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Researching policy implementation: interview data analysis in institutional contexts

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In this paper I am concerned with the analysis of semi-structured interview data that emerge from an inquiry rooted in institutional environments. The examples of data used to illustrate the procedures of analysis come from research carried out in Further Education Colleges in England. The focus is on individual actors (managers and teachers), mediating change within organizations. This focus provides scope for the exploration of social manifestations of political action. A number of epistemological questions arise with respect to the data and the nature of knowledge that is accessible through their analysis. The paper is practically oriented in that it presents an example of data analysis as part of researching the implementation of policy at the level of institutions, and the enactment of such a policy by individuals. The consideration of different traditions underpinning research and specific methodological techniques for data analysis has resulted in identification of a set of theoretically informed procedures that provide a framework for de-constructing, interpreting, and synthesizing interview data into accounts of policy implementation in the field. These procedures are presented and exemplified, while the theoretical assumptions underlying them and their implications for further research are discussed.

Introduction

This article explores some of the theoretical, methodological and practical issues that emerge when analysing semi-structured interview data in studies of policy implementation in education institutions. It arises from research that investigated the impact of government policy on two colleges of Further Education (FE) in England (Alexiadou 1999). The first part of the paper is concerned with presenting a short account of the study, and a brief description of the theoretical roots of the research that provide the necessary context within which to situate the considerations that underpinned the analysis of data. In the second part, which is the main focus of the article, I set out to present the procedures that I followed for the analysis of individual interviews, and then exemplify the 'building up' of more general and theoretical accounts.

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The study

The data used in this paper come from a research project that set out to examine the changing principles of governance introduced in FE through (mainly) the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. The project had a dual focus: (1) locating the reforms within the context of a wider transformation of the public sector; and (2) exploring the extent to which the introduced changes were becoming 'institutionalized', as well as their impact on teaching and managerial identities and cultures. It is this second part of the research focus that I will draw upon in this paper, since it provides an example of policy implementation and its implications for institutions and individuals within them.

Through considering the perceptions of teachers and managers in the two colleges the study looked at issues of organizational re-positioning in an increasingly marketized context, the control and regulation of work, professionalism and managerialism. The focus of the analysis was on the ways in which teachers and managers (from now on referred to as 'participants' in the research) interpreted and enacted policy and practice, and in the process reconstructed their work identities. It was acknowledged from the outset that policies do not become adopted in an unproblematic and straightforward way. Rather, people mediate change through practice, existing values and beliefs, occupational discourses, and personal biographies. My focus is on the processes and mechanisms of such policy mediation by individual actors within institutional contexts, and hence, the transformation of political to social action. 'Mediation' is then the key word that draws attention to the re-contextualization of policies by individuals, and thus, highlights the complex mechanisms people use to make sense of changing social realities. Analysing individual discourses consequently allows us to draw theoretical inferences as to the mechanisms of mediation of policy in institutional contexts, as well as to the different interpretations that individuals at the local level provide for policy texts.

The empirical part of the research was conducted in the period between October 1995 and February 1997, across two colleges in two counties, one in the South and one in the Midlands area of England. In both colleges I conducted semi-structured interviews with a cross section of 29 individuals that included the principals, the majority of the senior management team, a sample of middle managers and lecturers, and support staff. In total 36 interviews took place, which included second interviews with some participants. Further material was gathered and analysed (inspection reports, college documents, strategic plans, and observation notes) but these do not form the focus of this paper. Here I will concentrate on the semi-structured interviews and the ways they were analysed. By 'semi-structured' I refer to an interview agenda shaped by the operationalization of the research questions, but retaining an open-ended, and flexible nature. The intention is to allow the interviewees to 'define' the situation on the basis of their own experience and so to focus on what *they* consider relevant.

My recent experience in designing a qualitative inquiry for a doctoral study, and the long, painstaking process of analysing and interpreting

the collected data, suggests that it is relatively difficult to find exhaustive, well exemplified descriptions of the processes followed by researchers in analysing, interpreting and synthesizing data into coherent accounts that lead to the generation of theory in studies of policy implementation.

Analysing data is explored in cultural studies (Alasuutari 1995), in discursive psychology, (Edwards 1999a,b, Edwards and Potter 1992), in the various traditions of phenomenology, (Giorgi 1985, Van Kaam 1996, Van Manen 1990), in reflexive feminist approaches (David *et al.* 1996, Mauthner and Doucet 1998) and, also in writings that provide more general, or 'technical' applications of the analytical process, suitable for a variety of data, and for a variety of theoretical perspectives (Coffey and Atkinson 1996, Glasser and Strauss 1967, Miles and Huberman 1984, Silverman 1993, Strauss 1987 and others). My search was for a set of theoretically informed procedures in analysing interview data, that enabled an understanding of 'lived experience' and the 'discovery' of meaning behind the talk provided by the interviewee, while at the same time allowing the exploration of language as it performs a social function. Hence, I took the decision to construct an eclectic approach to analysing the interview data using procedures based on social phenomenology (Moustakas 1994, Pendry 1994), and selected aspects of social constructionism (Potter and Wetherell 1995, Shotter 1993). This approach is compatible with the intention of researching policy implementation within institutional contexts, and the decision to adopt a neo-institutional sociological theory. In the next section I outline some of the main theoretical points that underpin the study and the methodology of the research.

