1

What Is Qualitative Research?

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- **understand what is meant by qualitative research**
- **link your research topic to an appropriate methodology**
- **recognise the advantages and disadvantages of both qualitative and quantitative methods**
- **understand the diverse approaches underlying contemporary qualitative research.**

1.1 IN SEARCH OF A WORKING DEFINITION

To call yourself a 'qualitative' researcher settles surprisingly little. First, as we shall see at the end of this chapter, 'qualitative research' covers a wide range of different, even conflicting, activities. Second, if the description is being used merely as some sort of negative epithet (saying what we are *not*, i.e. non-quantitative), then I am not clear how useful it is. As Grahame puts it: 'the notion that qualitative research is non-quantitative is true but uninformative: we need more than a negative definition' (1999: 4).

What, then, are the principal differences between quantitative and qualitative research? Table 1.1 sets out some common assumptions.

Unfortunately, as Hammersley (1992) makes clear, each of the assumed differences in Table 1.1 are problematic as follows:

TABLE 1.1 Assumed characteristics of research

Qualitative research	Quantitative research
Uses words	Uses numbers
Concerned with meanings	Concerned with behaviour
Induces hypotheses from data	Begins with hypotheses
Case studies	Generalisations

Source: adapted from Hammersley, 1992

- Quantitative researchers clearly use words as well as numbers. For instance, they usually offer verbal interpretations of their statistical tables. It is also not true that numbers are absent from qualitative research. Having discovered some phenomenon by qualitative means, there is every reason to see how frequently it occurs (see the case study on cancer clinics later in this chapter).
- Quantitative research is often concerned with meanings – questionnaires or surveys are commonly designed to establish how people 'see' themselves or others. Qualitative researchers can be interested in behaviour just as much as how people see things. Many qualitative studies examine how people interact with one another in particular settings like the workplace, a museum or an auction house (see Heath et al., 2010, discussed in Chapter 10).
- The standard, published quantitative study usually does begin with a hypothesis which it then seeks to test. However, it is becoming more common for qualitative researchers to begin with a hypothesis. My research on advice giving in HIV-test counselling (Silverman, 1997), discussed in Chapter 11, was based on a relevant earlier study. After more than a century of qualitative research, we would be in a bad way if we had no findings that were worthy of further study!
- The same applies to generalisations. As I argue later in this book, following Flyvbjerg (2004), we can make certain kinds of generalisations from case studies.

It would be foolish, however, to maintain that there is *no* distinction between qualitative and quantitative research. This can be seen clearly if we compare the format in different journals. Quantitative journals expect their authors to begin with a hypothesis which is then tested using accepted statistical measures on a large number of cases which are often randomly selected. Much of the material consists of tables of numbers. The interpretation of such tables is usually postponed until a final section which is often called 'discussion'.

By contrast, the papers in qualitative journals do not routinely begin with a hypothesis, the 'cases' studied are usually far fewer in number and the authors' interpretation is carried on throughout the writing. There is usually far greater attention paid here to the particular theory or '**model**' of qualitative research which the author is using. This allows me to make some simple, working distinctions set out in Table 1.2.

TABLE 1.2 Qualitative research: some simple characteristics

1. Often begins with a single case, chosen because of its convenience or interest
2. Often studies phenomena in the contexts in which they arise through observation and/or recording or the analysis of printed and Internet material
3. Hypotheses are often generated from the analysis rather than stated at the outset
4. There is no one agreed way to analyse your data. Multiple research models exist (e.g. grounded theory, constructionism, discourse analysis) and sometimes conflict with each other
5. Where numbers are used, these are usually in the form of simple tabulations designed to identify deviant cases and do not lead to statistical correlations or tests

Table 1.2 attempts to paint a realistic picture of what *most* qualitative research looks like – of course, there are exceptions. However, research methods are not always a subject for rational debate. In the next section, you will see how people often make loaded assumptions about different research **methods**.

1.2 LOADED EVALUATIONS OF RESEARCH METHODS

You may have had experience as a student of how different teachers and departments rate qualitative and quantitative methods. Within psychology, for instance, there is a clear split between those who favour quantitative studies, often based on questionnaires or laboratory studies, and those who use qualitative methods to study interaction in the 'field' (see Potter, 2011). However, you also have to bear in mind that these methods are often evaluated differently. This is shown in Table 1.3 which is drawn from the terms used by speakers at a conference on research methods. Unfortunately, little has changed over the decades since then.

Table 1.3 shows how imprecise, evaluative considerations come into play when researchers describe qualitative and quantitative methods. Depending on your

TABLE 1.3 Claimed features of qualitative and quantitative method

Qualitative	Quantitative
Soft	Hard
Flexible	Fixed
Subjective	Objective
Political	Value-free
Case study	Survey
Speculative	Hypothesis testing
Grounded	Abstract

Source: Halfpenny, 1979: 799

point of view, Table 1.3 might suggest that quantitative research was superior because, for example, it is value-free. The implication here is that quantitative research simply objectively reports reality, whereas qualitative research is influenced by the researcher's political values. Conversely, other people might argue that such value-freedom in social science is either undesirable or impossible.

The same sort of argument can arise about 'flexibility'. For some people, such flexibility encourages qualitative researchers to be innovative. For others, flexibility might be criticised as meaning lack of structure. Conversely, being 'fixed' gives such a structure to research but without flexibility.

However, this is by no means a balanced argument. Outside the social science community, there is little doubt that quantitative data rule the roost. Governments favour quantitative research because it mimics the research of its own agencies (Cicourel, 1964: 36). They want quick answers based on 'reliable' **variables** which can be reliably audited. Similarly, many research funding agencies call qualitative researchers 'journalists or soft scientists' whose work is 'termed unscientific, or only exploratory, or entirely personal and full of bias' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994: 4).

