The necessity of being flexible*1

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Abstract. In two kinds of research, changing the focus or nature of a research problem is an accepted practice: exploratory and qualitative research. By investigating the terms under which this practice is acceptable in these areas, by stressing the exploratory or qualitative character of all kinds of research, and by demonstrating its scientific quality, the conditions are outlined under which it is acceptable and even necessary to change the problem in any research. It is also argued that the changing of a research problem does not always imply post-factum explanations which are only plausible (Merton).

1. Introduction

Because of his embarrassment with the poverty of others, his urge to social reforms and, thanks to that, the necessity of understanding others, connected with his predominantly sociological knowledge, Whyte decided in 1936 to carry out a so called “community study” of the slum district known as Cornerville (Whyte 1969: 280–284). To do this he used Robert S. Lynd and Helen M. Lynd’s investigation of Middletown (1929) as a model. This implies a study of the economics, politics, patterns of education and recreation, the church, public health and social attitudes of a community at a given time (Whyte 1969: 284). After eighteen months of participant observation in Cornerville Whyte realized that he considerably deviated from this model. He hardly busied himself with family life, religion and economics in the district, and instead of addressing himself to the inhabitants as a group at a given time he had taken an interest in special individuals and groups, and their alterations (ibid: 322–323). He turned out to be interested especially in the changing social structure of the local politics and of the corner gangs (ibid: 324). It was this interest that constituted his eventual research problem. A research problem he, for that matter, nowhere specified, but which can be gathered only from the presentation of his eventual findings.

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Redefining the original research problem – and/or the original hypotheses during the research process (from now on, for shortness sake: redefining the research problem) – is a normal practice. But even so, this practice will be rarely expressed in published research reports. In those reports the actual research process will be moulded into a scientific shape, and, as is generally accepted, redefining the research problem is no part of that shape. For this standpoint two reasons are presented: (a) redefining the research problem can lead to post factum explanations, that is explanations which remain at the level of plausibility rather than leading to the compelling evidence of tested explanations (Merton 1957: 93–94); (b) having an ad hoc character redefining the research problem manifests a common sense practice rather than a scientific practice. These two reasons imply that researchers endanger their scientific status if they indicate the amendment of their research problem. Whyte’s “confession” of this practice twelve years after the successful publication of *Street Corner Society* manifests the researchers’ awareness of this danger. The neglecting or dissuading of a possible redefining of the research problem in introductions into the methodology of social scientific research is also characteristic for the poor position of this general applied practice. Because of this omission, many, usually young researchers cling tightly to their research problems more often than not at the expense of the relevance of their investigations.

In social science research, certain methodological conditions may require the investigator to redefine the research problem. There are two types of research in which redefining this problem is a relatively normal procedure: exploratory research and research using qualitative methods. As almost any project of social science research entails certain elements of exploration and qualitative research, the following conclusions will be drawn in this paper. First, the possibility will be presented to construct a general typology of situations in which it is allowed and sometimes required to redefine the research problem. Second, it will be shown that in a number of circumstances, redefining the research problem is an acceptable scientific procedure. Third, it will be argued that redefining the research problem does not in all and every case imply the constitution of post factum explanations, and that, if this actually leads to these kinds of explanations, it is possible that such explanations are more than plausible.

**Redefining the research problem in exploratory and qualitative research**

**Exploratory research**

The most important reasons why investigators decide to conduct an exploratory research instead of a hypothetical-deductive one, are: