (Stainback & Stainback, 1984), and observing people with mental retardation in particular (Edgerton & Langness, 1978).

Researchers tend to take two approaches to the study of people with severe disabilities. These approaches can be illustrated by examining two studies. When Bogdan and Taylor (1976, 1982) interviewed two people who had been labeled mentally retarded, they described the meaning that these individuals made out of their lives and particularly out of the label of retardation. In this case, they were able to rely on words as the language of interchange.

Biklen and Bogdan (1978) studied what happened when people with severe retardation were taken out of an institution where they had exhibited violent and aggressive behavior and were placed in a group home. These informants were nonverbal, and rather than studying their perspectives directly, the researchers studied their worlds, relying on the verbal interpretations of others closely connected to them and on their own observations.

These studies differ in two important ways. The interview study totally depends on language, while the participant observation research does not depend so heavily on the informant's own description of his or her situation. The first, however, studies two people labeled mentally retarded as they personally construct their worlds. The second depends on the views of significant others in the lives of the informant and less on the particular views of the informants themselves.

Studies that depend primarily on in-depth interviewing of people with severe disabilities approach the world from the perspective of the informant. This kind of research requires articulate research subjects.² Studies that depend on participant observation of people with disabilities and the settings where they live as well as on in-depth interviews with people connected to these individuals such as staff in a group home, friends, and caseworkers, do not demand articulate informants. This kind of study examines the world of the informant. Both approaches reveal the qualitative emphasis on gaining an empathic understanding of subjects.

This kind of understanding is central to the qualitative approach. Hence, researchers try to study groups where developing empathy is not impossible. But it is not always an easy task. Perhaps the closest observers of children with severe disabilities, at least those who live at home, are their parents. Even parents, however, have reported difficulties in discovering the perspectives of their children. Helen Featherstone (1980), for example, in describing her son, wrote that "it is almost impossible for us to imagine his world" (p. 6). Josh Greenfeld (1970) concurred when he described his fam-

² Qualitative researchers have a broad definition of articulate verbal behavior. Fine (1987) has written about issues involved in interviewing children.

ity's efforts to reach his son, who is labeled autistic: "[we are] constantly trying to pierce his perimeters" (p. 169). If parents have a hard time learning the perspectives of their children, how can the qualitative researcher manage?

In this article we present some of the problems qualitative researchers have faced and some strategies they have developed to handle these difficulties. Although we discuss interviewing and observation separately, we emphasize that in both cases the researcher wants to learn the perspectives of the informants. These methods are not separate. Moseley (1987), for example, depended heavily on observations even as he interviewed all of his subjects. As you will see, some circumstances require expansion of the qualitative approach, while others reaffirm its typical practice.

Deciding What and Where to Study

Design and analysis are closely related (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). The questions researchers ask, therefore, shape the findings they can report. Hence, disability rights researchers, for example, do not study the question, Does school integration work? Rather, they study, What is the nature of model school integration programs? (Biklen, 1985). Two sorts of questions have led researchers to further the analysis of successful integration of people with severe disabilities into society: questions which look at model programs and questions which examine promising practices. Taylor (1983) studied model school integration programs. He solicited nominations of model school programs from "state and local administrators, parent leaders, and university personnel known for their expertise in the area of the severely handicapped and their commitment to the principle of integration" (p. 43). Researchers made telephone calls to check on specific information about the programs before observers conducted 2-day site visits. The research was "oriented toward identifying and documenting integration strategies and practices rather than verifying educational approaches or evaluating programs" (p. 43). Research teams also have used similar strategies in the study of promising practices for serving people with disabilities in the community (Biklen, 1987, 1988; Bogdan, 1986, 1987; Ferguson, 1986; Searl & Wickham-Searl, 1985; Taylor, 1985, 1987a).

Different kinds of relationships, particularly friendships, are another promising area where qualitative researchers are studying people with severe disabilities (Biklen, 1986; Biklen, Corrigan, & Quick, in press; Bogdan, 1987; Bogdan & Taylor, 1987; Evans, 1983). When you study a particular category of people, you study not only those who are members of the group, but individuals with whom labeled people regularly interact such as neighbors, friends, and professionals.

