SECOND EDITION

INTRODUCING
QUALITATIVE
RESEARCH

A Student's Guide

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The scope and contribution of qualitative research

Aims

- This chapter illustrates the range of questions that qualitative research can answer.
- It examines the role of the researcher and her/his dispositions in shaping the questions asked and the approach followed.
- It outlines the range of methods used by qualitative researchers and enables the reader to match particular methods with specific research questions.
- It provides an overview of the potential and challenges involved in more recent developments, including online and visual methods.
- It highlights several broad propositions that appear to be accepted by all qualitative approaches and which render it distinctive.
- It shows how qualitative research has been shaped by the disciplines and professional groups that have espoused it.
- It looks at how qualitative research is positioned in relation to policy, practice and politics and discusses the main challenges involved.

Introduction

There has been some debate within qualitative research as to whether such researchers are 'born' or 'made', but I suspect that, for most of us, the answer lies somewhere in the middle. In this chapter the role of different dispositions – or types of curiosity – will be explored and its influence on

driving the focus and design of qualitative research studies. It is important to acknowledge the researcher's personal interests and situation and their bearing on how the research is framed and carried out. This is what is referred to as being 'reflexive' about some of our own assumptions, whether these derive from our previous research experience, disciplinary background, predispositions, or, even, life experiences.

This chapter illustrates what sorts of questions qualitative research can address, arguing that, through its detailed focus on everyday interactions and exchanges, it can make a unique contribution through illuminating aspects of social processes that other methods cannot access.

Next, the chapter will outline the range of methods deployed by qualitative researchers, discussing how these have been harnessed by different disciplines to address a variety of research questions. It will then go on to consider what is distinctive about qualitative research, attempting to dispel some of the common misconceptions and criticisms of qualitative work. Some of these are shown not to be relevant, since these overlook some of the distinctive principles underlying the qualitative research endeavour. If expectations and assumptions are reviewed, however, and these ideas about shortcomings are recast, it is argued that they can, instead, be viewed as strengths.

Dispositions

Tricia Greenhalgh (1998), who trained as an anthropologist prior to studying medicine, consequently has a unique insight into research endeavours situated at the conjunction between the two sets of disciplinary concerns. She points out that qualitative research taps into a different sort of curiosity. Recalling a story told to her by Cecil Helman, she uses the analogy of two children observing leaves falling from trees in autumn, to characterize two different 'research mindsets': one which is drawn to counting and calculating the rate of leaf-fall and predicting when trees will become totally bare, and the other which involves pondering the broader context where only some trees lose their leaves and the diversity of sizes, shapes and colours of leaves involved. To paraphrase Greenhalgh (and Helman) the 'calculators' are prone to becoming quantitative researchers, while the 'ponderers' are much more attuned to qualitative research approaches.

Although this obviously involves some over-simplification, it is certainly the case that we have tended to overlook the importance of the match between researcher and research methods. Trow, writing in 1957, observed:

> Every cobbler thinks leather is the only thing – most (researchers) have their favourite research methods with which they are familiar and have some skill in using ….
> We mostly choose to investigate problems that seem amenable to attack through these methods. (Trow, 1957: 33)

While this does not preclude researchers with a quantitative 'mindset' undertaking qualitative projects – or, indeed vice versa – this notion of deeply rooted dispositions helps to explain both why certain broad research questions, or properties of the data produced, 'grab' some individuals more than do others. This selectivity can be seen at work in the many examples provided throughout this book.

What questions can qualitative research answer?

Qualitative research answers very different questions to those addressed by quantitative research, and some criticisms directed against qualitative research have, at times, failed to take this into account. Qualitative methods cannot answer questions such as 'How many?'; 'What are the causes?'; 'What is the strength of the relationship between variables?' It can, however, provide an understanding of how official figures are created through social processes. Research, such as that done by Lindsay Prior (2003) – on suicide statistics and documentation used in psychiatric hospitals – and Bloor (1991) – on death certification – have examined how the categories are interpreted and employed by those doing the recording. Studies of this sort have also sought to explain how this has come about – due to policy emphases and working practices. Even a seemingly straightforward issue such as how hospital waiting lists are managed has been shown to be subject to fascinating variation, which has as much to do with social processes as it has to do with clinical factors (Pope, 1991).

