

# Qualitative Methods

Betina Hollstein and Nils C. Kumkar

**Abstract:** The article reviews the broad and diverse landscape of qualitative methods in sociology in German-speaking countries. Historically, the development of qualitative methods can be characterized by a strong focus on text-based, sequential analytical approaches such as objective hermeneutics, narrative analysis, and the documentary method. In the first section, we briefly sketch this development up to the turn of the century. In the second section, we describe the changes in the qualitative landscape after the millennium. Three major lines of development can be identified: First, qualitative approaches have become institutionalized and canonized and have been increasingly translated into English. Second, in conjunction with a heightened interest in theories of practice, constructivism, and post-structuralism, other methods have also gained ground in German-speaking countries, in particular ethnographic approaches, grounded theory, and discourse analysis, which has resulted in a much broader and diverse qualitative field. Third, this broader spectrum also encompasses the inclusion of new data types, specifically visual data and especially images and films. In the last section, we highlight current challenges and directions for future research.

**Keywords:** Data analysis, digitalization, methods, qualitative methods

## Introduction

When we speak of qualitative methods, we are referring to a broad and heterogeneous research landscape that is not easy to capture in a comprehensive fashion. Among these methods are ethnographic approaches, different forms of observation, various interviewing techniques, and the collection of documents or archival data. At the same time, a host of methods are used for analysis that rest on various theoretical assumptions and methodological positions. Among them are symbolic interactionism, the sociology of knowledge, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and constructivism to name a few major approaches (Schützeichel, *MICROSOCIOLOGY*, this volume). In adhering to the “interpretive paradigm,” most of these approaches share some common ground despite many contentions: Their defining feature is the pivotal role assigned to the understanding of meaning (*Sinn-Verstehen*). Qualitative research aims to systematically reconstruct such meaning or, in other words, involves what in German has been coined as a methodically controlled understanding of the other (“*methodisch kontrolliertes Fremdverstehen*”; Arbeitsgruppe Bielefelder Soziologen, 1973). Qualitative approaches emphasize that making sense of action and meaning always relies on processes of interpretation and understanding.

In the following, we review qualitative methods in German-speaking countries, which is a particularly lively and innovative area of research. To better understand the latest developments in this field, we begin by briefly sketching its early years, which were shaped by a strong focus on text-based, sequential analytical methods. In the second section, we describe the changes in the qualitative landscape after the millennium—namely, canonization, a diversification of methods, and the inclusion of new kinds of data. In the final section, we highlight current challenges and directions for future research.

## 1 Early Development of Qualitative Methods in German-Speaking Countries

Until the 1970s, qualitative methods of empirical social research were applied almost exclusively in combination with quantitative methods in German-speaking countries. Examples of this are the seminal Marienthal study (Jahoda et al., 1933), Theodor W. Adorno and colleagues' investigations of the authoritarian personality (Adorno et al., 1950), or Hans Popitz'/Hans-Paul Bardt's et al. studies on workers' images of society conducted among the West German steel industry (1957). It was only in the 1970s that German-speaking sociologists started to discuss the theoretical foundations of the interpretive paradigm and qualitative methods on a broader basis, a phenomenon that was triggered by a working group of sociologists in Bielefeld who translated the major works of Aaron Cicourel, Herbert Blumer, and Harold Garfinkel (*Arbeitsgruppe Bielefelder Soziologen*, 1973). In the late 1970s and 1980s, creative efforts that drew on different theoretical traditions resulted in several innovative methods for collecting and analyzing qualitative data. These became the cornerstones of qualitative schools in German-language sociology.

Perhaps the most salient aspect of the qualitative methods developed during that period is the strong focus on a reconstructive analytical approach that interprets the transcripts of observations or interviews by proceeding by sequentially (i.e., word for word and line by line). In this way, reconstructive approaches, such as narrative analysis, objective hermeneutics, or the documentary method, enable researchers to distinguish between explicit knowledge (i.e., subjective representations) and tacit knowledge or action orientations that can be reconstructed as implicitly guiding and connecting the sequence of utterances. Furthermore, these methods allow one to account for the genesis of such action orientations to a certain extent (i.e., “how an individual develops certain ways of reacting to difficult situations and experiences in the past”) (Breckner and Rupp, 2002: 299; cf. also Wohlrab-Sahr, 2006).