The theoretical context

The attention of the analytical processes in the research was on the ways that participants in the study construct 'meaning' in the process of making sense of their experience of change, and mediate this change in their practice. In order to achieve this, the research was framed by neo-institutional theory, and the methodology adopted was informed by a combination of a phenomenologically based sociology of knowledge and selected constructionist perspectives. Institutional theory has roots in the social constructivist approach as developed by Berger and Luckmann (1966), and its theoretical point of departure is the notion of an 'institution' as the end product of 'institutionalization' defined as a 'reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors' (*ibid.*: 72). Drawing on the work of Schutz, 'reciprocal typifications' signify the development of shared definitions of meaning. Emphasis in this tradition is on the shared cognitive systems that, although created in interaction by social actors, come to be viewed as objective and external structures that define social reality (Meyer and Rowan 1977, Silverman 1971). This is why for Berger and Luckmann 'society exists as both objective and subjective reality' (1966: 149). The process of institutionalization provides a theoretical

framework for the understanding of behaviours, practices and changes in organizational contexts. It forms the bedrock of institutional theory, and has been used in this study along with insights from social constructionism to underpin the methodology of the research.¹

Hence, the focus here is not only on the ways in which people make sense of change, but, also within the institutional context, what types of discourses they use and draw upon in the process of this sense making. In operationalizing this process in an empirical context I selected two mechanisms of institutionalization that 'fit' with the above theoretical context, while at the same time provide methodological tools and a focus of analysis. The first reflects Weick's 'sense making' techniques (1995) that provide a focus for the inquiry and the analysis of participant's talk. Such techniques emerge out of questions related to the ways in which people provide meaning for their practice, enact their social environment, construct identities and generate social commitments, produce social relations, retrospective justifications and constructions of reality. The second mechanism is the concept of 'discourse'. In the process of analysis of the data the concept of 'discourse' was used at two levels: (1) at a specifically linguistic level where it is related to meaning and perception of the participants; and (2) at the level of 'systems of thought which are contingent upon as well as inform material practices which not only linguistically, but also practically through particular power techniques ... produce particular forms of subjectivity' (Alvesson and Deetz 1996: 206).

Given the above theoretical context there are three issues that determine the nature of the interaction between researcher, participants and data and define the status of each. These issues, that underpinned my approach to the analysis of data, are summarized as follows.

The epistemological basis of the study

Based on Berger and Luckmann's (1966) earlier definition of the 'social reality' and the way it is experienced, the research design reflects what Hammersley (1991) refers to as a 'subtle-realist' perspective in relation to the data (p. 61). The realist assumption applies to the status of 'talk' (interview data) that is taken to reflect the participant's perception of social reality as being both objective and subjective. However, it also applies to the status of policy reforms in Further Education. These reforms provide a 'real' framework of possibilities and limitations that allow only a certain scope for interpretation. Thus, although the analysis of the data is concerned with the ways in which participants talk about their experience of change, there is also a focus on practice and emerging social relations. This dual focus in 'reading' the data reveals the significance attributed to 'talk' having both a *representational* function of people's perception of their social reality, and a strong *shaping* function of this reality. This perspective accepts that people construct reality through the use of language by attributing meaning, but, there are limits to the extent that reality can be 'constructed' as the realist principle suggests.²

Accessing meaning

Studying the participant's reality as reflected in their use of language and grounded in their experience of the reforms implies meanings, social relations and values that are independent of the researcher. This assumes a distinction between meaning (what people actually mean by their talk) and the interpretation of this meaning by the researcher (the claim that an accurate depiction of this meaning has been achieved). Interpreting the participant's world and their making sense of change is taken to represent a reflection of the reality of experiences and perceptions *for* participants. 'Meaning' then is accessible to the researcher through the mediation of the 'experiencing person' (participant) and the use of language. In that respect 'meaning' becomes the external reference point against which interpretation of talk can be judged (Smith 1993). The implication of this tenet for validity is clear. As an overall principle in the research, validity is taken to signify the extent to which the researcher can convince the reader that her interpretation is as close as possible to the 'real' or 'intended' meaning of the participants. This is close to Hammersley's (1991) definition of validity as 'truth', 'interpreted as the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers' (p.57). 'Social phenomena' here is taken to refer to participants' descriptions of their practices and perceptions.