Qualitative research can make visible and unpick the mechanisms which link particular variables, by looking at the explanations, or accounts, provided by those involved. Quantitative research excels at identifying statistically significant relationships between variables, such as social class and health status, and frequently produces diagrams which show the distribution and strength of this association for people located at different points on the social class spectrum. Further quantitative analyses can, of course, further explain such associations by determining the relative influence of individual variables for sub-samples of the population under study, or by looking at the effect of clusters of related variables. What eludes such approaches, however, is the capacity to explain *how* the '**macro**' (i.e. social class position, gender, locality) is translated into the '**micro**' (i.e. everyday practices, understandings and interactions) to guide individual behaviour. This is where qualitative research can provide a fuller picture.

Although qualitative and quantitative research answer very different questions, researchers often have common interests in seeking to understand a particular phenomenon and the two approaches can be complementary. An interview study of professionals directly involved in providing care for people who were HIV positive or who had AIDS focused on finding out what demands

professionals considered that this work made of them, and how they dealt with these challenges (Barbour, 1993; 1995). Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit the perceptions of workers in four Scottish cities, which were characterized by different epidemic patterns and varying histories of service development. By leaving it up to the interviewees to identify which aspects of their work they experienced as most demanding, interviews established that organizational aspects of their work and new professional challenges loomed as large for staff as did the more predictable problems posed by caring for young people (many of whom were already stigmatized by virtue of their drug use or sexuality) who were dying. Although there had been a number of quantitative studies which had sought to measure levels of burnout among AIDS-related workers, these had concentrated mostly on the issues raised by the interface with patients. Had this study been followed by a survey employing a structured questionnaire in order to try to quantify the impact of AIDS-related work on satisfaction or burnout it would certainly have been useful to have augmented these pre-validated scales. Additional questions could have been incorporated which investigated the way in which work was organized, since the interviews had shown that the demands of working in multidisciplinary teams, and responding to particular management styles, allocation of resources and the implications for career development were of particular importance to professionals (Barbour, 1993). Rather than predefining the variables likely to be important to those we study, qualitative approaches allow respondents to identify those issues which are salient for them and to explain how these impact on their daily lives and, in the case above, how these affect how they go about their work and how these affect their job satisfaction. It is for this reason that qualitative methods are often utilized in order to inform development of structured research instruments, such as surveys and mixed methods research is discussed more fully in **Chapter 9**.

By employing qualitative methods it is possible to study *how* people understand concepts; what sort of 'trade-offs' they might make to themselves in weighing up, for example, health promotion messages and deciding whether or not to take these on board. An early and influential publication in the field of medical sociology explains how individuals process information and make decisions:

> A person is unlikely simply to return from the doctor's surgery and take the treatment that he has been prescribed. It is more likely that the doctor's action and the treatment will be discussed and evaluated. Medication decisions will be made in the light of these discussions, in the light of the person's experiences with the treatment, and in the light of past experiences with the doctor and other illness and treatments … People live their problems and illnesses socially; they cannot be viewed as isolated individuals responding automatically to the instructions of their doctors. (Stimson and Webb, 1978: 152)

Researchers are also positioned within the social world and their own life experiences and disciplinary socialization inevitably shape their approach to doing qualitative research – in terms of the questions they seek to address, the methods they employ and the methodological approaches they adopt. This is discussed under the heading of 'What is distinctive about qualitative research?'

What is distinctive about qualitative research?

Qualitative methods can allow us to access 'embedded' processes by focusing on the context of people's everyday lives where such decisions are made and enacted, rather than simply looking at patient characteristics or the content of consultations.

It is not only members of the public – the 'lay population' – however, who weigh up information in what might be seen as idiosyncratic ways. A study by Fairhurst and Huby (1998) examined how general practitioners (GPs) evaluated the results of randomized control trials (RCTs) in a specific area of medical practice (the management of hypocholesterolaemia). Drawing on cognitive theories of education they showed that knowledge trickled down to GPs. Very few had actually read the papers in question, but relied on sources of evidence rather than the evidence *per se*. That is, they were more likely to accept the findings if these were passed on to them by someone they trusted – whether this was a highly-regarded journal summarizing the findings or a respected colleague. Reinforcement was required from several sources before GPs were persuaded of the need to alter their own clinical practice. Thus, although the evidence in question was located at the hard (quantitative) end of the methods spectrum, it was evaluated qualitatively by GPs and qualitative methods were required in order to study the process involved.

Qualitative methods can help us to understand apparently illogical behaviours. One of the best-known studies in this category was Hilary Graham's (1993) work on economically disadvantaged lone mothers and their smoking behaviour. Given the cost of cigarettes, both financially and in health terms, smoking by women in this situation could be regarded as being at variance with health advice and their own best interests. However, Graham's research highlighted the positive functions of smoking for the women in terms of allowing them to manage the exigencies of their circumstances and responsibilities. Smoking allowed the women to affirm their adult status in the face of insistent and pervasive childrearing demands, without necessitating either lengthy engagement in this alternative pursuit or requiring them to leave the home or children in their care. It was also a sociable activity in which they could participate with friends in the domestic setting. Compared with other activities which might have conferred these same benefits, smoking was also relatively

inexpensive and nicotine, moreover, is a powerful appetite suppressant, enabling the women to limit their own food intake while providing the optimum amount of food for children.

Even where individuals accept advice or templates advocating particular ways of behaving (whether these relate to individual health-related behaviours or models of professional intervention) there can be 'many a slip 'twixt cup and lip'. In other words, these are unlikely to translate seamlessly into changed practices. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited to studying context. It also excels at illuminating *process*, whether this is organizational change or individual decision-making, since it allows us to examine how changes affect daily procedures and interactions. This may lead to us uncovering unintended as well as intended consequences of new arrangements:

> **Providing insights into unintended as well as intended consequences of organizational change**
>
> In the course of carrying out research into smoking policies in the workplace in the late 1980s we selected several case studies of organizations at varying stages in the process of developing and implementing such policies. Discussions with a range of staff in one workplace alerted us to the unwitting potential for more egalitarian relationships, as we learnt that, since the introduction of the smoking policy one of the junior typists now habitually took a cigarette break with one of the managing directors. These chance meetings had provided the senior manager with insights into the illogicalities and impracticalities in the way the typing pool was run and led to work being organized in a different way thereafter. Needless to say, this is not a line of questioning that would have occurred to the researchers, but in further case studies, we did invite participants to reflect more widely on the broader consequences of the new smoking policy in terms of lines of communication and organizational hierarchies.

Qualitative methods can explain apparent discrepancies, such as the low rate of formal reporting of racist incidents in one area of Scotland which was at variance with police officers' experience 'on the beat' and their knowledge of the localities involved. Colleagues at Glasgow University (with myself acting as consultant to the project) carried out a questionnaire study, one-to-one interviews and focus groups with a range of people living and working in the communities concerned. We were interested in unpicking how incidents came to be defined as 'racist', and what people considered were the likely consequences of lodging a formal report. Qualitative methods, in particular, allowed us to 'problematize' both the concept of racism and the process of reporting, moving back several steps both from our own understandings and those of the police and looking at how people made sense of these ideas on a daily basis.

Focus groups, in particular, showed that 'racism' is a very complex issue and that the definition of incidents as racist is far from straightforward, since this is embedded in multiple considerations and attributions, including perceptions of police and legal processes, and the degree to which responses are premeditated or intended to cause offence (Barbour, 2007).

Qualitative research can 'de-mystify' by providing detailed accounts of experience and there is an extensive catalogue of such research in relation to patients' experience of chronic illness. Ethnographers, in particular, often see their work as providing 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973: 5). Some commentators – e.g. Crombie with Davies (1996) – have characterized qualitative research as being 'descriptive', using this to distinguish it from quantitative research, which is seen as furnishing explanations. Qualitative research, however, can and does provide explanations – albeit of a different type and focus than quantitative studies.

