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***A Realist Approach to the analysis of Focus Group
Data***

Introduction:

The objective of this paper is to put forward the assertion that social research methods producing qualitative data need not be restricted to an assessment of micro-level interactions and inter-subjective meanings, that the production of such data can potentially make a significant contribution to the conceptualisation of causative mechanisms at the societal level. It will be argued that the discourses of social agents, elicited through qualitative techniques such as in this case, the focus group discussion, if analysed within the framework of a realist methodology can expand our understanding of the interdependence of social structures and social interaction. An important aspect of realist methodology is that methods should be determined by the nature of the social object under investigation. Hence, the objective in using the focus group discussions to elicit discursive data was to facilitate the ontological depth required of any realist study of social phenomena. Qualitative methods being particularly suited to furthering an understanding of what is it about the nature of the social structures under consideration that produce or reproduce particular social practices

A key assumption of this paper is that the discourses of social agents are an expression of essentially collective social processes operating at the 'appearance' level of social relations, but are nevertheless as 'real' as the social structures to which they are materially related..

A realist approach is defined here as that which seeks to explain and contextualise social phenomena by reference to social mechanisms operating below the surface contingent upon specific historical, local or institutional contexts (Pawson and Tilley:1997). Contingent in this context, means acknowledging the centrality of the real world activities of social agents, this being fundamental in avoiding the descent into structural functionalism or reductionism. For Roy Bhaskar (1989), this notion of a 'duality of structure', wherein social structures are conceived as not being able to exist independently of the activities they govern, nor exist independently of social agents conceptions of what they are doing in their activity, is crucial to his *transformational model of social activity*. Both these positions essentially reflect Marx's classic dictum that 'men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past'(1973:398).

The paper will begin by assessing in general terms some of the limitations, from a realist perspective, of what might be termed the 'interpretative sociologies' in the analysis of qualitative material in general. It will then go on to outline the case for the use of focus group transcript material in developing a critical realist explanation of social phenomena. In particular, it will argue for the significance of the shared discourses held by social groups, not just in terms of their meanings for that group, but as reproducing or indeed resisting, wider social structural processes. Finally, an analytical schema is proposed which seeks to assist in the development of an applied realist methodology. It is an attempt to get beyond what is all too frequently purely a philosophical statement of intent regarding the practice of a realist social science.

1. The limits of non-realist approaches to the analysis of qualitative data:

a) Issues in the application of interpretative / hermeneutic methods:

For those social scientists influenced by hermeneutic philosophies both new and old, *verstehen* or 'understanding' is seen to be a fundamentally different activity from 'explanation'; that there can be no description of social phenomena which is not interpretation. In the 'hermeneutic circle', which Gadamer adopted from Heidegger, all understanding demands some degree of pre-understanding for further understanding to be possible (Giddens:1976:56). For those sociologists working within the ontological position of hermeneutics, all social research is 'qualitative' research, for want of a better term. In that the expressed knowledge or 'practical theorising' of subjects is taken at face-value. This is because subjects are seen to be drawing upon 'pre-understandings', or as Schutz describes it, 'first order constructs'. In '*Economy and Society*', Weber similarly conceives the fundamental concern of sociology as being the goal of achieving the 'interpretative understanding of human action', whilst at the same time ensuring that *verstehen* was compatible with natural science validity criteria (Giddens:1977:170). As interpretative approaches became more influential, particularly within sociology, hermeneutic understanding has inevitably affected the ways in which qualitative material has been utilised and analysed within the social sciences. It is within this context that it is necessary to point to some of the limits that this essentially ontological notion of 'understanding' places on the analysis of the discourses of social agents within the social sciences generally.

Whilst not denying the important philosophical differences between phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and the anti-positivism of Winch, these are all interpretative sociologies situated within an anti-naturalist ontology that can be said to share the following methodological assumptions. Firstly, that *verstehen* cannot be treated as a mere social research technique, but as something that is common to all social interaction. Secondly, and following the *verstehen* principle, at root the social scientist is seen to utilise the same resources a lay person does in analysing their own experiences. In this way, the 'practical theorising' of the subject cannot be ignored in a 'scientific analysis' of human behaviour because it is central to why that behaviour occurs. Thirdly, that knowledge drawn upon by subjects to make their social world meaningful is implicit knowledge. Fourthly, the concepts (what Schutz called 'second order' constructs) utilised by social scientists must depend upon a prior understanding of the implicit lay knowledge of their subjects (Giddens:1976:52-3).