Eliminating bias

It is accepted that there is a danger in interpreting other peoples' meanings when all researchers bring their own interests, assumptions and values. My intention, however was not to render 'objective' accounts of the participants' experiences, since it is not possible to have a neutral and uninvolved researcher. Quite the contrary, I endorse the claim that it is the interaction between the researcher and the participants in research that generate the data (Charmaz 1995, Potter and Wetherell 1995). More important, the influence of the researcher is even greater in the process of analysis of these data. In dealing with this issue, I am seeking to avoid bias, rather than trying to convince as to the neutrality of my approach. I tried to achieve this by: (1) making explicit the theoretical assumptions and principles that underpin the design and execution of the research; (2) providing a detailed outline of all the procedures followed through the different stages of the research; (3) sketching the criteria used to operationalize the validity of data analysis; and (4) taking the interpretations that emerge from the analysis back to the research participants for validation (respondent validation was sought with 16 out of the 29 participants in this study).

Data analysis

The purpose of this section is to describe a set of procedures for the analysis of my interviews. These adopt the above theoretical considerations and

research principles. I have organized the presentation of the analysis stages in two sections, and this reflects the temporal and procedural sequence of the analysis. The first section is concerned with the analysis of individual interviews, while the second is concerned with more general descriptions across individuals and institutions. In the second section I will also discuss issues of generalizability and relevance of this type of data. I believe that this analytical framework can address the concerns of researchers of institutional contexts with both understanding and accessing individual experience, but also moving descriptions to the level of the organization.

It is noted that this framework is more likely to suit research with relatively small samples (in my case there were 36 interview transcripts). It also presents a fruitful approach when the research participants represent a wide range of backgrounds or positions within the organization (I was dealing with participants across the range of the hierarchy, in both academic and business functions). The diversity of the sample and the different interview focus for different groups of research participants according to their role, present a challenge to analysing data under common categories, unless one wishes to separate the groups for both the analysis and the interpretation of the data (for instance, in the present study that would mean treating all senior managers together, separate from the teachers group, the middle managers, etc.). Such a separation was not attempted in this study, since I did not make the assumption that the different position of individual participants would necessarily have an impact on their perception of all aspects of the phenomenon under study.

Analysis of individual interview transcripts

The aim of this phase is the writing, for each participant, of a summary account that captures the most essential qualities and characteristics of their perceptions and experiences. The procedures outlined below aim at constructing these individual accounts to comprehensively encapsulate the entirety of the data presented in each interview, and to adequately represent the content of each interview. The process involves de-constructing the interview, trying to make sense of meanings, and then re-constructing the data into the form of an account, and it follows a set of rules which I applied to all interview transcripts. These rules aim at ensuring internal consistency and validity of the analysis procedure. Before proceeding to the presentation of the analytical stages, a brief note is necessary on the linking between these 'stages' and the previous theoretical framework. The 'stages' described below reflect my attempt to de-construct the participant's talk in a direction reverse to that of 'institutionalization' of social phenomena, as it was described earlier. Thus, I take the participant's talk to represent definitions of meaning created through experience and discourse, and I accept that at the same time people use discourses and sense making techniques as 'resources' in constructing such meanings. The analysis procedures aim to de-construct these 'institutionalised' meanings, and then, re-construct them against the

background of organisational issues and theoretical considerations (for example, questions of power, autonomy, etc.).

In relation to the use of participant's talk as illustrative data, I aimed to minimize the danger of focusing on 'striking but unrepresentative experiences' identified by other research (Davies 1993: 183). Following Woods (1981), the selection of extracts that exemplify the stages of the analysis and the claims made is based on four criteria: validity, typicality, relevance and clarity. This first phase of the analysis includes the following 'stages':

Stage 1

At this stage I familiarize myself with the data, and try to develop a sense of the whole for each interview. This includes repeated readings of the interview transcripts, while listening to the tapes.

Stage 2

The second stage involves a process of focusing on those parts of the text that I consider to bear the 'weight' of the meaning. These parts of the data are underlined. I recognize that, at this early stage, such a judgement might be hasty, but, the rest of the data is not being dismissed. The whole transcript is re-visited at later stages, so data that had not been initially included as 'significant' can be seen under a different light. No radical process of reduction happens at this stage. The criteria for underlining certain parts of the data are the following (Moustakas 1994, Pendry 1994):

- (1) Identifying those phrases that seem to be the most relevant to the experience, thus, ignoring (at this stage) talk that was deemed to be exemplifying a point, or leading to a point. 'Relevance' is determined by the focus of the research questions, thus, by the question 'does this statement say something directly or indirectly about the phenomenon under study?' For example, when Carol, the College vice-principal, was asked the question 'Given all the changes you outlined, what would you say are now the primary functions of the College?' she replied:

In other terms that is the main function of the College still, to provide what the community needs in terms of a good broad curriculum base. How we do that is what's changed, that's become immensely more complicated, but to the man in the street out there if we've done it right, they probably won't be aware that anything much has changed. Inside we know it has ...

