

**Editorial:**

# **Introduction to the Special Issue**

What qualitative research makes us see?

by

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This volume of the Journal of Comparative Social Work offers six highly interesting articles, all of which employ methods and analytic strategies not so frequently used in both general as well as in social work. Apart from showing us how to use them, they also illustrate well what qualitative research offers to see in our research. Social reality is a most complex matter, and it is also contested. Both our choice of method and our choice of analytic strategy are vital for what we come to see in whatever we explore. This is not new, but the interest in this volume apart from the content of each article, is with illustrating how method and findings are closely linked. This variety of methods, techniques and analyses illustrate well how important qualitative research of a high quality is in exploring whatever it is that we research, which makes visible the complexity and the contested of organizational life. For anyone concerned with users and how we constantly attempt to improve caring for the variety of patients, clients or users, methods matter. They offer insight into practical organizational life as we find it in the meetings both in and across organizations, in the meetings between users and professionals and across and within professional groups.

Organizational life is never static and seldom takes place as shown in organizational charts or maps. Organisational life takes place as meetings between persons, and it is this that makes talk crucial for understanding how organizations work. Whereas the majority seem to think that the best way would be to ask people questions of how their organization works, our contributors instead explore organisational life in a variety of other ways by analysing documents, photos and ethnographic notes. Documents are written words, and apart from their content, also act as active agents by the impact on what takes place within organisations, networks inside and beyond organisations, how documents in many ways tend to reflect Western culture by manufacturing facts, how documents are called upon and how they make things visible and manageable. Documents enter organizational talk and behaviour in their own ways (Prior 2004), and our authors also use analytic approaches and strategies that make data speak to us in ways that other more classic methods and analyses cannot do. This is why the choice of method is a strategic choice based on our research problem stating what we are to explore. However, qualitative research is never just a question about textbook prescriptions, but as we are constantly reminded, it also deals with creative imagination.

This volume illustrates well the importance of methods to our analytic findings, as the authors critically discuss their data, methods and analyses as well as their conclusions. Our readers will find their rich material of interest to both their own research and their own practice, and not least, as interesting material for (their own) students. There is a particular reason behind this special issue with a methodological focus on qualitative research to which I will now turn.

On September 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> 2012, Lund University, Sweden, hosted the midterm conference for the Research Network no. 20 on Qualitative Research in the European Sociological Organisation (ESA RN20 QR <http://www.europeansociology.org/><sup>1</sup>) with Bernt Schnettler, Bayreuth University, Germany, as Chair (2011-2013). The Conference was called *Curiosity and serendipity – a conference on qualitative methods in the social sciences*, with David Wästerfors, (RN20 Chair 2013-2015) Katarina Jacobsson and Kristina Göransson as local organizers. Along with ESA RN20, the conference was co-organized by the School of Social Work and the Department of Sociology at Lund University, Sweden (<http://www.esamidterm2012.se/>). The conference keynote speeches are available in a special volume, “Curiosity and Serendipity in Qualitative Research”, in the *Qualitative Sociology Review* (QSR with journal editor Krzysztof Konecki, also a RN20 member ), 2013 Volume IX Issue 2 (<http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/volume25.php>), with Jacobsson, Göransson and Wästerfors as guest editors. That special issue is of particular interest to our special issue. Beyond being linked to the same conference, the different keynotes elaborate on some of the analyses that our JCSW contributors also draw on, which reminds us of the importance of historic time with its many methodological battles. Moreover, some of the authors of this JCSW special issue participated at this Lund conference.

Whereas we now take social reality as constructed and reconstructed for granted, this has not always been the case. Despite some who still naively see language as purely referential, as the special QSR volume reminds us, the philosophy of language

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<sup>1</sup> For anyone interested in qualitative research, ESA RN20 is a good arena for presenting the methodological side of your research (particularly for PhD students), as well as for any social science researcher for staying updated on qualitative research, see the web for membership.

and social philosophy have both made us see the importance of the communicative aspects of language to the (re)construction of social reality. In addition, new technology such as videotaping, taping talks or using a camera (the latter two are used in our volume) has made it possible to capture data in situ, or to capture the activities we study when they take place as opposed to retrospectively interviewing participants about what took place. Second, such technology has also made sequential analyses possible, in which we carefully and in great detail examine how social reality in practice is constructed and also as illustrated in this volume. Such analyses have taught us the importance of seeing language as social action as we find it with the difference between asking people questions about what took place as opposed to analysing data from when whatever we study actually took place, because very often the two for different reasons often do not overlap (Ryen, 2002 and 2011; Silverman, 2013). For anyone interesting in improving organizational practice, these are major improvements in qualitative research, though sadly they are too seldom used.

Let us now briefly comment on the articles in our volume. In his intranational comparative analysis on regional social planning on childhood in Italy, Giuseppe Moro is analysing documents through the use of a programme theory approach. Crucially, Moro points to the importance of the context(s) in which the transformations of child policies he explores have taken place. In this way, he invites us to see the challenges and limitations that otherwise might have been difficult to see despite the last decade's` focus on child policies. In his article on welfare technology, Niels Christian Mossfeldt Nickelsen studies two cases from Denmark in which disabled citizens use feeding assistance robots with the help of their care assistants. He does so through the use of a sociomaterial perspective inspired by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze and his work on assemblages, which include data here such as photos and texts from a logbook and observations. The analysis feeds directly into the contemporary debates on the welfare state squeeze by linking the use of robots with values. In her study from Sweden, Sara Eldén explores the research ethical challenges when doing research “with” as contrasted to “on” children by analysing children's narratives based on interviews in which the children do drawing exercises such as “draw-your-day” and “concentric circles of closeness”.

She does a most interesting job in illustrating that when ethical regulations attempt to find a balance between voice and protection in studies with children, such regulations may also be analytically problematic when inviting the parents` into the arena. Then inevitably, research ethical regulations not only regulate, but also intervene and influence upon the quality of the research with children. Göran Basic explores data from a collaborative project on Swedish youth care by reanalysing observational (or naturally occurring data) and interview data, while challenging the uncritical claim of organizational collaboration as the uncritical answer to dilemmas in the social services. In his study of service user involvement in psychiatry, Erik Eriksson draws on the narrative analysis or “service user narratives” in which patients and former patients are invited during staff training courses to tell their stories as a way of involving users. The crucial question is then what does telling such personal stories in this particular context achieve, and Eriksson does so by discussing the link between patient stories and power, balance or asymmetry in psychiatry, which has its own master narrative. As stated in his title of our last article, Mikael Nygård writes about the financial crisis and recent family policy reforms with a focus on three European countries: Finland, Germany and the United Kingdom. The question is: Is there a link between the two phenomena? To explore this with its many intricate ideological, rhetorical and other aspects, he uses data from the European Commission as well as official documents, statistics and media coverage. This comparative analysis illustrates very well the importance of both knowing and employing different methods and methodologies to make us see what otherwise might have been left unnoticed in the shadows, even in the case of the financial crisis and economic recession in Europe. In this issue, we also have a review by Yan Zhao of Shweta Singh’s` 2013 book entitled, *Social Work and Social Development. Perspectives from India and United States*, which was published in Chicago by Lyceum Books.

The ESA QR20 conference in Lund motivated this Special Issue of the Journal of Comparative Social Work. We hereby congratulate the conference organizers for a most successful event and thanks as well as for announcing the call for this special issue of our journal.

A special thanks to Maury Saslaff for his great job in working with the English language throughout this journal issue. It does, indeed, make a difference!

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