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Qualitative Field Research in Anthropology.
An Overview of Basic Research Methodology[*]

Abstract: Methodology of qualitative anthropology study is presented, as it was used in investigating HIV/HCV-vulnerability in Belgrade injecting drug users and sex workers, as well in documenting lives of people living with HIV. Fieldwork techniques, ethical considerations, and some wider contribution of research of this type to the health issues have been reviewed particularly.

Key words: anthropology; fieldwork; qualitative research; methodology; public health.

This paper is inspired, or even provoked by the need of presenting some theoretical background for methodology applied in anthropological research conducted mostly in Belgrade among injecting drug users, sex workers, and people living with HIV. The results of such research are published already, or being in preparation to be published and they offer certain kind of a final product considering the aims of study[1]. They do not deal with theory and method of research in a great amount, mostly just presenting those briefly, designed with eagerness to depict the facts and to discuss them, operating in way to perform the tasks assigned. So, here I would like to present a condense overview of the methodology of qualitative anthropology study, which was used as its basic research framework, as well to mention in a glimpse some wider contribution of research of this type to the health issues, because that matters feature somehow as the main client for qualitative anthropological research contributions.

About qualitative research

Qualitative research is a goal-orientated investigation into the social and cultural phenomena. It was developed mostly in anthropology and sociology,

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[1] I am referring to Bernejs et al. 2007, Prodanović et al. 2005, Rhodes and Simić 2005, Simić et al. 2006, Žikić 2006a,b, Жикић 2006.

as a tool for accessing the specific data among the particular populations. That usually means – in social and cultural contexts that are inherent to the broadest cultural experience of the researchers, but mostly different to its everyday emanations, where that differences could range from those who are subtle, to those dramatically discreet.

The goal-orientation stands for that there is always an overall goal of the qualitative study, which goes beyond the sole purpose of scientific inquisitiveness, beyond accumulating knowledge. Data got by qualitative research is collected with intention to be further deployed as the tool for some kind of social action, or intervention; so the study has to be designed that way. For an example, if we investigate social epidemiological factors of sexually transmitted infections among the street sex workers, we will turn our attention to the use of condoms, sex workers' experiences with the medics and relations to them, the means of structural violence production in targeted population and so on. But we will not ask them about the economy of their job, daily routines etc. The idea guiding the research then will be to present relevant data, reliable and suitable for preventing the outburst in spread of the sexually transmitted infections.

Populations targeted by such studies are often those hard-to-reach social and cultural groups; that is mostly because groups like that are perceived to be the groups – or their members to be what is conotated by the name of the group – by in fact limited number of characteristics, if not just the one of them (Cf. Жикић 2006). Sex workers, injecting drug users, or men having sex with men are very loosely tied together just after the single habit, or characteristic, which is only the part of their personal or even broader socio-cultural identities (ethnic, religious, gender etc). But for some exact purposes, like it is that concerning sex workers and sexually transmitted infections, the only relevant feature of otherwise not so tightly connected people becomes that one to which basic problem is the most applicable.

Alas, when tracing passionately the feature like that, researcher usually discovers that there *is* social and cultural context around it, no matter how it is true that people whose thoughts and actions are surrounded by it (if not determined by it) are not socially netted as it is rooted in common presumptions of so called hidden populations. Anyway, discovering and describing contexts like that is not the primary task for qualitative studies by themselves. The task is to get the data and organize the knowledge on exact problem, having in mind the need to offer the results to be implemented in some broader social strategy/intervention. If we continue the hypothetical speak about sex workers and sexually transmitted infections, then the imminent researching goal is to present the real acquaintance with the factors influencing sexually transmitted infections among the sex workers – in the manner which could help building the prevention strategy, by at least making it clear what is possible/feasible to do knowing what is causing the main harm.