The phrases that focus on identifying the main functions of the College, and on pointing out the nature of the change, are taken to be the most significant in this paragraph. The phrase 'that's become immensely more complicated', is an exemplifying phrase, following from, and elaborating, her main point; and

- (2) Finally, I put in parentheses talk that is considered to be irrelevant to the participant's experiences, and perceptions, as well as to the understanding of the context within which they work. Such paragraphs can at a later stage be eliminated.

Stage 3

This stage represents an attempt to 'sort out' the data, and reduce, or, abstract from the talk of the participants, and it involves a process of capturing the meaning of talk. The question I ask here is 'what does this statement tell me about the phenomenon I want to explore?' The answer to this question leads to encapsulating meaning in the form of a word or phrase which represents a 'theme'. A theme is defined as a way to get at meaning and describe it, as a means to give shape and form to meaning, and is always a reduction from it (Van Manen 1990: 88). Meaning is the unit of analysis, represented within a whole paragraph, within a sentence, or even as part of a phrase. In the following paragraph the theme depicted is 'responsibility':

... In our strategic planning, we are expected to take a view of, we have to do surveys—that is one of John's roles, we have to take a view of what is going on in the local community, there is an expectation of what we should continue to provide, and for example going back to special needs, a very expensive area to deliver, but we must, so that's something that we accept, that these students must have the opportunity.

The themes can be *in vivo*, namely directly represented in a participant's talk or they represent the researcher's definition of what is 'read' in the data. For example, 'responsibility' in the above case reflects the researcher's definition of the participant's implicit assumptions guiding her talk on established interactions with the community. Reading throughout the transcript, the whole text is labelled in this way.

Stage 4

Continuing from the preliminary attempt to identify themes in the talk, the data bits that represent these themes are clustered together. Following Pendry (1994) and her adoption of Schutz's criteria of analysis for developing 'second order constructs' (here 'themes'), the intention at this stage is to generate themes that are mutually exclusive, clearly defined, and represent the whole interview in a comprehensive way. In so doing, the validity of the analysis lies in the criteria for logical consistency, subjective interpretation, and adequacy (*ibid.*). Thus, a 'data bit' is defined by the beginning and end of a distinct meaning unit. So, the bit before, and the bit after each data bit, have a different meaning and this is what determines their boundaries:

(And now they (FEFC) are very much backing off because the sector, Colleges have grown up, have matured.) (Because, as I said, we learn quickly in this sector, we have to, cause everything we do changes so quickly, always has.)

In this example the first part of the data bit in brackets (And...matured), is taken to describe aspects of the theme 'market culture' (this bit in particular refers to 'discipline' which is one of the characteristics of the theme 'market culture'). The meaning changes in the following phrase, that has been classified under the theme of 'the natural entrepreneur' ('learning quickly' is one of the characteristics of the theme 'natural entrepreneur'). No attempt is made yet to reflect on the status of the themes, rather the focus here is on defining the themes, and trying to ensure that they are distinct from each other. The problem of overlaps of meaning between data bits is quite strong at this stage. In the attempt to avoid unclear boundaries between themes, while recognizing the existing links between them, the following criterion is applied to the clustering of a data bit under a particular theme: when the talk refers to a phenomenon encapsulated by a theme A, but at the same time it is illustrative or explanatory of a theme B, then the data bit is taken to belong to the theme B. The following example illustrates the point:

... To realize that my concepts and my ideas aren't really completely alien, they actually make sense. Because sometimes, you know, it's like banging your head on the wall, one of me and 300 of everyone else.

The talk in this extract refers to Laura's perception of 'divisions' within the College along the lines of 'concepts and ideas' (theme A). But, her talk in this extract is both illustrating and explanatory of her experience of 'isolation' (theme B). Thus, her talk that refers to theme A ('divisions') is used to illuminate theme B ('isolation'). Following the above rule, the data bit is classified under theme B. Such classifications are noted for their importance in making links between different themes and uncovering functions of the talk (explored at a later stage).

