Piore (1979) "Discovering Qualitative Research"

Attached is an extract from Piore (1979) "Discovering Qualitative Research", *Administrative Science Quarterly*. It's the introductory section of the paper.

1. Please read the extract.

2. Please write a short explanation in your own words of the message Piore seems to be trying to get across to readers.

3. Piore mentions the Hawthorne experiments. Have a look at this webpage, which briefly describes these experiments: http://www.mgmtguru.com/mgt301/301_Lecture1Page10.htm

Qualitative Research Techniques in Economics

Michael J. Piore

DISCOVERING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

I did not plan to do open-ended interviewing and participant observations: I happened into it, in the course of my graduate education, in two ways: in my thesis research and in my work with civil rights and anti-poverty groups. My thesis topic was the effect of automation upon the skill composition of manufacturing jobs. At the time, there was considerable controversy about whether technological change was increasing or decreasing the skill requirements of jobs. An important group of analysts in the debates about national economic policy were arguing that skill requirements were increasing, leaving a residue of workers who had, or might have, been employed by the old techniques but who were unqualified for the new jobs. This growing residue was supposed to be a barrier to reductions in the level of unemployment.

John Dunlop, my thesis advisor, proposed investigating this question by comparing two factories using old and new techniques. The idea was to find a series of cases where an old factory that was being torn down or abandoned, to be replaced by a totally new facility, producing the same product. Engineering designs for the two factories would show the various work stations and the jobs associated with them. A comparison of these manning tables, as they were called, would provide the maximum contrast between old and new technologies and thus would indicate the direction of change for the economy as a whole. The project required exceptional cooperation on the part of the companies whose factories were involved. Dunlop obtained access at the headquarters level. I went to the factories, or in some cases to the engineers designing the plants, to collect the data.

There were, however, several problems with this approach which I had not anticipated. One problem was that the data were available in the expected form in only one company and even there the data were very difficult to interpret without the aid of plant personnel. Elsewhere, the data had to be constructed, and this required a considerable input from a variety of different company and factory officials.

Second, the cooperation of local officials was not forthcoming merely on command from national headquarters; it was necessary to first gain their confidence and interest in the project. For this purpose, I spent a lot of time visiting various local officials, trying to make conversation with them in a way which would seem purposeful enough so as not to be wasting their time, but far enough away from my actual interest so as not to queer the whole project by premature disclosure of the magnitude and degree of confidentiality of what I was about to ask them to do.

At first, I developed an elaborate list of questions for this "preliminary" part of the interview, but I quickly found that the questions had very little to do with the success or failure of the interview. As I learned much later in a write-up of one of the Hawthorne experiments, most people had a story to tell. The interviewees used my questions as an excuse for telling their stories. Since I thought of my initial interview as a means of developing rapport, this did not bother me at first. Indeed, I was glad to be relieved of the burden of

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keeping the conversation going, and I began to look for ways to get the respondent to do his or her thing. Later, I became interested in using the same interview format to obtain the answers to a specific list of questions, but I was unable to change the interview process. Either I let the respondent tell his or her story, using my questions as an excuse, or else I forced him or her to treat the questions seriously and to give me a codable response to each item. If I took the latter approach, the respondents soon lost interest in the project and began to concentrate on getting through the questionnaire and on to their next appointment. In this process, they often provided misinformation in order to avoid an anticipated follow-up question.

As this process continued, I became increasingly interested in the stories I was being told in the interviews. The stories revealed that the processes of technological change and labor allocation, indeed the basic process of business management, were totally different from the ways in which the original project had been conceived. The manning tables which I had set out to collect were only tangentially related to the manning structure of the plant and the skill composition of jobs — a consequence of the process diverging so radically from what I had envisioned. I would never have understood this if I had focused only on the manning tables; what I would have understood was that there was an "error" between the tables and the data I wanted, and I would have looked for, and found, a correction factor.

Finally, however, the interviews seemed to reveal what the actual process was and, at least in retrospect, what my thesis came to be about was the definition of that actual process, and a comparison between it and the process I had first envisaged.

The actual process was one in which there was no clear distinction between jobs or workers of varying skills. The manning tables were used as only a rough guide to factory layout and cost. The actual manning was arrived at experimentally and evolved over time, through adjustments in which work was first done by design engineers and then gradually transferred to craftsmen who, in turn, taught operators. It was indicative of an informal process of skill development on the job in the process of production or, in the case of new technologies, in the process of technological change. When this process worked well the "skilled" work force was trained without cost by participating in the installation and start-up of the new equipment. Bottlenecks of the kind envisaged in theories of structural unemployment were created by failures of this informal on-the-job training. Such failures were most often social, rather than economic, and were generated by racial or class distinctions which inhibited the necessary contacts between the skilled and unskilled employees.

Civil Rights and Poverty

My experience with open-ended interviews in thesis research was reinforced by work that I did during my graduate studies with civil rights groups and inner city manpower and poverty programs. My graduate education coincided with the rise of the civil rights movement and the development of