THE BASIC DYNAMICS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCHING IN SPECIFIC TO BILL SANDER’S STUDY ON DRUG CULTURE*

BILL SANDER’SİN UYUŞTURUCU KÜLTÜRÜNE DAİR ÇALIŞMASI ÖZELİNDE NİTEL ARAŞTIRMANIN TEMEL DİNAMİKLERİ

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Abstract

Qualitative researching is one of the most important methodological approaches in social science researches. This approach helps to understand changing character of social phenomena by investigating social processes in specific to time and place. That is why researchers prefer qualitative inquiry when dealing with local and special connections regarding the subject examined. In this respect, qualitative investigation allows researchers to reach in-depth information on sensitive, risky or complicated issues in regarding life.

In this current study, Bill Sanders’s qualitative work, which problematizes use of drug and normalization process of drugs in night clubs, will be critically analysed. In doing so, methods used by researcher will be reminded in order to underline some important elements of qualitative approach. At the end of the study, two more methods belong to qualitative investigation, which are visual methods and focus group study, will be discussed as a potential contribution to Sanders’s study. It will be shown that main elements of Sander’s research such as normalization, drug culture, drug economy and more specifically; demonized character of security guards, etc.

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could be better analysed in qualitative way beside quantitative one that considers numbers and absolute correlations on social science research. From this point, it will be asserted that social science studies could be better generated by qualitative methodology and its specific techniques.

**Key Words:** Qualitative Methodology, Qualitative Interview, Participant Observation, Normalization of Drug, Club Culture, Visual Methods

**Öz**


Bu mevcut çalışmada Bill Sanders’in uyusturuucu kullanımını ve uyusturuucunun gece kulüplerindeki normalizasyon sürecini inceleyen nitel çalışması elestirel olarak analiz edilecektir. Bu yapılarken, araştırmanın kullandığı teknikler, nitel yaklaşımların önemli elementleri aktarmak amacıyla gözden geçirilecektir. Çalışmanın sonunda, Sanders’in faydalandığı ‘katılımcı gözlem’ (*participant observation*) ve ‘derinlemesine görüşme’ (*in-depth interview*) tekniklerine ek olarak, diğer nitel araştırma tekniklerinden ‘görsel metodlar’ ve ‘grup müzakere’, çalışmaya yöneldik potansiyel bir katkı olarak tartışılabilecektir.

Tüm bu metotların isıngında, Bill Sanders’in problematize edip metninde tartışıdıgı normalizasyon, uyusturuucu kültür, uyusturuucu ekonomisi ve daha özel olarak illegal keyif vericisi maddeler ve bar çalışanlarının olumuz bir karakterde resmedilmesi gibi konuların, sayılardan üzerine kurulu nicel araştırmadan ziyade nitel araştırma yöntemleriyle daha sağlıklı bir şekilde incelenebileceğidir edilecektir. Bu noktadan hareketle, daha genel bir çıkarım olarak nitel araştırmancının sosyal bilim çalışmalarına daha uygun olduğu tartışılabilecektir. Bu yonuyle calisma, metodolojik yaklaşımları

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Nitel Metodoloji, Nitel Görüşme, Katılımcı Gözlem, Uyusturuçunun Normalleştirilmesi, Bar Kultürü, Görsel Metotlar

**Introduction**

Qualitative studies tend to illustrate unique aspects of social reality in local base (King *et al.* 1994). When conducting a qualitative research, subjective and dynamic structures of social phenomena are examined in detail (Goertz & Mahoney 2012).

Qualitative inquiries are built upon some considerations. Briefly; some vital steps in researches such as putting rationale of the research/determining a problem, deciding what questions fit for research, finding a sample, collecting the data,
analysing the data, etc. are all considered in terms of the originality of time and place that researcher deal with (Elliot 2005).

In this current study, Bill Sander’s research on drug culture will be examined in terms of qualitative approach and methods that he benefited from. To understand qualitative inquiry through an example, some issues on research will be discussed. To specify, Sanders’s research aims, methods and findings will be highlighted. Secondly, integrity among the problem and methods he used for his study will be investigated. After that, strengths and weaknesses of the methods benefited by researcher will be tough upon in the light of subjective background of his study. Lastly, some qualitative methods that have not been mentioned or benefited in Sanders’s study will be discussed. By doing so, it is proposed to demonstrate relative methods used in qualitative inquiries and let to reader to review/imagine the study under the potential contribution of alternative qualitative methods.