For the general public, there is a mixture of respect and suspicion of quantitative data ('you can say anything you like with figures'; 'lies, damn lies and statistics'). This is reflected by the media. On the one hand, public opinion polls are treated as newsworthy – particularly immediately before elections. On the other hand, unemployment and inflation statistics are often viewed with suspicion – particularly when they appear to contradict your own experience (statistics which show that inflation has fallen may not be credible if you see prices going up for the goods you buy!).

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Ben Goldacre's column in the UK newspaper the *Guardian* (see www.badscience.net/) looks at how the press reports (and distorts) scientific research.

For this reason, by the beginning of the new millennium, in many Western countries, the assumed reliability of quantitative research was starting to be under significant threat. The failure of surveys of voting intention in the British general election of 1992 (almost comparable with the similar failure of US telephone poll studies in the 1948 Truman–Dewey presidential race) made the public a little sceptical about such statistics – even though the companies involved insisted they were providing only statements of current voting intentions and not predictions of the actual result.

The case study below provides a recent example of how one polling company approaches the problem of measuring voting intentions.

CASE STUDY
Why Polls Sometimes Show Different Results

How should you recruit a sample of people in order to ask about their voting intentions? Party identification is usually a good guide. Should you base your sample on the results of the last election? Some pollsters argue that partisan identification is fluid and changes frequently. This approach suggests that whatever partisan mix falls out from the results of a random sample is the 'right' answer. Or should you 'purposively' sample by finding respondents in numbers which fit the ratio of *current* party identification?

[based on *Rasmussen Reports*, Thursday, 26 June 2008]

Part of the public's scepticism about statistics may be due to the way that governments have chosen numbers selectively. For instance, while the US administration kept statistics on US soldiers killed in Iraq, it published no data on the numbers of Iraqi citizens killed since the 2003 Iraq War. Or, to take a second example, in 2005 the British Chancellor of the Exchequer (finance minister) announced a change in the years which constituted the present economic cycle. While this change appeared to be purely technical, it enabled the British Treasury to sanction increasing national debts which, under the previous methods, would have broken the Chancellor's 'golden rule' about public borrowing.

But such concerns may constitute only a 'blip' in the ongoing history of the dominance of quantitative research. Qualitative researchers still largely feel themselves to be second-class citizens whose work typically evokes suspicion, where the 'gold standard' is quantitative research.

It is important to be aware of the environment in which research functions. At the same time, it is important to try to avoid these kind of value-judgements. As I argue in the next section, research methods are rarely intrinsically 'right' or 'wrong'.

1.3 METHODS SHOULD FIT YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION

The term 'qualitative research' seems to promise that we will avoid or downplay statistical techniques and the mechanics of the kinds of quantitative methods used in, say, survey research or epidemiology. The danger in the term, however, is that it seems to assume a fixed preference or predefined evaluation of what is 'good' (i.e. qualitative) and 'bad' (i.e. quantitative) research. In fact, the choice between different research methods should depend upon what you are trying to find out.

TABLE 1.4 Qualitative or quantitative methods?

1. Imagine you want to study ambulance crews' responses to emergency calls. One way to do this would be to examine statistics giving the time which such crews take to get to such an emergency. However, such statistics may not tell the whole story. For instance, when does the timing of the emergency services' response begin (when the caller picks up the phone or when the ambulance crew receives the information from the operator)? And isn't it also important to examine how operators and ambulances services grade the seriousness of calls? If so, qualitative research may be needed to investigate how statistics are collected, e.g. when timing starts and what locally counts as a 'serious' incident. Note that this is an issue not just of the statistics being biased (which quantitative researchers recognise) but of the inevitable (and necessary) intrusion of common-sense judgements into practical decision-making (Garfinkel, 1967)
2. Say you are interested in what determines adolescents' diet. So you do a survey which asks them about the influences on their choice of food (e.g. parents, siblings, peer groups, advertisements). But is 'influence' really a suitable way of describing the phenomenon? For instance, a qualitative study may show that eating patterns arise in a variety of contexts including negotiations with parents over such practical matters as who does the cooking and when the food is served. Hence young people's diet is not a simple outcome of different sets of 'influences' (Eldridge and Murcott, 2000)
3. Imagine you want to study decisions by the police to charge juvenile offenders with a crime. It looks like being found with a weapon will lead to a criminal charge. But what kind of weapon? To answer this question, you code official records, giving a code of '1' to the use of a firearm and '2' to the use of a blunt instrument such as a baseball bat. But what are you to do if some offenders used *both* weapons (Marvasti, 2004: 9–10)? Do you just modify your coding system or do you add a qualitative study of meetings where police and public prosecutors grade the 'seriousness' of an offence and the likelihood of obtaining a conviction in deciding whether to charge a juvenile with a crime (Sudnow, 1968b)?

For instance, if you want to discover how people intend to vote, then a quantitative method, like a social survey, may seem the most appropriate choice. On the other hand, if you are concerned with exploring people's life-histories or everyday behaviour, then qualitative methods may be favoured. Table 1.4 gives three more examples of how your research topic should guide your use of quantitative or qualitative methods.

EXERCISE 1.1

Should I use qualitative research?

When planning your research project, try to answer the following six questions suggested by Punch (1998: 244–5):

1. What exactly am I trying to find out? Different questions require different methods to answer them.
2. What kind of focus on my topic do I want to achieve? Do I want to study this phenomenon or situation in detail? Or am I mainly interested in making standardised and systematic comparisons and in accounting for variance?

3 How have other researchers dealt with this topic? To what extent do I wish to align my project with this literature?
4 What practical considerations should sway my choice? For instance, how long might my study take and do I have the resources to study it this way? Can I get access to the single case I want to study in depth? Are quantitative samples and data readily available?
5 Will we learn more about this topic using quantitative or qualitative methods? What will be the knowledge pay-off of each method?
6 What seems to work best for me? Am I committed to a particular research model which implies a particular **methodology**? Do I have a gut feeling about what a good piece of research looks like?

