

ONE

Qualitative research and everyday life

Not long ago, my oldest child, a boy, started school. The school is located very close to where we live, and the sunny morning I walked him there, both of us were quite excited. We talked about the classmates he was soon going to meet. Some of them he knew in advance from the Kindergarten he had attended, but most of them would be new to him. Almost all his friends – at least the ones that had been invited to play in our house in the past – were boys, and my wife and I hoped that he would have a chance to expand his circle of friends to include some girls. We find it important to try to avoid the common segregation of children into groups of boys and girls, and, in our own childhood from the late 1970s and into the early 1980s, both of us had had as our best friend a child of the opposite sex.

Our ideals were quickly challenged, however, for already at the first school meeting, when all the parents had a chance to meet each other and exchange contact information, two lists circulated among the parents on which they were supposed to write down their telephone numbers. One list for the parents of boys and another for the parents of girls. It was tacitly assumed that boys would only play with other boys and girls with other girls. Not just this list, but also much of the micro architecture of the school worked for, rather than against, a segregation of the two sexes. In the rooms where the children play after school until they are picked up by their parents, there is one section where boys can put their clothes and another one for the girls. 'The boys rummage much more than the girls', as one of the pedagogues explained, 'and we don't want the boys to bother the girls'. Even the refrigerators contain separate shelves for boys and girls to put their lunch boxes. Obviously, when attending after school activities such as sports, the children are also divided according to gender, although there are no physical differences at this young age that warrant it.



As a result, my son plays almost exclusively with other boys. Although his interests are not just stereotypically boyish (soccer, violent video games), but also more gender neutral (he loves things like theatre, nature and music), he becomes quite embarrassed when we suggest that we invite one of the girls home to play with him. There are clearly numerous social factors that support a segregation of boys and girls and position them in stereotypical ways at this quite early age, even if the official school policy is meant to counter such tendencies. When he has occasionally (very rarely) played with a girl after school, it is important for him that this is kept as a secret from his class mates. Otherwise, there is a risk of teasing or even bullying.

These few remarks are meant to illustrate what I mean in this book when I address qualitative inquiry in everyday life. We have an everyday life occurrence – a child beginning school life – and we have a situation that causes the researcher (in this case myself) to stop and wonder. Something seems strange, confusing and maybe even worrying. An ideology of gender equality and positive relationships is seemingly contradicted by the social practices of school life. The short description given above draws upon two main sources:

- The researcher's experience of something strange, but interesting, from his everyday life. This would not be strange and interesting to everyone, but it was to me, given my personal background and childhood experiences, and also my theoretical readings of some feminist literature that have sensitised me to certain phenomena rather than others. The biographical and theoretical here meets the concrete social reality, and this is where qualitative inquiry often happens.
- I use my own memory of the encounter with the school. I remember a specific conversation with a professional pedagogue there, and I refer to observations of the school architecture and a few episodes of after school activities. There are thus both symbolic and material factors present that inform this micro analysis, based on my own experience.

This situation from everyday life could form the beginning of what I mean by a qualitative research project into everyday life. In order for me to turn this into a more focused study, I would have to supplement the initial observations and recollections with further ones. I would have to consider the ethical implications of writing about people I know and who know me. I would have to read about research that has already been done on the topic and think about how this could inform the way I see the situation now. I would have to consult theories about sex, gender and school life. And I would have to reflect upon my own role in the process of inquiry: Why have I not confronted the school with my observations and criticisms? Why is it so important to me that children have friends of the opposite sex?

If I were to do these things, and write about them in the process, I would likely end up with a piece of everyday life research that could perhaps even be published and be of interest to others. Hopefully, I would become able to



comprehend the situation better. I could possibly even use my analysis to try to change the situation if I still felt a need to do so. Or perhaps I would be forced to conclude that there are legitimate reasons why the local social world operates like this that will have to be respected. These questions are not rhetorical, for I honestly do not know the answers, but that is exactly the point, since I have not yet done the study – I have only taken the most preliminary steps towards an understanding of the phenomenon as laid out above.

Steps in the research process

An outline of the steps that are needed to carry out an everyday life research project (such as the one just described) would give us something like this:

- 1 *Choose a topic.* Normally this will be based on something that genuinely interests you, bothers you or confuses you. It is preferably based on something you do not yet understand and which you would like to understand, perhaps in order to be able to act more appropriately towards it. The first step can often be conceptualised as a breakdown in understanding. Good social science frequently springs from a breakdown ('I don't understand this'), coupled with a mystery (e.g. the framing of the breakdown as a riddle) and then a possible resolution of the riddle, e.g. based on a novel perspective on the matter that confused you (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). If you are in the process of learning how to do research, you may be 'forced' by the teacher or the curriculum to choose a topic that might not constitute a breakdown. In this case, you can favourably practise breaking down your own understanding of the phenomenon you are going to study. Later in this chapter (and also in the next one), I present some techniques that can help you to defamiliarise yourself with the phenomena that you take for granted, thus creating a sense of curiosity that is conducive to good qualitative research.
- 2 *Collect materials.* When you choose a topic, you are simultaneously collecting materials. These steps are deeply related – as are all of them. Recollections that you write down, newspaper articles that you read, commercials that annoy you or conversations that seem to stick in your memory can all be examples of materials that may enter into defining the topic that interests you. From the point of view of the present book, 'data collection' is not a separate process that starts only after the research project is designed, but something we all constantly do as living human beings with memories.
- 3 *Consult the literature.* We should never underestimate the insights that other researchers have provided us with, so it is important to read about empirical analyses in the topical area, and it is also important to develop one's imagination and powers of observation by reading theoretical literature. Who knows, maybe Hegel's dialectics of recognition can inform my understanding of the issue of gender segregation? Or maybe I need Judith Butler or Erving Goffman?
- 4 *Continue collecting materials.* Try to think broadly about what may be needed and include visual as well as textual materials whenever possible. Don't try to purify data

