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Elizabeth Hill and Gabrielle Meagher

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Doing 'Qualitative Research' in Economics: Two Examples and Some Reflections

Elizabeth Hill and Gabrielle Meagher
University of Sydney

Introduction[1]

For related practical and epistemological reasons, economists rarely collect their own data: quantitative data are typically very expensive to collect, and 'statistical' and 'empirical' seem synonymous. Using reflections on our own research projects by way of demonstration, we submit that with 'qualitative' data and methods, economists can gain useful empirical and theoretical insights often unavailable with conventional 'quantitative' sources and tools.

There are, of course, several kinds of qualitative method. Whipp (1998) lists interviews, ethnography and case studies as three alternatives. Participatory action research is a fourth (see, for example, Whyte 1998). Again, distinctions between qualitative methods emerge from practical and epistemological differences in data gathering and interpretation, as well as in the (intended) impact of the research process on informants and their environment. In this paper, we focus on the data and insights available using semi-structured interviews, and compare this with the quantitative methods typical in economics. For ease of exposition, we use a rough dichotomy between 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' to represent this comparison, at the cost of recognising and exploring diversity among qualitative methods.[2] Although our chosen method (interviews) is at the 'minimalist' end of the qualitative continuum, the comparison is profitable.

We neither claim nor aim to further debate in the philosophy of the social sciences, nor to provide a how-to manual for would-be qualitative economists. Rather, by systematically reflecting on the research process, we hope to further discussion within economics about how and why we do what we do. Our reflections have a three stage iterative structure (see Figure 1). We start with some practical issues – recruiting subjects, conducting interviews and so on. We then move on to discuss validity questions, and then to 'qualitative analysis' proper. But of course, practical matters, validity questions and analysis are inextricably linked in ways we hope this paper demonstrates. We conclude with some comments on the distinctive contributions of qualitative data and research in economics. Where appropriate, we refer readers to texts in the qualitative methodology literature for further reading.

Our reflections on the research process derive from two projects we are currently undertaking. The first, Elizabeth Hill's 'SEWA project,' evaluates the impact of an all-women trade union called the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) on the economic and social security of women working in the Indian informal sector (see Hill 1998, 1999). The second, Gabrielle

[1] We would like to thank the participants in the seminar at the Open University where we presented an earlier version of this paper for their insightful and challenging questions and comments.

[2] The dichotomy is also 'rough' because of the extent to which 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' approaches rely on and inform each other in ways obscured by the conventional distinction, which, we confess, we do little to redress.

Meagher's 'domestic workers project,' examines workers' experience of paid household work, and the demographic and institutional structure of the domestic services industry in Australia (see Meagher 1997, 1999).

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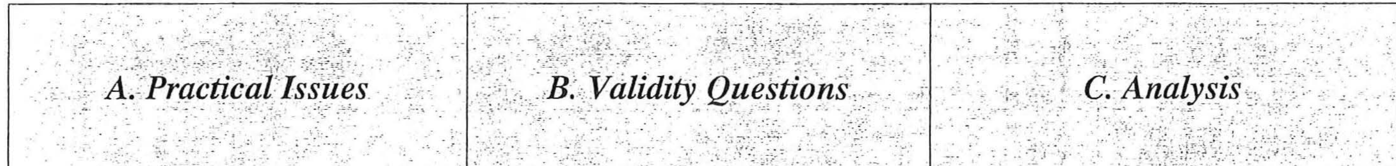
Figure 1: Outline of issues.



- Knowing your research context
- Finding informants
- Designing questions
- Conducting interviews (process of conversation)
- To tape or not to tape
- Using a computer aided data analysis tool
- Time and resources

- Structure of 'sample'
- What do interviews tell the researcher (facts and interpretations)
- Status of interview material as both 'fact' and 'interpretation'
- Reporting data

- Relationship to theory/literature
- Hypothesis testing
- Story telling
- Creative induction

A. Practical Issues

1. Know your research context.

Most economists and social scientists research issues not directly related to their own life experience. Good research, however, requires some understanding of the context within which you wish to work. This allows you to plan how to collect data and anticipate possible problems in doing so. While knowledge and understanding of the context is imperative for research of any kind, it is particularly important in qualitative research. By contrast with quantitative research methods, the socially embedded nature of qualitative data collection means that knowledge of your research context is crucial to the successful collection of data. The greater the number of 'boundaries' (national, class, language etc) research crosses, the greater the amount of background knowledge and/or experience required.

