# Unexplored Realities in Qualitative Research

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This thematic issue is premised on the assumption that studying 'unexplored realities' is one of the key strengths of qualitative methods and research approaches. In sociology, qualitative research approaches have undergone a thorough revitalization in the past 40 years, after a long hiatus during which they have not disappeared entirely, yet have been marginalized, despite having contributed core methodologies to the discipline from its very beginning. This revitalization has brought along an enormous diversification considering epistemologies, methodologies, research

interests, and empirically studied domains of social reality. The resulting compartmentalization of qualitative research into various communities focused on a particular research approach or a specific paradigm is ambivalent. While specialized in-depth discussions allow for further development of a particular research methodology and approach, what is often lost out of sight is the broad range of empirical findings, the epistemological diversity, and the myriad of potential theoretical insights—particularly when research communities do little to engage in serious intradisciplinary discussions across research approaches. What is also needed are attempts to shed light on common themes and ongoing concerns of the various strands of qualitative research, keeping qualitative methods vital and relevant through a continued dialogue—focusing on the commonality of qualitative research as constituted through shared activities and not uniformity.

As as theme, "unexplored realities" is such an attempt. It sheds light on what qualitative scholars working with different premises in distinct fields may share—in one way or the other—when they engage in research activities. As a theme of the 2018 midterm conference of the ESA research network qualitative methods,[2] the notion of unexplored realities served as a starting point to dialogically explore the commonalities and differences in how qualitative scholars approach the study of social reality. At the conference, two key themes emerged, around which contributions and discussions often revolved. On the one hand, discussions focused on the empirical study of societal domains that are, for one or the other reason, hidden, concealed, marginalized, neglected, or out of sight from public or academic attention. On the other hand, the discussions turned to elements that are, again, for various reasons, methodologically underutilized, little explored, neglected, or particularly challenging—amongst others, studying and using new technologies and the various senses available to us. Continuing these discussions, the focus on the senses constituted the theme of the following midterm conference in 2020, titled "Seeing and the Other Senses."[3]

The four articles in the thematic section of this issue are based on some of the keynote addresses of these two conferences. In two cases, they consist of updated previous publications that report from empirical research projects. Patricia and Peter Adler present a study of the practice of self-injury, and Ross Koppel demonstrates the relativity challenge of healthcare information technology. The other two articles are more conceptual in character. David Howes elaborates on sense-based research, and Wolfram Fischer expands on the sensual construction of body and biography. The following section briefly introduces these four diverse articles by relating them to the two above subthemes that emerged when discussing the notion of unexplored realities—social domains that are little explored empirically and the sensory dimension of qualitative research that still shows potential for further exploration.

## 'Hidden' or 'Unexplored'?

When we presented the conference theme at the network meeting at the midterm conference in Cra-

[1, 2] "Unspoken, Unseen, Unheard of. Unexplored Realities in Qualitative Research," 06-08 September 2018, St.Gallen, Switzerland (https://qualitative-research.ch/en/unexplored-realities/). The conference was financially supported by the Swiss Academy for the Humanities and Social Sciences (SAGW/ASSH).

[3] "Seeing and the Other Senses—Making Sense of the Senses through Language. Opportunities and Challenges in Qualitative Research," 26-28 August 2020, Kassel, Germany (held online due to measures to contain the COVID-19 disease).

cow, Poland, in 2016, we first chose the term 'hidden realities.' The notion of a reality being 'hidden' was controversially discussed—ethnomethodological scholars argued that any socially relevant phenomenon needs to be perceived by the involved actors of a given interactional situation. Anything hidden from the actors will not shape their interaction and is thus not *socially* relevant in that situation (although it may be relevant within the subjective reality of an individual). And if an entire social setting is only little known in public or amongst scholars, *this* is the very phenomenon to examine: How is this setting accounted for? How do others deal with the fact that there is little knowledge about that reality?