(e.g. by conducting only standardised research interviews), but use everything that helps you clarify the situation. Have you read novels about your phenomenon? Or media stories or television programmes? Where and how is your phenomenon represented in the social world? As Bruno Latour (2005) argues in a recent book on *Reassembling the Social*, from now on, when you think of what you are doing as a research project, *everything is data!* That everything is data in everyday life research is both a burden and a blessing. It is a blessing since it makes it easy to get started on an often enjoyable research quest, but it is also a burden since the researcher risks losing focus. The researcher must therefore frame the research project very carefully in order not to end up with a deeply fragmented analysis. My argument is that *theory* is the most important tool to help in this regard, which means that you must constantly go back to step number three.

- 5 *Do analytic writing.* I have already quoted Laurel Richardson that writing is a method of inquiry. I call the writing that you need to do 'analytic' to stress the idea that good qualitative writing often uses theoretical concepts to analytically unpack the social situations, events and processes that are scrutinised. I am not saying that you should avoid using the concepts of everyday language to write about everyday life – indeed you often must use the vernacular – but I am saying that the concepts of everyday language are theoretically loaded in the first place, and you can do a much better analysis if you understand both *how* they are so loaded, and can *evaluate* whether this works for or against what you want to say (e.g. my way of talking about boys and girls above used everyday language, but in a way that possibly reinforces some of the distinctions that I would like to deconstruct).
- 6 *Publish your text.* Your writing is done when things have cleared up for you, when the breakdown in understanding is somehow mended, and you are able to explain to others how you now understand things (differently) and possibly even to convince them that your understanding is helpful. Sometimes you must adjust your text to fit certain standard ways of reporting if you aim to publish it. Sometimes you may even have to downplay the fact that you have done a piece of everyday life research and reconstruct the steps that you have taken to make them fit into more standardised formats. You should never lie, of course, but some disciplines and journals will not be open to what I recommend in this book. You can sometimes work your way around this by writing that the empirical examples of your analysis 'illustrate' some general point instead of saying that your materials made you discover something new in the social world. Other journals – often those that use the word 'qualitative' in their names – are completely open to the kind of research that this book is about.

Some will no doubt find these six steps overly loose and unmethodical. But my point is that good research very often rests on a cultivation of common human capabilities of understanding and communicating with others rather than on mechanical methodological procedures. This is not a licence to do sloppy work – quite the contrary. It demands a lot from the researcher: she must learn to focus her attention, spend hours reading and writing and be a master of linking theoretical concepts with the empirical world. One can only learn to do this by trying



it again and again and by reading examples of research that have employed this procedure. This explains why I have devoted a considerable number of pages in this book to examples of concrete everyday life analyses. It is not enough to say what one should do – it needs to be shown.

If this way of working appeals to you, I encourage you to try it out for yourself. One way would be to just do it – following the loosely outlined steps above – and then return to the rest of this book afterwards as a kind of after-thought that may enhance the quality of the analysis. Another way would be to read the book first and experiment with some of the practical exercises along the way. In any case, I believe that it is very important to work concretely with some everyday life materials while reading this book. In the final sections of this chapter, I will present three examples of everyday life research that may serve as sources of inspiration.

On everyday life

It seems reasonable to begin a book entitled *Qualitative Inquiry in Everyday Life* by explaining its main concepts: qualitative inquiry and everyday life. In the rest of this chapter, I will first briefly address the notion of everyday life before moving on to qualitative inquiry, both of which are harder to define than one would think. I recommend approaching qualitative inquiry as a vital human activity that all living human beings are engaged in. In the next chapter, I draw upon varieties of pragmatic and hermeneutic paradigms (that emphasise the idea that being alive as a human being should be conceived as an interpretative process of inquiry) to develop a philosophical anthropology of the human knower.

The term ‘everyday life’ has entered many corners of the social sciences today. Classical works have investigated ‘the presentation of self in everyday life’ (Goffman, 1959), ‘everyday life in the modern world’ (Lefebvre, 1968) and ‘the practice of everyday life’ (de Certeau, 1984). More specific approaches, such as ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) and symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), have also advocated a focus on the mundane details of human interaction as the key to understanding social processes. A focus on our everyday lives becomes particularly central in a postmodern era, when society ‘has been broken apart and reconstituted as everyday life’ (Ferguson, 2009, p. 160). In a postmodern world in fragments, where larger social structures and processes are experienced as disjointed, everyday life has become the essential ‘theatre of fragmentation’ that must be studied if we want to understand our lives (p. 157).

Social science began with the emergence of modern, industrial society, when individuals and society were conceived as separate entities, and when this separation was seen as problematic, resulting in disintegration, anomie and the modern malaises (such as excessive individualism, loneliness and neuroses). More





specifically, we can say that the particular social science focus on everyday life began at the University of Chicago in the late nineteenth century, when there was a need to understand the experiences of people living in the new big cities (Jacobsen, 2009). The urban experience has since intensified in the postmodern epoch, which, among other things, is characterised by the fact that Society (conceived as a stable, hierarchical social order) seems to be breaking apart and is reconfigured as heterogeneous networks and practices that have a more precarious and fluid character. Some refer to these emerging social forms as network sociality (Wittel, 2001) and others argue that they result in deeply fragmented forms of human experience that demand a fragmented rendition in writing (Baudrillard, 2007).