Yet, as Giddens (1976) has demonstrated, interpretative sociologies do share important limitations. The major limitation being that they deal with action as meaning, not action as praxis; if the latter is understood to include the material transformation of nature. Partly as a consequence of this position, any conception of power as a fundamental relationship within social interaction is absent.

b) Interpretative analysis and the question of essence and appearance :

The position adopted in this paper would reject the dualism which at one pole (anti-naturalism) sees the natural and social sciences as radically different types of enquiry, whilst at the other pole (physicalism), seeing the natural sciences as providing the social sciences with the conceptual framework for explaining social behaviour – reducing the human sciences to physics. It argues that interpretation is not only inescapable in any social enquiry, but that it is perfectly compatible with the naturalist position that there must be a methodological unity (which does not imply the hegemony of physics) of all the sciences in the formulation and evaluation of any theoretical proposition. Acknowledging that language and thought/reflection are inseparable, and then attempting to make sense of the sounds/sentences of individuals, means attributing beliefs and rationality to that individual. The process of giving the correct sense to a sentence used by that individual must then be an interpretative process. Interpretation thus represents a crucial dimension in the (scientific) explanation of human behaviour given that any description of social practices makes ‘irreducible reference to human beliefs and intention’ (Callinicos:1985:97-105).

However, should a realist process of interpretation take such intentional activity at face-value? do what informants tell us about their social experiences constitute knowledge of the social processes at work? Clearly, as Engholm (2000) points out, there are inherent difficulties in the rendition of the practical understanding of subjects to theoretical reconstruction. But that when constructivists, both of the weak and strong variety, argue this conversion is impossible they are confusing the intransitive and transitive dimensions of science. Here, Tony Lawson (1997) is cited in support of the argument that it is possible to achieve a concrete conceptualisation of the discursive; “... *social objects exist intransitively at the time any social scientific analysis of them is initiated, whatever the eventual effect upon them induced by such an enquiry* “ (in Bhaskar, Archer et al:1998;145). The aim then, of a realist social science must be to account for the real generative structures which produce the discursive rationales and intentions of lay social agents, rather than interpreting this phenomena purely in terms of particular transitive patterns.

To develop this point further, if one accepts the (I would argue) essentially critical realist proposition that we live within a class-based society characterised by differentials in material power between individuals and social groups, then we must recognise that in any purely hermeneutic interpretation of the expressed discourse of subjects, there is the danger of reproducing (at least inadvertently) the hegemonic ideas of such a stratified society. This certainly could be said to amount to a passive legitimisation of a dominant ideology. We need to go beyond a simple acknowledgement that social agents accounts can be fallible. Whilst it is impossible to avoid the process of interpretation in making sense of human actions and beliefs/ideas, the recognition of the existence of discrepancies between the way people perceive their world and its actual structure, is an acknowledgement of the much broader point that appearance and essence are not identical. This contention supported by Bhaskar’s argument that, “ *actors accounts are both corrigible and limited by the existence of unacknowledged conditions, unintended consequences, tacit skills and unconscious motivations; but in opposition to the positivist view, actors accounts form the indispensable starting point of social enquiry* “ (Bhaskar, Archer et al:1998:xvi).

Thus a realist social science that is informed by historical materialism would argue that underlying the rational or conscious intentions of social agents are hidden generative structural mechanisms. But that in order to avoid a crude reductionism concerning the relation between structure and agency it is important to acknowledge (certainly when analysing agents discourse) the impact of an ideological dimension to material practice that can allow us to begin to account for the existence of these 'discrepancies' or contradictions that exist between appearance/discourse and essence/structure (*discussed below*).

c) Induction and the coding-categorisation problem :

A methodological issue of a different order concerns the validity of the results of data analysis which result from the type of inductive reasoning that is frequently found within, but is not unique to, qualitative social science research.

The process of coding, if understood as the indexing and then linking of those elements of the data that are conceived of as sharing some perceived commonality, is always a first step in the analytical process; whatever the epistemological standpoint of the researcher. Nevertheless, the process of coding all too often uncritically reflects the researcher's (pre-) conceptualisations of the social phenomena under investigation. Transcript data is also often seen as being something unwieldy, as raw material that needs to be refined or reduced in some way prior to interpretation. Yet this form of 'data management' can exclude a priori whole sections of material that do not fit easily into the emerging codes. In this way, as Coffey and Atkinson (1996) argue, the process of coding can become confused with the analytical work of developing conceptual schemes (p27).