For others working with participant observation, the notion of hidden or unexplored realities also proved counter-intuitive at first. As soon as we start connecting to individuals formerly unknown to us, as we start becoming a member of relatively obscure settings, these settings are, strictly speaking, not 'hidden' or 'unexplored' anymore—at least for the researchers involved. We cannot be sure about the existence of phenomena that we do not perceive directly. But, as soon as we experience certain phenomena, they cannot be labeled hidden. And, of course, if we abstract from the researcher, there is always *somebody* involved in the hidden reality. Thus, it is never strictly hidden or unexplored as long as it is populated by actors. Understood in a strict sense, hidden or unexplored realities appear not to be the adequate notion to label what we are dealing with as qualitative researchers.

## Unexplored Spaces and Practices

These issues become less problematic when 'hidden' or 'unexplored' are defined less strictly. This enables us to ask questions such as: *For whom* are certain realities hidden or unexplored? Why are they kept secret? Why do they remain in relative obscurity? Why are they not explored by outsiders? Why do we not hear voices from these social realities? And why has not yet more research been done on them? What can we learn about society in general by studying them? And should we, indeed, bring attention to settings or phenomena that the involved actors might not want to be exposed to or explore? These questions sensitize us to new developments and spaces that have gone largely unnoticed, be it because they are not recognized in their nascent status, be it because there is an uneasiness in thematizing them, or be it that the current public discourses and discussions make it difficult to see them. And who would be better positioned than qualitative researchers to venture into these blind spots of our contemporary discourses?

Accessing unexplored realities can be a particularly intriguing endeavor, as it entails venturing into the unknown, exploring a space known to only a few. It is also a particular strength of qualitative research, as it is mostly through personal contact that one can build trust and rapport to study what typically remains concealed or inaccessible. Studying these realities not only advances scholarly theories and concepts but may produce knowledge that provides a broader public outside academia with an understanding that is more complex and differentiated and one that is—in many cases—grounded in first-hand experience. The grounding in first-hand experience is gaining more relevance in an increasingly mediated world in which 'alternative facts' are more easily spread than ever, in turn, rendering the discussion ever more pertinent regarding how to produce 'robust' knowledge and findings—inviting us to cultivate the corresponding methodological strengths of qualitative methods by keeping the

discussions on the various moments of reflexivity in qualitative research alive.

The notion of unexplored realities not only points to little-known social realities but also to those aspects that remain understudied both in well-known and hardly known social realities, namely, social forces and action patterns that rest on and consist of a large body of tacit or implicit knowledge. While the notion of social structure and its correlates on the micro- and macro-level of analysis form an important core of sociology as a discipline, at first sight, they often seem strikingly intangible in everyday life. This is another classic strength of qualitative research—getting symbolically and, at times, literally 'in touch' with these implicit yet nonetheless relevant elements of everyday life—the study of which is much harder, if not impossible, if one stays behind one's desk. While explicit rules—through sanctions and institutionalization—may constitute powerful forces, they are also out in the open for contestation and negotiation. Implicit or tacit structures may, however, be as powerful as the explicit ones, partially because they remain unrecognized by (some of) the actors and thus operate outside their attention.

Some argue it may even be the qualitative researcher's main task to describe the "silent" aspects of the social (Hirschauer 2001). Why do we need, we might ask, an ethnographic description of what has been already communicated, of what the actors are expressively aware of? Participant observation could consist in transposing that which remains silent into a medium accessible to scholarly debate and an extra-academic audience. Through a long-term presence in and active engagement with the field, an ethnographer can experience and, in some sense, 'test' which aspects—patterns, conditions, and understandings—are more evanescent and which elements prove to be resilient over time. It is through the prolonged sharing of the everyday life-worlds in which the phenomena of interest are manifest that we come to experience structures that may otherwise remain unrecognized.

In light of current developments, this may be somewhat counter-intuitive—contemporary societies seem to be in a process of becoming ever more talkative. We live in 'interview societies' and in societies in which much of what happens seems to be recorded on video and audio and made accessible to very large audiences in an abundance of digital spaces. Many of our contemporaries seem to share aspects of their lives on social networks that would not long ago have been considered very private matters. There are, in other words, plenty of so-called 'naturally occurring' data we can use for our purposes. Yet, many experiential domains remain not only not externalized but are not transposed into the medium of the digital. And qualitative research methodologies enable us to explore these aspects through interviews and participant observation.