Later in this chapter, we consider whether the kind of issues listed in Table 1.4 may sometimes make it sensible to adopt both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

However, so far we have been dealing with little more than empty terms, apparently related to whether or not researchers use statistics of some kind. If, as I already have argued, the value of a research method should properly be gauged solely in relation to what you are trying to find out, we need now to sketch out the uses and abuses of both quantitative *and* qualitative methods.

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For articles on the qualitative–quantitative debate:

www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-e/inhalt1-01-e.htm

1.4 THE GOOD SENSE OF QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

So far we have been assuming that quantitative research always involves studying official statistics or doing a survey. Before you can decide whether to use quantitative research, you need to know the range of options available to you. Bryman (1988) has discussed the five main methods of quantitative social science research and these are set out in Table 1.5.

To flesh out the bare bones of Table 1.5, I will use one example based on the quantitative analysis of official statistics. The example relates to data taken from the General Social Survey (GSS) carried out every year by the US National Opinion Research Center (NORC) and discussed by Procter (1993).

TABLE 1.5 Methods of quantitative research

Method	Features	Advantages
Social survey	Random samples Measured variables	Representative Tests hypotheses
Experiment	Experimental stimulus and control group not exposed to stimulus	Precise measurement
Official statistics	Analysis of previously collected data	Large data sets
'Structured' observation	Observations recorded on predetermined 'schedule'	Reliability of observations
Content analysis	Predetermined categories used to count content of mass media products	Reliability of measures

Source: adapted from Bryman, 1988: 11–12

Procter shows how you can use these data to calculate the relationship between two or more variables. Sociologists have long been interested in 'social mobility' – the movement between different statuses in society either within one lifetime or between generations. The GSS data can be used to calculate the latter as Table 1.6 shows.

In Table 1.6, we are shown the relationship between a father's and son's occupation. In this case, the father's occupation is the 'independent' variable because it is treated as the possible cause of the son's occupation (the 'dependent' variable).

TABLE 1.6 Respondent's occupation by father's occupation

		FATHER'S OCCUPATION	
		Non-manual	Manual
SON'S OCCUPATION	Non-manual	63.4%	27.4%
	Manual	36.6%	72.6%

Source: adapted from Procter, 1993: 246

Table 1.6 appears to show a strong association (or 'correlation') between father's and son's occupations. For instance, of the group with non-manual fathers, 63.4 per cent were themselves in non-manual jobs. However, among sons with fathers in manual occupations, only 27.4 per cent had obtained non-manual work. Because the **sample** of over 1000 people was randomly recruited, we can be confident, within specifiable limits, that this correlation is unlikely to be obtained by chance.

However, quantitative researchers are reluctant to move from statements of correlation to causal statements. For instance, both father's and son's occupations may be associated with another variable (say inherited wealth) which lies behind the apparent link between occupations of father and son. Because of such an 'antecedent' variable, we cannot confidently state that father's occupation is a significant *cause* of son's occupation. Indeed, because this antecedent variable causes both of the others to vary together, the association between the occupation of fathers and sons is misleading or 'spurious'.

TABLE 1.7 Club membership and voting in union elections

	POLITICAL INTEREST		
	High	**Medium**	**Low**
PRINTER FRIENDS	61%	42%	26%
NO PRINTER FRIENDS	48%	22%	23%
	PERCENTAGE PARTICIPATING IN ELECTIONS		

Source: adapted from Lipset et al., 1962

EXERCISE 1.2

1 Does Table 1.7 show that there is an association between having a printer friend and participating in union elections? Explain carefully, referring to the table.
2 Can we be confident that the degree of political interest of a printer does not make any correlation between friendships and participation into a spurious one?

Along these lines Procter (1993: 248–9) makes the interesting observation that there appears to be a marked correlation between the price of rum in Barbados and the level of Methodist ministers' salaries: that is, in any given year, both go up or down together. However, we should not jump to the conclusion that this means that rum distillers fund the Methodist church. As Procter points out, both the price of rum and ministers' salaries may simply be responding to inflationary pressures. Hence the initial correlation is 'spurious'.

While looking at Tables 1.6 and 1.7, you may have been struck by the extent to which quantitative social research uses the same language that you may have been taught in say physics, chemistry or biology. As Bryman notes:

> Quantitative research is … a genre which uses a special language … (similar) to the ways in which scientists talk about how they investigate the natural order – variables, control, measurement, experiment. (1988: 12)

Sometimes, this has led critics to claim that quantitative research ignores the differences between the natural and social world by failing to understand the 'meanings' that are brought to social life. This charge is often associated with critics who label quantitative research as 'positivistic' (e.g. Filmer et al., 1972).

Unfortunately, **positivism** is a very slippery and emotive term. Not only is it difficult to define, but also there are very few quantitative researchers who would accept it (see Marsh, 1982: Ch. 3). Instead, most quantitative researchers would argue that they do not aim to produce a science of laws (like physics) but simply to produce a set of set of cumulative generalisations based on the critical sifting of data, that is a 'science' as defined above.

As I argue, at this level, many of the apparent differences between quantitative and qualitative research should disappear – although some qualitative researchers remain insistent that they want nothing to do with even such a limited version of science (see Section 1.7 below). By contrast, in my view at least, qualitative researchers should celebrate rather than criticise quantitative researchers' aim to assemble and sift their data critically (see Chapter 11). They occasionally also need to reconsider whether qualitative methods might be inappropriate for a particular research question.