Stage 5

The above stages represent a sense-making ordering of the data. This stage involves a gradual moving towards the unravelling of participant's meaning. I began with a critical reading through the data bits that are classified under each theme, so I:

- (1) Described the themes in specific terms, and discovered their characteristics. The terms used for such descriptions are based on the participants' words. For example, the theme of 'responsibility' for Carol has the following characteristics in her interview:

- Responsibility is a duty: 'we must, so that's something we accept';
- It is a response to community expectations: 'we are expected to provide a curriculum for ...';
- The College is judged against this perceived responsibility: 'of course they could turn around and say 'why are you not providing engineering any more?';

- Responsibility is part of the history of the College, thus, determined by tradition: 'we have been around for 150 years ... a feeling that this responsibility has been handed down over the years...; and
 - Responsibility is care for, and commitment to the community: 'if you take College away those people are in a dead end ... this is what worries me ...'
- (2) I then went on to discover the 'functions' of the theme in the talk (how the theme is 'used'). The idea of 'functions' was taken by Pendry, where certain responses revealed 'a personal and idiosyncratic reconstruction of the question' and the fact that certain themes ('constructs' in her research) had 'additional functions' to the ones anticipated (1994: 53). Edwards (1999a), and Potter and Wetherell (1995), in their approach to discourse analysis adopt a similar focus—albeit without using the term 'function'—when they are concerned with 'what people do with their talk' (p. 81). To keep to the same example, when Carol was asked the question 'what are the main functions of the College?', her answer provides some of the above 'characteristics of responsibility' which are used as yardsticks for evaluating the extent to which the College fulfils its main purpose. For example, the theme of 'responsibility' overall performs the following functions in Carol's talk:
- It partly structures her perception of the community;
 - It defines a main function of the College in the community;
 - It defines the role of senior managers towards the community and other staff in College;
 - It underpins her perception of formal and informal accountability; and
 - It structures a set of moral assumptions on the basis of which she evaluates the introduced changes.

Exploring the characteristics and functions of themes, I sought to understand the various levels of participants' meanings, what Charmaz (1995) has identified as: explicit explanations and reasoning for particular statements, implicit assumptions that underline held positions, intentions for engaging in or supporting certain practices, effects of what participants argue for on others, guidance for future practice. In determining 'characteristics' and 'functions' of the themes, rigorous testing should be applied so as to secure the 'boundaries' of the data bits that are supporting the themes. Such testing entails re-examination of definitions of each theme and comparison of their characteristics to ensure that overlaps are avoided. In the process some of the initially depicted themes might be re-constructed, re-defined, or subsumed under others. For example in the earlier example the theme 'discipline' was eventually subsumed under the theme 'market culture' as one of its characteristics.³ Furthermore, the themes are taken back in a review of the whole transcript, in order to ensure that the totality of

what was said has been covered, and that the themes are an adequate representation of the data.

Stage 6

Reading through the characteristics and functions that define a theme, I discovered further meanings that were not 'obvious' or were inconsistent. Potter and Wetherell (1995) point out: 'we do not expect individuals to be consistent in their discourse—indeed, it would be very surprising if they were. We expect variation of this kind as people perform different actions with their talk ... as they construct locally coherent versions of the social and moral world' (p. 88). Similar observations are made by Alasuutari (1995) who has suggested that internal contradictions, distinctions and normative statements that participants make in their talk, can open up new ways of understanding the data. He points to a series of interesting 'why questions' that can be asked from the data, still within the limits of individual themes. For example, in her talk classified under the theme of 'responsibility' Carol makes some strong normative statements:

... Going back to special needs, a very very expensive area to deliver but we must, so that's something that we accept.

She makes distinctions:

In other terms that is the main function of the College still ... How we do that is what has changed ...

She falls into contradictions:

We didn't have to change, it focused the mind more on how we went about things, and yes, we did change. So, I wouldn't like to think that we changed how we did things ...

Making distinctions indicates a certain construction of the social reality (here, she distinguishes between 'how' and 'what', placing different value in each), contradictions often point to different meanings and definitions of things (here she falls into contradictions as to nature and applications of change), while normative statements may reveal moral underlying issues, although there are more aspects in the use of norms (*ibid.*). Such observations help to enrich and expand the individual themes by revealing further 'functions' that these themes perform in the talk of the participant (for instance, the moral underpinning of re-defining the relationship between College and community). Furthermore, they can provide new insights into a theme and help in the making of links between themes or their functions. This last point will be illustrated next.

Stage 7

The preceding stages focus entirely on the internal structure and meaning of individual themes. In this stage two things are attempted: (1) to establish

links between the themes and discover relationships; and (2) to interrogate the data from the perspective of the research focus:

- (1) Similarities, patterns, contradictions or inconsistencies are sought between the themes or their functions. The following example illustrates how this stage is used: a contradiction has been identified in analysing Duncan's interview between data bits classified under the themes of 'flexibility' and 'responsibility'. The contradiction applies to the ways in which he talks about a certain category of students and how the reform created a tension in his working practice in relationship to these students:

... They cut the hours the students are on, but they increased the hours I have to do. So, eventually having taught as many of my regular students, I still have hours that I have to teach. So, they give me special needs students to teach. Now, they are not always the appropriate I would say students ...