In any event, what seems to be the case is that 'the social' in broad terms is recast as everyday life in the social sciences. The social is no longer primarily conceived as a hierarchical and rigidly structured sphere (like the Marxian base-superstructure or the Habermasian system-lifeworld), but as something that is much more mundane, fluid and heterogeneous. This does not mean that inequalities have disappeared and that everyone shares the same perspective on culture and society – far from it – but it does mean that it has become more difficult for people to know their own society, for the social no longer has an obvious centre. Our 'social imaginary' (Taylor, 2004) no longer revolves around one central deity, state or nation. Rather, the flow and flux of our everyday lives is what now constitutes the social. We simply tend to imagine the social in terms of everyday life.

Can we approach a more specific definition of everyday life? One suggestion is that the everyday in a literal sense refers to 'a host of routine activities, private and public, carried out on a regular, if not actually daily, basis; such as eating, sleeping, working, commuting, shopping and so on' (Ferguson, 2009, p. 164). These activities, although trivial at first sight, turn out to be rich sources of information about who we are in a postmodern era. I will soon illustrate this by referring to some seemingly trivial events and objects (such as a tube of toothpaste) that turn out to be richly informative about our lives. Furthermore, as Ferguson adds, the everyday is 'the inclusive arena in which occasional, incidental, and unusual events *also* take place' (p. 164). So not only the commonplace, the daily, but also the exceptional can be a significant object for everyday life analyses. It is not the prevalence of something that makes it ordinary; rather, something is ordinary because it appears in our everyday lives. A divorce, for example, must be considered an everyday life event, even if the person is only divorced once in her life.

As these initial analyses testify, it is notoriously difficult to define everyday life. There are numerous ways of characterising the term and it seems to be 'overloaded with meaning' (Jacobsen, 2009, p. 9). Still, the term directs our attention





in an important direction. Everyday life can be described as a place (e.g. the home), a temporal dimension (e.g. what happens daily), an attitude (the unreflective, practical stance), as specific artefacts (everyday objects), a theoretical approach (focusing on lived experience), an academic abstraction, and as a set of experiences (p. 14). Elias has attempted a characterisation of everyday life by contrasting it with what it is *not*: holidays, the bourgeois sphere, the life of the privileged, exceptional events, public life, the artificial and the unspontaneous (Elias, 1998). Others have argued more specifically that the everyday is confined to four types of quotidian space: workspaces, urban/mobile spaces, living spaces and non-places (between contexts) (Scott, 2009, p. 1). Although it can be helpful to keep these distinctions in mind, I doubt that they exhaustively define or delineate our everyday lives. The difficulties of pinpointing everyday life are probably related to the fact that everyday life is our paramount reality, the life world (to speak with the phenomenologists), the ubiquitous interaction order (to speak with Goffman), or the immortal ordinary society (to speak with Garfinkel). Everyday life is everywhere, and we live through it like fish proverbially live in the water.

In this book, I take a pragmatic attitude to everyday life and define it relative to the everyday life of the *researcher* and what mediates her activities and experiences. Everyday life *objects* are thus those that the researcher in question appropriates and uses in her daily living (e.g. consumer products, technologies, pieces of art), and everyday *situations* and *events* are those that the researcher experiences in her life (e.g. conversations, parties, work, rituals). Throughout the book, I try to focus equally on objects and events. These are not unrelated: something appears as an object for human beings in the course of events as these are unfolding, and there is hardly any event in the social process that does not include objects (Latour, 1996). Qualitative researchers, however, often tend to forget about objects and materialities and concentrate on studying 'social interaction' as if this could exist in some kind of material vacuum.

Needless to say, the discussion about where and how 'the social' shows itself is unresolved. How does one capture human experience, sociocultural life or the *Zeitgeist*? Rather than postulating macrosocial entities like social structures or systems that should be studied by social and human scientists, this book follows the microsocial turn to the everyday that has become increasingly important during the last fifty years or so. Everyday life, in this perspective, is not 'the rest', i.e., what is left over when we have looked at important institutions such as work, education and health care, but everyday life is rather the zone where acting persons *conduct* or *lead* their lives (Dreier, 2008). Phenomenologists often refer to this zone as the *life world* (*Lebenswelt*), an intersubjective world where objects and events appear as meaningful prior to those theorisations we may engage in about them. For example, before my condition is a clinical depression, perhaps caused



by a dysfunctional serotonin level in the brain, it is a disheartened way in which the world appears to me as uninviting (I return to phenomenology several times, but most thoroughly in Chapter 4).

On qualitative inquiry and the everyday

There is no simple relationship between qualitative inquiry and social science theories that look at our everyday lives, but in the box below, I mention some paradigms that more or less explicitly take an interest in everyday life research from a qualitative perspective.

BOX 1.1

On qualitative everyday life theories

In books on everyday life sociology, a number of well-known theories and disciplines are usually rehearsed as specifically concerned with everyday life. Scott lists psychoanalysis, social psychology, structural functionalism, interpretivist sociology, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy, structuration theory, cultural studies, post-structuralism and the so-called new sociologies of everyday life, which includes the theories of de Certeau and Lefebvre (Scott, 2009, pp. 11–31). Although Scott has helpful discussions of each of these, it is hard to see what warrants recruiting all of them as qualitative everyday life sociologies. In fact, they more or less seem to encompass the entire field of sociology, and the inclusion of all of them under the heading of everyday life risks emptying the concept of meaning. Since the present book is not confined to sociological analyses, I will not go through these theories here, but I do try to flesh out some more general theoretical points below.