It is obvious that the study itself will be possibly just the part of some "big picture", meaning that qualitative researches are usually included in the preparatory parts of social reaction and intervention considering some problems society is faced with, but unable to manage it relying on the device of a single-institution-reaction (Cf. Rhodes et al. 2004). And it is not just the case with the hidden populations; hard-to-reach problems are not inherent only to hard-to-reach groups which are socially marginalized and ostracized. Wherever is a need to unveil the real people experiences that lie beyond some technical knowledge, or when that experiences are obscured by the highly structured (and mostly – institutionally established) relations – like it is the case with medicalisation or with judicial system[2] – there is place and time for qualitative researches to be deployed in order to learn what are the real needs and attitudes of the people involved.

So, qualitative results could inform and guide practice, dictate interventions, and produce policies. Qualitative methods are said that can be reliably and validly used to evaluate, to document mechanisms of change microanalytically, to record macrolevel changes in society, but they should be considered as more important for enabling the access to non-generalized data, mostly with the factual relevancy of evidence (Cf. Rhodes et al. 2006).

Out in the fields

Qualitative research is social research and an ethnographic one in itself. That means not only it is based mostly on interviewing and observing, eventually using the focus groups, but also that it is designed to meet some certain heuristic demands, although not so strictly postulated (Genzuk 2003).

First, the aim of social research is to capture the character of naturally occurring human behavior. This can only be achieved by first-hand contact with it, not by inferences from what people do in artificial settings like experiments or from what they say in interviews about what they do elsewhere. This is the reason that ethnographers carry out their research in "natural" settings, settings that exist independently of the research process, rather than in those set up specifically for the purposes of research. This is called principle of *naturalism*.

Then, human actions differ obviously from the behavior of physical objects, and even from that of other animals: they do not consist simply of fixed responses or even of learned responses to stimuli, but – human actions involve interpretation of stimuli and the construction of responses. So, we need to *understand* them.

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[2] See for example Hosaina and Chatterjee 2005, Kane and Mason 2001.

Finally, there is a conception of the research process as inductive or discovery-based; rather than as being limited to the testing of explicit hypotheses. It is argued that if one approaches a phenomenon with a set of hypotheses one may fail to discover the true nature of that phenomenon, being blinded by the assumptions built into the hypotheses (Cf. Bryman 1984). Rather, they have a general interest in some types of social phenomena and/or in some theoretical issue or practical problem. The focus of the research is narrowed and sharpened, and perhaps even changed substantially, as it proceeds. It is principle of *discovery* (Genzuk 2003), which indeed differs from discovering things about physical world if not in other, then in people's behavior is studied in everyday contexts, rather than under experimental conditions created by the researcher.

Data could be gathered from a range of sources, but observation and/or informal conversation are usually the main ones, besides interviewing, which is the most important one. Ethnography as deployed here relies heavily on up-close, personal experience and possible participation, not just observation, by trained researchers. Typical qualitative ethnographic research employs three kinds of data collection: interviews, observation, and documents. This in turn produces three kinds of data: quotations, descriptions, and excerpts of documents, resulting in one product: narrative description[3]. The latter is what goes then under scrutiny of analyzing, preparing the ground for interpreting and theorizing.

In qualitative methodology, ethnography stands more for what is understood so in Serbian academic tradition, than in post-modern theorizing, and it assumes the principal research interest is primarily affected by community cultural understandings. The methodology virtually assures that common cultural understandings will be identified for the research interest at hand. Interpretation is apt to place great weight on the causal importance of such cultural understandings (Cf. Rhodes et al. 2006, Žikić 2006a, b). Typically, the researcher focuses on a community (not necessarily geographic obviously, considering also work, leisure, and other communities), selecting informants who are known to have an overview of the activities of the community. Such informants are asked to identify other informants representative of the community, using chain-referral sampling[4] to obtain a saturation of informants in all empirical areas of investigation. Informants are interviewed multiple times, using information from previous informants to elicit clarification and deeper

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[3] For the moment, the most comprehensive recent examples of this, from research performed in Belgrade, could be found in Bernejs et al. 2007 and Жикић 2006.

[4] The easiest way to go through targeted population – using members of the group to recruit their social contacts; also called "snowball sampling". Basic principle is presented in Жикић 2006.

responses upon re-interview. This process is intended to reveal common cultural understandings related to the phenomena under study.

Observational research is not a single thing. There is a choice (which need not to be simple) between participation and nonparticipation. The extent of participation is a continuum which varies from complete immersion in the program activities being studied as full participant to complete separation from the activities observed, taking on a role as spectator; there is obviously a great deal of variation along the continuum between these two extremes. Participant observation is an omnibus field strategy in that it simultaneously combines document analysis, interviewing of respondents and informants, direct participation and observation, and introspection (Genzuk 2003). The purpose of such participation is to develop an insider's view of what is happening. This means that the researcher not only sees what is happening but "feels" what it is like to be part of the group. Experiencing an environment as an insider is what necessitates the participant part of participant observation.

The extent to which it is possible for a researcher to become a full participant in an experience will depend partly on the nature of the setting being observed. For example, in studying injecting drug users or sex workers, it is not feasible for the researcher to become neither and therefore experience the setting as one of them. It should be said, though, that many researchers do not believe that understanding requires that they become full members of the group(s) being studied. Indeed, many believe that this must not occur if a valid and useful account is to be produced. These researchers believe the ethnographer must try to be both outsider and insider, staying on the margins of the group both socially and intellectually[5]. This is because what is required is both an outside and an inside view. For this reason it is sometimes emphasized that, besides seeking to "understand", the researcher must also try to see familiar settings as "anthropologically strange", as they would be seen by someone from another society, adopting what might be called the Martian perspective (Genzuk 2003).

Interviewing is crucial part of qualitative fieldwork methodology. It helps best to understand the meanings that individuals give to their lives and the social phenomena that they have experienced. It focuses on the understandings and significance that people give to their life experiences, in regard to the main topic of study. Interview should be based on semi-structured topic-guide, which in turn should not be considered to be some rule-book. Its questions have to be open, in order to generate the discussion, with prompts, aimed

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[5] Besides Bryman's discussion and Genzuk's consideration, those sentences are based on consultations which I had with some of the researchers experienced in qualitative studies and/or involved in Belgrade research, like Tim Rhodes, Ali Judd, Lisa Johnston, Ana Prodanović, Sarah Bernays, and Milena Simić.

to help facilitating the discussion. It is clear that the accent is not just on pure responding to researcher's questions, but on creating such conversational discourse, which will be suitable enough to enable building capacity for in-depth understanding of persons, relations, acts, situations, and processes of significance for the topic of study.

To get at individual experience, researcher must find ways that allow the individual to tell us about his/her life experiences in as full and open a way as possible that allows this uniqueness to find expression. Imposing our theoretical/conceptual frameworks on the individual during the interview process will hinder this process. Therefore, some *don'ts* must be obeyed. The informant must not be bombarded with questions, or being asked many questions in one. Arguing with respondents and/or setting them traps in questions should be avoided also, as well responding for respondents, or hypothesizing for them. Judgments and using judgmental or emotional language do not have their place in a good interview to, and researcher must take care not to take some roles, such as featuring him/herself as expert, social worker, missionary, smart guy, moralist, or even buddy[6].

One should not forget that fieldwork is a highly personal experience. The meshing of fieldwork procedures with individual capabilities and situational variation is what makes fieldwork such a highly personal experience. The validity and meaningfulness of the results obtained depend directly on the observer's skill, discipline, and perspective. This is both the strength and weakness of observational methods. Also, by studying individual stories, we gain not only understandings of the individual and his/her experiences but also insights into the particular social structures and dynamics and cultural values, mores, and norms in which the individual lives. The life story, personal experience etc. of each person may be unique – as it is, in fact – but the researcher should not miss that those are also embedded in particular social and cultural contexts.