It is important when studying any people who have

been labeled to remember that individuals feel differently. Qualitative methods are biased toward this view. However, the researcher can distinguish between factions or affiliated peoples. The qualitative researcher who studies special education faculty, for example, can distinguish between those whose perspective reflects disability rights issues and those whose perspective is rooted in a charity ideology.

Interviewing

Researchers who interview people with severe disabilities find that observation is an important part of the process, especially during initial sessions before the informants get to know the researchers and rapport is developed. Interviewers feel challenged to provide enough structure so that the subjects know what is being asked of them, yet not so much that subjects' answers are proscribed (Spradley, 1979). Like all informants at the early stages of a study, subjects with severe mental retardation may be inclined to please the interviewer and may frame their answers according to what they think the interviewer wants to hear rather than giving their "own" responses. Although many research subjects respond in a like manner, those who have been closely supervised by the human service system may be very accustomed to responding in a way they think most acceptable to staff (Goode, 1984; Taylor, 1987b).

Interviewers may encounter six general kinds of difficulties. These include misunderstandings of what was said (on the part of both researcher and respondent); problems with open-ended questions; the interview environment; the "same answer" problem; pleasing the interviewer; and the use of significant others.

Misunderstandings

Qualitative researchers learn qualitative methods in university classes, where language is generally assumed to be a developed skill available to both parties involved in an interview. Although we may discuss social class differences between interviewer and interviewee and how these differences might affect the interview, we are less likely to think of problems encountered with informants who have severe mental retardation. Qualitative researchers often develop a mental picture of an interview situation which demands that the researcher use "small talk" to develop rapport with the interviewee. This approach, based on an assumption of mutual understanding and familiarity with typical patterns of communication, may result in continuation of discussions when neither party understands fully what is being discussed. Interviewers' difficulties tend to center on their inability to understand the actual language of the informant, while the interviewee may have a difficult time with the concepts of the interviewer.

In one study of work (Moseley, in press), the interviewer (I) struggled to communicate with Pete, the

research subject (P):

I: How are supervisors different than counselors?

P: Oh, I like it.

I: How are they different?

P: Pretty good.

I: Are they the same?

P: Oh yea.

I: They do the same jobs? [P: Yup] Or, do they do different jobs? [P: Yea]. What does the supervisor do?

P: Well, they have to clean up the stuff.

The interviewer was finally able to determine how the jobs differed by asking Pete to describe his first supervisor's job and then that of his counselor. Pete was not able to bring the supervisor and counselor together to compare them. One strategy used to overcome these cognitive difficulties, then, is to ask about people, things, and activities separately, rather than asking the respondent to provide a comparison or analysis.

Sometimes respondents may not understand what you are talking about (or vice versa). Interviewers in a project to study long-term relationships between people with disabilities and their advocates, for example, often struggled to learn how respondents described their own histories. The interviewers discovered that informants often confused time sequences and settings (Biklen, 1986) and found it possible to obtain more detailed histories through interviews with advocates.

Some misunderstandings require repetition and honesty to overcome. During one conversation, D. Biklen (1987) repeated his preference several times while developing rapport with Pat, a group home resident.

Pat: Doug, would you like a nice cold coke? Doug, a coke on ice?

Doug: Thanks, but you know, I'd rather have water if you have it.

Pat: Coke, Doug? Want a nice cold coke. Doug? A coke on ice?

Doug: (smiles) No thanks, but I'd love a cold glass of water.

Pat: No coke, Doug?

Doug: No thanks, but I'd love water.

Pat: Water it is, Doug. (p. 16)

Biklen's honesty heightened their communication and revealed Pat's ability as a flexible and gracious hostess.

Taping interviews with subjects who are severely mentally retarded may help researchers to better understand the informant's pronunciation. Moseley (in press) found it easier to understand language when he listened to the tapes than when he was in the actual interview situation. Taping the interviews also enabled him to replay sections when desired.

Open-Ended Questions

Most qualitative researchers are trained to ask open-ended questions in order to allow respondents to frame answers from their own perspectives. When interviewing persons with severe mental retardation, however, such questions may become more confusing than clarifying. When the interviewer in the study of work (Moseley, in press) asked questions such as "Tell me about your work" or "What do you think about what you are doing?", he received answers such as "It's okay," "Alright," or sometimes no response at all other than a smile or a stare. We suggest avoiding open-ended questions. Break requests for information into parts and ask separate questions about each. One researcher, for example, broke down the original question "What did you do before you worked here?" to "When did you start working here?" "What were you doing the day before you started here?" "Were you going to school or were you in a workshop, or just at home?" (Moseley, in press). This process may elicit richer responses and answers to other questions as well. You can obtain a response to queries involving more complex concepts if you can determine the right form to use.

