

THE COST OF HIDDEN HISTORIES: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON QUALITATIVE METHODS

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ABSTRACT

Research tools can play a critical role in unearthing hidden and invisibilized narratives within the global equality discourse. In social anthropology, non-quantitative methods hold the key to yielding robust and universalizable insights. This is particularly relevant when attempting to equitably capture extra-economic phenomena like care labor, informal labor, and undocumented labor. By examining studies and literature within these vulnerable spaces, this paper aims to shed light on how marginalized groups often get overlooked in quantitative analyses of labor dynamics. The importance of taking into account their experiences and perspectives cannot be overstated, as it has direct implications for policymaking and social intervention. This study, through a comprehensive review of existing literature, intends to highlight the limitations of quantitative methods in capturing the nuances of these labor experiences and explore qualitative approaches that can help correct such oversights. By amplifying the voices and stories of those typically silenced, this research hopes to contribute to a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of global equality.

I. Introduction

In the field of social research, quantitative data has long been the cornerstone of inquiry. These methods—which include statistical, mathematical, and numerical data—can offer critical insights across various research contexts. However, numbers alone are not wholly effective in interpreting the socio-economic issues of the 21st century. This is particularly the case when accounting for the experiences of marginalized individuals and communities, where the reach of quantitative data seems to fall short.

On one hand, quantitative methods have been a pivotal tool in expanding our understanding of social issues. Yet, it has become increasingly clear that drawing conclusions based solely on numbers, as noted by scholars such as Scott (2010), can obscure rather than reveal certain socio-

economic realities. A clear example of such distortion can be seen in narratives surrounding hidden or invisible labor in world economies.

Such labor can be identified in three main sectors: care labor, informal labor, and undocumented labor, which are often ignored or inadequately explored under conventional research methodology. Care labor, as illuminated by Ferrant et al. (2014), encompasses the overlooked and unpaid care work that is often disproportionately shouldered by women. In fact, the International Labour Organization (n.d.) also emphasizes the importance of recognizing the significance of care work, not just within but outside of its economic implications. Informal labor, the second sector of interest, is estimated to cover over 60 percent of the world's adult labor force (International Monetary Fund, 2021). This includes activities such as street hawking and construction work that are not formally registered, but continue to generate market value. Lastly, the third sector, undocumented labor, refers to the economic activities of undocumented migrants, whose contributions also go unnoticed in the labor market.

As a result, it is not uncommon for such groups to be left out of policy matters because of the notion that they are too “difficult” to measure. This can, in turn, lead to decision-making that inadvertently heightens the very inequalities it sets out to correct. Hence, this paper will explore and evaluate the viability of non-quantitative methods in understanding and investigating hidden labor. By comprehensively reviewing existing studies and literature, this paper aims to demonstrate how qualitative approaches can help comprehend the multifaceted nature of labor phenomena in care, informal, and undocumented sectors. Apart from highlighting the need to broaden research tools, this paper will also analyze how qualitative methods can ultimately lead to a more inclusive and holistic understanding of our complex social world.

II. Background

Qualitative research occupies a vital position in the field of socio-cultural anthropology. Unlike quantitative methods—which prioritize numerical data—qualitative data delves into the intricacies of human behavior, beliefs, and practices. With this mode of inquiry, the aim is to contribute a comprehensive understanding of the diverse and intricate social landscapes that define our world. As Hasty et al. (2022) explain, qualitative methods encompass the “subjective analyses of language, behavior, ritual, symbolism, and interrelationships of people”, which help researchers interpret the complexities of human experiences, social interactions, and cultural phenomena. Since qualitative tools use open-ended questions, they also allow for more in-depth responses that can be studied to extract and classify common themes.

Owing to this flexibility, Vasundhra (2023) notes that qualitative data can be a powerful tool for revealing hidden narratives, understanding cultural nuances, and arriving at a holistic view of

societies. More importantly, these methods offer a robust understanding of marginalized groups compared to quantitative approaches. As Bailey et al. (2019) put it, qualitative data helps researchers strengthen their commitment to intersectionality as it can vividly capture the multifaceted nature of social inequalities.