There are some significant differences in the methodological approach to the process of coding within qualitative research. Using codes to simplify or reduce transcript data is the characteristic form of the 'content analysis' approach, the purpose being to identify a simple conceptual schema. This process usually involves the exclusive index coding of segments of data text, so as to be able to eventually retrieve sections sharing a common code; as a method for treating the data in a 'quasi-quantitative' way. Thus some non-realist approaches to the analysis of qualitative data appear to begin and end with a coding process which segments, then reassembles the qualitative material in a manner resonant of some Frankensteinian project. Such approaches result in the fragmentation and decontextualisation of research material, and distort the richness and complexity of interactive discourse of informants (in the case of focus group transcript material). The problem is essentially one of failing to integrate fieldwork with an explicit theoretical framework (Coffey and Atkinson:1996).

Certainly, the data generated through the increasingly popular focus group method, has, as Frankland and Bloor (1999) point out, all too frequently been selectively analysed. This outcome is a consequence of employing exclusive coding procedures, and the use of decontextualised interview quotations, possibly as a result of a desire to retain the richness of transcript data. Frankland and Bloor (1999) go on to argue that analysis, as an essentially comparative exercise, should seek to derive propositions that can be applied across all of the data/transcript items, not just selected items.

To this end, the analytical technique known as analytic induction (AI) (Hammersley & Atkinson:1995; Coffey and Atkinson:1996), is one possible avenue that can lead away from the reductionism of the content analysis type approach. Each section of interview transcript is not assigned a single code, in some final and arbitrary interpretative act, rather each segment is assigned several non-exclusive index-codes which refer to the various analytic topics brought-up in the group discussion. Index-code words or labels are attached to these emergent themes as an inductive process, which initially can be quite general but becomes progressively elaborated as more data is examined. Once indexing is completed a method of making systematic comparisons within the transcript data is required, the indexing process being merely the first stage. In AI, generalizability of the final analytical propositions is achieved by focusing on the 'deviant' or contradictory indexed items. Here the attempt is made to modify the analytical propositions to embrace these deviant cases, this procedure being designed as an attempt to guard against selective attention to data to provide a more systematic means of extending analytic thinking.

There are clear merits to this deviant case approach applied to focus group data analysis, particularly in its drawing attention to the importance of the ways in which participants contradict one another. Contradiction as being indicative of an important dynamic at work rather than some aberrant occurrence or utterance that cannot be fitted into a code. Nevertheless, there remain considerable ontological and subsequently epistemological difficulties associated with adopting a purely inductive approach, however sophisticated, to the analysis and subsequent generation of hypotheses from qualitative material/data. This is particularly the case if the aim of engaging in qualitative research is conceived to be about furthering our understand of the social processes at work within the observed behaviour, texts, or group discourses under investigation.

2. The case for a realist approach

What then can the qualitative material generated by a focus group discussion offer a realist social science that is more usually associated with the quantitative structural analysis, or put another way, what can the subject tell us about the object ? . The argument presented here is that such qualitative material, if utilised within a broader realist framework of inquiry, has the potential to contribute to a transcendental (beyond the subject-object/agency-structure divide) understanding of causal relations and social processes operating at a particular social and historical conjuncture. For whilst qualitative data would (and does so in non-realist research) appear to privilege *discourse* as a social form over *action* (and agency over structure in a wider context), it will be contended that both represent forms of practice rooted in the conditions of material existence and associated sets of social relationships and practices.

a) What are the assumptions of a realist social science ?

The claim to realism characterises a very wide range of social research.. For Marx, realism, as opposed to forms of idealism (including the work of Hegel), recognises thought or 'the ideal' as purely a reflection of the material world in the minds of men (1976:102). It is both in this sense of thought as reflection, and in terms of the existence of objects independent of thought (appearance/essence distinction) that

Marx's notion of realism is described by Callinicos as being an 'epistemological materialism' (1985:114).

For Bhaskar (1989) as a 'transcendental' or critical realist, some forms of 'realism' are more realist than others. He identifies 'actualism' as being the commonest form of realism in 'empiricist cultures'. This he argues is a shallow form of realism which seeks to assert the reality of existing state of affairs and events locating the sequence of cause and effect only at the level of events. This he counters with a 'depth realism', which identifies all social structures as dependant or built upon social relations :
" *The relations into which people enter pre-exist the individuals who enter into them, and whose activity reproduces or transforms them; so they (social structures) are themselves structures* " (p4; cited in Collier:1994:10).