(Duncan, under 'flexibility')

We offer areas of the course for example that are loss making, but they are of value to the students. It would be very easy for me to cut that out ... and for me to become totally profit oriented. I mean offering provision for special needs students is not profitable for me as a caterer in College, but it is valuable to these students, so I do it ...

(Duncan, under 'responsibility')

The contradictory nature of the two statements generates a number of questions along the lines of 'who are the "appropriate" students?', 'what makes them "appropriate"?', 'what is it that guides Duncan's sense of responsibility?', 'what are other effects of the temporal and skills flexibility that he is required to exhibit?', 'why the apparent change in his attitude towards teaching special needs students?' Again, 'why' questions emerge and point to, sometimes new, directions. In this case a new theme is generated as a result of such questions, the theme of 'student's progress' that for Duncan underlines his evaluation of students as appropriate or not ('appropriateness' being determined by his commitment to 'forming the professional' for his industry). A second insight emerging out of the above contradiction relates to the mechanisms people use to make sense of social relations. So, Duncan here upgrades the status of having to do something that he does not approve of, by constructing it as consistent with his moral principles. In so doing he incorporates it as a feature of his professional identity.

- (2) Here I asked questions from the data that reflect the specific purpose of the study as well as some of the principles of social constructivism:
 - What aspects of change do participants focus on, and why? What does their selective perception reveal?
 - What parts of change are treated as 'reality', 'matter of fact' and what as problematic?

- What is left out—why?
- In what terms is the selectively perceived reality constructed?
- What is the social meaning of this reality for the participant?
- What is the choice of vocabulary like? What does this reveal?
- What metaphors, examples, parallels are used? What do these reveal?

At this stage also, a preliminary assessment is made of the status (and thus, relationship) of the themes in the context of the research questions. Thus, certain themes seem to have a 'textural' (or surface) quality that is recognized and described (for instance, the constituent elements of the experience of change), while others seem to be more 'structural' in the sense that they constitute 'underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced' (Moustakas 1994: 98). In analysing Carol's interview, the themes of 'tension' and 'pressure' are textural, whereas the theme of 'responsibility' is a structural theme, since it underlies almost at a causal level, the way that she experiences change. This is, then, a process of discovering structures of meaning and the discursive resources people draw upon to make sense of their experiences and to justify their practices.

Stage 8

At this stage we can construct an account for each participant in which we depict the main essence of that individual's experience and perception of change. The accounts provide the researcher with a sense of the 'whole' for every participant. They also serve as a contextual point of reference against which propositions, subsequently drafted, are reflected upon.

The move from a situated to a general description

This section provides a frame upon which we can draw conclusions that move beyond understanding each individual experiences. The question of generalizations is relevant here. The process followed here for the analysis of data and their subsequent synthesis allows scope for both naturalistic and theoretical generalizations. In my study I was seeking to generalize at two levels. At one level I wanted to draw conclusions with respect to the focus of the inquiry being concerned with the changes as have been experienced by participants in the two institutions under examination. On the basis of such conclusions the reader can make informed judgements as to the applicability of the findings to other 'bounded contexts', i.e. other FE colleges and other public sector, professional institutions that have had to implement the same reforms. This is a form of 'naturalistic' empirical generalization or 'fittingness', based on tacit knowledge but also 'reasoned judgements' about 'the extent to which the findings from one

study can be used as a *guide* to (the understanding of) what might occur in another situation', under similar contextual conditions (Kvale 1996: 233, Schofield 1993, Stake 1994). The presence of more than one institutional context in the study, although it does not attribute any representational function, adds confidence to the findings (Miles and Huberman 1984).

The study sought to draw theoretical inferences on the basis of the emerging findings related to the phenomenon of the implementation of the reforms and their effects within the boundaries of the two colleges. These inferences refer to the phenomenon of institutional change as *process* and as *effects*. The claims made on the basis of the analysis and interpretation of the findings are set against existing theories and other research claims with respect to implementing 'similar' reforms in educational settings. The validity of the research design in collecting, analysing and reporting data, and the providing of a theoretical context, offer a variety of sources for the evaluation of the plausibility, and credibility of the theoretical inferences made in the study.