Perhaps this misconception has been fuelled by the limitations of some variants of qualitative research. While some such researchers seek to develop analytic explanations, and to interrogate and generate theory, there is also a body of qualitative research that seeks solely to 'bear witness' or illuminate 'lived experience' rather than bringing theoretical or disciplinary concerns to bear on understanding the data generated and sometimes comes close to what could be termed 'confessional journalism'. While the intent of such work may be admirable, this represents the very least of what qualitative research can achieve. Even if researchers identify with the more limited aspiration to elucidate experience, they might still benefit from questioning their methods and developing a more robust approach to data analysis. If such studies paid more attention to sampling, identifying and explaining **patterning** in the data, they could say much more about the mechanisms involved and would, therefore, be much better placed, not only in relation to advancing disciplinary theoretical debates, but also with regard to making recommendations relevant to policy or practice. This is, after all, more likely than are empathic accounts *per se* to ameliorate conditions for those whose cause such studies seek to champion. (These issues are also highly pertinent to **action research**, which is the subject of **Chapter 10**.)

The range of qualitative methods

Before moving on to enumerate the principal ways of generating data in qualitative research and (in the next chapter) their attendant philosophical underpinnings, it is necessary to make a distinction between 'methods' – the specific practical measures and tools employed to access or create data through different forms of interaction with those we are studying – and '**methodology**' – the more general discussion about the assumptions (theoretical, philosophical,

disciplinary, and even political) that underpin the use of different methods and the implications, challenges and limitations of choices for the process of conducting research and formulating its ultimate products.

Methodological and theoretical assumptions are discussed in **Chapter 2** under the heading of 'Key qualitative traditions', and the philosophical and political assumptions underpinning qualitative research are also discussed there.

The brief outline of the methods employed in qualitative research mirrors the order in which these are presented (in much greater detail) in Section 2 of the book, which focuses on these different approaches to generating data and what each can offer. This starts with interviews, then looks at the use of focus groups, and observational fieldwork (most often associated with an ethnographic approach), before going on to review other sources of data, including documentary analysis, visual methods, and online research (including looking at the potential afforded by social media).

Interviews

One-to-one interviews are perhaps the most commonly used method in the qualitative 'toolbox'. Indeed, quantitative studies sometimes also refer to the use of interviews, but, here, are usually referring to more tightly-structured schedules. The hallmark of interviewing in qualitative research is the use of open questions, which allow respondents to focus on the issues of greatest importance to them, rather than the agenda being determined entirely by the researcher's interests. Most qualitative researchers favour the use of semi-structured interviews, which allow for the ordering of questions to be employed flexibly to take account of the priority accorded each topic by the interviewee. **Chapter 5** is devoted to interviews and also discusses, in detail, the role and contribution of narrative interviews and elite interviews (most commonly employed in health research, political science, business studies or organizational research). Although many studies use interviews to elicit and even document individuals' views and experiences, in order to provide descriptive accounts, interview data lends itself to the possibility of being analyzed using a range of approaches, ranging from content analysis, through **thematic analysis** (discussed in **Chapter 11**) to **conversation analysis** (which, deriving from the discipline of linguistics, pays close attention to the structure and strategies involved in constructing talk).

Focus groups

Focus groups have become much more popular in the social sciences over the past 15 years or so. Since focus groups are of somewhat mixed parentage, drawing on the marketing research tradition, organizational research and community

development, this has given rise to some confusion regarding terminology. Some researchers refer to group interviews, which I would see as veering towards the more structured end of the spectrum, with the researcher putting each question to each of the participants in turn, whereas **focus group discussions** focus on the interaction *between* participants, with the researcher taking a less active role in directing talk. As is argued in **Chapter 6**, focus group research is inherently flexible and can be employed in the exploratory phase of projects in order to inform development of more structured 'tools' such as questionnaires, or even for developing consensus guidelines for clinical management. They are also, however, a useful – and in some respects unrivalled – stand-alone method whose value lies in their capacity to illuminate group processes and the way in which meanings and even action plans are developed and refined through interaction. Apart from marketing research (which has made extensive use of focus groups) the disciplines which have made most use of focus groups are sociology, psychology, and action research, which has capitalized on the capacity of focus groups to enable consultation and collaborative problem-solving.