For example, in drawing on basic distinctions made by linguistic theory, Fritz Schütze developed *narrative analysis*, which seeks to reconstruct so-called “elementary biographical process structures” (i.e., how people relate to external circumstances through their actions, such as “biographical action schemes” or “trajectories of

suffering”) and the sequence of such biographical process structures over the life course (Schütze, 2008). Central to this method is the distinction between different communicative schemes of representing past experiences and perceptions (i.e., extempore (impromptu) autobiographical narratives), in which individuals recount events in an unrestricted way on the one hand and offer descriptions and argumentations that are more strongly bound to social frames and the current situation on the other. To account for these differences, Schütze developed a specific method of data collection, the *narrative interview* (ibid.), which became a dominant means of collecting biographical data in German-speaking countries (Huinink/Hollstein, LIFE COURSE, this volume). The aim of this method is to primarily elicit (“trigger”) autobiographical stories with narrative stimuli, later followed by questions that prompt argumentations and evaluations. By comparing passages from extempore narratives with current interpretations documented in descriptions and argumentations, researchers are able to account for reinterpretations of experiences and events (Schütze, 2008: 171f.).

*Objective hermeneutics*, sometimes also called *structural hermeneutics*, was developed by Ulrich Oevermann and colleagues at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin (Oevermann et al., 1987 [1979]; cf. Garz and Kraimer, 1994; Wernet, 2014). It is perhaps the most elaborate sequential analytical method. Originally applied in a study on socialization and interaction processes in families, this method aims at reconstructing the inner logic and genesis of action and interaction systems. By drawing on structuralist thinking and George Herbert Mead’s writings, and in explicit opposition to the classic hermeneutic tradition, this method builds on the distinction between “subjective” (i.e., intended, conscious) meaning and so-called “latent” meaning that structures the subjects’ actions and interactions “behind their backs.”

Another strand of research that is particularly prominent in the German-speaking community is one that rests on the sociology of knowledge (Karstein/Wohlrab-Sahr, CULTURE, this volume). For example, the *documentary method*, a socio-genetic approach that follows the ideas set forth in Karl Mannheim’s work and was developed in the late 1980s by Ralf Bohnsack (2014a), builds on the distinction between explicit and implicit (atheoretical, incorporated) knowledge. This method aims to reconstruct the implicit knowledge of social actors and the orienting frames guiding their actions, (i.e., structures of meaning “beyond the literal or referential meaning content, but also beyond the communicative intentions of the interlocutors”) (ibid., 218). The documentary method focuses on collective orientation patterns and so-called “conjunctive experiences” that are shared by specific milieus or groups. To grasp these collective orientations, researchers typically employ non-directive *group discussions* with subjects who share a similar social background (cf. Loos and Schäffer, 2001).

Until the mid-1990s, text-based analytical methods clearly dominated the qualitative research landscape (cf. Garz and Kraimer, 1994; Hitzler and Honer, 1997). Whereas qualitative research is often associated with ethnography in the Anglo-Saxon world, ethnographic approaches were less visible and clearly subordinate in German-

speaking sociology at that time. However, ethnographic studies did exist (cf. Hirschauer and Amann, 1997), such as Karin Knorr-Cetina's ethnography on the "manufacture of knowledge" in U.S. scientific labs, a study quite significant in the establishment of so-called laboratory studies (1981); Roland Girtler's study on police work (1980); Bruno Hildenbrand's ethnography of families with schizophrenic family members (1983); or Jörg Bergmann's ethnomethodological study on gossiping as a discrete form of indiscretion (1987).

## 2 Major Developments after the Millennium

Since the turn of the century, several lines of development can be identified in German-speaking countries: Reconstructive approaches have become canonized and institutionalized. Apart from reconstructive methods, other methods have gained ground, in particular ethnographic approaches, grounded theory, and discourse analysis. This has resulted in a much broader and diverse qualitative landscape. Finally, this broader spectrum also encompasses the inclusion of new data types and areas of application, especially visual data such as images and films.