The SEWA project demonstrates how crucial knowledge of the research context is to successful qualitative research. I chose India as my research context having spent several years living and working in New Delhi. This experience gave me a good working knowledge of the particular pressures I might face doing research in India. Even before I began my research I had developed personal strategies for both managing and overcoming the unpredictability that characterises India and grassroots organisations like SEWA.
I also spent a significant amount of time and effort developing an understanding of the needs of SEWA and how my research might be used to facilitate their research agenda and policy development. Time spent developing good relationships with SEWA leadership was not only a central component of my own research philosophy, but of great value in overcoming hurdles in the ongoing research process.

Connection with other relevant institutions and individuals further enhanced my overall knowledge of the research context, providing both an alternative point of view, additional information and access to related activities and meetings.

2. Finding informants

Practical strategies such as informant recruitment are to some extent project-specific, and may even differ within a project depending on the kind(s) of informants sought. In the SEWA project informants were readily available because the research focussed on members of an organisation, but in the domestic workers project, some informants had to be found 'by hook or by crook.'

In the domestic workers project, one obvious recruitment problem was that many contacts between domestic workers and householders are made by word-of-mouth in local networks, or through agencies or companies operating with private lists. To deal with this problem, I started with a rough dichotomy of formal and informal markets, and took a two pronged approach to finding informants. On the 'informal' side my only option was to seek initial contacts within my own local network, and 'snowball' from there. On the 'formal' side, I started with the public list provided by the 'Yellow Pages'. Contacts made this way led to others. I had also decided to include domestic workers employed by a statutory authority to perform housework and personal care for the frail aged and disabled in their own homes. To recruit these fieldworkers from the Homecare Service of New South Wales I needed the permission and assistance of Area Coordinators, which was

readily obtained. Thus, recruiting across informal markets, and both private and public sector institutions required diverse strategies.

3. Designing questions

Rather than trying to prove a pre-existing hypothesis, one purpose of qualitative research is exploratory, to generate data around a particular issue. In interview-based research, questions are the way you produce the data. Another purpose of qualitative research is to 'get at' actors' interpretations of their environment and actions. In both cases interview questions need to be very open, and not 'theoretically loaded'. Bland is the key!

In the domestic workers project, I was interested in exploring informants' perceptions of the status of paid household work, as well as their experience of domestic employment relationships and their understanding of the structure of these relationships. If possible, I needed informants to establish the terms. So I did not use terms like 'domestic service' or 'maid' or indeed 'worker.' Instead I used bland, vaguely technical language ('service provider,' 'paid household work') to phrase my questions, when the interview process had not already established the informants terms for the issue or role under discussion.

However, no matter how bland questions might be, the language and sentiment embodied in their construction always reflect the researcher's worldview and agenda. This is another problem associated with efforts to research issues that lay outside the researcher's personal experience and 'culture.'

This was particularly the case in the SEWA project. I found that having designed bland questions that asked interviewees to 'tell stories' or 'describe' certain events and experiences, I still confronted problems with informants' interpretations of my questions. Questions I thought straightforward and clear did not match the worldview of my informants and either failed or produced data that was irrelevant to my project. This was particularly the case in time-bound questions asking for future expectations or some kind of assessment of the past.

In this kind of 'cross-cultural' research context question design is not always easy. Qualitative researchers must take the time to understand the worldview of their informants. This helps in designing questions that are both understood by informants and generate the kinds of data you want.

4. Conducting interviews (process of conversation)

Separate from the language of questions is the practice of the interview. Informants need to be comfortable with the interview process, and how the researcher ensures this will vary with different kinds of interviewees, and in different contexts.

In the domestic workers project, for example, my approach to conducting interviews differed between my two main groups of informants: business people, and domestic workers. With business people in the domestic services industry, I used a written interview schedule in a folder, and moved through the questions systematically. In such situations we were professionals meeting, and that 'atmosphere' worked well.

With domestic workers, I quickly realised that this approach would not work, so I threw away the folder and let the path through the topics and questions be much more flexible. Although I had a set of topics or issues that I needed to cover with each respondent, I

began starting interviews with a prompt like 'Tell me about the work you're doing at the moment.'