Thus, qualitative research is perfectly suited to explore unexplored realities and tacit forces and to convey some of the findings and understandings to a larger audience. This may also entail giving a voice to individuals who live in marginalized settings and are not heard in mainstream society, that is, to raise awareness about their existence and thematize their marginalization. This, in turn, immediately raises the question of how to represent these voices and realities, particularly if—in an ever more talkative society—providing knowledge through qualitative research not only consists of reproducing everyday statements but of abductively gaining insights that shed a different light on the actions in the field than

the perspectives of the actors do, without neglecting or devaluating their explicit articulations and emic perspectives. What should be represented that is encountered in the field, and how so? How do we negotiate this representative aspect when we discover processes with which the actors in the field or society at large are uneasy?

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Of the four articles, the study on self-injury by Patricia and Peter Adler and Ross Koppel's investigation of reality construction in medical care settings can be considered in an almost ideal-typical way concerned with unexplored realities. When Patricia and Peter Adler set out to study self-injury, the practice was little known, both in the wider public and the social sciences, and the actors involved in the practice were often uncertain whether their actions were highly idiosyncratic or shared by a few or many others. When 'exposed,' the available frame was predominantly one of medical problematization, implying a range of consequences, both in treatment and the corresponding self-understanding and identification of the involved persons. Over time, however, this mostly isolated practice had become a more well-known phenomenon, largely due to digital technologies both making it easier to connect to others who engage in self-injury and increasing the available representations of self-injury. Thus, a process in which often concealed and isolated subjective realities have become more well-known social phenomena, undergoing a moral passage from a medicalized to a voluntarily chosen deviant behavior. The study also demonstrates that some realities are structured in a way that makes the use of participant observation difficult, if not impossible, as the co-presence of a researcher could potentially have unwanted consequences for those engaged in the practice and their immediate social environment. The article also invites us to reflect on the ethics of what scholars should shed light on and expose, and how to do so. As the Adlers discussed in another article (Adler and Adler 2012), the psycho-medical framing of the practice in terms of research ethics by institutional review boards had almost rendered a sociological investigation of the practice unfeasible in the sense that they would have needed to expose the involved actors in ways that would have led to fundamental and mostly unwanted changes in their lives. The Adlers convincingly demonstrate that understanding this little-known reality from the perspectives of the actors without a medicalized normative interference adds to a scholarly understanding of the practice and provides a wider extra-academic audience with insights into relevant yet hidden 'pockets' of the societies they live in.

While entirely different in character and the involved actors, Ross Koppel also faced ethical issues throughout the research he and his colleagues conducted in hospitals, as they discovered that the little-understood reality of the day-to-day use of healthcare technology at times had dramatic effects on patients' lives. Populated by many more actors than the setting of self-injury and by a range of complicated digital realities, the microcosmos of electronic health records (EHR) and other IT systems used in hospitals is little or not at all understood by the patients and understood only narrowly and pragmatically by the involved clinicians. Through long-term ethnographic investigations of a range of hospital settings, Koppel and his colleagues reconstructed the often-implicit patterns with which the involved actors transpose their perspectives into the EHR, developing models or scenarios of how differing perspectives can

misalign to produce distortions in comprehension and treatment. The article demonstrates how the largely implicit patterns of this little-explored reality can be discovered through long-term ethnographic fieldwork, contributing an understanding thereof that connects to but goes beyond and adds to the understanding of the involved actors.

David Howes and Wolfram Fischer focus on aspects of social realities that have traditionally been less explored in social science research than other aspects—the sensory dimension of social realities and the intersection of biographical constructions with bodily experiences. Howes shows that particularly exteroceptive senses other than sight and hearing have posed difficulties in both conceptualization and empirical investigation, emphasizing that senses must be considered as constituting a multimodal experience that, in turn, is fundamental in the social construction of reality and in constituting co-presence. The article proposes 'participant sensation' as a research approach that both considers sensory experiences in their own right and in their relevance in constituting (social) phenomena that have conventionally been studied by registering them via sound and sight. If, in qualitative research, the researcher is the 'research instrument,' participant sensation requires the explicit broadening of those aspects of the researcher's experiences that one considers being empirically relevant for data analysis. Wolfram Fischer more specifically thematizes the senses in that biographical research needs to consider how the construction of biographies is linked to both the experiences and the construction of the body. Both articles invite us to conceptually reflect on the role of sensory experiences and to empirically ask which senses need to be involved in the study of a particular domain of social reality.

## Unexplored Senses

It has become commonplace to notice that contemporary culture is more concerned with sensory experiences. Over the last decades, sensory experiences have become an explicit focus of what people seek concerning leisure activities and the qualities of the built environment, and the cultural-technological artifacts they are surrounded by in their everyday lives. Consequently, large domains of contemporary industries have become concerned with crafting and aestheticizing the manifold sensory dimensions of the products and services they sell. A new service class rose with a strong commitment to fashion and alert to and engaged in producing more rapid transformations of style. Much of the work members of this class do as cultural intermediaries—in media, advertising, and design—has been and is symbolic and aesthetic. Recently, however, we witness an increase in experiences sought after and sold as being more 'authentic,' in contrast to what has been described as 'postmodern' development that has chiefly been concerned with bricolage and pastiche, with playfulness and 'fun,' as well as with aesthetically stylized surfaces, the latter not only but often being perceived in mediated forms. 'Authenticity' in this context does not necessarily (but also) indicate experiences that are 'not contrived' but rather in which the individual is sensorially involved in more encompassing ways—for example, in contrast to those digital media in which reality is primarily perceived through seeing and hearing. Thus, while the visual and acoustic senses remain key senses in everyday life, other senses have shifted into focus—at least amongst those classes, milieus, and population segments in which such experiences had previously taken on 'postmodern' characteristics.

Of course, ontologically and epistemologically, everyday life is and remains a fundamentally embod-

ied experience, all senses being vital in one way or the other, irrespective of the above developments. Any type of sociological research and imagination must thus, to some extent, consider the sensory dimensions of everyday life when developing empirically corroborated, more theorized accounts of it. Qualitative methods and social science research methods in general have developed a preference for the visual and auditory senses, probably also (but not only) because they are central in expressing written and spoken language. Sight and hearing are important in communication and interaction, and have historically proven to be highly effective senses in the natural sciences, and the technologies to reproduce visual and auditory sensations have become widely distributed and sophisticated since the advent of photography and sound recording in the 19th century.

However, sensory dimensions seemed to have posed difficulties to be considered in a methodologically robust manner, not at least since the dominant medium of the social sciences has long been language—in its auditory form as oral discourse, but particularly in its specific visual form as a written text. If "a medium is a medium is a medium, [then] it cannot be translated. To carry a message from one to the other medium always implies subjecting it to different standards and materialities" (Kittler 1987:271 [trans. FE]). Given this premise, the specific qualities of sensory experiences are lost when transposing them into text—the account of these experiences becomes a linguistic description. Of course, language is a key medium of social life, and there are good reasons to believe that robust accounts of the social organization of daily life can be given by focusing on language. After all, the actors' subjective consciousness remains mutually transcendent in everyday life. Often, relatively 'thin' linguistic externalizations of comparatively 'rich' internal experiences and meaning are sufficient to coordinate interaction and generate mutual understanding.

However, if sociological accounts are to take sensory experiences seriously in their non-mediated form, challenges arise on various levels, particularly concerning collecting the data and conveying the corresponding analyses to scholarly and lay audiences. While much of this is often handled pragmatically in the sense that spoken and written language remains the central medium for data analysis and the presentation and discussion of results, including the reflection of how language relates to non-linguistic domains, sensory qualities have become more important in the presentation of results, particularly in the context of performative social research. In terms of data analysis, the technical restrictions in registering sensorially experienced reality still pose significant challenges. While visual and auditory experiences can be recorded selectively, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory dimensions are much harder to register in forms accessible for data analysis, requiring—maybe—a reconsideration of what it means to collect data *beyond* the registration of reality in technological media. And internal sensations are, by definition, only accessible to others through externalization, be it by the actors using externalizing means themselves or through technological devices.