Observational fieldwork

This method was widely used by anthropologists studying other cultures, but has also been popular within sociology, where it has allowed researchers to see how work or social practices are enacted on a daily basis. It affords an opportunity to view behaviour in a naturalistic setting, akin to the 'fly on the wall' format so beloved of television documentaries, where the influence of the researcher is minimal and can uncover inconsistencies between how people perceive and present their own involvement and what they actually do in practice. Thus, it can illuminate the discrepancies between intent and outcome. This method is the mainstay of **ethnography** (see **Chapter 7**) which does sometimes employ other methods alongside **observational fieldwork**, including analysis of documents and interviews or focus group discussions.

Documentary sources

There is also a substantial body of qualitative research that relies on pre-existing materials as sources of data. Biographers and social historians have routinely drawn on diaries, letters and archival material in their work, capitalizing on the properties of such material to be used to explore issues which might not have been current at the time of their production. Documents also yield useful information as to how they have come into being, allowing researchers to reconstruct policy decisions, for example. Far from being inert, documents are also invoked by individuals and groups as they go about their everyday lives and perform social and professional roles. **Documentary analysis** can, thus, afford a window onto these processes and sense-making

activities and its contribution is discussed in more detail in **Chapter 8**. This approach is often used in the context of **mixed methods research** (which is the subject of **Chapter 9**), alongside interviews, or focus groups and, sometimes, also **observational fieldwork**.

Diaries

Documents can also be produced for research purposes. One of the most popular ways of collecting such data is through asking research participants to keep **diaries** (usually, but not necessarily in written form – see Allen's 2011 account of using photo diaries for researching sexuality in the school context, highlighted in **Chapter 8**). Diaries can also be used to good effect in the context of participatory research (see, for example, comments by Prades et al. [2013] on combining diaries with group discussions in an action research project featured in **Chapter 10**). As this usage suggests, diaries are unlikely to be used as a 'stand-alone' method, but can be used to advantage in mixed methods studies, which may seek to combine different qualitative methods or which may use a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods of collecting data. Mixed methods approaches, their potential and challenges are explored in **Chapter 9**.

Online research

This list of possible data sources is for ever expanding as new technologies arrive and further possibilities suggest themselves. The internet has afforded for some a source of ready-made data and a growing number of researchers have harvested material from online chat-rooms and discussion groups, using this as a basis for their qualitative analysis of the 'text' thus produced. (Some of the implications for developing qualitative research to draw on this resource are further explored in **Chapter 8**). The use of social media as a data source is gaining in popularity, but is not without controversy and the ethical issues are discussed in **Chapter 8**. The internet also provides a new platform for data generation, with researchers using email or Skype to conduct interviews, moderating discussion forums online or, even, eliciting responses via project-specific Facebook pages or via Twitter.

Visual methods

Anthropologists have long championed the use of photographs and non-verbal means of communication – often in contexts where lack of a shared language (or unequal language abilities) have necessitated finding alternative means of communication in order to clarify understandings. Of late, however, we have seen a growing enthusiasm for visual methods, which has permeated virtually

all sectors of the qualitative research community. Approaches to using visual materials range from those which employ photographs, advertisements, images, artworks, or video clips as stimulus materials, to those which encourage research participants to produce their own materials (whether photographs, videos or art) – sometimes in private and sometimes with the researcher present – usually followed by interviews which explore their significance and meanings for participants. Again, technology – this time in the form of readily-available video-recorders and smartphones – has facilitated such work and, has also helped to make such approaches more acceptable to research participants. (Visual methods are also discussed in **Chapter 8**).

Qualitative research, however, amounts to more than a simple set of techniques and mastering the art requires much more than learning how to employ these. The idea of predispositions, as outlined earlier, also goes some way towards understanding some of the problems that may be encountered by researchers engaging in qualitative studies. Many researchers, particularly those who have been trained in the quantitative tradition, may eagerly embrace qualitative methods while continuing to subscribe to some lingering assumptions which are inappropriate for qualitative research and which lead them to perceive or, indeed, manufacture, problems where these do not really exist – at least, not if one shifts one's perspective to conceive of these not as challenges, but as resources. There are, nevertheless, some broad propositions, or assumptions, which underpin most qualitative research.