Often I did not need to ask about every issue individually, because informants introduced topics unprompted by a specific question. I did use questions and prompts to encourage informants to clarify or amplify particular points. I rarely offered comments on the substance of responses other than to say 'That's interesting'. This, in combination with a relaxed approach to questioning, gave the informants the opportunity to shape the language and emphases of the conversation to some extent.

In the SEWA project, the importance of being open to informants' preferences was made apparent. I had planned to conduct my interviews with individual workers, one at a time. However, neither the SEWA staff assisting me, nor the informants themselves expected this. I soon discovered that in many cases my research was to be a community experience and that informants would meet with me in groups of two, three and even ten in some rural areas! This immediately raised questions for me over the validity of data collected - would the group setting produce a kind of 'demonstration effect'? Interestingly my concerns were not realised. Each individual respondent told her specific story, and all were eager to differentiate themselves from one another. Unexpectedly, the community context added richness to the interviews as individual stories were often elaborated upon or clarified by other women in the room who picked up on details that I would have missed in a one-on-one interview. Openness to informants preferred 'atmosphere' generated richer data.

5. To tape or not to tape

This is a methodological issue more than a technical one. Like quantitative methods, qualitative research is about collecting and analysing data. Optimal data collection method varies with the qualitative method being employed. Taylor and Bogdan conclude that although taping is not appropriate for participant observation, it is for interview-based research in which words become the data (1998:112-113). These words need to be collected, and taping does just that. Taping also allows you to relax and listen to the interviewee. The security and 'head-space' that a rolling tape provides a researcher is important in that it further enhances the quality of the data collection process and hence the validity of the data.

Taping is not only the best method for collecting interview-based data, it also provides the means of constructing verbatim transcripts for analysis. The nature of qualitative research is such that issues and themes emerge as the research process proceeds. Taping and creating a complete record of the conversation enables you to identify themes you might not have known were going to be relevant or of interest at a later date. Again, taping becomes an issue of data validity.

In both the domestic workers and SEWA projects, we collected data by taping and transcribing interviews. In both projects we found that informants were happy to have the interview taped and in both projects the request to tape assisted the research process to the extent that it formalised the interaction between researcher and respondent. In the SEWA project a rolling tape contributed to respondent' sense of importance and participation.

6. Using computer-aided data analysis tools

Both the SEWA and domestic workers projects made use of a computer analysis tool called NUD*IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theorising) for compiling, managing and analysing their interview transcripts. This kind of tool – there are several available – is invaluable for managing what can amount to several hundreds of thousands of words of transcribed interviews.

Although neither project made use of all NUD*IST's cross-matching, hypothesis testing and other capacities, the software facilitated comprehensive coding and retrieval of all relevant data, supporting the validity of findings and allowing us to discern key patterns and relationships. The next generation package from Qualitative Solutions & Research (QSR), the developers of NUD*IST, called NVivo, makes considerable advances on the user-friendliness and flexibility fronts, and we recommend that people doing or contemplating qualitative research look into it.[3] For impartial assessment of the variety of qualitative data analysis tools available, see Weitzman and Miles (1995) and Fisher (1997).[4]

7. Time and resources

One of the reasons why economists do not do qualitative research may be that it is typically time consuming, resource intensive and just plain hard work. Negotiating 'foreign' contexts, identifying key informants, organising meetings, and conducting interviews is often intellectually and emotionally taxing (Whipp 1998: 54). In both projects we found that having completed the background work and persuaded informants to give us their time, the pressure to make the most of each interview opportunity was high. In most forms of qualitative research work there are no second chances. You have to be alert and fully engaged with your informant, and ready to guide the research process for optimum data collection.

Resource and time demands vary between projects. The domestic workers project was conducted in the local area so that neither time nor resource constraints posed a significant challenge to data collection. However, the SEWA project highlights some of the problems qualitative researchers can face when time and resources are limited.

The majority of the interview-based component of the SEWA project was undertaken during a six week visit to SEWA in 1998. In order to make the most of my short stay I spent the days organising and undertaking interviews, observing meetings etc, and the nights transcribing and writing key reflections in my research journal. While this routine enabled me to process and reflect on my data as it was collected, it was a taxing six weeks. Tiredness at the end of my time made remaining inquisitive and alert to nuances in the data difficult. Additional time and resources would have relieved this pressure and possibly enhanced the data collection process. Again, this raises issues of validity.