Central to this depth realism is the assertion that human societies are characterised as being stratified, differentiated, and dynamic (Bhaskar:1975). It is a differentiated social world in the sense of recognising the existence of multi-determinations rather than a single deterministic essence. This is because societies are by definition open rather than closed systems. It is a stratified and dynamic social world in the sense of recognising pre-existing structures which operate below the surface. These are generative or causal social mechanisms which interplay with other objects including social agents, and result in non-predictable but potentially explicable outcomes. That to understand any social phenomenon means to contextualise it in terms of the operation of these hidden mechanisms. As Roy Bhaskar (1975) has stated, " *social structure is both the ever-present condition and the continually reproduced outcome of intentional human agency* " (cited in Archer et al:1998;xii). It does however need to be acknowledged that at this substantive level, realism is potentially compatible with a wide range of social theory, although there might be formal differences as to the relative importance of certain mechanisms and structures.

b) *Realism and the status of the knowledge/discourse of subjects produced in a Focus Group situation :*

It is clearly important to be clear about the status of the discourse articulated by respondents in a focus group situation concerning their understandings of the world; putting to one side for the moment the somewhat narrower methodological concerns regarding interviewer bias, the artificiality of research format, etc. Can the knowledge of individuals and social groups represented through talk, or collectively as 'discourse', be accepted for research purposes as data that can inform a realist understanding of the social world ?. Andrew Sayer (1992) asserts that any empirical observation of the world must inevitably be 'theory-laden'. He rejects the possibility of achieving a scientific 'objectivity' as a naïve belief that facts can 'speak for themselves' and only need to be 'collected' as 'data'; this applying as much to qualitative as to quantitative research methods (p45). However, he avoids a retreat into relativism however, by arguing that theory does not order or structure given observations/data, but rather it 'negotiates their conceptualisation, even as observations' (Sayer:1992:84).

However, whilst acknowledging that discourse as an expression of shared meanings and beliefs, cannot be readily assessed quantitatively, this does not imply that it is

merely some superficial manifestation of more fundamental social structural relations. If shared discourses are seen to be reciprocally confirmed through the reproduction of social practices in the form of social institutions and processes, then discourse as the articulation of shared knowledge has a material existence. Discourse as an expression of essentially collective social processes, whilst operating at the 'appearance' level of social relations, is nevertheless as 'real' as the structural interrelations to which it is materially linked. In this sense then, a realist research methodology would recognise the importance of qualitative methods in furthering an understanding of what is it about the nature of the social structures under particular consideration that produces or reproduces particular social practices. This position would argue that social processes cannot be reduced to the level of statistical relationships alone; this is not though to diminish the value of quantitative approaches.

Depth realism, as against forms of structuralism, recognises the structures of social objects as being constituted through a set of internal relations, or put another way, intersubjective social practices which must be understood *qualitatively* (Sayer:1992). Utilising qualitative data such as discourse/narrative transcriptions, and with the assumption that knowledge and practice are inseparable, offers us the possibility of exploring the intersubjective meanings of a social practices. Whilst informants are clearly fallible in their common-sense understandings, textual material can, within a realist methodological framework, offer us the potential to understand the dynamics of the social relationships that act to reproduce or bring about a transformation of such social practices.

A depth realism that is influenced by the historical materialism of Marx would also recognise that knowledge is primarily produced through social activity or 'practice'. For Marx, the notion of practice refers to both to the goal of transforming our environment/nature through work or 'labour', and the process of communicative interaction with others through the sharing of meanings (men and women transforming themselves); both forms of knowledge being highly interdependent. At the root of this central conceptualisation of the transformative power of labour is an isomorphism of thought and the object of that thought (Brown:1999). Embracing such a isomorphism means recognising the existence of a relationship between the social form or 'appearance', and a hypothesised structure or 'essence'. For Marx, this relationship in class societies reflects a contradictory reality. This arises from the historical development of production processes and a division of labour out of which social relationships and social conditions emerge independent of (the majority) of men and women's will and interests. From these contradictions or unintended consequences of human practice, emerge structures and relations (social class divisions) as an 'objective power' over which men now lack control. Practice which is as a product of an 'incomplete' or contradictory reality' results in ideology (Larrain:1979:45). It should be said that the notion of contradiction is conceived by Marx not as the universal essence of reality, but as a condition of specific social situations where inversion (used in the Hegalian meaning of an inner reality concealed and reversed by its phenomenal form) occurs, that is all class societies. For Marx, these are real, historical contradictions rather than the abstract ideal conceptualisation that exists within Hegel (Larrain:1983:132).