Jacobsen's introduction to the sociologies of everyday life – or of the 'unnoticed', as he prefers – has a more focused selection of theories that includes the Chicago School, pragmatism, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, existential sociology, critical everyday life sociologies, Marxism, Goffman, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis and the sociology of the absurd (Jacobsen, 2009). What such diverse theoretical orientations share can perhaps be explained with reference to Maffesoli's account of the three (cross-theoretical) defining features of everyday life studies (Maffesoli, 1989):

- *First*, the researcher is seen as involved in the object of inquiry, which means that the researcher is first and foremost understood as a *participant* rather than a spectator in social life. As an everyday life researcher, she writes from her own participating stance in the social world.
- *Second*, everyday life research is focused on human *experience* in a broad sense, and the theories mentioned above differ to a considerable extent concerning their views on whether human experience is an authentic, experiential realm

(posited by some schools of phenomenology) or whether it is constructed linguistically and discursively (as argued by some conversation analysts, for example).

- *Third*, the theme of everyday life demands *conceptual audacity* so that descriptions and analyses of mundane life can be intellectually interesting and challenging. A conceptual audacity can 'break the closure of the political-economic logic which still underlies many analyses' (p. v). We use (audacious) concepts not to neutrally mirror the world, but as tools that enable us to see new and perhaps surprising aspects of the everyday lives that we lead. This may in turn generate new forms of human action.

In Box 1.1 I have attempted to say something general, i.e. across theories, about everyday life research and how it pertains to qualitative inquiry. Concerning Maffesoli's third point, conceptual audacity, this book argues that a focused use of theoretical concepts can help researchers become defamiliarised from their lives and distance themselves adequately from their subject matters in ways that facilitate research with a critical edge. Without theories and philosophies, everyday life research would become nothing but a trivial recounting of our quotidian activities (Jacobsen, 2009, p. 17). Unlike other contemporary texts on qualitative inquiry that follow more or less anti-theoretical currents, the present book advocates using theoretical concepts as tools with which to see the unnoticed in everyday life. Theories are in this sense epistemologically important in the production of knowledge, just as hammers and nails are important in the carpenter's activities of producing objects.

When we take an interest in how people obtain knowledge about their everyday lives (e.g. about the *Lebenswelt*), we are beginning to address what is usually called qualitative inquiry. Human inquiry is qualitative when it concerns the *how* of our lives: How do we experience the world? How do we collectively construct social worlds that subsequently seem to be independent of our constructive efforts? How do we accomplish everyday acts such as producing or consuming objects, or educating the young? These are questions that can be answered only by using what is now conventionally called qualitative methods. Qualitative methods throw light on the qualities of experience, actions and emotions, whereas quantitative methods are used to chart the causal effects of independent variables on dependent ones.

For an initial, generic definition of qualitative research that is close to the spirit of this book, I will refer to Denzin and Lincoln:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research

involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3)

The keywords are *situated* (the researcher is placed in a historical and social situation that informs her analyses), *interpretative* (qualitative analyses concern meanings that must be interpreted), *material* (all research takes place in a material situation, which includes economical and institutional factors that shape the activity) and *transform* (qualitative inquiry never leaves the world as it was).

This book is written from the more specific premise that the social world inhabited by acting persons is one that cannot be understood as controlled by causal laws (Harré, 2004). There are no social structures, institutions or powers that *cause* us to do, think or feel in certain ways. Instead, persons are the only efficacious agents in the social world (Slocum-Bradley, 2009). The social is that which is continually *done* by persons. Only persons act, but they could obviously not do so without discursive practices that render certain acts intelligible and thereby meaningful. And they could not do so without a range of enabling conditions that are material, such as brains, bodies and artefacts, and this whole network of discourses and materialities is, in principle, relevant when one engages in qualitative analyses of social processes (Brinkmann, 2011b). If it is true that the social world in which we conduct our everyday lives is one where persons are agents, then we can only understand the lives and experiences of these agents by engaging in qualitative inquiry. We should not, first and foremost, explain what *happens* (as in quantitative research traditions), but rather understand how people *conduct their lives*, i.e., understand what they *do*. Table 1.1 summarises some simplified (and rather caricatured) differences between these two modes of thought.

In qualitative inquiry, we study things that are done, conducted or performed. This means that we approach human beings as agents. Humans are not just

Table 1.1 Two forms of inquiry

	<i>Qualitative inquiry</i>	<i>Quantitative inquiry</i>
Subject matter	Relations of meaning	Causally related entities
Purpose	Understanding actions and events	Uncovering causal relations
Ontology	Performances that are done	Things that happen
Methods	Interpreting human actions, practices and cultural productions	Establishing correlations between variables
Materials	Texts	Numbers

causally reacting entities, but acting persons that can often give accounts of what they do and may try to justify their actions. Unlike the causal processes in non-human nature, human actions are based on reasons and motives that are important to describe when we seek to understand the things that are done. Often this will involve interpretation, for actions, and the reasons on which they are based, are not always transparent to onlookers, and may not even be clear to the persons who are performing them. Typically, an action makes sense *as* an action, when it is part of a broader social practice that has a social history and involves other people who participate in the practice. It is impossible to understand the concrete actions at school described in the example above, for example, if one does not take the history of education and practices of boys and girls into account. Human beings perform the social here-and-now, but they always do so on the background of social practices that have a history. When we study how actions are related to other actions, and how an individual action is part of a historical practice of carrying out that action, we are seeking to understand relations of meaning. In qualitative inquiry, we are not trying to pinpoint a specific causal factor that may have brought about a certain action (such as the school division between boys and girls), but we are rather trying to understand how a certain action makes sense to the people involved, what constitutes the conditions for it being performed, and how the action may be related to other ensuing actions and events. In short, we are interested not in causal relations, but in meanings.