Take a research topic which appeared in a recent newspaper job advertisement: how is psycho-social adversity related to asthma morbidity and care? The advert explained that this problem would be studied by means of qualitative interviews.

My immediate question was: how can qualitative interviews help to address the topic at hand? The problem is not that people with asthma will be unable to answer questions about their past, nor, of course, that they are likely to lie or mislead the interviewer. Rather, like all of us, when faced with an outcome (in this case, a chronic illness), they will document their past in a way which fits it, highlighting certain features and downplaying others. In other words, the interviewer will be inviting a retrospective 'rewriting of history' (Garfinkel, 1967) with an unknown bearing on the causal problem with which this research is concerned.

This is not to deny that valuable data may be gathered from such a qualitative study. Rather, that it will address an altogether different issue – **narratives** of illness in which 'causes' and 'associations' work as rhetorical moves. By contrast, a quantitative study would seem to be much more appropriate to the research question proposed. Quantitative surveys can be used on much larger samples than qualitative interviews, allowing inferences to be made to wider populations. Moreover, such surveys have standardised, **reliable** measures to ascertain the 'facts' with which this study is concerned. Indeed, why should a large-scale quantitative study be restricted to surveys or interviews? If I wanted reliable, generalisable knowledge about the relation between these two variables (psycho-social adversity and asthma morbidity), I would start by looking at hospital records.

1.5 THE NONSENSE OF QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

Procter's attempt to control for spurious correlations was possible because of the quantitative style of his research. This has the disadvantage of being dependent upon survey methods with all their attendant difficulties (see the case study below). As we will see in Chapter 6, what people say in answer to interview questions does not have a stable relationship to how they behave in naturally occurring situations.

CASE STUDY
Are Artists Sex-Crazed Lunatics?

Here is a newspaper report on the results of a questionnaire survey comparing artists with the general public:

> artists are more likely to share key behavioural traits with schizophrenics and (to) have on average twice as many sexual partners as the rest of the population.

This is how this study was carried out:

> The psychologists sent a questionnaire to a range of artists by advertising in a major visual art magazine and writing to published poets … other questionnaires were passed to the general population by pushing them through letterboxes at random … another set of questionnaires was filled out by a group of patients diagnosed with schizophrenia. (*Guardian*, 'Mental illness link to art and sex', 30 November 2005)

Of course, the problem with this quantitative approach is that answers to such questionnaires may be highly unreliable. One critic puts it even more strongly:

> What a pile of crap. Those responsible should be shot. Better still, they should be forced to have several thousand sexual partners. Preferably schizoid artists, bad, ugly, psychotic ones. Then shot.
>
> For a start, they've only polled 425 people by placing adverts and randomly posting questionnaires in artists' whingepapers, read only by those snivelling in the evolutionary foot bath of the artistic gene pool. You should never expect people to tell the truth about their sexual shenanigans. They lie. Always. They lie to themselves – why would they tell the truth to you? (Dinos Chapman, *Guardian*, 1 December 2005)

This is why a dependence on purely quantitative methods may neglect the social and cultural construction of the 'variables' which quantitative research seeks to correlate. As Kirk and Miller argue, 'attitudes', for instance, do not simply attach to the inside of people's heads and researching them depends on making a whole series of analytical assumptions. They conclude: 'The survey researcher who discusses is not wrong to do so. Rather, the researcher is wrong if he or she fails to acknowledge the theoretical basis on which it is meaningful to make measurements of such entities and to do so with survey questions' (1986: 15).

According to its critics, much quantitative research leads to the use of a set of ad hoc procedures to define, count and analyse its variables (Blumer, 1956; Cicourel, 1964; Silverman, 1975). The implication is that quantitative researchers unknowingly use the methods of everyday life, even as they claim scientific objectivity (Cicourel, 1964; Garfinkel, 1967). This is why some qualitative

researchers have preferred to describe how, in everyday life, we actually go about defining, counting and analysing.

Let me try to concretise this critique by means of some examples. In what follows, I take a few salient examples of surveys about national identity and briefly review how they have been criticised.

In 1979, 56% of people in Scotland chose being Scottish as their 'best' identity. This compared with 38% who said they were 'British'. By 2001, the proportions were 77% and 16% respectively (Kiely et al., 2005: 66).

Such longitudinal data potentially raise fascinating questions about the direction of change. The data also directly tie in to debates about citizenship and national identity. Unfortunately, robust correlations between variables are only as reliable as the methods which have been used to generate their data. As Fielding and Fielding argue:

> the most advanced survey procedures themselves only manipulate data that had to be gained at some point by asking people. (1986: 12)

Even if we can ask questions in a reliable way, what people say in answer to interview questions may not have a stable relationship to how they behave in naturally occurring situations. In this sense, interview responses may be artefactual.

Again, Fielding and Fielding make the relevant point:

> researchers who generalize from a sample survey to a larger population ignore the possible disparity between the discourse of actors about some topical issue and the way they respond to questions in a formal context. (1986: 21)

Of course, good survey researchers are conscious of the problems involved in interpreting statistical correlations in relation to what the variables involved 'mean' to the participants (see Marsh, 1982: Ch. 5). As the researchers who produced the data on Scottish identity point out, even more nuanced five-point Likert scales would not solve this problem since such scales:

> cannot provide information on what people mean by these categories and what sort of decision-making process they use in plumping for one category over another. (Kiely et al. 2005: 66).

An extreme example of what this means in practice is found in the recent study by a graduate student of residents in a Chicago housing project for the poor (Venkatesh, 2008). Imagine the impact on gun-toting gang members of being confronted by a researcher with a clipboard asking them questions like 'how does it feel to be black and poor?' and offering multiple-choice answers such as 'very bad', 'somewhat bad', 'neither bad nor good', 'somewhat good' or 'very good'!