When engaged in a realist analysis of the qualitative transcript data emerging from the focus group discussion, we are attempting to move beyond the interpretation or

abstraction of themes/conceptual categories in order to achieve a concrete conceptualisation of the underlying generative mechanisms at work (*see next section*). The assertion here is that the concept of ideology as used by Marx, enables us situate the discursive within a conception of reality that, “...*does not explain practice from the idea but explains the formation of ideas from material practice*” (1970:58). This essentially non-reductionist relationship between both ideas and practice, and structure and agency, recognises the subject shaping as well as being shaped by ideology. The conception of ideology (both critical and positive variants) can account for the structural basis of contradictory realities overcoming the relativism of constructionist approaches to discourse, in a way that simply admitting the fallibility of subjects can never achieve.

c) *Marx's method of inquiry and the synthesis of the concrete concept :*

Marx's own 'method of inquiry' went beyond the analytical induction that characterised much of political economy in his time. The latter having assumed that by moving from given / presenting categories to more complex ones, the analyst was able to achieve an understanding of the phenomenal object. The problem however, was that the historical and analytical origins of these simple analytical categories was taken as read. Marx began with the concrete phenomenon and sought to find by analysis its simple determinants. The resulting abstract categories were then 'presented' in such a way as to achieve a synthetic concrete categorisation of the phenomenon; the key to this approach was to start from some pre-analytic concrete concept. In other words, a double movement (*Fig 1*) from concrete social phenomena to abstraction, then following a synthesis of these abstractions construct a concrete conceptualisation of that social phenomena.

Fig 1: The process of retroducing or synthesizing the concrete concept

$$C1 > A , A > C2$$

C1 = concrete phenomenal object ; A = process of abstraction ; C2 = concrete conceptualisation

Source: Sayer (1992)

Marx's analytical approach is empirical rather empiricist, in that he recognised that in the devising of simple abstract determinations, the analytical categories did not have to be immediately identifiable by observation / measurement. However, their emergence did require an analytical process of reasoning; as much as the subsequent proceeding synthesis ('presentation') stage. Yet here Marx, “*steered a middle ground of method by avoiding the extremes of the assumed omnipotence of reason as independent of any concrete reality found in idealism and the crass devotion to the scope and power of the senses which limited the potential for comprehension in empiricism*” (Oakley:1984;149).

Marx's analytical process of synthesis, it is asserted here, is essentially that described by critical realists such as Bhaskar and Collier as 'retroduction'. For the latter, the retroduced concrete concept synthesises a range of relevant abstract categories to arrive at an analogous generative mechanism(s) at work - "... which if it were to exist and act in the postulated way would account for the phenomenon in question " (Bhaskar:1989:12 - cited in Collier:1994;163). It should also be added, that the analytical process of retroduction necessarily 'draw(s) heavily on the investigators perspective, beliefs and experience' (Lawson:1997;165).

3. A proposed realist schema for the analysis of qualitative focus group data

This section of the paper sets out in an essentially exploratory way, a realist analytical schema for the analysis of qualitative focus group data, which seeks to move beyond the traditional methodological cul-de-sac within social research, that is the choice between an inductionist or deductionist approach to theory development. Rather it seeks to reflect the dialectical method employed by Marx in his critique of political economy. The schema set-out in *Figure 2* outlines an analytical process that is designed to be an open one, whereby the 'trail' from the data to analytical conclusions is transparent.

Fig 2: A realist analytical schema for the generation of the concrete concept from qualitative focus group data

(i) Transcriptions	(ii) Indexing	(iii) Interpretation	(iv) Theorisation	(v) Retroduction
Taken from Focus group discussion/s	Non-exclusive coding of focus group discursive material	Abstraction of conceptual 'themes'. Analytically induced through an interpretative understanding of indexed data.	Conceptual category/s derived from sets of specified deductive frameworks ; applied to identified theme.	...of a concrete conceptualisation. Postulated through a process of synthesis or retroduction. Which identifies the necessary rather than contingent causal relationships or mechanisms which are the condition for the generation of the social phenomena under investigation.

The analytical schema starts with the data set-out in transcript form (**Row i**). The principle established in the AI approach (outlined above) that the coding of data must be a non-exclusive indexing process in order to avoid selection at this early stage, is adopted in the indexing of the focus group transcript material, so as to include all the

points/issues raised by the focus group participants themselves. Thus possible contradictions will not be precluded at this early stage in the analytical process (**Row ii**). These issues/ideas are then interpretatively abstracted into 'themes' or conceptual categories, as would be usual in an orthodox hermeneutic approach (**Row iii**). However, here these abstracted themes represent a first stage in the retrodution of a concrete conceptualisation in this analytical schema, rather than an end-stage in the process of data analysis. These themes essentially representing the perspective of social agents (through interpretation). The problem however, in leaving the analysis at this level, which while it could be said to represent a reality from a phenomenological perspective because it is rooted in the actual discourses / 'practical logic' of the respondents, is from a depth realist perspective, merely examining the 'domain of the actual'. An actualist analysis cannot establish the hidden dynamics of the multi-relational stratified nature of shared discourse.