Therefore, researcher must be able to obtain a suitable sample, consisting of individuals both willing enough to present relevant data considering the topic of interest, and able to do so, by their position in certain social and cultural environment. Sampling is a core concern determining the ongoing success of a research project. Consequently, it is an issue requiring continual examination as practiced. Qualitative research typically - although not exclusively - employs non-probability sampling techniques (Cf. Murphy et al. 1998). This means that it is not usually intended that the findings of a particular study will be generalisable, but will apply only to the specific population under investigation. Hence the sample size is not determined by the need

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[6] All of that was part of research training in preparing Belgrade HIV/HCV-vulnerability study, Cf. Жикић 2006.

to ensure generalisability, but by a desire to investigate fully the chosen topic and provide information-rich data.

Obviously, much smaller numbers may be involved than in probability sampling. Non-probabilistic sampling for generalization is also known as non-random sampling for representativeness. There are no hard and fast rules about numbers. While there are no closely defined rules for sample size, sampling in qualitative research usually relies on small numbers with the aim of studying in depth and detail. Seeking a richness of data about a particular phenomenon, the sample is derived purposefully rather than randomly. For qualitative sampling, criteria typically define the process as: embodied within a reasonably flexible research design, in which sampling criteria may change as the study unfolds; participants are sought serially: that is, depending on who and what has come before, so that ongoing sampling supports the emerging theorizing (ideas about ideas); sampling continues until the researcher recognizes no new data were forthcoming - a point of data or information redundancy, an ideal dependent upon some effort to seek out disconfirming or 'negative' cases (Genzuk 2003).

My research experience suggests that is most feasible to approach sampling in opportunistic manner, i.e. in the way which is the most convenient. That means to recruit easiest, most available individuals at the beginning, and then to approach cases identified during co-occurring observations. Although you are likely to miss the most marginalized individuals in population targeted, this approach proved to be good enough for finding key informants, was useful in different settings, as well of much help in identifying new subgroups of populations issued, in a form of micro-social nettings.

Ethics in qualitative research

Invariably, ethical issues are inherent in all research designs involving human respondents owing to an intrinsic tension between the needs of the researcher to collect personal data on which to base generalizations and the rights of the participants to maintain their dignity and privacy. Ethical issues of confidentiality are inherent in those research studies in which the data provided by participants must be kept separate from their identities. *Ethics* stands here for: a) ethic standard of the research institutions – necessarily reflects the ethic notions of the official social discourse, b) normativized set of acts which obedience in research secures the informants from personal, social, and cultural harm eventually imposed upon them by their participation in the research (Meadows et al. 2003).

In ideal case, ethical review of the research is multi-faceted and not limited to the researchers' institution. Rather, it is an ongoing process involving the

institution, the community and individuals. Formal ethical considerations usually include review of the research by the some Research Ethics Board – provided by the University, local or national government, professional association or so (ibid.). Obviously, it is not the case in this country yet, so researches are faced with individual sense of ethics, according to what has been postulated during researhers' trainings[7], in preparing the study. Nonetheless, there are several issues which must be taken almost as for granted by the researchers.

Researchers must make their research goals clear to the members of the community where they undertake their research and gain the informed consent of their consultants to the research beforehand. It is also important to learn whether the group would prefer to be named in the written report of the research or given a pseudonym and to offer the results of the research if informants would like to read it. Most of all, researchers must be sure that the research does not harm or exploit those among whom the research is done[8]. Researches must be clear also with such questions as: who best represents the interests of the individual or the community to be studied? Do people not participate because they lacked understanding or belief in the value of their own contribution to the study? What influence do past research experiences, and cultural differences (or those in social status) have on participation? How does the interviewer's connection with the community influence data collection? Are participants more or less likely to share sensitive information with an interviewer from the community or one viewed as external to the community?