Qualitative methods and, particularly, forms of participant observation grounded in first-hand experience have an important role to play in both providing methodologies to empirically study everyday cultures in a sensorially encompassing way and—by drawing on reflections of the challenges that arise in this endeavor—in advancing the theorization of the relationship between sensory experiences and the

various forms of media they are transposed into. In encountering actors and everyday social settings in person, researchers experience these settings in sensorially encompassing ways, enabling them to literally *sense* what senses are important for the actors involved in these settings. This also enables them to use their sensory experiences both as data of how these settings are experienced and as indications of where and how to engage in further data collection (in collaboration with the other actors). Importantly, it provides them with what Max Weber (1978:5) called an "emotionally empathic or artistically appreciative quality [as] basis for certainty in understanding" in contrast to a "rational" understanding. In other words, they acquire knowledge to not only evaluate in rational terms how evident both their and others' accounts and interpretations are but in emotional or sensory ways.

In "striving for clarity and verifiable accuracy of insight and comprehension" (Weber 1978:5), much of social science has followed Weber's suggestion to focus on rational evidence, given its comparatively 'higher degree' of intersubjective clarity and logical intelligibility, in its 'ideal' form manifested in "logically or mathematically related propositions" (Weber 1978:5), expressed and contained within the medium of (linguistic) sign systems. On the other hand, "empathic or appreciative accuracy is attained when, through sympathetic participation, we can adequately grasp the emotional context in which the action took place" (Weber 1978:5). Qualitative methods enable researchers to develop such an understanding. And if this type of research aims to create a sensorially encompassing way of understanding—however imperfect—in academic colleagues and the audience interested in the academic findings, the use of other media than the language may play a crucial role. This is not to say that a focus on this type of evidence should replace rational evidence, but rather complement it—and foster a discussion on how language and related sign systems as dominant media of rational evidence relate to 'appreciative' evidence. Given the long-standing predisposition of sociological research and thinking to prefer rational evidence, other forms of evidence may be perceived as comparatively more 'fuzzy,' 'ambiguous,' 'diffuse,' et cetera, constituting a challenge considering that Wittgenstein's dictum that "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (Wittgenstein 1922:7) remains a fundamental part of sociological socialization, with the effect that other ways of articulating findings are experienced not only as 'insufficient' but also as 'uncomfortable.'

The widespread and still increasing distribution of computer-powered devices and their interconnectedness have given rise to a variety of digital media that have come to play an important role in our everyday life-worlds. These media are, in various ways, media of connection and disconnection. Through the relative ease with which they enable visual and oral communication, they have facilitated the maintenance of social relations by increasing the frequency of mediated interaction. Yet, while these media allow the registration and transmission of auditory and visual dimensions of reality in previously unknown quality and thus 'increase' the sensory range of mediated interaction, many everyday sensory experiences are not (yet) transposed into the realm of digital media. There is, thus, a disconnection in a double sense. On the one hand, the materiality of our everyday experiences, their 'tangible' character and 'unavoidable reality accent' of happening and existing seem to be rendered less relevant or significant in an age where digital media become a 'reality on their own' to the extent of dominating our sense of reality, this presumably

being one of the reasons for an increased longing for 'authentic' experiences (as mentioned above). On the other hand, digital realities may come to dominate material, lived realities even more than the traditional media, as everyday actors are immersed in these media in a more encompassing way. A scholarly investigation of social reality thus should not only focus on these digitized domains but also consider in more encompassing ways lived, sensory, and embodied experiences—and how everyday understandings and practices are transformed as they become intertwined with digitized and interconnected media.

Such an understanding should consider the aforementioned notion that carrying a message from one to another implies subjecting it to different standards and materialities. Instead of adhering to the notion of translation that is oriented towards the idea of reproducing an equivalent meaning, the notion of media transposition might be more adequate, not aiming at representation, but (re)production. In other words, a phenomenon or epistemic object is produced again in a new medium, and thereby—necessarily—certain characteristics and properties are lost, and others are gained. Nowadays, cultural practices are empirically transposed into a variety of different media. Not only should empirical studies reflect upon these processes but use this as potential to gain a more diverse idea of cultural practices as their epistemic objects.