**An Overview on Research Aims, Methods and Main Findings**

This qualitative research maintained by Sanders specifically focuses on “the use and the supply of ecstasy in a large London nightclub” (2005, p.241). Researcher’s main problem is to discover whether use of ecstasy among young people in nightclubs is normalized or not (Sanders 2005, p.241). In order to understand this problem, Sanders creates a conceptual framework and examine some processes that include “club culture”, “drug economy”, “normalized character”, etc. This framework characterizes the appropriate socio-cultural and political phenomena of the problem (Jabaren 2009). Throughout the study, author investigates the relationship of these one to another. His main objectives are “ecstasy use” and “ecstasy supply” by ‘bouncers’ in nightclubs (Sanders 2005, p.242). Security guards of the nightclub, which author choses for the study, have crucial status on this research. Concepts and processes on the problem mentioned above are viewed on the role of security guards who sell/supply ecstasy for users and who provide availability to drugs inside club. In addition to their potential contribution to conceptual framework, security guards represent the research sample. Data, for this research, is predominantly collected by the interviews maintained with them.

Some embedded questions clarify the aim of the research and help to understand the methodological consideration. Firstly, Sanders questions the implications of selling or controlling the drugs by security guards (2005, p.241). Another research question, in relation to the research problem, is based on whether the use of ecstasy reflects a subculture between clubbers (Sanders 2005, p.242). Lastly, he asks whether there is a club culture connected with drug economy.

In the light of the problem and research questions, Sanders benefits from a) ethnographic inquiry, which “emphasis on understanding how people *interpret* their
worlds, and the need to understand the particular cultural worlds in which people live and which they both construct and utilise” (McLeod & Thompson 2009, p.80) and b) qualitative unstructured interviews, which help him to understand cultural texture and values (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p.28), with 7 security guards and a club manager (Sanders 2005, p.242). He works as a security guard in the research place for three months and collects the data during this period. In relation to the methodology he used, Sanders chooses the interpretive approach to understand the problem. He deeply investigates the use of drugs and sorts of drugs, exemplifies the perceptions and the context of use of drugs and their diversity in the USA, the UK throughout the 20th century (2005, p.243). He also points out the “demonized” character of security guards in media/society (2005, p.243) by referring to socially constructed/perceived roles of security guards. This situation is observed on the examination of drug users and their roles, values, expectations by club, etc. Club atmosphere, psychological effect of the place that pushes young people to use ecstasy, etc. are also tough upon (Sanders 2005, pp.246-249). Because he doesn’t use positivist methodology, which “aims at singling out causal explanations, on the assumption of a cause–effect relationship between variables” (Porta & Keating 2008, p.26), researcher considers perceptions, roles, the originality of dependent variables regarding the conceptual framework (Grbich 2004, p.61). Sanders supports this perspective by saying “the findings cannot be generalized but aim to challenge what we know about ecstasy users, ecstasy sellers and their relationship” (2005, p.243). In this respect, author use the method of empirical and scientific refutation which are one of the main subjects in the philosophy of science (Popper 2002).

As Sanders hypothesized at the beginning of the research, “ecstasy was normalized at Sam’s Club” (Sanders 2005, p.254). Atmosphere of the club encourages and makes acceptable the use of ecstasy. More generally, a drug culture integrated with an intensive drug economy could be observed in the place (2005, p.254). Here, the position of the sellers, who are security guards, and users represent this culture. As another finding, bouncers seem as the major actors that keep drug culture/economy alive not only by providing ecstasy but also by supplying some illegal drugs. As Sanders pointed out, “by giving ecstasy users what they wanted, several bouncers not only encouraged their own illicit ‘retail enterprise’, but also aided in the club’s overall longevity by doing so” (2005, p.254).