The next level in this analytical schema is concerned to establish those theoretically deduced categories drawn from the literature (moving from the abstract to the concrete) which might offer a structural context for the particular discourses (**Row iv**). This 'theorisation' column is included to reflect those hypothesised structural determinants of the discourse of social agents. Again, the problem with leaving the analysis at this theoretical-deductive level, is that it is in essence a generalised conceptualisation of a complex social phenomenon and lacks specificity. Both the interpretation and theorisation columns/categories would reflect what Sayer (1992) describes as 'an ordering framework' used as a 'nominalist solution' to concept formation.

Finally, the attempt is made to synthesis those relevant abstractions from which we might understand the dynamics of the concrete object (**Row v**). This involves the process of inference that critical realists have described as retrodution, in which the conditions for the social phenomena under investigation are explained through the postulation of a set of generative mechanisms. In the process of abstracting from the concrete object then back to the postulation of a concrete conceptualisation it is essential to distinguish between those social relationships that are necessary rather than contingent for this social phenomena to occur i.e those which are internally related. Clearly it is important to specify those contingencies that bring about or indeed, counteract the action of the identified generative mechanisms. Certainly in the case of the discourses of social agents, it is necessary to be sensitive to developments within the ideological environment which maybe determinant in the practices of those agents under investigation.

It should be noted that this analytical schema does not imply that the emerging inductive and deductive categories combine together in some way so as to constitute the retroduted concrete concept. Rather that the representations, beliefs, and shared meanings which constitute the discourse of the social groups under investigation, arise out of the shared material practices and habitus of these social agents, and it is the shared understandings associated with these practices that inductive theorising through a process of interpretation can effectively draw attention to. Whilst deductive theorising can draw attention to the ways in which social structural features are reproduced in the discourse of such social agents.

4. The process of analysis applied to actual focus group data :

As indicated above, the interpretative induction of conceptual 'themes' from the data marks a beginning of the process of analysis rather than an end stage. Themes are then identified across the whole of the transcript data, following a process of indexing (to facilitate the management of the data). However, themes need not be mutually exclusive, indeed contradictions are specifically looked for (given the understanding of the ways in which ideology manifests itself within contradictory realities). Attention can be drawn at this stage to the significance of the omission or emphasis of a specific theme, that may emerge from the different focus group discussions around the same broad issue. Once identified, these interpreted 'themes' derived from social agents form the basis of a further level of abstraction, which attempts to deductively hypothesis key (structural) determinants of these discursive manifestations. The process of retroduction produces a set of generative mechanisms which it is postulated can account for, and contextualise the discourses of the specific social agents being investigated

Example: The discourses of Accident and Emergency nurses

The transcription, indexing, and thematic interpretation set-out in this example (*see Appendix 1 below*), are derived from the transcriptions of a number of focus group discussions with groups of Accident and Emergency nurses concerning with exploring the ways in which the institutional changes within the NHS, reflecting a change in the welfare relationship between state and citizen, have impacted upon the role and expectations (by patients) of these nurses. The example utilises an excerpt from two of these discussions, where both focus groups are specifically discussing patient responsibilities towards their own health management.

The transcript and associated indexing are set out in two columns. Following this several conceptual categories or themes are identified through a process of interpretative induction. Six categories are identified which include the issues of professionalism and objectivity; lay public knowledge; failures of health care system; nurses as having responsibility without power; and the complexity of the nursing role.

These abstracted themes are then looked at in relation to the theoretical literature in a deductive process. This draws out the following theoretical models/abstractions in relation to the data: Professional-client conflict reflecting different interests; workload pressure increasing in A&E departments as a result of problems elsewhere in system of health care; The use of shared typifications by occupational groups to manage work.

Finally, these abstractions can be retroduced in order to determine the generative or causal mechanisms producing this nursing discourse (acknowledging that whilst there is no one unified position on patient responsibility, a broad distinctive nursing voice can be identified). This very small example points to the importance of competing ideologies and emergent contradictions concerning the role of the patient within a late modern health care system in the articulated discourse of these nurses n.b although

patient stereotypes were present, these were far too diverse to constitute taxonomic Weberian typifications of nursing beliefs about patients.

The following substantive generative relationships were identified :

- Nursing ideology which emphasises both professionalism and evidence-based biomedical practice, whilst at the same time embracing humanistic philosophical positions of patient autonomy & self-empowerment.
- Two competing sets of demands on the work of A&E Depts : From *within* the health care system the demand that all patients attending A&E Depts be assessed and treated within set time limits, but with limited additional resources. From *outside* the health care system - greater patient expectations of public services such as that provided by A&E Depts, fuelled by a pervasive consumerist ideology..