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The four articles address the dimension of the senses and the interplay of digital(ized) realities and sensory experiences in various ways. David Howes and Wolfram Fischer both consider the role of the senses explicitly. Howes elaborates on theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches for studying the senses and demonstrates in a historical discussion how the senses have been considered in the context of the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth century and the Cognitive Revolution of the mid-twentieth century. He elucidates how the study of the senses has conceptually and empirically focused on specific aspects in such a way that has hindered the development of an encompassing understanding and consideration of the senses. The sensory turn in the human sciences and the development of the interdisciplinary field of sensory studies can be seen as an attempt to develop such a more encompassing theorization and empirical investigation of the senses, resonating with the wider societal shift to emphasize sensory and aesthetic experiences. Sensory studies centrally hinge on the sensorium, that is, the human sensory apparatus, and qualia—those aspects of the material world contingent on human perception. Including the extension of the senses via (technological) media, the sensorium is also conceived of as an operational complex that partially and importantly consists—in contemporary life-worlds—of digital technologies and realities, the sensorium thus in itself regarded as continuously involved in both a range of 'media transpositions' and in processing 'multi-media' perceptions. Methodologically, these aspects are studied using 'participant sensation,' overall constituting an approach of 'quali(a)tive' inquiry. Participant sensation explicitly focuses not only on seeing and hearing—particularly not only on written and spoken language and visual signs—but on those other senses that are more difficult to register for data analysis and the presentation of research results. In explicitly considering the relationship between the senses and meaning-making, it urges us to face the challenge of how to deal with those aspects not easily transposed into language.

It emphasizes that co-presence consists of having a "sensory effect on each other" (Simmel), an effect experienced in a multimodal manner. Howes concludes by presenting case studies in which the researchers have expanded the conventional limits of using the senses, involving the development of a 'more-than-human sensorium' of the researcher or (re)constructing the epistemic object in ways that allow for a multi-sensory experience thereof.

Connecting to this broader conceptual and empirical development of the sensory turn, Wolfram Fischer elaborates more specifically on the interplay between the senses, the body, and biography. In bringing together specific strands of biographical research and conceptualizations of the body and mind, he develops a processual model that considers how the body is sensually constructed. He discusses the various conceptual, empirical, and methodological implications for biographical research, indicating how existing methods conventionally used for biographical research, such as the narrative interview approach, could be extended.

Studying the practices of self-injury, Patricia and Peter Adler report from an in-depth empirical investigation of a social phenomenon in which the body and a particular way of sensorially experiencing the body play a fundamental role. Self-injury as an empirical phenomenon of study is one in which both participant observation and participant sensation are hardly feasible methodological choices. The article demonstrates how such a fundamentally embodied practice can nonetheless be thoroughly investigated through interviews and written communication and invites us to reflect on the practical and ethical limits of existential involvements of the ethnographers. Self-injury is, furthermore, a practice that is intertwined with the constitution and construction of the involved actors' self-understanding. The Adlers show how this entanglement of self-injury and self-understanding has changed over time, the practice undergoing a 'moral passage' from being understood and framed as medicalized behavior to a voluntarily chosen deviant behavior. This transformation is linked to the rise and use of digitally mediated communication and spaces such as website postings and internet groups, extending, amongst other aspects, both the range of actors with whom those who practice self-injury can communicate and the mediated representations and discussions of self-injury.

Ross Koppel's work on the three realities in healthcare institutions—the physical reality of the patient, the clinicians' mental models of the patient's conditions, and the EHR—focus on the various transpositions that take place between the respective 'media' in which these realities manifest. These medical settings are social realities in which the interaction and relation between the various actors are fundamentally shaped by a digital actor—the EHR. On the one hand, his study shows how bodily conditions—sensorially experienced by the patients and represented in medicalized terms by the clinicians—are not simply transferred but transposed into the digital EHR reality, both the transposing and the EHR structure imposing constraints on the process and the results. On the other hand, the study shows how this transposition process operates under distinct *empirical* expectations, namely, those of 'correct' or 'adequate' representation of both the physical reality of the patient and the clinician's mental model thereof. Seen from the patients' perspectives, these expectations become relevant insofar as the transposition of EHR representations back into specific medical treatments have corporeal consequences of a considerably higher reality accent than their digital correlates.

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