Additionally, recent events like the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed that inequalities within the informal, undocumented, and care labor sectors are more rampant globally than previously thought. This is because all three groups are restricted from fully exercising their own labor power. For example, because of school and daycare closures, the landscape of care labor experienced dramatic shifts during the pandemic, which forced many carers to balance increased levels of care with no pay and very little support. In India, where informal and undocumented labor accounts for nearly half of the country's workforce, those primarily engaged in these sectors also faced the most dire economic consequences (Tiwari, 2020).

During this time, several researchers turned to qualitative data to explore the impact of the pandemic on these populations. After a global scoping review that examined 32 such articles, Mengesha et al. (2022) paint a clear picture of the unequal impact of the pandemic on two groups: asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. Qualitative data appears particularly effective here, revealing complex mental health issues, fostering a dialogue on intimate partner violence, and documenting their differential socio-economic experiences. The relevance of non-quantitative methods is clear here, which points to the notion that such forms of inquiry seem to have a unique ability to target and translate the experiences of the marginalized. More specifically, those who are not fully integrated in the market space and hence, face exploitation under the capitalist paradigm.

Lastly, as the labor market becomes more intersectional, the inclusion of qualitative inquiry has become more critical than ever. One key reason is that non-quantitative methods can study multiple groups along multiple axes more effectively, ensuring that the "elasticity" of social realities is not reduced to predetermined categories (Bailey et al., 2019, p. 4). Moreover, numerical analysis often requires that observations be compared to a "norm" in order to arrive at a differential. Such practices, Baldwin (2022) argues, ultimately recenter the experiences of dominant communities rather than the marginalized.

All this, broadly speaking, makes a strong case for the importance of qualitative inquiry. By reviewing existing studies and literature in these vulnerable labor spaces, this paper will further contextualize the critical role of such research in vulnerable settings and its ability to amplify the voices of marginalized communities.

III. Discussion

From a socio-economic perspective, care workers, informal workers, and undocumented workers share similar experiences. These include a lack of formal recognition in the labor market, little to no pay, and exclusion from policy decisions. Qualitative research methodologies have proven instrumental in uncovering the hidden experiences such marginalized groups face, as demonstrated by a range of scholars and researchers.

In one such study exploring South Asians' experiences as "hidden carers" in the United Kingdom, Hossain et al. (2022) employed a qualitative approach to delve into the nuanced aspects of caregiving for relatives with dementia within the community. After examining the study's tools and approaches, it can be ascertained that qualitative methods allowed for many rich, in-depth findings. They not only helped shed light on the complexities of caregiving roles but also revealed the distinct challenges faced by carers and the cultural context that shapes these experiences. Ultimately, these findings allowed researchers to outline gaps within policies concerning caregivers as well as the need to emphasize culturally sensitive support in these spaces.

In fact, a systematic review by Greenwood et al. (2015) directly compares the benefits offered by qualitative inquiry in this field. After comparing the results from qualitative and quantitative methods in a study on minority ethnic carers and their main perceived barriers to accessing social care support, it was revealed that some barriers identified by qualitative findings were not observed in quantitative findings. One example is that though both approaches noted that language could be a possible barrier, only qualitative research was able to narrow down two further pain points: low awareness and lack of culturally appropriate services. Yet, a common argument put forward is that qualitative findings, unlike their quantitative counterparts, cannot be generalized at large. But as noted in the review, qualitative data, while not generalizable, is "transferable" across contexts (Greenwood et al., 2015).

Viewpoints like this are significant since common research practices like generalizing and relying on existing datasets, are some of the ways in which quantitative findings can inadvertently "explain away discrimination" (Baldwin, 2022). This is especially damaging since many numerical databases researchers use are possibly influenced by external motivations. As Baldwin (2022) sums it up, "the very organizations we suspect might be discriminating tend to produce the data."