### 2.1 Canonization, institutionalization, and internationalization

In her article on the state of the Germanophone field of qualitative methods before 2000, Monika Wohlrab-Sahr concluded that a canonization of the different approaches was to be expected in the years that followed (Wohlrab-Sahr, 2000: 215), a prognosis that turned out to be true. Before 2000, familiarizing oneself with the different approaches often required one to personally join workshops and seminars held by the respective groups or to piece together their methodological development by working one's way through the chapters on methods in written reports on research projects, in collected volumes, and unpublished manuscripts (ibid.). Today, a number of textbooks and monographs is readily at hand. For example, the manual *Einführung in die Interpretationstechnik der objektiven Hermeneutik (Introduction to the Interpretation Technique of Objective Hermeneutics)* first published in 2000, provides the reader with an accessible beginner's guide to objective hermeneutics (Wernet, 2009). A compilation of major articles by Fritz Schütze (2016) is available, too. Ralf Bohnsack's *Praxeologische Wissenssoziologie (Praxeological Sociology of Knowledge)* (2017) offers a thorough discussion of the approach's theoretical development and its epistemological foundations.

At the same time, we can detect an increasing awareness of the commonalities of reconstructive and sequential analytical approaches. Bohnsack's *Rekonstruktive Sozialforschung (Reconstructive Social Research)*, first published in 1991 and now available in its ninth edition (2014b), introduces students and researchers to the general methodological stance of reconstructive social research, arguing for a theo-

retically consistent understanding of qualitative social research as reconstructive research. In a similar vein, the manual *Qualitative Sozialforschung (Qualitative Social Research)*, first published in 2008 (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014), provides a practice-oriented and didactically sophisticated, systematic introduction to the different reconstructive approaches to qualitative social research, methods of data collection, and interpretation (cf. also Rosenthal, 2018; Strübing, 2013).

A large number of textbooks, monographs, and edited volumes on the collection and interpretation of specific types of data completes this picture—for example, on interviews (Helfferich, 2004), and more specifically, narrative interviews (Küsters, 2006), expert interviews (Bogner et al., 2002; Gläser and Laudel, 2010), problem-centered interviews (Witzel and Reiter, 2012), group discussions (Loos and Schäffer, 2001), focus groups (Kühn and Koschel, 2011), and ethnography (Dellwing and Prus, 2012; Breidenstein et al., 2013). In addition, peer-reviewed journals for qualitative methods channel and organize the lively discussion on the subject. Examples of these include the *Zeitschrift Qualitative Forschung (ZQF; Journal of Qualitative Research)*, *Sozialer Sinn (Social Meaning)*, and the multilingual, open-access *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung (FQS; Forum: Qualitative Social Research)*.

However, the Germanophone field of qualitative methods did not develop in isolation, of course. This was already true for its early phase before 2000; the reconstructive paradigm is inconceivable without the favorable reception of the writings of, for example, Harold Garfinkel, Aaron Cicourel, and Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. Since 2000, the international interwovenness of the field has intensified—partially because younger scholars in particular are increasingly working and writing in English and because exchange students from all over the world study qualitative methods in German-speaking countries and vice versa, thus rendering the very definition of the ‘Germanophone’ field of qualitative methods somewhat problematic.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.2 Diversification: “New” methods have gained a foothold

These processes of internationalization are bidirectional. While, on the one hand, translations and publications in different languages (mostly in English) made the methodological stance of Germanophone reconstructive research accessible to international discussion and a wider reception,<sup>2</sup> a host of ‘new’ methods that are in-

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1 At the very least, it does seem like a stretch to qualify the work of a Chinese social scientist, published in the English language, as ‘Germanophone qualitative social research’ simply because she uses the documentary method’s approach to the interpretation of films (Hao, 2016).