The surveys I have reviewed are dogged by the problem that their findings might be simply artefacts of the method employed. However, we should not take this argument

too far. First, as we know from the uncertainty principle recognised in physics, all data are to some extent an artefact of how they are collected. Second, there are in principle no 'good' or 'bad' research methods and, therefore, the choice between different research methods should depend upon what you are trying to find out.

However, the quantitative desire to establish 'operational' definitions at an early stage of social research can be an arbitrary process which deflects attention away from the everyday sense-making procedures of people in specific milieux. As a consequence, the 'hard' data on social structures which quantitative researchers claim to provide can turn out to be a mirage (see also Cicourel, 1964). This is illustrated by the two examples in Table 1.8.

TABLE 1.8 The limits of quantitative methods

1	Say you are interested in racial discrimination and think of doing a quantitative study. First, you will need an **operational definition** of your topic, e.g. should racial discrimination be defined legally, should you follow the perspective of the victims and potential aggressors or should you yourself define the term? Whatever you decide, your research will be stuck with how you define the phenomenon at the outset (Marvasti, 2004: 11)
2	Imagine you want to discover whether small children who are able to empathise with others will make good teachers. So you administer a psychological questionnaire to a sample of such children. Then you conduct a **laboratory study** to see whether those who score highly on 'empathy' are best at instructing other children on how to complete a simple task such as constructing a toy tower (O'Malley, 2005). However, do your questionnaire answers tell you anything about how 'empathy' is displayed and recognised in everyday life? Moreover, when you watch a video of the lab study, you will need to decide whether or not the instruction was successful in any particular case. But this raises a set of difficulties: if a child being tutored successfully completes the tower, how do you know this was due to the other child's tutoring? Moreover, how did the tutored child define what they were being taught? The very speed at which researchers' coding of the behaviour of the tutor–tutee takes place may underplay how the recipient of the action codes the activity

These brief (non-random!) examples should allow you to understand the kind of criticisms that are often directed at purely quantitative research by more qualitative 'types'. Because space is short, Table 1.9 attempts to summarise these criticisms.

It should be noted that Table 1.9 contains simply complaints made about *some* quantitative research. Moreover, because quantitative researchers are rarely 'dopes', many treat such matters seriously and try to overcome them. So, for instance, epidemiologists, who study official statistics about disease, and criminologists are only too aware of the problematic character of what gets recorded as, say, a psychiatric disorder (Prior, 2003) or a criminal offence (Noaks and Wincup, 2004). Equally, good quantitative researchers are conscious of the problems involved in interpreting statistical correlations in relation to what the variables involved 'mean' to the participants (see Marsh, 1982: Ch. 5).

In the light of this qualification, I conclude this section by observing that an insistence that any research worth its salt should follow a purely quantitative logic would simply rule out the study of many interesting phenomena relating to what

TABLE 1.9 Some criticisms of quantitative research

1. Quantitative research can amount to a 'quick fix', involving little or no contact with people or the 'field'
2. Statistical correlations may be based upon 'variables' that, in the context of naturally occurring interaction, are arbitrarily defined
3. After-the-fact speculation about the meaning of correlations can involve the very common-sense processes of reasoning that science tries to avoid (see Cicourel, 1964: 14 and 21)
4. The pursuit of 'measurable' phenomena can mean that unperceived values creep into research by simply taking on board highly problematic and unreliable concepts such as 'discrimination' or 'empathy'
5. While it is important to test hypotheses, a purely statistical logic can make the development of hypotheses a trivial matter and fail to help in generating hypotheses from data (see my discussion of **grounded theory** in Chapter 3)

people actually do in their day-to-day lives, whether in homes, offices or other public and private places. But, as the next section shows, a balanced view should accept the strengths, as well as the limitations, of quantitative research.

1.6 THE GOOD SENSE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative researchers suggest that we should not assume that techniques used in quantitative research are the *only* way of establishing the **validity** of findings from qualitative or field research. This means that a number of practices which originate from quantitative studies may be *inappropriate* to qualitative research. These include the assumptions that social science research can only be valid if based on operational definitions of variables, experimental data, official statistics or the random **sampling** of populations and that quantified data are the only valid or generalisable social facts.

Critics of quantitative research argue that these assumptions have a number of defects (see Cicourel, 1964; Denzin, 1970; Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Gubrium, 1988). These critics note that experiments, official statistics and survey data may simply be inappropriate to some of the tasks of social science. For instance, they exclude the observation of behaviour in everyday situations. Hence, while quantification may *sometimes* be useful, it can both conceal as well as reveal basic social processes.

Consider the problem of counting attitudes in surveys. Do we all have coherent attitudes on any topics which await the researcher's questions? And how do 'attitudes' relate to what we actually do – our practices? Or think of official statistics on cause of death compared with studies of how hospital staff (Sudnow, 1968a), pathologists and statistical clerks (Prior, 1987) attend to deaths. Note that this is *not* to argue that such statistics may be biased. Instead, it is to suggest that there are areas of social reality which such statistics cannot measure.

The main strength of qualitative research is its ability to study phenomena which are simply unavailable elsewhere. Quantitative researchers are rightly concerned to establish correlations between variables. However, while their approach can tell us a lot about inputs and outputs to some phenomenon (e.g. how national identity is correlated with voting behaviour), it has to be satisfied with a purely 'operational' definition of the phenomenon and does not have the resources to describe how that phenomenon is locally constituted (see Figure 1.1). As a result, its contribution to social problems is necessarily lopsided and limited.

FIGURE 1.1 The missing phenomenon in quantitative research

One real strength of qualitative research is that it can use **naturally occurring data** to find the sequences ('how') in which participants' meanings ('what') are deployed. Having established the character of some phenomenon, it can then (but only then) move on to answer 'why' questions by examining the wider contexts in which the phenomenon arises (see Figure 1.2).