There is also the matter of the researcher's or research team's ability to deal with sensitive and/or disturbing data. Each individual has his/her own perspective and experience of what constitutes sensitive issues for them as individuals and as members of some community, being it the one of the researches or the one of the researched. Some research assistants or outreachers working with trained research professionals sometimes disclose their discomfort and reluctance to broach potentially sensitive topics (such as personal HIV status of the sex workers); or even suggest that would prefer to end the interview if the certain topic arose, even if the interviewee raised it him/herself[9]. The issues of what constitutes topics that are sensitive for researchers and those

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[7] When writing on field researches, I assume research assistants and outreachers as researches. It is easy for me to think of all the people involved in sampling and collecting the data that way, then to always make distinction between them and principal researches.

[8] The latter is unclear somehow, because it could be subject to various ways of interpreting things, so it usually means not to cause legal and/or economic troubles to the informants, or not to expose their true identities in public in any possible way.

[9] Belgrade study did not experience problems like that indeed, but it is useful to have it discussed, here presented after Meadows et al. 2003.

who share their experiences with us are not limited to any given population. Researchers simply need to be reflexive as the realities of fieldwork unfold. In all interviews the participants must be informed that they are free to end the interview at any point in time. It is also ensured that the interviewers and the transcriptionists (if different from the interviewer) understand that they too could initiate closure, or terminate transcription if the subject matter became uncomfortable for them[10].

Finally, there always come a dissemination phase of the research: presentation of the results, their use for policy-building and/or intervening. Sometimes it happens to be ethically the most vulnerable part of the project, because the public display of the findings could often expose the members of the targeted population in front of those social institutions which are not willing to recognize the substantial social benefit of the research, but perceive the researched populations as kind of a social pest for an example (like it is mostly case with the sex workers and injecting drug users). Lucky enough for researches – or from a bit cynical, but nonetheless factual point of view – their engagement usually do not reach so much far beyond fair presentation of the results.

Anthropology, qualitative studies and matters of health

Anthropology has its roots in a Western fascination with the "exotic" and the associated attempts to make the strange comprehensible. Hence its research methodology became flexible enough in order to enable designing the best tool of achieving goal like that. Qualitative methods of data collection have become popular in contemporary research within Western-type societies mainly because they are seen to "reach the part other methods cannot" that is, the views of ordinary people in the real world. Implicitly, the methods are a valuable but purely functional means of gathering data to answer an initial research question. This does not imply any particular method of interpretation to be preferred above any other once ethnography is completed, but somehow disfavors those not taking care of what lies beyond obvious in some particular social and cultural context, or those eager to inflate the meanings to that context that cannot be justified by factography.

There several capacities of anthropology which make it eligible above other social science disciplines in providing general public with highly valuable information, obtained in a manner of an academic rigor: anthropology views the familiar afresh through focusing on classification and on understanding rationality in social and cultural context; it highlights the value of

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[10] This also was not the case in Belgrade study: researchers did all of the transcriptioning.

data gathered informally and the differences between what people say, think, and do; its emphasis on empirical particularity helps to avoid inaccurate generalizations and their potentially problematic applications (Cf. Lambert 1996).

A particular way that anthropology achieves this is by its focus on classification and meaning. This interest probably derives from anthropology's development as a discipline associated with the ethnographic study of "other" cultures, in which the nature and boundaries of apparently basic categories such as family, religion, and medicine could not be presumed but required empirical investigation. Thus an anthropological approach, rather than taking phenomenon x or y as a given and investigating views of or beliefs about it, also investigates the form and contents of the thing (x or y) itself. Insights derive both from examining the nature and meanings of apparently familiar categories for example, clinical terminologies, or health service constructs, such as "patient satisfaction" and from investigating how and why such categories are constructed and maintained (Lambert and McKevitt 2002).