In order to get past difficult spots and find this form, you can ask the informant questions which can be answered by "yes" or "no" or by giving a short answer. In this way the researcher can develop an understanding of the problem through a series of successive approximations. It is helpful to view this process as temporary rather than routine, however, because there are problems with it as well. Moseley (in press) found that respondents sometimes did not see a relationship among a series of short answer questions, and he felt the lack of continuity. Another danger with short answer questions is that they represent the concerns of the interviewer rather than those of the interviewee. Moseley, however, did do extensive observations at informants' work sites before interviewing them and asked questions based upon those observations. We suggest using a structured interview approach along with observations.

The Interview Environment

Effective interviews need to occur in situations where the informant feels comfortable. Qualitative researchers talk about building "rapport" and interviewing people in settings where they feel most natural. This is no less true when interviewing a person labeled severely mentally retarded. Because institutions usually make people more anxious and because people with disabilities may have been negatively evaluated in institutional settings (cf., Goode, 1984), a home-like environment may be more comfortable. In one interview by Moseley, an individual living in a group home expressed great anxiety when she thought she would be interviewed in the group home office and requested that her bedroom be used. In such cases you can ask the informant to tell

you about objects in the room, a topic which often elicits more data about the individual's experiences.

The "Same Answer" Problem

What do respondents mean when they use the same phrase over and over again in response to different questions? Moseley (1987), for example, found that one respondent frequently repeated "What I like to do is do all my work and get the job done, and that is what I like best." Perhaps the informant added this statement to many of his answers to reassure the interviewer that he was a good worker, or perhaps just to have something to say. Another informant would respond "Oh I like it" to virtually any question that he did not understand. Other respondents might not talk at all, but would simply smile and nod. As an interviewer you can use these repetitions as signals that respondents may not know the answer to your question (but will not say so), that you may not be asking questions that they find important, or that they may not understand the question.

Phrases may also be repeated because the respondent is preoccupied by a particular concern or problem which is unsolved. In response to virtually any open-ended question, for example, one woman said something like "Oh, I don't want to work at the recycling company, I want to go out. Do you think they will let me? I don't think they will." She repeated this basic statement again and again. In this situation, Moseley (1987) acted more like a counselor than a researcher. When informants repeatedly mentioned a worry or concern in response to any question, he attempted to reflect the problem back to the individual and would ask "Well, what are you going to do about it?" or "What do you think you could have done in that situation?" Asking questions that encouraged respondents to think of other options seemed to help them concentrate on what they could do and moved the conversation along.

Pleasing the Interviewer

All interviewers worry about the extent to which the interviewee says what the researcher wants to hear. When interviewing persons with severe retardation, this typical methodological problem may be heightened, as discussed earlier, by the informant's institutional experiences. This problem can be especially apparent when the informant is not sure who the researcher is and may mistake him or her for an institutional staff member. Institutionalized people may become so accustomed to telling staff members what they want to hear in order to gain control over their lives that they will not be able to express readily what is on their minds. Moseley frequently was asked if he were a staff member, and when he replied that he was not, they did not know where to "place" him, so he added that he was from the university, or that he did not work for anyone and was just there to observe. For some informants this alter-

native role identity worked to loosen the connection with institution staff.

Significant Others

One strategy to handle language difficulties and communication problems is to use important people in the lives of informants. There are both advantages and disadvantages to this approach. One advantage is clear. The friend, parent, or advocate frequently has spent considerable time with the subject and has a better understanding of the individual's language and methods of communication. In addition, these friends or family members often know specific dates or events that the respondents do not know or remember. In the study of relationships fostered by the Georgia Advocacy Office, for example, there were many instances in which the advocate expanded on answers that the protegee gave or clarified situations where the protegee combined two incidents into one (Biklen, 1986). In this case, because the relationships were being studied, the oral historians interviewed both parties as part of the method.