FIGURE 1.2 The phenomenon reappears

Figures 1.1 and 1.2 show that there are gains and losses in quantitative researchers' tendency to define phenomena at the outset through the use of operational definitions. Such definitions aid measurement but they can lose sight of the way that social phenomena become what they are in particular contexts and sequences of action. As we shall see in Chapter 2, what I call **contextual sensitivity** means that qualitative researchers can look at how an apparently stable phenomenon (e.g. a tribe, an organisation or a family) is actually put together by its participants.

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For more on why sequences of action are important, see my paper at:

www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-e/inhalt3-05-e.htm

TIP

When researching any phenomenon, try putting it into inverted commas as an aid to thinking about what that phenomenon comes to be in a particular context. This may lead you to see that you are faced with a set of phenomena which can be marked by hyphens, for example the family-in-the-household; the family-in-public; the family-as-depicted-by-the-media; the family-as-portrayed-in-criminal-sentencing. This approach is also a useful way of narrowing down your research problem.

1.7 THE NONSENSE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Unfortunately, contextual sensitivity is not always shown by qualitative researchers. Sometimes, they forget to put phenomena into inverted commas and chase some 'essential' object often apparently located inside people's heads, like 'meaning' or 'experience'. For instance, some qualitative researchers use open-ended interviews, like TV chat-show hosts, to try to tap directly the perceptions of individuals. This **romantic** approach can make unavailable the situations and contexts to which their subjects' refer (see Figure 1.3).

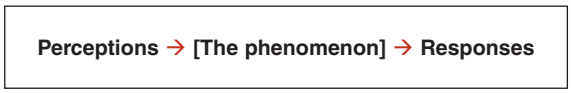

FIGURE 1.3 The missing phenomenon in (some) qualitative research

It was bad enough when romanticism was just the basis for some qualitative research and all chat shows. Now it is being used to justify wasting billions of dollars. Despite all the evidence that unmanned space missions give you far more bangs per buck, on BBC World News, a few years ago, I heard a professor at the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) support President Bush's plans for a manned Mars mission by saying: 'Actually having a human being experience being on Mars is important. That means that millions of people on Earth can experience it too.'

This idea of a totally new experience, as we shall see in Chapter 2, is the dream of upmarket tourists. In the context of space travel, it ignores the way in which both astronauts and TV viewers will necessarily draw on pre-existing images (ranging from *Star Wars* to previous visits to strange places) in order to make sense of what they see on a distant planet. Fortunately, President Obama has now frozen plans for such space flights.

It is not just (some) qualitative researchers who misunderstand the potential of what they are doing. Qualitative research is regularly miscategorised by others. For instance, in many quantitatively oriented, social science methodology textbooks, qualitative research is often treated as a relatively minor methodology. As such, it is suggested that it should only be contemplated at early or 'exploratory' stages of a study. Viewed from this perspective, qualitative research can be used to familiarise oneself with a setting before the serious sampling and counting begin.

This view is expressed in the extract below from an early text. Note how the authors refer to 'nonquantified data' – implying that quantitative data is the standard form:

> The inspection of *nonquantified* data may be particularly helpful if it is done periodically throughout a study rather than postponed to the end of the statistical analysis. Frequently, a single incident noted by a perceptive observer contains the clue to an understanding of a phenomenon. If the social scientist becomes aware of this implication at a moment when he can still add to his material or exploit further the data he has already collected, he may considerably enrich the quality of his conclusions. (Selltiz et al., 1964: 435, my emphasis)

Despite these authors' 'friendly' view of the uses of 'nonquantified' data, they assume that 'statistical analysis' is the bedrock of research. A similar focus is to be found, a quarter of a century later, in another mainly quantitative text: 'Field research is essentially a matter of immersing oneself in a naturally occurring … set of events in order to gain firsthand knowledge of the situation' (Singleton et al., 1988: 11).

Note the emphasis on 'immersion' and its implicit contrast with later, more focused research. This is underlined in the authors' subsequent identification of qualitative or field research with 'exploration' and 'description' (1988: 296) and their approval of the use of field research 'when one knows relatively little about the subject under investigation' (1988: 298–9).

These reservations have some basis given the fact that qualitative research is, by definition, stronger on long descriptive narratives than on statistical tables. The problem that then arises is how such a researcher goes about categorising the events or activities described. This is sometimes known as the problem of **reliability**. As Hammersley puts it, reliability 'refers to the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions' (1992a: 67).

The issue of consistency particularly arises because shortage of space means that many qualitative studies provide readers with little more than brief, persuasive, data extracts. As Bryman notes about the typical observational study: 'field notes or extended transcripts are rarely available; these would be very helpful in order to allow the reader to formulate his or her own hunches about the perspective of the people who have been studied' (1988: 77).

Moreover, even when people's activities are audio- or videotape recorded and transcribed, the reliability of the interpretation of transcripts may be gravely weakened by a failure to note apparently trivial, but often crucial, pauses, overlaps or body movements. This is shown in the following case study.

CASE STUDY
Transcribing Tapes of Cancer Consultations

A study of medical consultations was concerned to establish whether cancer patients had understood that their condition was fatal. When researchers first listened to tapes of relevant hospital consultations, they sometimes felt that there was no evidence that the patients had picked up their doctors' often guarded statements about their prognosis. However, when the tapes were retranscribed, it was demonstrated that patients used very soft utterances (like 'yes' or, more usually, 'mm') to mark that they were taking up this information. Equally, doctors would monitor patients' silences and rephrase their prognosis statements (see Clavarino et al., 1995).

Some qualitative researchers argue that a concern for the reliability of observations arises only within the quantitative research tradition. Because what they call the 'positivist' position sees no difference between the natural and social worlds, reliable measures of social life are only needed by such 'positivists'. Conversely, it is argued, once we treat social reality as always in flux, then it makes no sense to worry about whether our research instruments measure accurately (e.g. Marshall and Rossman, 1989).