In concluding this brief example it could be said that an understanding of the generative mechanisms point to a complex set of competing ideological and structural influences on the professional discourses of these nurses. That it is not a question of a dramatic paradigmatic shift (in relation to the constituents of 'nursing work') in line with changing political and historical circumstances, rather there is a stratification of cultural and social ideas about the role of the nurse, with what were previously dominant not disappearing, but continuing to exert a residual effect.

Conclusion

In arguing for the importance of a realist ontological approach to practical social science research, this paper has proposed a methodological framework that it is contended, enables qualitative transcript material to be integrated into an analytical process resulting in a concrete conceptualisation of a set of interactive generative mechanisms. This means going beyond the interpretation of conceptual categories from the themes drawn out from the micro-interactions of a group of social agents, towards an explanation of the way in which social discourses arise out of the interaction between agency and structure in a particular material context. However, it does need to be emphasised that this is essentially an exploratory schema, an illustration of just one possible way in which a depth realism may be applied to the analysis of qualitative data.

Whilst the depth realist approach to analysing focus group discussion material that is proposed in the analytical schema (*Figure 2*) is undoubtedly an unwieldy and drawn-out process, it is argued that social researchers should attempt to demonstrate the process by which they arrive at their final analytical conclusions. Admittedly, this is sometimes difficult to achieve given the expectations of how qualitative social research data in particular, should be presented for publication i.e through the use of often disarticulated interview extracts.

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Appendix 1: Transcribed discourses of A & E Nurses re: patient responsibilities

Transcript	Indexing
<p>A&E Nurses @Hospital A</p> <p>So we are talking about personal responsibility, how much account do you take of this when you are treating these patients ?</p>	
<p>R2. Not really. For me they are a patient, they`re here for treatment and you give it. But when you are doing the treatment you may say, `You could do this in future`. But you don`t really think that it is their fault therefore I am going to be nasty to them. You treat the person because that`s what they`re here for.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We treat the patient not the person.
<p>R3. It depends why they have come, because I have found myself saying to people, getting angry...for example, this woman puts tablets under a mattress, the child goes and takes the tablets. Now, I went back to her and asked `why did you keep those tablets then, you are supposed to keep them high up`, I won`t say I made her cry, but she became quite emotional and said to me that she had two toddlers at home...there was a mound of social problems and pressures on her. What is straightforward to us became an enormous problem to her, she said `I know I should of put them higher up, but I have this pain, I have these kids, and its easier to just keep them under the mattress, I won`t do it again`. But, I felt myself thinking, why was I like that to that person. You wouldn`t have known she had all those problems, so I asked if she had a health visitor and family support. So my feelings did open-up the situation, so that she could ask `what can I do ? `.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental irresponsibility - An example of a judgemental intervention by a nurse. • Personal feelings and conduct of professional role.
<p>R1. The thing that I resent is your regular attenders who have alcohol problems, and come in all the time and are very abusive, and mainly come in with alcohol-withdrawal fits and they bump their heads all over the place, and come in covered with blood...</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alcohol abuse as an example of a perceived self-inflicted health problem.
<p>R4. I don`t think that we should resent them, they do need helping...</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disagreement concerning the capacity of certain patient groups to help themselves
<p>R1. They do need helping, but when they have been referred many times and they just don`t want to help themselves.</p>	
<p>R2. But they can`t help it.</p>	
<p>R4. I think you just have to keep digging away.</p>	
<p>R2. I think its very easy to dish-out big advice and asking why do you do this ? We don`t know anything about their background, they can`t help it. I`m sure they aren`t doing to come up to Casualty for the excitement; they have a problem.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patients will use A&E because they have a problem, whatever nurses think about appropriateness of use
<p>R1. But the ones that come in regularly and give you abuse; it is hard.</p>	
<p>R2. Just like that woman you were talking about, poor woman, she just couldn`t cope.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving health advice to patients which results in abuse.
<p>R3. Yes, but if I hadn`t of been like that with her, she would never of told the Casualty Officer, because he went in and said `Guys (Hospital) say this isn`t a problem, you can take your child home`.</p>	
<p>R2. But the child was brought in here because the child has taken the tablets. So whether you made her feel guilty about it isn`t going to make things different</p>	