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[3] For more information about QSR products, demonstration versions of both NUD*IST and NVivo, and a range of training materials see http://www.qsr.com.au/

[4] Because of the rapid pace of software development, and publishing lags, these texts, although the latest available, do not evaluate the most recent versions of existing software, nor those, such as NVivo, released very recently.

B. Validity Questions

1. Structure of 'sample'

Typically qualitative research projects do not operate with samples which fulfil the 'equal probability of selection' criterion. There can be both technical and epistemological reasons for this. When a researcher is dealing with a population like 'domestic service workers' or 'informal sector workers' a sampling frame from which informants can be randomly chosen simply does not exist – this is a technical problem. But qualitative projects are also often undertaken to explore a particular social group or practice, how it works and how it might be changing, and so randomness may not be a criterion of validity.

In the domestic workers project, preliminary research indicated considerable diversity among both informants and institutions in the domestic services industry. Moreover, as research proceeded it became evident that the industry was evolving rapidly, with new kinds of institutions emerging to organise transactions it. Thus, I aimed for a sensible cross-section of informants, and constructed the sample, in part inductively as research proceeded. I selected and recruited informants in stages, simultaneously developing a stratified sample designed to capture the diversity of industry participants and institutions as it emerged (see Figure 2). Clearly, recruitment strategy and sample construction are closely interdependent.

The sample in the domestic workers project is representative to the extent that it replicates the known diversity of the population along several dimensions - institution of entry, sex, ethnicity, migrant status and life cycle stage.

The use of a stratified sample structure ensured a good range of informants, but it suffers the limitation of few in each 'cell.' Unfortunately this is an intractable problem in a one-researcher study of this kind. No measure of the statistical representativeness of the sample in relation to the whole population is possible, but is not really necessary to draw valid conclusions about how the industry works for different kinds of participants.
Mark Granovetter points out that 'Every [sampling] method, of course introduces systematic distortions and it is best to be aware what these are before evaluating results' (1995:8). In the domestic workers project, the principal systematic distortion was that I generate a qualitative analysis of the supply side of the domestic services industry only. I did not interview householders who employ domestic workers, apart from the handful of domestic service providers (both workers and company operators and so on) who themselves hired or had hired domestic workers.

Figure 2: Domestic services industry study sample structure

Institution	local network	
	agencies	
	capitalist firms	
	franchise operations	
	open market	
	Home Care Service of NSW	
Market Relationship	worker	
	organiser	
Work Type	cleaning, domestic only	
	cleaning, including commercial	
	housekeeping	
	housework with childcare	
	housework with aged care	
	personal care (aged or disabled care)	
Sex	female	
	male	
Migration status/ Ethnicity	Australian born	
	migrant	English speaking country
		non- English speaking country

Another imbalance in the domestic workers project sample is that company and agency operators are over-represented in the study group. One reason is that they appeared on public lists and so were easily accessible. But more importantly, these informants were able to offer some workforce and industry information that individual workers could not, including, in some cases, quantitative data about the number and personal characteristics of the paid household workers whose industry participation they organised.

In the SEWA project, I took a common sense approach to generating my sample structure. Having familiarised myself with SEWA's membership and activities, my informant population was designed to include respondents who represented the diversity of SEWA membership and involvement. I included respondents from all levels of SEWA's organisational hierarchy, rural and urban workers, those involved in trade co-operatives and regular union members, as well as representatives from the full range of occupations and trade affiliations (see Figure 3). This stratified sampling structure provided me with access to the widest variety of experience and data on the impact of each aspect of SEWA's policy initiatives. With geographic, trade, institutional and status differences

reflected in my sample I established avenues for checking and cross-checking data as it was collected. This further enhanced data validity.

Figure 3: SEWA Sample Structure

SEWA Status	Regular SEWA membership
	Union organiser
	Union Staff
	Non-members
Location	Urban
	Rural
Institutional Link	Trade cooperative members
	Union member
Trade Affiliation	Land-based occupations (dairy, gum collecting, nursery, salt farming)
	Craft workers (blockprinters, embroiderers, patch, garment stitching)
	Daily labourers
	Agarbatti & beedi rollers

2. What kind of 'data' do researchers expect to get out of interviews

Although researchers in the phenomenological tradition emphasise the interpretive dimensions of qualitative data and analysis (see, for example, Taylor and Bogdan 1998:7), qualitative methods also yield facts. In both the SEWA and domestic workers projects, facts, interpretations, and 'interpretive facts' were all important kinds of data, and interviews were the best means for collecting them.