Such a position would rule out any systematic research since it implies that we cannot assume any stable properties in the social world. However, if we concede the possible existence of such properties, why should other work not replicate these properties? As Kirk and Miller argue:

> Qualitative researchers can no longer afford to beg the issue of reliability. While the forte of field research will always lie in its capability to sort out the validity of propositions, its results will (reasonably) go ignored minus attention to reliability. For reliability to be calculated, it is incumbent on the scientific investigator to document his or her procedure. (1986: 72)

A second criticism of qualitative research relates to how sound are the explanations it offers. This is sometimes known as the problem of **anecdotalism**, revealed in the way in which research reports sometimes appeal to a few, telling 'examples' of some apparent phenomenon, without any attempt to analyse less clear (or even contradictory) data (Silverman, 1989a). This problem is expressed very clearly by Bryman:

> There is a tendency towards an anecdotal approach to the use of data in relation to conclusions or explanations in qualitative research. Brief conversations, snippets from unstructured interviews … are used to provide evidence of a particular contention. There are grounds for disquiet in that the representativeness or generality of these fragments is rarely addressed. (1988: 77)

This complaint of 'anecdotalism' questions the validity of much qualitative research. 'Validity' is another word for truth (see Chapter 11). Sometimes one doubts the validity of an explanation because the researcher has clearly made no attempt to deal with contrary cases. Sometimes, the extended immersion in the 'field', so typical of qualitative research, leads to a certain preciousness about the validity of the researcher's own interpretation of 'their' tribe or organisation. Or sometimes, the demands of journal editors for shorter and shorter articles simply means that the researcher is reluctantly led only to use 'telling' examples – something that can happen in much the same way in the natural sciences where, for instance, laboratory assistants have been shown to select 'perfect' slides for their professor's important lecture (see Lynch, 1984).

EXERCISE 1.3

Review any research study with which you are familiar. Then answer the questions below:

1. To what extent are its methods of research (qualitative, quantitative or a combination of both) appropriate to the nature of the research question(s) being asked?
2. How far does its use of these methods meet the criticisms of both qualitative and quantitative research discussed in this chapter?
3. In your view, how could this study have been improved methodologically and conceptually?

Despite these common problems, doubts about the reliability and validity of qualitative research have led many quantitative researchers to downplay the value of the former. However, as we have seen, this kind of 'damning by faint praise' has been more than balanced by criticisms of quantitative research offered by many qualitative researchers.

I conclude this section, therefore, with a statement which shows the absurdity of pushing too far the qualitative/quantitative distinction:

> We are not faced, then, with a stark choice between words and numbers, or even between precise and imprecise data; but rather with a range from more to less precise data. Furthermore, our decisions about what level of precision is appropriate in relation to any particular claim should depend on the nature

of what we are trying to describe, on the likely accuracy of our descriptions, on our purposes, and on the resources available to us; not on ideological commitment to one methodological paradigm or another. (Hammersley, 1992a: 163)

EXERCISE 1.4

This exercise requires a group of at least six students, divided into two discussion groups ('buzz groups').

Imagine that you are submitting a proposal to research drug abuse among school pupils. Each buzz group should now form two 'teams' (Team I = QUANTITATIVE; Team II = QUALITATIVE).

1 Team I should formulate a quantitative study to research this topic.
2 Team II should suggests limits/problems in this study (Team I to defend).
3 Team II should formulate a qualitative study to research this topic.
4 Team I should suggest limits/problems in this study (Team II to defend).
5 Both teams should now come to some conclusions.

1.8 VARIETIES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The methods used by qualitative researchers exemplify a common belief that they can provide a 'deeper' understanding of social phenomena than would be obtained from a purely quantitative methodology. However, just as quantitative researchers would resist the charge that they are all 'positivists' (Marsh, 1982), there is no agreed doctrine underlying all qualitative social research.

Nonetheless, writers of textbooks on qualitative methods usually feel obligated to define their topic and to risk suggesting what qualitative researchers may have in common. Martyn Hammersley has taken a cautious path by arguing that, at best, we share a set of preferences. These are set out in Table 1.10.

TABLE 1.10 The preferences of qualitative researchers

1	A preference for qualitative data – understood simply as the analysis of words and images rather than numbers
2	A preference for naturally occurring data – observation rather than experiment, unstructured versus structured interviews
3	A preference for meanings rather than behaviour – attempting 'to document the world from the point of view of the people studied' (Hammersley, 1992: 165)
4	A rejection of natural science as a model
5	A preference for inductive, hypothesis-generating research rather than hypothesis-testing (cf. Glaser and Strauss, 1967)

Source: adapted from Hammersley, 1992: 160–72

Unfortunately, as Hammersley himself recognises, even such a cautious list is a huge overgeneralization. For instance, to take just item 5 in the table, qualitative research would look a little odd, after a history of over 100 years, if it had no **hypotheses** to test!

Moreover, if we take the list above as a reasonable approximation of the main features of qualitative research, we can start to see why it can be criticised. As already noted, in a world where numbers talk and people use the term 'hard' science, a failure to test hypotheses, coupled with a rejection of natural science methods, certainly leave qualitative researchers open to criticism.

So unless we use the negative criterion of being 'nonquantitative', there is no agreed doctrine underlying all qualitative social research. Instead, there are many 'isms' that appear to lie behind qualitative methods. In the Preface, I referred to my own position as broadly fitting within **constructionism**. In this chapter, we have seen how critics of quantitative research accuse it of positivism. And many readers of this book will have already come across other 'isms' such as **feminism** and **post-modernism**.