<p>different.</p> <p>R3. She needed extra support from somebody.</p> <p>R4. But remember she was probably at an emotional point anyway, feeling guilty about leaving the tablets around. So it made her feel more guilty. But R3 needed to give that advice.</p> <p>R3. You have got to judge the situation, because you just can't plough in there and say to someone who is paralytic, 'For goodness sake, this is the tenth time you've be in this week, pull yourself together', they would just laugh at you.</p> <p>R1. But at the back of your mind, you do think 'Oh, for gods sake', you might not say it, but you think it.</p> <p>R3. You are only a human being, and sometimes you see this man again who is absolutely paralytic with a head injury, you just want to shake him and say 'what are you doing !'.</p> <p>R4. But you don't.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">A&E Nurses @ Hospital B</p> <p>As we have discussed, many people use A&E departments for comparatively minor health problems, to what extent do you think that individuals should be held personally responsible for maintaining their health ?</p> <p>R10. I think they have to be made more aware of what services are available outside a hospital. Like your dental pains come in, and I think they need to be educated a lot more about the availablity of dental services, and facilities for pain relief available through chemists. They don't realise that you can get codeine tablets over the counter.</p> <p>R9. And I think education is about the illnesses they've got. People come in with food poisoning a lot, they really think that there is something drastically wrong with them, of course they do because its never happened to them before. Its reassurance that you're giving out, you don't necessarily have to give them anything, just reassurance.</p> <p>R8. Patients perceptions of their illness are important, be it an 'abdo' (<i>minimal</i>) pain or a finger injury, the finger injury could present worse than the abdo pain patient. They will assume the patient role, and you have to tend to that when the patient comes through.</p> <p>R9. Working in A&E you realize how completely thick people are (<i>laughter</i>), no seriously though, how completely uneducated they are. They literally have no idea about anything. They think something drastically is happening to them when its only minor. You think of all the things the media say about health education, all those '999' programmes, all the media that's been on HIV and Aids, and you still have people in who have no idea.</p> <p>R8. But media scares about salmonella poisoning, the meningitis scare have an effect. And then you have a big influx of parents coming with their children wanting to be checked out, they don't want to go to their G.P because its time-wasting.</p> <p>R9. And because they hear horror stories about G.P's missing the</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Patients require emotional support ● Making judgements about nursing intervention ● Hiding personal feelings ● More patient education required, lack knowledge regarding availability of services ● Patients don't understand significance of symptoms ● Assuming the 'patient role' ● Patients are uneducated about health problems - despite extensive media campaigns ● Media producing health panics
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<p>problem.</p> <p>R10. Don't you agree that often these people come in because they have no where else to go, and you have to redirect them. Once you've given them the reassurance and advised them where to go, they go away much happier. They are prepared to wait to see their G.P once they know that its not a life-threatening thing they've got.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● GP service does not meet patient needs ● Patients use A&E service for reassurance
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(iii) Abstracted emergent themes through a process of induction

- Whilst nurses do attempt to be 'professional' in their relationship with patients, professional objectivity is sometimes outweighed by personal values.
- The lay public in general is perceived to lack an understanding of health issues and the role of health services -.
- A recognition that the professional nursing role is as much about providing emotional reassurance, as treating patients health problem.
- Whilst patients might see nurses as gate-keepers to treatment, nurses themselves recognise their relative powerlessness within system of delivery.
- The health care system perceived as failing to provide sufficient resources to ensure immediate access to appropriate treatment for patients produces tensions between professionals and patients
- Many patients are not doing enough to help themselves - over-reliant on professionals.

(iv) Abstracted conceptual category deductively derived from theoretical frameworks

- Professional Role literature points to conflicts in the therapeutic relationship arising out of differing goals and interests between patients and nurses as professionals i.e 'competency gap'.
- The increase in 'inappropriate' attenders experienced by A&E depts nationally over the past decade, as reflecting failures of primary care services (in particular access to G.P's), bring about increased workload for A&E departments.
- The literature points to the importance of the use of shared typifications (of in this case- 'inappropriate attenders in A&E) in managing everyday routines for professional /occupational groups -However, a contradiction is immediately apparent here in that there is some evidence here of a critical awareness of the impact of using these typifications in the context of the professional - client role.

(v) Postulated generative mechanisms

- Nursing ideology which emphasises both professionalism and evidence-based biomedical practice, whilst at the same time embracing humanistic philosophical positions of patient autonomy & self-empowerment.
- Two competing sets of demands on the work of A&E Depts : From *within* the health care system the demand that all patients attending A&E Depts be assessed and treated within set time limits, but with limited additional resources. From *outside* the health care system - greater patient expectations of public services such as that provided by A&E Depts, fuelled by a pervasive consumerist ideology..