2 For example, Schütze (2008) or Oevermann et al. (1987). See also the impressive list of foreign-language publications in the recently updated bibliographical list for the documentary method: <https://www.hsu-hh.de/systpaed/wp-content/uploads/sites/755/2020/01/LitdokMeth20-01-07.pdf>). A pioneering work was *Qualitative Methoden: Ein Handbuch* by Uwe Flick, Ernst von Kardoff, and Ines Steinke (2000; translated into English in 2004).

creasingly used in German-speaking countries also attests to an increasing ‘import’ of methodological approaches developed in other international contexts. Qualitative approaches that were common in the Anglo-Saxon world, such as ethnographical approaches and grounded theory, gained a foothold in German-speaking countries, too. If qualitative methods in the German-speaking world were marked by a strong focus on text-based analysis and reconstructive methods up to the millennium, this has changed remarkably during the last two decades.

As mentioned above, *ethnographic methods* were never completely absent from Germanophone sociology before the turn of the century, but they were either limited to a few individual studies or merely used as an ancillary methodology for exploring and gaining ‘access’ to a field, which was then to be investigated using other methods. A heightened interest in practice theories and with it in *die Schweigsamkeit des Sozialen* (the reticence of the social; Hirschauer, 2001) has led to a productive and multifaceted engagement with ethnography over the last two decades.

These studies include works in the ethnomethodological tradition, such as Thomas Scheffer’s study on practices of granting asylum (2001) or the conversation-analytical studies by Christian Meyer, which have a strong focus on body language (2013). The latter vein encompasses studies on the relationship between the rhetorical practices of the Iroquois and their political organization, body language in sports, or interactions with dementia patients (Meyer, 2014).

Ethnographic studies also include the works of Stefan Hirschauer and Herbert Kalthoff, two former students of Knorr-Cetina, who employ a constructivist approach, for instance, when analyzing knowledge practices of risk-management strategies and calculation practices in banking (Kalthoff, 2011). In the research group on “un/doing differences,” funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), Hirschauer and his colleagues investigated practices of differentiation, that is, of “creation, overlap, and invalidation of cultural distinctions” (Hirschauer, 2014: 117) in various social contexts, such as the construction of gender in sports (Müller, 2014) or the grading practices of teachers in German high schools (Kalthoff, 2013; Karstein/Wohlrab-Sahr, *CULTURE*, this volume).

Building on Alfred Schütz’ and Thomas Luckmann’s sociology of knowledge, a distinct phenomenological approach has been institutionalized in German-speaking countries (Karstein/Wohlrab-Sahr, *CULTURE*, this volume) that encompasses different strands of ethnography. So-called *ethnographic lifeworld analysis* (Hitzler and Honer, 2015) is primarily concerned with the subjective experiences and bonding (*Vergemeinschaftung*) of social groups, such as the lifeworlds of youth cultures like punk, antifa, techno music, sport climbing, or veganism (Hitzler and Niederbacher, 2010). In contrast, *focused ethnography* (Knoblauch, 2005) aims at the detailed sequential analysis of certain social practices and communicative activities and is characterized by rather short visits in the field and the use of recordings that allow for intense analysis of such action (e.g., Microsoft PowerPoint presentations or commemoration rituals) (Knoblauch and Schnettler, 2012).

Besides ethnographic approaches, *grounded-theory methodology* has also experienced a considerable upswing in German-speaking countries in recent years in both its more pragmatic and its more constructivist variants. It needs to be mentioned in particular for its contributions to methodology and research practice (Strübing, 2004; Mey and Mruck, 2007; Equit and Hohage, 2016). *Qualitative content analysis* became more popular as well—a development that might have been accelerated by the advancements in qualitative data-analytical software tools (e.g., Kuckartz, 2018).<sup>3</sup>

Finally, *discourse analytical methods* that build on the (post-)structuralist work of Michel Foucault have gained tremendous momentum since the millennium. In recent years, a broad scene has established itself that has developed different variants of Foucault's discourse analysis (Keller et al., 2004; Diaz-Bone, 2006; Keller, 2007). As a specific German-language development, mention must also be made of the strand of discourse analysis linked to the sociology of knowledge that has been promoted in particular by Reiner Keller (Keller, 2007). In empirical studies, it is often combined with grounded-theory methodology. Topics range from discourses on garbage to human genetics and climate change (Keller et al., 2010).