The most useful attempt to depict these different approaches within qualitative research is in Gubrium and Holstein (1997a). They use the term 'idiom' to encompass both the analytical preferences indicated by my term model (see Table 2.1) and the use of particular vocabularies, investigatory styles and ways of writing. They distinguish (and criticise) four different 'idioms':

- **Naturalism**: a reluctance to impose meaning and a preference to 'get out and observe the field'.
- **Ethnomethodology**: shares naturalism's attention to detail but locates it in the study of talk-in-interaction.
- **Emotionalism**: desires 'intimate' contact with research subjects and favours the open-ended interview and attempts to understand the impact of the biography of both researchers and subjects.
- Post-modernism: seeks to challenge the concepts of 'subject' and the 'field' and favours pastiche rather than science.

Some development of these ideas is found in Table 1.11.

TABLE 1.11 Four qualitative idioms

Idiom	Concepts	Preferred method
Naturalism	Actors Meaning	Observation Interviews
Ethnomethodology	Members' methods Construction	Audio/video recordings
Emotionalism	Subjectivity Emotion	Interviews Life-histories
Post-modernism	Representation Pastiche Construction	Anything goes

Source: adapted from Gubrium and Holstein, 1997

According to Gubrium and Holstein, qualitative researchers inhabit the 'lived border between reality and representation' (1997a: 102). On this border, in their view, each idiom veers too far to one side as set out below:

- Naturalism: its pursuit of the content of everyday lives offers deep insights into the 'what?' of reality at the price of the 'how?' of reality's representation (by both participants and researchers).
- Ethnomethodology: its focus on common-sense practices gives rewarding answers to 'how?' questions but underplays the 'what' of contextual givens.
- Emotionalism: helps us understand people's experiences but at the cost of privileging a common-sense category ('emotion').
- Post-modernism: reveals practices of representation but can lead to a nihilistic denial of content.

As a way out of this purely critical position, Gubrium and Holstein offer three valuable practical ploys for the qualitative researcher. First, seeking a middle ground to 'manage the tensions between reality and representation' (1997a: 114), they show how we can give voice to each idiom's silenced other. The figure of the insider, so dear to naturalism, can be treated as 'a represented reality' which arises within subjects' own accounts (1997a: 103). The same applies to emotionalism's description of people whose 'feelings' are crucial. Equally, **conversation analysis**'s account of institutionality (see Chapter 9) and Sacks's membership categorisation analysis (see Chapter 8) show how ethnomethodology can put meat on the bare bones of representation. Last, while we must respect what post-modernism tells us about representation, this can be treated as an incentive for empirically based description, not as its epitaph.

EXERCISE 1.5

This exercise will also focus upon drug abuse among school pupils. It can be done in buzz groups or by individuals.

Following Gubrium and Holstein's account of four 'idioms' of qualitative research (Table 1.11), suggest how each idiom might:

1 Define a delimited research problem on this topic.
2 Suggest a particular methodology.

If 'qualitative research' involves many different, potentially conflicting, models or idioms, this shows that the whole 'qualitative/quantitative' dichotomy is open to question.

In the context of this book, I view most such dichotomies or polarities in social science as highly dangerous. At best, they are pedagogic devices for students to

obtain a first grip on a difficult field – they help us to learn the jargon. At worst, they are excuses for not thinking, which assemble groups of sociologists into 'armed camps', unwilling to learn from one another.

The implication I draw is that doing 'qualitative' research should offer no protection from the rigorous, critical standards that should be applied to any enterprise concerned to sort 'fact' from 'fancy'. Ultimately, soundly based knowledge should be the common aim of all social science (see Kirk and Miller, 1986: 10–11). As Hammersley argues:

> the process of inquiry in science is the same whatever method is used, and the retreat into paradigms effectively stultifies debate and hampers progress. (1992: 182)

TIP

Quantitative methods are usually the most appropriate if you want to find out social facts or the causes of some phenomenon. Qualitative methods are best suited if you want to ask 'what' and 'how' questions.

KEY POINTS

- When we compare quantitative and qualitative research, we generally find, at best, different emphases between 'schools' which themselves contain many internal differences.
- Qualitative researchers should celebrate rather than criticise quantitative researchers' aim to assemble and sift their data critically.
- Reliability and validity are key ways of evaluating research.
- A dependence on purely quantitative methods may neglect the social and cultural construction of the 'variables' which quantitative research seeks to correlate.
- Qualitative research should not limit itself to the study of perceptions or subjective meanings. Qualitative research has a unique ability to focus on behaviour in naturally occurring situations.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1 What are the main differences between how people have used qualitative and quantitative methods?
2 Are there any similarities in how researchers have used qualitative and quantitative methods?

(Continued)

(Continued)

3 Which comes first: your research question or your choice of methods? Why?
4 What kinds of research questions are most appropriate for quantitative research?
5 What kinds of research questions are best addressed by qualitative methods?
6 What criticisms have been made about (some) quantitative research?
7 What criticisms have been made about (some) qualitative research?
8 What are the main models that inspire qualitative research?

RECOMMENDED READING

Two good chapter-length treatments of the relation between qualitative and quantitative methods are Julia Brannen's 'Working qualitatively and quantitatively' (2004) and Neil Spicer's 'Combining qualitative and quantitative methods' (2004). The most useful introductory texts are Alan Bryman's *Quantity and Quality in Social Research* (1988), Nigel Gilbert's (editor) *Researching Social Life* (1993) and Clive Seale's (editor) *Researching Society and Culture* (2011). Sensible statements about the quantitative position are to be found in Marsh (1982) (on survey research) and Hindess (1973) (on official statistics).

In addition to these general texts, readers are urged to familiarise themselves with examples of qualitative and quantitative research. Strong (1979) and Lipset et al. (1962) are classic examples which show respect for both qualitative and quantitative data.