Qualitative research methods, such as interviews, fieldwork and paradigmatic approaches like phenomenology or discourse analysis, have been developed in order to throw light upon human experience and social life. Statistical averages are not in focus, but researchers are rather concerned with understanding concrete human beings and how they think, feel, act, learn or develop as persons. Few qualitative researchers are, as such, against generalising their results, but they believe that generalisation must proceed by means other than statistical tests (see the next chapter). Qualitative researchers are committed to a study of the human world of meaning and value and take an interest in how actors themselves experience the world. In that sense, researchers strive to understand human life 'from the inside', i.e., from inside the local practices where life is led, rather than 'from the outside' at a distance through objectifying methods.

The main challenge when doing research 'from the inside' is that so much is taken for granted in our everyday life. It can be very difficult to understand the obvious. This has been articulated well by Hall, Lashua and Coffey:

How are we to know that which we begin by taking for granted? This is precisely no problem at all when it comes to 'doing' daily life, in everyday ways – fluency here follows from our very unconscious familiarity with the mundane – though much harder when it comes to knowing the everyday and making it the explicit object of attention and understanding. Here the everyday resists, or rather

eludes, scrutiny. Attending to the everyday can require an estranging sensitivity, one that is more often found in the arts than the sciences. (Hall, Lashua, & Coffey, 2008, pp. 1021–1022)

When I refer to examples from the arts in this book, it is not just because of the aesthetic qualities of novels, poems and films, but also because of what the authors above refer to as the required ‘estranging sensitivity’, in relation to which art is often helpful. Art can defamiliarise us with our lives in a way that can be conducive to understanding it better.

Three stances and examples of qualitative inquiry in everyday life

Before moving on, it might be useful to see some concrete examples of what I mean by qualitative analyses of everyday life, i.e., of research that has given us significant insight into human lives by using very few and everyday pieces of ‘data’. I will describe three examples of research below that deal with quite mundane materials in ways that are both theoretically rich and insightful in relation to broader human and social issues. These examples of everyday life research are published as short and highly readable articles, and they make clear that less can be more. Each deal with a single everyday life phenomenon that all of us have access to. I have chosen these three specific examples because they illustrate three different but related analytic stances or strategies that are helpful to bear in mind when one conducts everyday life research, and which I will return to throughout this book. Although these stances point in different directions, they can all help us in knowing the obvious, or that which we take for granted, as we shall see. Inspired by Noblit and Hare (1988), these strategies are:

- 1 Making the obvious obvious
- 2 Making the hidden obvious
- 3 Making the obvious dubious

These are quite general strategies across different paradigms in the social sciences and humanities, and the distinction between them comes from Noblit and Hare’s book on meta-ethnography, which is the art of synthesising results and analyses from different qualitative studies (Noblit and Hare emphasise that this art is an interpretative affair and not a simple aggregative or cumulative exercise). I generalise the strategies here and present them as three wide-ranging stances in qualitative inquiry that are all important today, and particularly so in relation to our everyday lives. After presenting the stances, I provide an example of each of them.

Phenomenological stance: Making the obvious obvious

The first can be called a phenomenological stance that seeks to describe human experience by making the obvious obvious. I present phenomenology more thoroughly in Chapter 4, but, in colloquial terms, it is meant to help us see the trees as a forest and the forest as an array of trees. In everyday life research, this can be much harder than it seems, as the example below will indicate. In this context, we may quote Pelias, who argues that what I call a phenomenological stance is really the stance of poetry: 'Science is the act of looking at a tree and seeing lumber. Poetry is the act of looking at a tree and seeing a tree' (Pelias, 2004, p. 9). The poet, argues Pelias, is really the one who can see the world clearly as it is; at least those aspects of the world that are 'poetic' and 'aesthetic' rather than instrumental (the term 'aesthetic' originates from the Greek word for experience).

Critical stance: Making the hidden obvious

The second stance is a critical stance that is shared among Foucauldian discourse analysts and Marxists critics of capitalism. To criticise is here to uncover the hidden power structures that regulate human behaviours and influence human experience. Marxists talk about ideologies and Foucauldians about discourses, but the point is to see through the surface and demonstrate the working mechanisms behind the phenomena. Marx famously argued that 'all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided'.¹ Science is needed to go beyond appearance or the surface to critically uncover a truer reality. Some of the authors who approach the world from the critical angle are at odds with the assumption in this book that persons are the only efficacious agents in the social world. Some critical scholars invoke hidden social structures or systems as causal agents, whereas I advocate seeing social and cultural artefacts as mediators that acting persons may use in living their lives, but nevertheless it may still be relevant to take a critical stance and ask what hidden roles such mediators may play in our everyday lives.

Deconstructive stance: Making the obvious dubious

The final stance is the deconstructive. This stance implies an attempt to question what we take for granted, not necessarily to uncover hidden mechanisms, but rather to show that meanings and understandings are unstable and

¹Cited from the internet edition: www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch48.htm

endlessly ambiguous. The relations of meaning, referred to in Table 1.1, could always appear in different ways, and deconstruction is the art of bringing these differences to light. The concept of deconstruction was introduced by Derrida as a combination of 'destruction' and 'construction'. It involves destructing one understanding of a text and opening for construction of other understandings (Norris, 1987). The focus is not on 'what really happens' or 'the real meaning of what was done', but on presenting alternative versions of the real. It is affiliated with the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' of the critical stance, but it does not search for any underlying genuine or stable meanings hidden beneath a text or an event. Meanings of words are conceived in relation to an infinite network of other words in a language. What we take for granted in our everyday lives – e.g. that we must work, love and consume according to the logics of late modern capitalism – can be deconstructed, thereby opening up for other images of human existence.