### 2.3 New types of data: Visual sociology

In the last two decades, not only has the spectrum of methods expanded considerably but so have the types of data that are analyzed beyond the hitherto dominant focus on verbal data. One area in which differentiation and transfer to new data types is especially prominent is visual sociology (i.e., the analysis of visual data, especially images and films). This is also an area of innovation that developed in close contact with the international and chiefly Anglophone discourse: whereas the founding texts of the reconstructive methods sometimes took decades before they made their way into the international arena, the debate on the analysis of visual data was either already interwoven with the broader visual turn in sociological methods or at least translated for international collected volumes early on (e.g., Pauwels and Mannay, 2019; Knoblauch et al., 2008).

The central challenge that visual materials pose for reconstructive approaches is the synchronicity of the image (moving and still alike). All these approaches rely on sequential analytical methods for the interpretation of texts (be they interview transcripts, group discussions, conversations, or actual literary texts) to reconstruct meaning as it unfolds in time. This basic premise conflicts with the seemingly banal truth that an image is defined by the synchronicity of everything that is 'in its frame.' As Foucault writes, citing Condillac, "to my gaze 'the brightness is within the rose'; in my discourse, I cannot avoid it coming either before or after it" (Foucault, 1994: 82),

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<sup>3</sup> The software programs Atlas-ti, MaxQDA, and Feldpartitur (for the analysis of video data) have all been developed in Germany.

and this is true not only for the still but also for the moving image. While video records events and replays them in time, every ‘scene’ it depicts (or every still that it is frozen into) remains a composition of simultaneously existing elements.

This challenge is solved in various ways. Whereas hermeneutic approaches based on the sociology of knowledge (Raab, 2008) reestablish the principle of sequentiality by insisting on temporally structured processes of producing and especially reading an image, other methods proceed differently. For example, the documentary method, which builds on the science-of-arts approaches of Max Imdahl and Erwin Panofsky, interprets the meaning of the image through the (synchronous) compositional levels of planimetric composition, perspective projection, and scenic arrangement (Bohnsack, 2019), thereby putting special emphasis not so much on the processes of producing and reading but rather on the mimetic habitual aspect of experiencing the visual, the implicit understanding through (and not about) the image. Such a compositional (instead of sequential) approach proves especially well suited to understanding pictures as data whose special property is the synchronic unity of contradicting elements. In objective hermeneutics, by contrast, the question of whether compositional aspects are taken into account depends on the type of images (Oevermann, 2014). Two books that contain analyses of one particular picture—the famous photo of high-ranking members of the Obama administration sitting in the situation room at about the time when Bin Laden was killed—illustrate the different approaches (Kauppert and Leser, 2014; Przyborski and Haller, 2014). For instance, in his analysis, Oevermann eschews planimetric or other compositional aspects because he considers aesthetic composition to play only a minor role in photos of this kind (2014). He concentrates first and foremost on the immanent content of the photo and refers to any knowledge and context information beyond what is actually depicted (such as the names and status of the depicted persons) only at the very end of his analysis. In this analysis, his focus is on “making sense of what is observable” and the question of which other situations are portrayed in a similar way. These thought experiments result in rather surprising findings, such as that the *mise en scène* could also be a sports event, where people are engaged but not personally affected—which in light of the actual context (an execution) contributes to its downplaying and legitimization (*ibid.*). Other analyses that take into account the complex formal composition, perspective, and scenic choreography, such as the analysis by Aglaja Przyborski, which employs the documentary method (2014), or by Roswitha Breckner, which applies segment analysis (2014), reveal additional facets of the discrepancies between the factual status of the depicted actors and their position in the image (such as between Obama’s real-life status as POTUS and his rather insignificant position in the photograph itself), thus shedding light on a specific representation of political power.

Combining visual data with other documents can prove especially productive (Knappertsbusch/Langfeldt/Kelle, *MIXED-METHODS AND MULTIMETHOD RESEARCH*, this volume). For example, Kumkar (2018: especially 109–183) triangulates the documentary interpretation of the imagery used in propaganda from Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party with an interpretation of group discussions with activists. He

demonstrates that these methods can help to understand how images, via the simultaneity of contradictory elements, allow their recipients to have their cake and eat it too, so to speak. On the one hand, the images encourage the onlooker to identify with the implicated subject position by referring to their ‘negative’ emotions (like aggression), which are often repressed in the discourse of the respective groups. On the other hand, the images offer a symbolic relief from these negative emotions by transposing them into heroic postures (e.g., signing up for a greater cause).