In the domestic workers project, interview data was the most appropriate because it allowed me to collect both facts and interpretations. Little empirical information about the structure and characteristics of the domestic services industry and its workforce had ever been collected, and only industry participants could provide it. I also wanted to understand how participants understood and evaluated the processes and experiences they described, and again, only they could tell me. Survey-based research requires strict definition of the concepts or variables being measured before data collection starts. Strict protocols regarding survey administration are designed to ensure uniformity and so comparability of responses, as well as replicability of results. In these ways, reliability is secured. But the domestic workers project aimed to discover rather than measure dimensions of the organisation and experience of paid household work. Data collection and analysis needed to be sensitive to the understandings of industry participants, and to issues which emerged as the study proceeded. Thus, the use of interviews able to assure the validity of the data rather than the reliability of measures.[5]

[5] For a brief discussion of the distinction between reliability and validity, and of how this distinction relates to that between qualitative and quantitative research, see Taylor and Bogdan (1998:9).

This is because the kinds of open-ended questions and open-structured interviews used in both the SEWA and domestic worker projects (see sections A 3 and A 4) allow informants to define some of the content and language of the interview, and so influence the 'shape' and 'flavour' of the data. By giving informants some authority in the interview process, the dialogic structure of the conversation allowed informants to feel free as well as be free to talk. In this way, practical issues about conducting interviews are also methodological and epistemological. The immense fertility of the data collected in interviews in these projects would have been compromised by the pre-emptive reductions that more conventional survey methods require.

In the SEWA project the distinction between fact and interpretation was more blurred. As in the domestic workers project, my aim was to discover rather than measure the direction and pattern of change in the economic and social security of SEWA members. Lacking the time and resources to do a longitudinal study, I investigated the type, pattern and direction of change experienced by SEWA members by asking them to recollect their work life experience both before and after joining SEWA. This gives my facts an interpretive slant! While subjective, the interview data gives profound insight into informants' reported levels of well-being, which although not easily measured, is a valid indication of change in economic and social security.

3. Status of interview material as both 'fact' and 'interpretation'

This apparent methodological failing of inadequate separation of facts and interpretation needs to be understood in context. Qualitative research is not just interviews! Other 'unstructured' data are also collected and included in analysis and theory building as both fact, interpretation and as verification of interview data. Use of use of multiple forms of research data is called 'triangulation' in the qualitative research literature (Taylor and Bogdan 1998: 80-81). Triangulation both adds important sources of data to the research process and addresses concerns about the validity of interview-based research.

In the SEWA, project triangulation was at the centre of my research methodology. To substantiate my key informant interview data, I collected data in the form of official SEWA publications; in-depth interviews with policy makers, labor organisations and other non-government groups working on informal sector issues;[6] focus group discussions; and notes from participant observation of the Annual SEWA meeting, Trade Committees and a variety of other formal and informal union meetings. This additional data proved important in both understanding, amplifying, contextualising, and interpreting interview data.

Triangulation also helped me deal with the 'clash of cultures' inherent in research interactions between a Western-educated white woman such as myself and the poor, semi-literate women with whom I worked.

Use of a translator raised additional concerns over matters of interpretation and validity at a more basic level. Unable to speak Gujarati, I employed translators to assist me in interviewing. I ran the interview, using my translators to provide English translation of both questions and answers. Each translator (I had two) had her own particular way of

[6] This included the National Council for Applied Economic Research, India; the National Centre for Labor, India; HomeNet and the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers Associations (IUF).

expressing the English translation of informants' responses, and informants often required them to offer some explanation or clarification of my question. Concerned about the 'shaping' of data in the process of translation, I did some basic cross-checking to evaluate irregularities in the data. With no irregularities demonstrated I remained vigilant, but satisfied that my translator's 'interpetations' were adequate.