The phenomenological, critical and deconstructive stances are not confined to their own traditions (phenomenology, critical theory and deconstruction), although these schools of thought tend to cultivate such specific perspectives. Obviously, a phenomenologist can be critical and even deconstructive, and vice versa, so here I use the terms more generally to point to analytic strategies that may be useful to bear in mind when one does qualitative inquiry in everyday life. The logic of one's study, and the way one presents and analyses the material, may differ relative to one's interest in either making the obvious obvious, making the hidden obvious or making the obvious dubious.

In Box 1.2 we shall look at an example of the first strategy of making the obvious obvious in everyday life.

BOX 1.2

Throwing like a girl: Making the obvious obvious

In a classic article entitled 'Throwing like a girl: A phenomenology of feminine body comportment, motility and spatiality', political scholar and feminist Iris Marion Young addressed the extremely mundane activity of throwing objects (Young, 1980). Young began by quoting the phenomenologist Erwin Straus, who, in an earlier essay from 1966, had observed what he called a 'remarkable difference in the manner of throwing of the two sexes' (p. 137). Girls at the age of five, Straus had noted, do not make any use of lateral space when throwing an object such as a ball. A boy of the same age, on the other hand, uses his entire body when throwing, which results in a much faster acceleration of the ball. Straus ascribed this observed difference to an innate biological difference, a specific 'feminine attitude' that girls have in relation to the world and to space that is not as such anatomical, but biological at some deeper level. This difference between boys and girls results



in the derogatory expression 'he throws like a girl', which is used, for example, as an insulting comment in American baseball.

Young finds Straus's descriptions compelling, but she disagrees with his essentialist explanation, which invokes 'a mysterious feminine essence' (p. 138) in order to account for the difference between boys and girls. So Young significantly expands on Straus's description through an extremely close portrayal of the motions of gendered bodies. Let me quote some of Young's words here:

[G]irls do not bring their whole bodies into the motion as much as the boys. They do not reach back, twist, move backward, step, and lean forward. Rather, the girls tend to remain relatively immobile except for their arms, and even the arm is not extended as far as it could be. (p. 142)

Young goes on to describe further differences in body style between boys and girls, and men and women, concerning how they sit, stand and walk:

Women generally are not as open with their bodies as men in their gait and stride. Typically, the masculine stride is longer proportional to a man's body than is the feminine stride to a woman's. The man typically swings his arms in a more open and loose fashion than does a woman and typically has more up and down rhythm in his step. (p. 142)

And there are many other rich descriptions in Young's essay, for example concerning how women tend to lift heavy objects:

[W]omen more often than men fail to plant themselves firmly and make their thighs bear the greatest proportion of the weight. Instead, we tend to concentrate our effort on those parts of the body most immediately connected to the task – the arms and shoulders – rarely bringing the power of the legs to the task at all. (p. 143)

Young's prose is precise, descriptive and quite dry, but she manages to take the mundane movements of girls and women and present them as a very relevant and interesting topic for analysis. As a reader, one is convinced by her accurate descriptions; there is an immediate feeling of recognition. In a sense, we know already what Young is saying, but we don't know that we know it, and in that way, she is making the obvious obvious for us, something that is extremely difficult to do in such an insightful way.

In the essay, Young wants to say that women are holding themselves back, not just concerning their bodily movements, but also more generally in society. Unlike boys, who learn to be assertive, aggressive and proactive, and grow up to act in this way as adult men, girls are not taught to use their full bodily capacities 'in free and open engagement with the world' (p. 152). Consequently, they often become insecure, restricted and self-enclosed as adult women. This, for Young, is not to be explained with reference to anatomy, physiology or by invoking a mysterious feminine essence, but is rather a result of the particular situation of women in a





patriarchal and thus oppressive society. If this analysis is valid, it ought to have significant consequences for how to conceive of gender inequality, which turns out not just to be a matter of discourses and the symbolic, e.g. concerning unequal rights and treatments. Gender inequality may be rooted in the very bodily habits that persons acquire from a very early age, which may be quite difficult to change. A first step towards improvement, however, can be taken when these inequalities are made obvious for us.

Young does not stay with the merely descriptive. She also invokes theoretical concepts to present an explanation of the phenomenon that she has observed. And we can even say that her initial descriptive stance is theoretically informed, namely through the phenomenology of the body, as developed by Merleau-Ponty (1945). Phenomenology builds on an ambition to describe the world as it is experienced pre-reflectively by human subjects, and, for Merleau-Ponty, by *embodied* subjects specifically. We know the world through our bodily engagement in the world, and we develop as subjects as our bodily habits are formed. To be a subject is to have the capacity for *transcendence*, i.e., for projecting oneself into the future, and this is a capacity Merleau-Ponty ascribes to the body. However, Young points out that enacting the existence of women in patriarchal society implies a contradiction: as a human subject, a woman participates in transcendence, but the societal conditions that shape her habits simultaneously deny her that very transcendence (p. 141).

Box 1.2 summarises some of the points of Young's analysis of 'throwing like a girl'. There are several other points worth mentioning, but I will refer the reader to Young's essay for further details. The analysis exemplifies many virtues of everyday life research when well carried out: it deals with an aspect of human existence that is pervasive in everyday life – gendered ways of moving our bodies – that is at the same time sufficiently specific to be analysed in a rather short essay. It is primarily based on the researcher's own observations, which are described very closely and directly. But although based on ordinary observations, the analysis is far from a-theoretical. Young helps us understand the phenomenon better by invoking phenomenological theory and by introducing theoretical concepts that crystallise the everyday phenomenon of feminine movement and its contradictory modalities: ambiguous transcendence (a transcendence of the body that is simultaneously laden with immanence), inhibited intentionality (when the feminine body under-uses its real capacities) and a discontinuous unity (meaning that the part of the body that is transcending towards an aim is discontinuous with the rest of the body) (Young, 1980, pp. 145–147). These contradictions, for Young, are rooted in the cultural tendency to make the feminine body both subject and object for itself at the same time, and, in this way, her mundane observations are related to much larger social issues about gender inequalities. By making the obvious obvious, these analyses can potentially assist in changing the oppressive character of the patriarchy. Given the significance of





Young's contribution, it seems reasonable to conclude that her essay has indeed contributed to greater social justice and gender equality.