Overall, visual sociology has become a lively and innovative part of qualitative methods with applications that draw on a wide spectrum of visual data and encompass political photos, advertisements, or fine art. For instance, everyday photography (e.g., Breckner, 2017; 2021; Müller, 2018) or genograms (Hildenbrand, 2004) have been used in biographical and family research. In addition, visual tools have been increasingly employed in data collections, such as in the qualitative analysis of personal and organizational social networks (e.g., Schönhuth et al., 2013; Häußling, *SOCIAL NETWORKS*, this volume).

Finally, the analysis of videos and films of different sorts has also become an area of broad interest in which reconstructive sequential analytical approaches have proven especially productive (e.g., Knoblauch et al., 2006; Kissmann, 2009; Knoblauch and Schnettler, 2012; Tuma et al., 2013).

### 3 Outlook: Qualitative Methods in the Digital Era

In general, the development of qualitative research methods in German-speaking sociology has been characterized by a strong orientation toward theory and a high level of methodological reflexivity (cf. e.g., Kalthoff et al., 2008; Hirschauer et al., 2018). The 1970s and 1980s saw the development of elaborate text-based sequential analytical methods. These included narrative analysis, objective hermeneutics, and the documentary method, which were almost exclusively applied in German-language qualitative research. This has changed since the millennium. Since then, sequential analytical methods—formerly restricted to German-language sociology—have been increasingly translated into English and have thus been made available to a wider audience. At the same time, a heightened interest in theories of practice, constructivism, and post-structuralism has contributed to methods such as ethnographic approaches, grounded theory, and discourse analysis gaining ground in German-speaking countries. These two trends have converged to create a broader and more internationalized qualitative landscape. This broader spectrum has also seen the inclusion of new data types, in particular visual data, such as images and films. In this regard, extensions of the heretofore text-based reconstructive methods to the analysis of images and films can be seen as a further specific contribution of the German-language research community.

The current challenges are related largely to the increasing digitalization of society. Although the digitalization of qualitative research itself has made important

advancements, with the most prominent probably being the development and widespread use of software programs such as Atlas/ti, MaxQDA, or Feldpartitur, discussion and methodological innovation with regard to the collection and interpretation of digitalized data has just started within the German-speaking qualitative community. This is especially true if compared with the discussion on big data, computational social sciences, and data mining that has been led by scholars in the quantitative realm (Barth/Blasius, *QUANTITATIVE METHODS*, this volume).

Empirical studies in substantive areas of research are increasingly tapping into virtual reality, digital (especially Internet) data, and the use of social media. Particular mention should be made of media and communication research (Hepp, *MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION*, this volume), the sociology of technology (Rammert, *TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION*, this volume), or network and migration research, such as Heike Greschke's ethnographic study on the everyday life and use of virtual space of migrants (2009).

However, methodological reflections on this special type of data and what it means for qualitative methods—particularly in terms of its specific analytical benefits—still remain a subordinate field of discussion. Notable exceptions in this regard are contributions on the use of asynchronous written online communication for qualitative inquiries (Schiek and Ullrich, 2017), the interpretation of Instagram posts (Schreiber and Kramer, 2016), YouTube videos (Geimer and Burckhardt, 2017), or photos on Facebook (Breckner, 2021), and more general discussions of virtual (Marotzki et al., 2014) or Internet data (Rammert and Schubert, 2006; Schirmer et al., 2015; Müller, 2018).

Since large amounts of digital data, especially on the Internet, are qualitative (textual or visual) data, methods specifically designed for the proper analysis of such data with the aim of understanding its meaning and demonstrating a high degree of sensitivity toward the context of its production and interpretation have much more potential than has been realized so far. In this context, ethnographic approaches and sequential analytical methods as developed in German-language sociology seem to be especially powerful tools to not only address and better understand digital traces and the limits of big data analysis but also to foster fruitful cooperation across fields and disciplines—for instance, between sociology and cognitive and computational sciences. There is a lot of work ahead to be sure, but there is also a strong foundation on which to build.

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