Broad propositions underpinning qualitative research

'Truth' is relative

One of the most persistent questions raised in relation to reporting qualitative research findings relates to their veracity – 'How do you know that people were telling you the truth?' The answer is, of course, that none of us can ever know this for certain. While it is common practice in survey research to include cross-checking questions designed to catch respondents out in terms of providing information that seeks to mislead, qualitative research deals with contradiction is a very different way, that recasts inconsistency as a resource or intriguing analytic puzzle rather than a problem of disconfirmation.

Qualitative researchers generally subscribe to the adage that 'if people believe things to be real then they are real in their consequences' (Thomas and Thomas, 1929). In the course of carrying out my PhD research into professional socialization for social work I was alerted to the popularity of the belief, among students, that social workers were deserting the profession after short periods of employment, due to burnout or disillusionment. An examination of

the scanty figures available established that attrition was no greater than for other comparable professions such as teaching or nursing, both of which also involved a predominantly female workforce with the attendant likelihood of career breaks. However, this belief in the face of less than compelling evidence led me to question why the idea seemed to hold such appeal for the social work students I was studying. The belief may have been unfounded, but the consequences for retention in the social work profession could, indeed, be far-reaching, if most new social workers held similar views. Misconceptions may have their own internal validity and public or lay perspectives can be very sophisticated. This is something which the advertising industry has recognized and its use of qualitative methods – especially focus groups – has involved probing for sometimes illogical associations made by consumers with respect to products or potential advertising campaigns which may impact on their purchasing decisions and brand loyalties.

Multiple realities

Sometimes apparent contradictions surface not in the context of an individual's account but in relation to two competing accounts of the same event. Of course people put a certain 'spin' on a story, telling it to make a particular point, and a health care professional's or policeman's version of events is likely to differ markedly from the account provided by a patient or someone who has been arrested. A workshop session unexpectedly provided an example of two conflicting versions of the same event – in this case an admission to hospital. While the patient told this story to illustrate the incompetence of medical professionals, a health care professional (who had apparently witnessed this same incident) did not have the emotional investment that the patient had, and chose, instead, to present this as a routine call-out dealt with in a fitting professional manner. Clearly the two versions were being produced from very different standpoints and illustrate how two people can process things according to varying sets of criteria, reflecting the nature of their involvement.

   The role of qualitative research is not to determine which account is the more accurate or 'truthful' but is, rather, to use these accounts as a resource in order to understand how 'situated accounts' are told in a way that allow speakers to achieve a different purpose through emphasizing some aspects of their stories and de-emphasizing others. We all give a slightly different account of ourselves and our actions to a group of friends 'down the pub' than we would present, for example, at a job interview. Focus group participants – and our dinner party acquaintances – often engage in telling 'horror stories' which tend to be amusing and make for compelling listening. Indeed, most of us will have been involved in embellishing such tales to dramatic effect.

Views are not static

Novice qualitative researchers often complain that it is extremely hard to assign their respondents to the categories they are employing to try to make sense of their views and perceptions. A colleague who had held a series of focus group discussions with health care professionals was attempting to place their views in terms of whether they were supportive or dismissive of the importance of breast feeding. She exclaimed, 'Just when I think I can safely put someone in one box they go and say the opposite!' While her frustration is understandable, this is a difficulty that she had imposed upon herself through conceptualizing views as being dichotomous and fixed. Incidentally, this notion often surfaces in relation to trying to utilize interview or focus group data as 'back door' surveys. This is problematic – but misguided – for two reasons: firstly, qualitative research excels at unpicking views, uncovering the subtleties and graduations involved rather than applying crude measures; and, secondly, since qualitative research sampling does not aspire to representativeness (see **Chapter 3**) measuring views will not produce statistically generalizable results. It is those self-same recalcitrant comments – those that defy categorization – that comprise the most valuable pieces of qualitative data. They are the fascinating grey areas that force the researcher to question straightforward models or typologies and go on ultimately to develop more sophisticated explanations. Qualitative methods, by virtue of their immediacy and capacity to encourage respondents to question their ideas, may elicit contradictory remarks – even within the space of one interview or focus group discussion.