The next example tries to go beyond the obvious to critically uncover hidden discourses at work in a mundane object.

BOX 1.3

Toothpaste and discourse: Making the hidden obvious

In a short paper called 'Discursive complexes in material culture', critical psychologist Ian Parker presents an analysis of a text found on the back of a toothpaste tube. The text reads:

Directions for use

Choose a children's brush that has a small head and add a pea-sized amount of Punch & Judy toothpaste. To teach your child to clean teeth, stand behind and place your hand under the child's chin to tilt head back and see mouth. Brush both sides of teeth as well as tops. Brush after breakfast and last thing at night. Supervise the brushing of your child's teeth until the age of eight. If your child is taking fluoride treatment, seek professional advice concerning daily intake.

Contains 0.8 per cent Sodium Monofluorophosphate. (Parker, 1996, p. 189)

It is difficult to think of a more mundane piece of prose, and it may initially strike one as completely uninteresting to invest time and energy in analysing it. However, from an everyday life perspective, even the most dull objects and routine activities have the potential to teach us important things about our cultural worlds. In Parker's case, it is a discourse analytic reading that enables him to open up the object and reveal the hidden discursive complexes within it. As he says: 'What seems trivial can be seen as symptomatic of patterns of regulation, and the toothpaste text in question can now no longer be read with an innocent eye' (p. 185).

Parker is particularly interested in uncovering the culturally prescribed understandings about the nature of subjectivity that circulate in society and influence even such things as toothpaste texts. Any text, according to Parker, 'interpellates' the reader. Interpellation is a term from the French structuralist Althusser, and it refers to readers being 'hailed' by the text, whether they choose to agree with its message or try to resist it. In this case, the reader is interpellated through four discourses that Parker identifies in the text: a rationalist discourse that hails the reader as someone who can follow 'directions for use' and who accepts health authorities; a familial discourse in which one has ownership (cf. 'your child') of family members and a duty to care for them; a developmental-educational discourse, which concerns the education and training of children's skills and abilities; and, finally, a medical discourse, according to which the use of toothpaste is linked to hygiene within a complex of knowledge about health and disease.

Parker recognises not just the discourses that are visible in the text, but also those that are invisible. He finds it interesting that gender as a category is repressed,





illustrated by the absence of gendered pronouns ('to clean teeth', 'sides of teeth') (p. 191). And he introduces psychoanalytic notions of the Oedipal triangle and the reality principle to analyse the activity of brushing the interior (indeed a Freudian cue word) of the mouth after restraining the head. An activity is presented 'in which the child is physically restrained while a cleaning implement is inserted in the mouth. There is powerful affect running alongside meaning, and it is helpful to attend to our "emotional response" to the text, to images in the text here as varieties of affect produced in discourse' (p. 190). We come to witness 'a scene in which an adult with power gazes upon and acts upon the child' (p. 193). Parker asks us to use our own emotional response as a way of reading the text.

Parker's relationship with psychoanalysis in this paper and elsewhere is ambiguous. On the one hand, he employs psychoanalytic concepts as theoretical tools in concert with discourse analysis to study social and psychological processes in everyday life. On the other hand, he argues that psychoanalysis has shaped the culture and the subjectivities that inhabit it, so, in a sense, he says that we need psychoanalytic concepts to understand our lives, because psychoanalysis has constructed the way that we interpret ourselves. In any case, his reading is deeply informed by theoretical concepts that enable him to make the hidden obvious.

In Box 1.3, I have summarised some of the main points of Parker's discursive and psychoanalytic reading of an object that nearly all of us possess: a tube of toothpaste. His research interests concern the discourses that shape subjectivities, and these discourses are doing their work in the most unlikely places in our everyday lives, even on toothpaste tubes. By using his psychoanalytic and discourse analytic theoretical tools, Parker manages to reveal how certain discourses, which are normally hidden to our eyes, function to interpellate us and invite us to act as subjects within specific discursive complexes.

The most important part of taking the critical stance exemplified by Parker concerns what he calls taking a 'step back' (Parker, 1996, p. 190). This is described as an essential part of discourse analysis, and I would add that it is nearly always a crucial part of any study of everyday life. It consists of producing a critical distance between the reader (or researcher) and the text (object or event) so that one becomes able to pose the question: 'what collections of relationships and theories of self must obtain for this material to make sense?' (p. 190). This is a question we can pose in relation to literally any everyday life object or event: what are its conditions of possibility as a meaningful phenomenon? An answer to this question will nearly always include references to numerous discourses, symbolic systems and material structures. I will suggest that this question ought to accompany any qualitative study of everyday life from the outset, since it has the potential of stimulating our (sociological) imagination. What collections of relationships and theories of self must obtain, for example, for you to be able to read this book?





The final example of everyday life research involves a deconstructive reading of a seemingly trivial activity, leading to a destabilisation of our commonsense understanding of ourselves as subjects.