Here I discuss re-contextualizing the analysed data within broader frames of reference. First, this includes the totality of the interviews, thus, the examining of each participant's interview in relation to the others, and then relating this analysis to theory. So, having completed individual accounts, the aim is now to identify patterns in the ways that participants perceive and experience the phenomenon under study, how they talk about it, and whenever possible, why. Each interview analysis is a starting point for developing an understanding of the structures of the experience of the phenomenon for the participants in these particular settings. The intention is to 'build up' propositions which link to the research questions, a process that will eventually provide the structure for the writing up stage. The procedures adopted in the construction of propositions take place in the following stages:

Stage 1: the construction of individual propositions

To begin with, *propositions* about each individual participant are formulated. A proposition is defined as a succinct key idea that encapsulates the thinking or experience of the participants with respect to a particular aspect of the phenomenon under exploration. Propositions are formulated on the basis of the functions and characteristics of the themes that represent each participant's experience and main concerns, and they often, but not necessarily, represent a linking of themes. For the purposes of validation these propositions are compared with the summary account written for each participant. In so doing they are evaluated as to the degree they fit with the 'whole'. An illustration of the way in which individual-participant propositions can be constructed is provided in the following example drawn from the analysed interview of Laura. The same example will be used to explore the subsequent stages, so that the process of 'building up' is clearly exemplified.

Example:

One of the themes identified for Laura in all three of her interviews, is the theme of 'divisions'. Talk about 'divisions' has various characteristics, one of which describes her perception of, and relationship with, teachers at the college. Thus, for Laura, a young marketing manager, teachers belong to two groups: (1) the ones that support her work, (hardly present in her account); and (2) the ones perceived to be 'resistant' to marketing, what it involves and its ideological implications. Another theme in Laura's interviews is that of 'student-customers', again having a variety of characteristics and functions. This theme is used in her talk to evaluate the correspondence between what she perceives as appropriate 'offer' to customers and what teachers are offering—the two are described as incompatible. In that respect, the theme of 'students-customers' underlines and re-enforces the theme of 'divisions'. Thus, teachers are perceived and evaluated through her perception of student-customers. The following propositions have been constructed on the basis of linking the above functions and characteristics of these two themes:

- (1) Laura constructs an image of teachers based on her perception of what students-customers want. This provides her with a frame against which she evaluates a teacher's 'worth'. At the same time it provides her with a sense of self-value.
- (2) The images that Laura selects to describe and assert the 'reality' within which teachers and managers now operate, create this 'reality'. Thus, talk that highlights what prospective customers are perceived to want, promotes these same features and thus, establishes them as a priority. The need for teachers to change their identities follows as self-evident. This second proposition functions to re-enforce her belief in the first.

The following extract from Laura's second interview partly illuminates these propositions ('partly' refers to both the existence of more data-bits that support these propositions and the further functions that the particular extract contains):

... To think that your teaching doesn't matter, it's only added to other things, that must be a hard concept if you are doing it all your life, it makes you feel quite worthless ... it's almost like saying that if the refectory is brilliant, this is why they'd come rather than wanting to be taught by Mrs. X. But, that's how it's happening. I know it sounds really sad but, if that's the way things are going, we can only follow that trend.

At the end of the process, each proposition is tested against the summary account. I thereby looked to see if the account would support or refute each proposition. Propositions are then confirmed or re-formulated. Once I felt secure in each proposition, i.e. confident that the propositions validly reflected the participant's concerns on particular issues, the totality of the account would be represented in a propositional form.

Stage 2: the development of propositional statements

After constructing propositions for each individual participant, these are reviewed against each other. The intention here is to abstract from the specific propositions describing individual experiences and perceptions, and to integrate them to form general *propositional statements*. These statements apply to experiences of participants as well as to the discursive techniques they used in order to make sense of changes and thus, the ways in which they constructed their 'reality'. The previous example, together with propositions from other transcripts led to the formation of the following propositional statements:

Participants define their 'reality' within a 'space' constructed by a selective perception of situations and contexts, by images, and metaphors. This 'space' defines boundaries of work—constraints, limitations, possibilities for action and thought.

Many of the managers in the sample construct their work identities on the basis of polarities, since the 'opposite' one (usually aspects of teachers' identity) is formulated as the mirror 'other'. The constructed identities offer models for explaining, classifying, justifying and evaluating others and self.

Individual propositional statements are not the same for all participants. This reflects the different roles and positions of participants within both institutions, and their different experiences and perceptions of change. Thus, propositions that refer to various perceptions of management, and the construction of management identities do not apply to teachers in either College. Propositions that refer to managerial conceptions are only relevant to managers, and they still do not necessarily cover the whole group. In the above example, the second propositional statement describes the process of identity construction for a particular group of senior and middle managers. Other groups or individuals (managers and teachers) within both Colleges construct their reality differently, so different propositional statements are constructed in those cases. So, for example, another statement drawn from different propositions, with respect to identity construction is the following:

This group of teachers and academic middle managers (not including all of either group), construct their social and working identity in two ways: first, by projecting their 'ideal' constructions of 'the professional' of their represented industry to students, second, by defining student's progress along a number of dimensions that reflect this 'ideal'.