4. Reflexivity and the research process

One of the key issues raised by critics of qualitative research is the problem of reflexivity. Concern typically focuses on the relationship between (a) the profile of the researcher, (b) the rationale of the research project, and (c) the nature of the social relationships established during the course of the research, and their impact upon the assumptions, framework, categories and choices that determine the outcomes of the research project. In response to these concerns and calls for clarification some theorists argue that the researcher should 'be critically reflex, locate their own experiences and concerns centrally within the research problematic and assess the implications of these in the development of the methodology they employ' (Connolly 1996:189). Others suggest that the associated technical problems of transparency and validity can be overcome by researchers documenting key choices and assumptions (Whipp 1998:58).

In the SEWA project I responded to these problems in a pragmatic fashion. While my status as an 'outsider' is clear, my value-judgements and political commitments are the same as those expressed by SEWA leadership, key staff and respondents.[7] Whether Indian or Australian, affluent or poor, both researcher and respondent shared a common belief that women employed in the informal sector of the Indian economy lacked economic and social security. Our common goal was to identify economic policy options that would deliver economic and social security to women in this sector. My place as researcher was that of fellow 'work sister'[8], doing what she could to promote economic and social well-being amongst informal sector workers. I have commented elsewhere in this paper on the problems of working cross-culturally, and the care with which it must be approached (see A 1, A 4, B 3). If researchers take the necessary time to address these problems then there is no good reason why we should refrain from conducting research projects that are outside our own socio-economic class and culture.

Although it is important to remain alert to potential problems of interpretation and validity commonly associated with the reflexive nature of qualitative research, it is also important not to overstate this problem, nor see it as peculiar to qualitative research methods. Quantitative data collection is equally prone to problems of interpretation and validation. Respondents to formal quantitative surveys often misunderstand the meaning of questions, or for reasons of their own choose to provide incorrect responses. This has been a particular problem with the collection of data on women's labour market participation in India.[9] Use of qualitative methods can provide economic researchers with techniques for combating some of these problems.

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[7] Connolly (1996:189) suggests that the 'matching' of value-judgements and political commitments across researcher and oppressed group is one way of dealing with some of the problems of reflexivity.

[8] SEWA organisers use the term 'work sister' as one of their key organising ideas. It has been effective in affirming the similarities between women workers and overcoming religious and caste differences.

[9] Personal communication with Jeemol Unni, Gujarat Institute of Development Research, Ahmedabad, India, and Renana Jhabvala, The Self Employed Womens Association, India.

5. Presenting data

Whatever their methods, researchers need to find informative and valid ways of presenting data. For qualitative researchers, a variety of means are available. This section reports on some used in the domestic workers project.

One method not appropriate in studies like this is statistical summary of responses of the type '34% of informants earn above the average hourly rate of $14.67' or '20% of informants reported being satisfied with their employment relationships.' Because of the size and structure of the study sample such presentations would have been misleading, and in the second case, would have detached informant assessments of their employment relationships from crucial contextual and personal information. Instead of such summaries, I used case-studies of particular organisations based on interviews with several of their members, and representative statements from individual informants. Where responses on particular themes were diverse, I collected a comprehensive range of quotations into boxes in the text, as a kind of qualitative equivalent of a table or graph (see Meagher 1997, 1999).

In qualitative research reporting, use of informants' own words is critically important. This practice adds to both the human interest and validity of research reports, because the reader 'meets' informants, and has some basis for judging for themselves the researcher's interpretations and conclusions.

C. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Qualitative data collection practices yield large quantities of rich but relatively unstructured data that the researcher must fashion into arguments and documents of various kinds. Although we have stressed the exploratory nature of interview-based research so far, obviously no researcher goes into the field without some ideas and preconceptions about what she or he will find, nor without a more or less clearly defined set of issues they want to explore. The researcher also needs to construct or employ frameworks and categories to manage and analyse the data. This section presents some of the strategies we have used in constructing our qualitative analyses.[10]

1. Relationship to theory/literature

The relationship between analysis in a particular qualitative research project and the literatures to which it contributes and from which it draws happens at two 'levels.' One is the framing of the project: how it contributes to debate and knowledge in the area (empirical, disciplinary etc). The second level is 'internal' to the project, and involves the researcher's choice of categories and analytical strategies for ordering the material and developing the descriptions and explanations which make up the project's output. We deal with the first in this sub-section, and the second in the subsequent subsections.