BOX 1.4

I eat an apple: Making the obvious dubious

In just a little more than six printed pages of text, the ethnographer and philosopher Annemarie Mol uses the mundane process of eating an apple as a basis for theorising subjectivity (Mol, 2008). And she doesn't just theorise subjectivity – the *I* who eats an apple – she also suggests explicitly in her conclusion that if we draw upon exemplary situations to do with eating as we engage in philosophy, many things, including subjectivity, may change (p. 34). Without using the term herself, I propose that she is using her analysis of apple eating to deconstruct our traditional notion of the subject as a discrete, bounded self with agency. 'The eating self', as she says, 'does not control "its" body at all' (p. 30). And it is worth continuing the quote:

Take: *I eat an apple*. Is the agency in the *I* or in the *apple*? I eat, for sure, but without apples before long there would be no 'I' left. And it is even more complicated. For how to separate us out to begin with, the apple and me? One moment this may be possible: here is the apple, there I am. But a little later (bite, chew, swallow) I have become (made out of) apple; while the apple is (a part of) me. *Transsubstantiation*. What about that for a model to think with? (p. 30)

By describing the everyday occurrence of eating an apple, Mol wants to make us think about how to remodel the subject. The subject emerges in her text as much more embedded in the world, or saturated with the world, so to speak, than on traditional accounts. The subject emerges in her analysis as something with semi-permeable boundaries (p. 30). Mol takes the 'thin' situation of apple eating as her starting point, but she goes on to provide much more 'thick' history around it. Thus, she tells us the cultural history of apples, how the apple has biblical connotations, how apples came to the Netherlands (her home country), and how there is a politics of apples (Mol dislikes Granny Smiths, because they used to be imported from Chile during the Pinochet dictatorship). Eating apples is an everyday phenomenon that is radically situated, and which is made possible because of complex webs of relationships (agricultural, religious, geographical, political, etc.) that it is possible and interesting to study.

Instead of confining action, activity, uniquely to human subjects, Mol deconstructs the whole subject-object split and posits an image of *inter-activity* – 'shared activity all round' (p. 31). And her deconstructive tools are deeply poetical. Consider the following statement:





In the orchard, the apples. The trees carefully grafted. The colours and textures and tastes and cellar life attended to and the best fruit selected. And again. Without the work of ever so many generations of cultivators my apple would not have been. The cultivators, meanwhile, owed their lives to their apples. When and where in all these flows does subjectivity emerge? Where to stop the flow and point at it? (p. 31)

Should we consider this as poetry, philosophy or as an ethnography of apple eating in everyday life? In my view, it qualifies as all three things, and the result is a beautiful account of subjectivity as always already in transaction with its surroundings.

Mol's elegant text is written almost without specific theoretical concepts, and yet it can be argued that it is her theoretical stance (feminist science studies) that enables her to see the mundane practice of eating an apple in a new, deconstructed light. As a reader one immediately recognises what she describes, but then one suddenly loses one's hold on the world, when subjectivity slips away in the deconstructive movement. But then subjectivity reappears in the text; only now in a mutualist form that is deeply integrated with apples – and the world more generally. There are references and a few theoretical discussions in the paper, but these are confined to the footnotes.

Mol's text illustrates that it is possible to do provocative and interesting deconstructive work simply by taking an everyday occurrence as a starting point. She makes our 'obvious' preconceptions of subjectivity dubious by showing us other possible ways of thinking that are immanent in eating practices. In the process, the world itself appears as re-enchanted; the world is no longer a collection of lifeless objects in Newtonian space, but an active process of change and becoming. This re-enchantment is achieved by a movement similar to Richard Rorty's Deweyan advice that 'the way to re-enchant the world, to bring back what religion gave our forefathers, is to stick to the concrete' (Rorty, 1991, p. 175). Perhaps we can say that this, exactly, is the virtue of qualitative inquiry in everyday life – it enables us to re-enchant the world without fleeing into abstraction or mysticism, but precisely by sticking to the concrete.

We can see that Maffesoli's three defining features of everyday life research (researcher as participant, a focus on experience and conceptual audacity) are richly present in all three examples of everyday life research, albeit in different ways. All examples can be seen as pieces of 'empirical philosophy', grounded in phenomenology, discursive psychoanalysis, and a form of feminist materialism, respectively. Thus, the three researchers use philosophical positions and theoretical ideas to open up everyday objects and practices in audacious ways that enable us to understand more.



Concluding comments

In this chapter I have provided three examples to indicate what I mean by qualitative everyday life research. It is research that deals with particular objects or events that are found in the researcher's everyday life, and which can inform us about more general issues in human life. These objects and events do not suddenly fall from the sky, but are chosen because they disturb, annoy or simply interest the researcher. They are usually chosen because of some kind of breakdown in the researcher's understanding.

I have also argued that in order for the researcher to engage in fruitful analyses of such everyday life materials, it is often indispensable to master theoretical concepts. These should not be thought of as eternally true reflections of the social world, but as sensitising instruments that can assist us in understanding and eventually coping with the different situations and materials (I further unfold this pragmatist epistemology in the next chapter). I have also discussed different characterisations of qualitative inquiry in everyday life and I have introduced a number of stances to one's material that are worth considering (phenomenological, critical, deconstructive).

EXERCISE

Choose a particular event that you have experienced and which made you stop and reflect. It may be something that confused you or simply something that made you wonder.

Describe the event in less than 1,000 words. Provide an answer to the questions: What made this event possible? What common rules and regularities were involved (and possibly broken)? What was taken for granted by the participants – and why?

Take your analysis and consider whether it primarily made the obvious obvious, the hidden obvious or the obvious dubious. Discuss your analysis and your reading of it with others.

If you find it worthwhile to do further work on your analysis, try to rewrite it by explicitly taking one or more of the analytic stances (phenomenological, critical, deconstructive).