A key anthropological contribution to health research lies in its empirically based grasp of the context specific nature of social processes. This focus on the particular, which anthropology insists on through documenting the complex details of everyday life, provides an important corrective to misleading generalizations and abstractions that can "grotesquely flatten" the diversity of different settings (ibid.). For an example, an anthropological study in the multicultural setting of New York city showed how unequal power relations were created through the use of authoritative technical language used in amniocentesis[11] counseling despite counselors' expressed commitment to providing information neutrally and facilitating choice for their clients. This showed a need to scrutinize the language and context, as well as the content, of the information given if these aims were to be achieved (Cf. Rapp 1988).

Anthropologists are (mostly!) aware of what people (including health professionals) say can be different from what they think and do. This goes unrecognized in most health research that is designated "qualitative" but which in fact relies mainly or solely on formal interview based methods. The ambiguous relation between language and action fundamentally informs anthropological research using participant observation. Ideas about treating illness and lay explanatory models, for example, are shaped by contingent circumstances and forms of practical "reasoning in action" that are not always expressed orally, especially in one-off interviews, which tend to produce orthodox responses (Lambert and McKevitt 2002). Qualitative health research often fails to distinguish between normative statements (what people say should be the case), narrative reconstructions (biographically specific reinterpretation of

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[11] Amniocentesis is a common prenatal test in which a small sample of the amniotic fluid surrounding the fetus is removed and examined.

what has happened in the past), and actual practices (what really happens). Anthropological practice ensures awareness of these distinctions even when interpreting interview data, by "situating" an interviewee's statements and the circumstances of the interview as far as possible in the broader context of that person's life. Participant observation may not always be feasible or appropriate given constraints on time, funding, and expertise, but the methodological lessons from anthropology are transferable. These lessons are that words cannot be taken at face value and that naturally arising informal situations involving talk and action are more useful than formal interviews in highlighting this (Cf. Kaufert and O'Neill 1993).

A core conceptual feature of anthropology is that what is "rational" is seen to be socially and culturally specific and valid in its local context. An anthropological approach does not assume that, for an example, even biomedical concepts and practices of the Western world are both normative and universal. Rather, it regards the knowledge and practice of "experts" as locally variable as are the knowledge and practice of lay people and it includes both within the boundaries of empirical inquiry. Some of the most relevant anthropological research for evidence based health care has considered differences between epidemiological, clinical, and popular concepts of health and disease in particular contexts and has thereby shed light on the implications of such distinctions for appropriate practice in these settings (Cf. Lambert 1998).

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To summarize, qualitative anthropological research helps understand the local context, and it is a crucial prerequisite for interpreting relations and meanings shaped within it. By investigating the perceptions of the targeted population, it adds depth to study in general, by enabling exploring the reasons standing behind the facts. It could also identify issues and/ or trends which could emerge within the targeted population while the study is still ongoing, and could serve as a tool of extending itself not just into being part of policy making, but of policy applying too. Its ability to reach marginalized groups relies heavily upon mutual trust between the researcher and the researched, which could be used – and is used this way in some communities (Cf. Rhodes et al. 2004) – to combine research with providing informants with information and services considering principle matter of study, their health status for an example. Focusing on context-dependence of the issues researched, and being designed to be applicable, it is also a mighty mean of interpretation, but beware – poor analysis and use of findings exploits those who have given their time, energy, and knowledge to the research!

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Kvalitativna terenska istraživanja u antropologiji.
Pregled osnovnih istraživačkih metoda

Predstavljena je metodologija kvalitativne antropološke analize kroz njenu upotrebu u istraživanju HIV/HCV podložnosti među intravenskim korisnicima droge i seksualnim radnicima u Beogradu, kao i u dokumentovanju ličnih priča ljudi koji su HIV pozitivni. Detaljno su razmatrane terenske tehnike, etička pitanja, kao i neki širi doprinosi istraživanja zdravstvenih problema.

Ključne reči: antropologija, kvalitativna istraživanja, metodologija, zdravstvo