In the domestic workers project, the 'framing' literature was existing writing on paid household work in contemporary US and Britain. In section B 1, I described my attempt to capture in the study sample the diversity of participants in the domestic services industry, and to record the industry's institutional evolution. These aims arose out of my reading of the literature, specifically the observation that most studies are not based on this kind of

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[10] Taylor and Bogdan (1998 Chapter 6) also present a range of qualitative analysis strategies.

sampling, tending instead to recruit informants from particular subordinated racial-ethnic groups, even though their writers are making general claims about the nature of domestic occupations and employment relationships. I was uneasy about the relationship between theory and evidence in existing feminist writing on paid household work, and by defining the scope of my sample the way I did, I generated data which allowed me to systematically assess the validity of arguments presented in the literature as a 'general theory' of this industry.

2. Hypothesis-testing

The assessment of these arguments is a kind of hypothesis testing. This raises the general question of what kinds of hypotheses can be tested using qualitative data, and how?[11] In this context, we can only make some brief and suggestive comments based on an example or two from our own research.

Clearly regression analysis with its battery of significance tests cannot be applied to qualitative data because of the kinds of sampling constraints discussed above. However, using the criterion of validity as opposed to reliability, correlations of certain kinds can be studied.

Many feminist writers on paid household work argued that the personal nature of domestic employment relationships makes them uniquely exploitative of workers.[12] In the domestic workers project, I tested this posited connection through comparing two cases from my research with the paradigm in the literature (see Table 1).

With comparative analysis of these cases, I was able to show that personal disrespect and economic power are not causally related in the way argued in the literature. Of critical importance here was the finding that fieldworkers for the Home Care Service of NSW reported acceding to demands for extra unpaid work, and experiencing disrespectful treatment at the hands of clients who neither employed them nor had any other economic power over them (see Meagher 1999, Chapter 4).

[11] Some writers in the qualitative methods literature debate whether the purpose of qualitative analysis is to develop *or* verify social theory. However, the choice need not be posed so starkly, particularly if verification is given a 'soft' interpretation relaxing the positivistic requirement for causal laws and universals (see Taylor and Bogdan 1998:136).

[12] The critical argument supporting the prevailing characterisation of paid household work as unique turns on the coincidence of 'personal' and 'employment' in the relationship between householder and domestic worker. Householders have economic power over workers because they can hire and fire at will. The intimate location and content of paid household work fosters a personal relationship between householder and domestic worker, particularly when personal care of household members is involved. Personal and economic aspects of the relationship reinforce each other to the detriment of the worker. On one hand, the structural inequality inherent in the 'employment' aspect of the relationship precludes a 'personal' relationship of good will and mutual respect. On the other, the unequal, but intimate *personal* relationship leaves workers especially vulnerable to economic abuse because a clear boundary between work and non-work is difficult to establish. Thus, the argument goes, householders are in the position to abuse workers 1) economically, by increasing workloads without increasing pay, and thereby extracting unpaid labour in a process of 'simple exploitation'; and 2) psychologically, by demanding or assuming intimacy with them, and/or by treating them with disrespect (see Meagher 1999, Chapter 4).

Table 1: Testing hypotheses by comparing cases: Characteristics of cases

	Corinne's domestic cleaning company	The Home Care Service of NSW	Paradigm in the literature
Householder is employer	no	no	yes
Personal care involved	no	yes	varies between studies
Service type	consumer	social	consumer
Sector	formal, private	formal, public	informal, private

3. Story telling

In addition to hypothesis-testing, story telling is integral to qualitative research. Again, this has a couple of meanings. First, the data and findings are the stories of informants – and collecting and retelling these stories is part of the research process. Second, the researcher's own interpretation of the informants' accounts, and our attempts to capture and transmit the 'flavour' of organisations and practices being studied is a kind of story telling. In the domestic workers project, institutional innovation in the domestic services industry emerged as a key development with powerful implications for the fortunes of workers and the structure of the domestic labour market (see Meagher 1997; 1999, Chapter 6). I used informants' own descriptions, facts about the size, operation, practices, and history of their companies, and the interpretive framework of feminist political economy to construct stories about new institutions in the domestic services industry. Presenting accounts of – for example - professionalising companies as an institutional rather than an individual response to the problems domestic workers can experience is an example of the second kind of story telling.