This is only a problem if one conceives of qualitative methods as providing a 'back door' route to measuring attitudes, which is really the preserve of quantitative methods. Provided that researchers pay attention to such contradictions and explore these thoroughly in their analyses, qualitative methods can afford unique insights into the process of change, unpicking the limitations people place around their views, the circumstances or situations that may cause them to shift perspectives and the contexts or settings in which they are likely to espouse different attitudes.

In order to capitalize fully on the advantages of qualitative methods, however, it is essential that the researcher pay attention to issues relating to research design. Tantalizing and apparently readily-accessible data sources aside, it is necessary to make some decisions at the outset with regard to the scope of the study; where it is to be carried out; and with which participants. **Research design**, the choices and dilemmas involved, is the subject of **Chapter 3**, but two aspects – the **Case Study** and **Critical Incident Technique** – have been singled out for discussion here, as they are fundamental to the practice of qualitative research, since both provide the means for ensuring the comparative – and, hence, analytical – potential of a study. The variant of qualitative research covered by the term Action

Research is also discussed here, since this, too, derives much of its potential as a result of careful attention to research design issues.

Approaches related to research design

Case study research

The case study approach allows the researcher, through careful selection of 'cases' (whether these are research settings, events, time periods, or individuals) to make instructive comparisons. Even where research involves a single case study, this setting will have been chosen following due consideration of its 'typicality' or its capacity to illuminate by virtue of particular unusual features. This allows the researcher to speculate as to the 'transferability' or 'theoretical generalizability' (discussed further in **Chapters 12** and **13**), but which, essentially, refers to the relevance of the findings from study of a specific case or collection of cases for understanding other similar – or even different contexts.

Critical incident technique

This is sometimes referred to as a distinctive qualitative method, although it is really a variant of the case study approach. It has its origins in the aeronautical industry where it was developed to study 'near misses' of aircraft and, by focusing on what (almost) went wrong was able to identify the more elusive factors that give rise to unproblematic outcomes the rest of the time. It involves a deliberate attempt to seek out 'negative' or 'deviant' cases and to use these as a resource in theorizing about more common patterns. Although it is most often invoked in relation to considerations of research design and sampling, the 'critical incident technique' embodies an idea very similar to that informing the notion of 'analytic induction', which refers to the important role played by exceptions in the process of analysis and refining of our explanatory frameworks. This will be revisited in **Chapters 11** and **12**, which are concerned with analyzing qualitative data. For a detailed history of the critical incident technique and its use within qualitative research, see Butterfield et al. (2005).

Action research

Some research aims explicitly at changing professional practice or improving the circumstances of disadvantaged or disenfranchised groups. Such projects frequently rely on mixed methods designs and emphasize the cyclical nature of the research endeavour, moving continuously between the phases of identification of problem; planning of intervention; implementation; and evaluation of change. This type of research is the subject of **Chapter 10**.

Discussion of action research again brings to centre stage the issue of the relationship between qualitative research and the 'real world'.

Qualitative research in the real world

Brinkmann (2007) revisits the list of requirements offered by Kvale (1996: 148–149) in defining the 'good' qualitative researcher. These capabilities involve the researchers being: knowledgeable; structuring; clear; gentle; sensitive; open; steering; critical; remembering; and interpreting. Clearly these mix technical abilities with more general value positions, or 'moral virtues' as Brinkmann puts it. This is, indeed, a tall order, but many things are expected of the qualitative researcher, who is charged with meeting her/his responsibilities not just to the academic community, but also to research participants, funders, practitioners and policy makers.

Of course, many qualitative researchers have been motivated by political convictions. Sociology and political science frequently involve a critique of society's institutions and power structures, and a particularly strong influence both in sociology and psychology has been that of feminism. In most iterations this blends 'moral virtues' – of valuing research participants' perspectives within the framework of anti-oppressive principles and the practice of **empowerment** (McNamara, 2009) – with a theorized critique of gendered relations. The critique of power differentials also extends to cover the research relationship, with some feminist researchers – for example, Oakley (1981) – arguing that women as researchers can reduce such disparities, while others – such as Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) – stress the importance of being transparent about power relationships, which can also permeate the feminist research endeavour. Discussing the practices of feminist research within social work, Archer (2009) makes a case for 'contextual diversity' and 'reciprocity' as the cornerstones of research practice, arguing that this chimes with the values that underpin social work practice with clients:

> The single social work mandate of 'meeting the clients where they are' is inextricably a part of the term 'contextual diversity'. … In family therapy, for example, the social worker seeks to learn about the family's context, including roles, rules, and expectations. (Archer, 2009: 191)

Qualitative research is also played out against the background of policy concerns and funding priorities, which also reflect changing fashions and preoccupations. For example, most funding bodies are currently championing the cause of service user participation. This appears, at least on the surface, to fit particularly well with feminist positions (Gillies and Alldred, 2002) discussed above in relation to reciprocity and valuing participants' perspectives. There is also the tradition within French sociology of Alain Touraine's (1981) approach, which, although emancipatory in focus rests on the capacity of sociological

theory – as co-developed by researchers and research participants through unfolding focus group discussions – to illuminate social problems and to provide a template for effective action. However, this approach rests on the capacity to engage with participants over lengthy periods of time and, despite its emancipatory tone, veers towards the theoretical end of the spectrum. Putting such approaches into practice – especially within the tight timescales afforded by funded research projects – constitutes a considerable challenge.

The impact agenda, as part of the current Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK – the latest version of research assessment – underlines the need to work not just with service users and clients, but also with practitioners and service planners. This is particularly important, if research is to have an impact in terms of influencing policy and practice. Carey, writing about service user participation within social work research, argues that this is deeply problematic, and that 'long-term social or political outcomes will almost always stand to maintain, or even strengthen, the political status quo' (Carey, 2010: 225). He cites Hammersley who argues that it is a mistake 'to assume that producing knowledge about an issue is always likely to lead to an improvement in the situation' (Hammersley, 2003: 31). Carey continues:

> Indeed research findings are instead likely to be *interpreted* in differing ways by policy makers, organizations and practitioners. Often this translation in *practice* will be contrary to any of the recommendations made by researchers, and therefore may further undermine the interests of service users. (Carey, 2010: 233)

Torrance (2008) argues that we should not expect too much of qualitative research, in terms of answering the question as to what works, as research should form only one element of the policy-making process. However, Donmoyer (2012) makes the interesting suggestion that qualitative researchers should seek to involve not just service users in the research process, but also policy makers. This is not something that is regularly done at present, but there are some signs that researchers are taking this advice on board – see, for example, Oreszcyn and Carr (2008) who developed a scenario-based workshop format in order to engage senior policy actors in their research project on genetically modified crops. Prades et al. (2013) – featured in discussion on **Action research** in **Chapter 10** – also developed a methodology to allow for unfolding discussions, including feeding back research findings to policy makers.

Key starting points

- Qualitative research asks different sorts of questions – not those relating to outcomes or strengths of association, but questions about process, understandings and beliefs.
- It excels at illuminating context and process as a route for explaining actions and events.

- Qualitative methods can be used in conjunction with quantitative methods – or other qualitative methods – in order to illuminate different issues or contexts.
- Each discipline and even individual researcher is likely to put their own 'stamp' on methods as they conduct qualitative research.
- Qualitative research involves an iterative process, whereby the research design, 'tools' and even the research question can evolve as the project unfolds. This allows for the testing of emergent 'hypotheses' or explanations.

Further reading

I have provided a few references which make the case for using qualitative approaches in several disciplines which are relatively new to these methods:

Business studies

Bansal, P. and Corley, K. (2011) 'From the editors: The coming of age of qualitative research: embracing the diversity of qualitative methods', *Academy of Management Journal*, 54(2): 233–237.

Education

Agee, J. (2009) 'Developing qualitative research questions: A reflective process', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22(4): 431–447.

Human geography

Crang, M. (2002) 'Qualitative methods: the new orthodoxy?', *Progress in Human Geography*, 26(5): 647–655, Durham Research Online: dro.dur.ac.uk/199/1/199.pdf?DDD14+dggOjk

Psychology

Malson, R. (2010) 'Qualitative methods from psychology', in I. Bourgeault, R. Dingwall and R. de Vries (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Methods in Health Research*, London: Sage, pp. 193–211.

Social work

Thyer, B.A. (2012) 'The scientific value of qualitative research for social work', *Qualitative Social Work*, 11(2): 115–129.