These statements cluster the research participants into different groups, according to a particular area (here, for instance, 'identity').

Stage 3: the construction of propositional themes and the creation of typologies

Once all propositional statements are formulated, to cover all interviews, they are grouped according to their area of reference. There are two intentions behind this clustering of propositional statements: the organization of the presentation of the analysis, and the gradual building of theory.

First, propositional statements are integrated into *propositional themes*. Thus, in the given examples of the two propositional statements that refer to identity construction, an integration of the two (and other) statements leads to further abstraction and reads as follows:

Participants construct their working and social identity on the basis of projecting this identity to significant 'others'. The perception of the 'other' offers 'ideal' models that reflect how participants, in a process of continuous interaction, imagine themselves within the College and in relationship to colleagues.

This propositional theme is applicable to all participants in the study and represents a theoretical inference. The credibility of such an inference is evaluated against existing theories and other research. Second, propositional themes are brought together in an ordering of the data that offers a structure around which we can build the presentation of our final report. Some propositional themes, such as the one just cited, underline more than one thematic areas, whereas other propositional themes are more specific, like the following:

During the years between 1993 and 1997 participants perceive a change in the way in which the boundaries of the College with its external environment are being defined and enacted. This reflects their perception of the external environment, and the constructed College identity projected to this environment.

In the writing up stage that follows, the specific propositional themes form the basis of the organization and content. Internal differentiation, i.e. the constituent elements or structure of propositional themes like the above, is provided by the clusters of propositional statements. It is these clusters that represent the basis for the formation of typologies for different themes.

Concluding remarks

The above description is not suggested as a blueprint for analysis of interview data in institutional contexts. It could be that in research driven by different theoretical considerations, analytical approaches taken from grounded theory, discourse analysis, or phenomenology, are more suitable. In the research described above, however, the eclectic selection of theoretical perspectives and methodological techniques aimed to overcome what I believed to be limitations in: (1) the epistemological foundations of these approaches in relation to the nature and status of knowledge we can gain through interview data; (2) the theoretical assumptions that would allow a focus on either 'internal', cognitive thought and experience processes, or, more 'surface', discursive constructions, and; (3) the methodological foci developed on the basis of these. Furthermore, the suggested approach provides a means to address the exploration of the bridging of structure/agency through the mechanisms of 'institutionalisation' of the political in social action.

Thus, the integration of social constructionist insights in the methodology of the research was based on the endorsement of a relational perspective to organizational analysis. It was the intention of the study to

understand how the participants in the research 'interactionally, situationally, and locally construct and negotiate a common world, how they do discourse, how they do social change' (Eberle 1995: 215). The compatibility of the social constructivist perspective with the concept of discourse resides in: (1) the belief that 'talk' functions as a bridge between experience and socially constructed practices; and (2) a rejection of the clear distinction between cognitive and discursive approaches to research. Shotter (1993), coming from the latter perspective, points out that 'to talk in new ways, is to "construct" new forms of social relations, and, to construct new forms of social relations . . . is to construct new ways of being . . . for ourselves' (p.9). The power properties of the concept of 'discourse' are inbuilt in this process of construction of social relations and thus, of being. But, what was also attempted through the analysis of data was to uncover deeper meanings in the participant's talk and their significance for the way in which people construct their identity in relation to change. It is at this level that a social phenomenological perspective becomes relevant and valuable for the exploration of experience.

What I intended to do in this article is present a way of analysing interviews that allows a rich exploration of the links between language and meaning, illuminates meaning through discursive contexts, and shows how language creates meaning, social relations and ways of being. I believe that the bridging between these perspectives is necessary in empirical research that focuses on policy implementation and explores the powerful constraints of grand discourses on peoples' experience and practice, but at the same time treats people as active agents that mediate and enact social change.

Notes

1. For the relationships and differences between social constructivism (making of meaning via phenomenological experience, cognitive mechanisms, and other internal processes, thus, emphasis on the individual), and social constructionism (meaning to be found at the surface of the inquiry, basis on language and language games, thus, emphasis on interpersonal activities of groups creating meaning), see Mary Gergen (1995).
2. Shotter (1993) provides a comprehensive account of life seen as conversational reality, a social constructionist position that focuses on the *shaping* function of language.
3. This process is not dissimilar to 'grounded theory' approaches to the analysis of data, but here it is theoretically rooted in the Schutzian tradition of generating second-order constructs that are 'grounded' in the data.

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