With qualitative data, however, the researcher is in greater proximity to the source, allowing them to more accurately and objectively capture the nuances of human experience. Similar to their applications in care labor spaces, qualitative tools also offer invaluable insights into the

complex and multifaceted realities of informal and undocumented labor. For workers in such sectors, a key commonality they share is the fear of precarious employment (PE). PE is believed to be an ill-defined grouping, which has long been obscured and omitted from scholarship. After reviewing the available literature on contractual relationship insecurity, Kreshpaj et al. (2020) demonstrate that qualitative studies, once again, are particularly adept at capturing the intricacies of such labor relations. By this, they mean subjective experiences like the emotional toll of job insecurity, living with low-income status, its mental health effects, and several other real-world consequences that quantitative data alone tends to overlook.

In this case, the range of experiences and issues documented include “unjustifiable dismissal, discrimination, sexual harassment, [...] the feeling of powerlessness to exercise their workplace rights, and mistrust towards the government for not providing support and transparency” (Kreshpaj et al., 2020). All this offered researchers a comprehensive framework to evaluate and make recommendations on the rights and protection granted to informal and migrant workers.

Lastly, the strength of qualitative data can be evaluated from another important vantage point, that is, within the research process itself. One comparative overview emerges in a study by Jauhiainen and Tedeschi (2021), which presents the responses and receptiveness of Finland’s undocumented migrants to two different methods: quantitative survey data and qualitative ethnographic data. While surveys were used to gather quantitative material, researchers used ethnographic participant observation to produce qualitative material. This required researchers to be in the field for nearly ten months and develop a rapport with the subjects to observe the dynamics and changes in their lives over time. After comparing the two, the study reveals how collecting quantitative data, despite being logistically easy, proved challenging on the ground. This was because many undocumented migrants, they noted, were wary and suspicious of divulging personal information on paper.

Qualitative data also had its own limitations, but researchers remarked how “a deep relationship of trust was slowly created with around 20 of them over the months,” which allowed them to record valuable insights into their background, perspectives, and fears, among others (Jauhiainen & Tedeschi, 2021). Such observations highlight how qualitative methods can help researchers eliminate the barriers to approaching undocumented workers and delving into their lived experiences, challenges, and aspirations.

Overall, these studies evidence the crucial role of qualitative research in capturing the experiences of groups marginalized within labor markets with depth and nuance. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that while contrasting the two methods helps articulate and evidence the strengths of qualitative findings, it is important to view them as complementary tools rather than diametric

opposites. In fact, research that utilizes both quantitative and qualitative methods is often able to exploit the richest form of data and make accurate conclusions in the process.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper underscores the necessity and significance of employing qualitative research methodologies in studying marginalized communities. These perspectives are especially crucial within spaces like caregiving, informal, and undocumented markets, where labor power is, to some extent at least, compromised.

Key findings from the paper highlight the depth and richness that qualitative approaches bring to understanding the experiences, challenges, and perspectives of vulnerable groups engaged in such activities. Across all three contexts, qualitative research allows for a nuanced exploration of these complex phenomena, shedding light on hidden narratives and providing valuable context to quantitative data. Without this context, as Baldwin (2022) powerfully states, numbers by themselves often have no meaning.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the ethical and legitimate considerations when conducting qualitative research in marginalized communities. As Moree (2018) emphasizes, researchers must approach such studies with a great deal of sensitivity and respect. More importantly, such studies should aim to uphold a strong commitment to ethical practices. This means many things, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, and actively involving the community in the research process whenever it is deemed appropriate. Ethical considerations are paramount to safeguard the well-being and dignity of the individuals and communities being studied or surveyed.

Furthermore, researchers should strive for genuine collaboration and reciprocity with marginalized communities. This primarily means fostering trust and mutual respect. By adopting a collaborative approach, researchers can enhance the validity and credibility of qualitative findings while ensuring that the voices of the marginalized are accurately represented.

Hence, while qualitative research offers a valuable lens through which the experiences of marginalized groups can be explored, ethical and legitimate conduct is paramount to ensure that the research process respects the rights and dignity of those being studied. This dual commitment to qualitative rigor and ethical integrity can contribute to a more equitable and authentic understanding of the lives and challenges faced by marginalized individuals and communities.

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