A Discussion on Appropriateness between Research/Research Questions and Choice of Methodology

In general, qualitative approach and data collection methods seem consistent for this research. As it is known, a qualitative research naturally investigates “fluid and flexible, data-driven and context-sensitive” (Mason 2002, p.27). It understands the social processes as the “outcomes of the interactions between individuals, rather than phenomena ‘out there’ and separate from those involved in its construction” (Bryman 2001: 264). Sanders believes that if epistemological position of the research deals with a methodology put the human interactions on the centre (Marshall & Rossm...
research findings could be more reliable. By using this methodology, Sanders builds the knowledge in practice (Shaw & Gould 2001). In relation to this, studying on a specific place and trying to find a new perspective for ‘club culture’ could be another reason for the qualitative approach. Some techniques in qualitative methodology, which will be discussed below, could help researcher to see beyond the apparent reality and reach to new interpretation of social phenomena (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p.8). This point refers to local, contextual and the rich nature of most qualitative investigations (Marshall & Rossman 2006). Additionally, the main subject of the research, which is very sensitive and dangerous, requires deeply investigation rather than quantitative analysis deals with numerical data (Hammersley 2013). Lastly, multidimensional status of the problem (economic, cultural, legal-illegal, etc.) might prompt qualitative approach. Remembering the conduct of the study, research questions in the text specifically will be helpful to understand the methodological consideration of Sanders in favour to qualitative perspective.

For the question of “What are the implications of drug selling/supplying in the club?”, the term of ‘implications’ could refer to qualitative inquiry. According to Berg, qualitative researches put the interest on how people organize their relationships through “symbols, rituals, social structures, social roles, and so forth” (2001, p.7). At the present, qualitative endeavour could elucidate the implications of the problem in terms of symbolic relationships and socially constructed processes. Similarly, the second question that seeks roles of club guards could be best understood by in-deep qualitative inquiry. As Grbich (2004) emphasizes, qualitative style of research considers validity and reliability according to subjective meanings of social phenomena and processes which may vary to time and context. Here, researcher could understand and express the roles of bar staff according to place they work and sell the drugs, the time and the atmosphere of club that encourage business. In brief, gathering the data in terms of drug selling and the position of sellers as the main actors of this research require qualitative endeavour rather than quantitative examination. Similar to this question, it should be noted that notorious character of the main research subject, which is drug, needs deeply investigation because of some possible hesitations of research sample. This point will be elaborated in the next section that extensively evaluates the methods/techniques used in research.

Normalization process of the use of ecstasy, which is mentioned on the third question, leads researcher to apply qualitative approach. It seems hard to check a “normalization” process by asking “whether or not” in a quantitative inquiry. For Sanders’ study, it might not be reliable to check normalization by asking guards and club manager some questions in “yes or no format” (Marvasti 2004, p.33). At the moment, Sanders chooses a qualitative approach which might examine the normalization in multi-dimensional way and might characterize wide-ranging
challenges (Mason 2002). Lastly, the fourth question investigates a club culture integrated with “use of drug” and “drug economy”. Qualitative inquiry and constructionist approach seem useful to understand this question because these underline cultural changes when “understanding can take place across cultures” (Hammersley 2013, p.44).

**An Evaluation on the Strengths and Weaknesses of the Methods and Some Critical Points on the Conduct of the Study**

To start with, interview method, which is one of the most important data collection ways for qualitative approach, seems to provide deeper information for Sanders. As a requirement of qualitative research, in-depth interviews maintained by him make researcher highly active and reflexive on the research process (Mason 2002). In this respect, the question of “What are the roles of bouncers on selling/supplying ecstasy?” could be best answered by being active and reflexive on the research place. Open-ended questions such as “Why do you think that?”, “How do you feel about them”, etc. (Sanders 2005, pp.246-248) encourage interviewees to elaborate their responses (Marvasti 2004, p.148) and might demonstrate their roles. These questions allow researcher to detail responses and give a chance to understand how things work in specific, similar and different contexts (Mason 2002). Throughout the interviews, by taking notes and analysing them at the end of his research, Sanders clarify the research questions. His main findings mentioned above seem relevant to these questions. Similarly, the question of “Is there a normalization process on use of drugs?” requires a long standing participant observation when maintaining ethnographic fieldwork (McLeod & Thompson 2009, p.80). To compare, discovering a normalization process seems harder by conducting a quantitative fieldwork, which probably include the standard questions and certain-general correlations (McLeod & Thompson 2009). It demonstrates a dynamic appointment of researcher for his own investigation (Mason 2002).