This approach has clear drawbacks as well, the most serious being that the friend, advocate, or parent may act, not just as a translator, but as a filter as well. In fact, it is impossible not to get the perspective of the other person. To some people, like the Georgia advocates, it is important that the story of the person with disabilities be told and a studied attempt is made to tell a story from the point of view of their friend. It depends on what stake this significant other has in the story.

In his study of the meaning of work to people with severe mental retardation, Moseley (1987) had such a difficult time understanding one young woman that he needed her mother to help him figure out what the person was saying. Although the mother's translation was helpful, her interpretations were less so; she filtered the informant's perspective through her opinions of what should or should not be discussed, or how the daughter felt. For example, when the interviewer asked the daughter if she thought her employer was giving her enough hours (she was working part time), the mother answered, "No they are not, are they, sweetie?" Fortunately the daughter seemed to feel no compunction about saying what she felt, frequently stating her own opinions. The mother would help translate if necessary (although as time went on, the better Moseley understood the daughter), but she also interacted with her daughter, offering opinions on her behavior such as "Oh, Alice, you know you shouldn't do that either." The daughter would then giggle or say something like, "Mom, I do it myself." An added benefit of relying on the parent was that the interviewer learned something about how the mother and daughter each felt about a particular issue and something of the dynamics of their relationship.

Biklen, who studied relationships between students labeled typical and handicapped in integrated fourth

grade classrooms, interviewed the teachers who became co-researchers. The teachers kept a log of student interactions with each other so that researchers could examine how interactions changed over time (Biklen et al., in press).

Nothing is trivial to qualitative researchers, and we can use situations that are not ideal to make the situation itself data. The researchers' need for the help of the informant's mother, for example, produced field notes on the mother-daughter relationship. The context in which researchers collect data must be included as part of field notes.

Observing

Researchers should seek opportunities to get unfiltered responses; hence, observations play a key role in studying persons with severe disabilities.

Qualitative researchers use participant observation to study subjects in the context of their worlds. Although language is important to the participant observer, it is possible to study a situation from the perspective of the individual with mental retardation who may also be nonverbal. The goal is to discover the meaning that subjects make of their world. In this section we use examples from the field to illustrate three issues to take into account: observe over a period of time in varied settings, get to know the person, and use significant others.

Observe Over a Period of Time in Varied Settings

Participant observation is labor-intensive research. The effort sustains insights. Goode (1984) observed a man with severe mental retardation in the institutional setting where he was tested and in the group home where he lived. The institutional staff asserted that the man had no language, although his friends in the group home insisted and the researcher observed that he spoke and communicated just fine. The informant did not experience the setting of the test as comfortable enough to risk talking, so he never did.

Some people are more difficult to know than others. Although this is not always language-related, language does give the researcher data. For the nonverbal person, however, the researcher must find other windows on the soul. Observing Chris, an institutionalized girl who was blind, deaf, and severely mentally retarded, over time, Goode (1979) discovered the ways she attempted to manipulate her environment. Goode realized that Chris did not perceive the world with the same senses that he did. Concluding that he and Chris occupied two different perceptual worlds, he wanted an experimental basis for discovering hers. He spent time watching her rock back and forth engaging in rhythmic banging of a spoon or rattle, and observed that she always held her head in a particular position. He surmised that she had slight hearing in one ear and impaired sight in one eye. In order to understand her world, he bandaged one of

his own eyes completely and the other slightly, and he closed one of his ears off completely and the other slightly. Then he used the strategy of imitating her as she sought pleasure. He let her be the teacher and discovered that her rocking motion allowed light and sound to form rhythmic patterns that were stimulating and pleasurable.

There are stages in Goode's work. First, he recognized that he and his subject lived in two separate worlds. Second, he realized he needed to experience her world in order to understand it. Third, he tried the strategy of letting her lead him.

Goode was interested in how Chris' given world looked to her. Though he has argued elsewhere about the socially produced identities of institutionalized people (Goode, 1984), here he did not study the structural effects of institutionalization on her behavior. Although rocking may have provided pleasure, given her situation, another setting may have encouraged entirely different behavior.

Others have used contrived disabilities as a consciousness-raising tool, but it is important to recognize the risks Goode took with this innovative approach. If the researcher is in an academic setting, such risk-taking may appear unattractive. It is important to remember, however, that many issues must continually be negotiated in the research process. We still negotiate with graduate students, for example, over how many subjects should be interviewed for their dissertation research. Strategies for studying nonverbal subjects can be negotiated as well.