4. Creative induction

Qualitative researchers may use also use creative induction to construct ways of organising and analysing data. Again, an example from the domestic workers project serves to illustrate.[13]

Many feminist writers argue that paid household work has a highly significant structural role in expressing and generating social inequality. This is an abstract argument, not well operationalised in the literature. I sought to operationalise it using the concept of 'careers' to explore occupational mobility as a marker of the relationship between paid household work and the reproduction of hierarchy. By comparing and contrasting individuals' patterns of participation, I identified five different 'careers' in domestic service provision:

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[13] For a brief methodological discussion of induction in qualitative research see Taylor and Bogdan 1998:136-140, and Whip 1998:57. Taylor and Bogdan discuss induction as theory building, and present a detailed account of how to do it in Chapter 6 of their book. Whip lists induction as one of three 'Limitations of Qualitative Research,' because, he argues, inductive theorising is sometimes the result of 'creative leaps' which are not always fully reported, and are difficult to replicate.

a stop-gap for students, a stepping-stone, career, a filler, or a dead-end. I found that a complex array of factors internal and external to the domestic services industry shapes the opportunities and constraints individual workers confront. For one group of workers – older migrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds, the occupational ghettoisation predicted in the literature results: these workers have 'dead-end' careers in the domestic services industry. However, many other domestic workers experience successful upward mobility within, or movement out of the industry. By looking at the relationship between personal characteristics, life course stage, and market conditions, I was able to make some more concrete claims about the relationship between paid household work and labour market disadvantage, and to suggest means of overcoming the barriers to mobility many workers face.

What Do Qualitative Data & Research Offer Economists?

Our research demonstrates that qualitative research methods are not a second best 'soft option', but a viable alternative for researching particular kinds of questions that lie outside the traditional concerns of economics. Concept measurement is central to most empirical orthodox economics, either in econometrics or experimental work. By contrast, qualitative research enables the researcher to create concepts and identify patterns of economic behaviour that may feed back into the theoretical literature. In both the domestic workers and SEWA projects, qualitative data challenged the existing consensus in the literature and produced original research findings. If one of the goals of research is to discover and investigate 'gaps' in our understanding of economic processes and behaviour then qualitative methods potentially have a lot to offer economic researchers.

Economists do not have a good name. One problem is the widespread perception that economists do not 'know' or get out into the 'real world'. Doing qualitative research forced us to go into the 'real world' and discover what life is really like for domestic workers and poor Indian women engaged in informal employment. This process allowed us to both evaluate existing research in the context of our own findings and discover new data needs.

Moreover, economics is essentially concerned with people. Taking the opportunity to listen to the people groups we were researching provided us with relevant and contemporary data. It also provided insight and sensitivity into aspects of our informants economic involvement that is not documented. In the SEWA project qualitative research methods produced data that demonstrated (a)the importance of constructing strong worker identity to the success of the SEWA model, and (b)the role of collective action in generating the self-recognition that drives socio-economic change for poor women workers. Qualitative methods also gave me insight and data on the depth of women workers' economic, social and political exclusion. This provided crucial contextual information that allowed me to make sense of the way in which particular economic policy, based upon strategies of collective action, effected workers' economic and social security (Hill 1999). These findings have significant implications for economic development policy in countries that, like India, have large informal economies. In the domestic workers project, qualitative methods enabled me to explore the capacities and limits of 'classical' concepts of contract and exploitation to explain economic interactions at the boundary of public and private domains. These methods also enabled me to collect data rich enough to explore nuances of labour market experience and disadvantage otherwise inaccessible, and to extend the debate about actual and potential remedies for domestic and quasi-domestic workers' work life problems.

In conclusion, qualitative research is more than amassing piles of written transcripts and other forms of unstructured data as an alternative to numbers. Its value lies in the use of alternative techniques designed to access data that cannot be captured, contained, or communicated in a linear numerical framework. By employing research methods that lie outside the constraints of quantitative data economists can add a new dimension to their research and hopefully develop a more complex, multi-layered picture of the economic sphere. The breadth and complexity of information that can be captured by qualitative methods is of particular importance to research projects that focus on policy outcomes. Most importantly, qualitative methods can produce data that requires us to ask new or different questions important to understanding economic processes. We are not the first economists to say so.[14] Our hope is that these opportunities will be welcomed by more.

[14] See, for example, Blinder (1990) and the Explorations in *Feminist Economics* Vol. 3, No.2.

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