After all, the last research question, “Can we observe a club culture that consists of use of drug and drug economy?”, helps to understand the ethnographic inquiry as a data collection way.

Ethnography could be defined as a “first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting on the basis of (though not exclusively by) participant observation” (Atkinson et.al 2001, pp.4-5). Because Sanders concentrates on culture and a cultural profile which may emerge in night clubs, it is reasonable for him to utilize from ethnographic investigation. It seems that unless he maintains a participant observation, it would be hard to get reliable information regarding club culture, drug economy and the roles of club guards. Moreover, the possibility of reaching unexpected and coincidental information during ethnographic observation (Dant 2004) enriches the scope of his study. For example Sanders (2005, pp.252) reports his own dialogues by drug users who want to buy ecstasy by him and he both astonishes and appreciates to experience this situation for his research. It should be
noted that Sanders uses the advantages of ethnographic observation by illustrating club atmosphere, light systems, the effect of music on use of drug, ethnic groups visit the club in exact days of week, bouncers’ gestures and dialogues, etc.

Before examining some weaknesses on in-depth interviews and participant observation, some general points could be criticized. To start with, Sanders investigates the validity of a club culture that includes drug use and drug economy by only communicating with club guards. He maintains interview only with them. Drug users, who are mentioned many times in the article, are just observed by researcher and only some dialogues between bouncers and buyers are given in the text. For the reliable findings on a cultural investigation; drug users’ viewpoints could have been asked. Of course this is not possible for the first research question, which seeks implications of drug selling. However, to discover the normalization on use of drug or a cultural background, users’ feedbacks could be supportive. It seems that Sanders misses the representativeness of the sample on the subject (Berg 2001, p.10) he searches for. Secondly, even though hypothesis-testing researches are generally maintained in quantitative studies (Hammersly 2013), Sanders generates his research on an assertion. For him (2005, p.243), there is a challenge on the main reasons that prompt young people to use drugs.

To find weaknesses on methods, some critical points in the conduct of the research could be remembered. To start with ethnographic inquiry, there are several points seem weak. For instance, he starts his fieldwork serendipitously by getting an offer to be a guard in Sam’s Club (2005, p.243). After several days that he observes bar atmosphere and get used to his job, supplying some illegal drugs by bouncers (besides ecstasy) determines his basic focus point of his research (2005, p.243). This shows that he doesn’t design his research in terms of rationale, research questions, and methods (Mason 2002) before participant observation he did. He designs his study and determines the conceptual framework after the observation process, instead. Secondly, sampling process of this research is not clear. He doesn’t discuss some questions such as “how can my sampling strategy help me to develop a theoretically and empirically grounded argument about something in particular?” and “have I searched for negative instances?” (Mason 2002, p.121) when maintaining interviews with guards. That is why there are some considerations on whether drug sellers and manager provide useful information for the certain research questions. Of course, qualitative researches could be purposive and as Marvasti (2004, p.9) points out “when researching drug dealers, random sampling is simply impractical”. However, the objection at this point is not against the initial sampling process of the research. The unclear point is whether 8 interviewees and their responses could bring researcher to main findings.

In relation to sampling, some points remain unclear for interviewing process, too. Because research questions seek a normalization process and a kind of culture,
interviews and questions asked during interviews are expected to be more detailed. However, short questions and short answers, which include very slang expressions, seem to limit the provision of useful information (Berg 2001). Thirdly, the research doesn’t mention the process of organizing and indexing the data in terms of key questions (Mason 2002). In conclusion part, Sanders (2005, pp.254-255) doesn’t explain the relationship between research questions, methods that answer them and some techniques help him to analyse the data he collected. In this respect, integrity and consistency that makes research meaningful (Mason 1994) seems weak. In other words, there is a lack of overall strategy on the research in terms of rationale (Marshall & Rosmann 2006).

Lastly, a research based on a qualitative inquiry requires a satisfactory explanation on ethical consideration (de Laine 2000), reflexivity that researcher subjects himself/herself (Usher 2005), and power relationship, which is an important dimension of fieldworks on cultural studies (Winter 2004). Research questions and the conduct of this study could have questioned in terms of these three aspects. Sanders (2005, p.244) mentions notorious side regarding bouncers; however, he doesn’t consider this situation on interviewing process. A reflexive explanation and consideration on power relationship between Sanders and his sample would have provided more reliable data and information in the light of research questions.