Get to Know the Person

One way to get to know subjects in their natural environment is by spending time with them. You go to know their preferences, their habits, and their mode of interacting. Getting to know the informant well allows you to see the person empathically. Reactions to characteristics, mannerisms, or appearance may change over time. Daniels (1983), for example, found that her original alienation from army psychiatrists or upper class volunteer women dissipated after she spent time with them. She gained sympathy with their perspectives.

The importance of getting to know a person with severe mental retardation well is grounded in the idea that early impressions are simply that—early impressions. There is someone to get to know. Goode (1984) argues that people try to interpret what it means to be retarded without knowing well the person with retardation. This tendency reflects Becker's "hierarchy of credibility" (1967), the idea that the more important or powerful the person, the more claim or legitimacy the person has to define the situation. Although it may be intellectually difficult to get to know the informant who is retarded, it is an obstacle to overcome. Moseley (in press) worries that as adults we have very few ways of conversing with persons who are not as smart as we are

Most of the ways we have developed of communicating cast them in the role of child, as incompetent, or even worse, as insignificant.

Experimentation and risk-taking become important, because we need to develop ways to talk and interact with individuals who have intellectual deficits that do not place them in a lesser position. Goode took risks in his attempt to enter Chris's perceptual world.

Use Significant Others

Significant others are as important in observing as they are in interviewing. Although there are dangers in depending on advocates, friends, or parents to interpret meaning, there are benefits as well. Ideally, the researcher would want to compare official records about an informant's life with the person's perspective. If this is impossible to achieve, the researcher can depend on others who know the person well to help. Biklen and Bogdan (1978) led a team of researchers to study community placement of 10 men labeled severely retarded who were judged to be the most violent residents in an institution. They relied on significant others to learn about the well-being of the men. The director of the men's former institution unit told the researchers that his observations of the intact furniture in the group residence suggested to him that one former inmate, Johnny, had improved his behavior in his home. Otherwise, he said, the furniture would have bite marks on it. Leading the team into a bedroom, he argued that a dresser filled with clothes showed that the resident was using the toilet and not ripping his clothes, two problems staff had faced in the institution. In this case the research team depended on people who knew the house residents well to interpret the meaning of activities and events. Had they not had the assistance of people who were familiar with the residents, they would have walked into the house and seen the furnishings as ordinary. They would not have looked for bite marks on furniture, ravaged carpets, or empty bureau drawers had they not been comparing the men's present lives to their former lives in the institution.

The difficulty of depending on significant others, of course, is whether or not to trust the person's views. This is a generic problem for qualitative researchers, but the difficulties in using language as a satisfactory means of communication make the researcher more conscious of this issue. The best way to judge the adequacy of important others is by the quality of the data they give. Rich data, full of examples, given about a variety of situations over time will provide enough details for the researcher to make a decision.

Conclusion

We have tried to show that basic guidelines of qualitative research hold up fairly well in the study of people with severe disabilities, primarily because the guidelines are, in themselves, flexible. We have suggested that

sometimes certain rules (e.g., the importance of staying in the field over time) are vital. On other occasions (e.g., Goode's [1979] investigation of a young girl's alternative perceptual view of the world), bending the parameters of academic research guidelines may yield richer data.

The researcher's major concern is language. The dependence of the qualitative researcher on language, and the image of the ideal informant (particularly in American field work) as an articulate person (e.g., Doc. in Whyte, 1955), may call for some creative tactics in the face of the informant who cannot verbally inform. It is important for the qualitative researcher who wants to learn about the worlds of subjects with severe mental retardation to supplement information received through verbal discussion with observations in the places where they live and work.

Qualitative researchers enter natural environments to find out what meanings people make of their situations, as well as to examine the conditions of people's lives (hence, the camera has been an important tool, cf. Blatt, Ozolins, & McNally, 1979; English, 1988), but we need a framework in which to place these meanings and to help explain conflicting perspectives. It is for this reason that the design of the research project is so important. If the design of the study takes the improvement of living, educational, and working conditions for people with severe disabilities as the starting point, then the analysis of the data will be based upon this orientation.

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