**A Potential Contribution to Study: Two Alternative Qualitative Methods**

Besides participant observation and one-by-one unstructured interviewing method, focus group study, which is a type of collecting verbal data (Flick et al. 2004) and visual recording methods could have been benefited for this research.

To clarify, focus group inquiry give interviewer a chance to collect more detailed data and discover the implicit responses by spending less effort (Bader & Rossi 2002). In addition, because focus group studies are maintained by the representative sample that have the same experiences about the subject investigated (Bloor et al. 2001), bouncers would be appropriate to this method. By doing this, the question seeks the roles of bouncers on drug selling/supplying could be better answered. Thirdly, group discussion could provide participants ‘synergy’ owing to collective dialogue, so researcher could test the agreements or disagreements on the topic (Morgan 1996). Bouncers, in this respect, would compare their experiences and observations each other or correct themselves. In doing so, some possible missing points in one-by-one interviews would be compensated.

It should be noted that, focus group discussion holds some disadvantages, as well. Because the subject is based on a sensitive issue, guards could hesitate to answer the questions in front of others. Confessing the supply of illicit drugs (Sanders 2005, p.244) could be hard in group discussion. In relation to this issue, some of participants in focus group inquiry could avoid to speak because of their status and the power relationship between them (Bloor et al. 2001). Before group study, club manager or the head of guards might have warned them about not to speaking on illegal drugs. It
would have automatically decreased the quality of data. However, this ethnographic study, which seeks a new type of culture, could have been conducted in a focus group that share the same position towards research subject.

Secondly, visual research methods could have been useful for Sander’s research. He could have benefited photographs, paintings, internet-based data, video recording, etc. (Pole 2004). Photographs could have showed some spectacular moments regarding use of drugs. This would provide a better understanding for implications and culture of ecstasy and it could set up some perceptions on ontological specificity of the subject he focuses on (Emmison & Smith 2007). It would also let the researcher to depict a realistic process (Harrison 2004) between bouncers and drug buyers alongside observation he maintained.

In addition to photography, Sanders could have used video recording when maintaining a) interviews with research sample and b) observation on club atmosphere. Instead of just taking field notes (Sanders 2005, pp.252-255), Sanders could have recorded the interviews, so he would have a chance to re-examine the reactions, responses and speeches of interviewees. This recording would also allow him to make an easier conversation analysis, which is a type of qualitative inquiry (Marvasti 2004). Similarly, video recording during his participant observation would help Sanders to ‘capture’ social reality, which is normalization process in his research, in empirically and theoretically productive way (Emmison & Smith 2007). Just like focus group method, visual methods have some disadvantages for ethnographic inquiry. For example, research sample could have some considerations when talking about ecstasy or other illicit drugs because of recording on video. Similarly, club manager probably wouldn’t like to speak on the video in because of legal considerations. He would think that video recording put his job and club in jeopardy. Besides disadvantages of visual methods, the complicated meaning of the concept of culture could lead researchers to utilize visual methods, so social relationship between sub-cultures could be better seen by the help of visual techniques (Rose 2007).

**Conclusion**

This current text proposed to shed light on qualitative researching by critically examining Bill Sander’s ethnographic study. To understand qualitative approach in social scientific base, beside theoretical examinations, some practical points and specific methods have been given. When analysing Sander’s research, 1) appropriateness of qualitative inquiry for the topic author investigates, 2) advantages and disadvantages of qualitative approach for research subject, 3) some techniques in qualitative methodology that could potentially contribute to Sanders’s reference work have been outlined.
When interpreting the data Sanders obtained and analysing it in the light of qualitative inquiry; main research topic, which is normalization of drug among young adults, has always been considered. Despite some weaknesses of qualitative researching, it could be said that such a sensitive issue would be best investigated by qualitative methods. It seems that it would be hard to measure drug culture or normalization of use of illicit drugs in bar atmosphere by applying quantitative questionnaires. However, by maintaining participant observation in addition to semi-structured interviews, researcher deeply analyse social phenomenon among some subcultures.

Despite its some weaknesses, Sander’s study once again shows that to discover social processes and changing character of social phenomena, applying to qualitative understanding and practicing would be better for researchers deal with human interactions.

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