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Approaching qualitative research

Within the broad context of doing qualitative research, about which much has been written, I will focus quite a lot on writing. This is an equally problematic area for novice and experienced researchers alike; and there is much to be learnt about the process of doing research by keeping the issue of writing in mind. In this chapter I will begin with the broader context. I am establishing a state of affairs that will be referred to in the discussion of examples of writing from Chapter 2 onwards. From the start I will take the view that there is the potential for considerable rigour and discipline in qualitative research, that there *is* science within its complex nature, but that this rigour largely resides in the way in which the research is expressed in writing. I shall argue that qualitative research presents a statement about reality and social life that has to be continually argued and reaffirmed. It is this need for constant articulation that makes writing as important as other aspects of doing the research.

I shall begin with a standard comparison between qualitative and quantitative research, and then move quickly on to the way in which qualitative research has to be carefully managed as a social activity which is as ideological and complex as those it studies. Finally, in a brief tour of schools and approaches, I shall locate the writing task as presented in this book.

A point of terminology: in the ensuing chapters I will be basing my discussion of writing in qualitative research around examples of writing. They range from short undergraduate assignments to masters' and doctoral dissertations and theses to published papers. For the sake of clarity, when I talk generally about the written product of research, I shall refer to all of these types of writing collectively as 'the written study'.

Qualitative and quantitative?

It is fairly standard to introduce qualitative research by distinguishing it from quantitative research. This is an unadventurous way to begin, but necessary

because, when asked ‘What is research?’ most people I think still refer to the more familiar, traditional quantitative research. Also, it is often argued that a major binding feature of qualitative research is its opposition to positivism, the philosophical basis for quantitative research. There needs however to be note of caution with regard to these distinctions here and throughout the book. Social research is a complex area, and attempts to divide it into hard categories will always suffer from oversimplification. Qualitative research will always involve quantitative elements and vice versa. I will look at this more complicated set of relationships in more detail later in the chapter.

Surveys and experiments

Quantitative research concerns counting. A straightforward example might be:

Example 1.1: Car survey

To find out the *proportion* of Ford cars to Peugeots in a particular country. This would entail counting the number of each. If it is not possible to find every single occurrence, a sample may be taken. Statistical analysis tells us both how many, or what percentage of each, and how valid the sample is in representing the whole.

The next example is not quite so straightforward:

Example 1.2: Car experiment

To test the *hypothesis* that more Ford cars will be bought if prospective first-time buyers are exposed to advertising that says they are safer. A sample of first-time buyers is exposed to the advertising; another sample is not; and the degree to which each group buys Fords is measured. A variety of techniques are employed to control variables to reduce contamination. For example, the age and social class of the subjects are kept constant.

Here we can see that a lot of effort is made to reduce the effect of variables other than that of exposure to advertising. The overall aim is to control so that the experiment can be replicated with different groups to test the hypothesis time and time again. However, this will always be difficult. The people taking part in the research would need to be isolated from all other influences on their attitudes to

cars, influences that nowadays pervade every aspect of society, if contamination were to be totally prevented.

At first sight, the next example seems as straightforward as the car survey in Example 1.1:

Example 1.3: Eyes survey

To calculate the proportion of brown to blue eyes within a particular nationality. The occurrence of each is counted within a statistically valid sample.

However, on reflection, the definition of 'blue' and 'brown' is not as straightforward as the definition of 'Ford' and 'Peugeot' which have clear proofs of manufacture to distinguish them. Indeed, in different places and among different types of people, the meaning of and therefore distinction between 'brown', 'blue' and other colours of eyes may vary according to language and social values. Colour when related to human appearance is not neutral. This is certainly true of skin colour, which carries racial connotation for many people and is attributed poetic value by others. 'Blond' hair and 'blue' eyes are not neutral phrases for many people as they relate to images of popular beauty that resonate beyond simple physical descriptions. An apparently simple survey is therefore made complex and less reliable by the social qualities attributed to definitions of colour. The next example addresses this issue by trying to find out what these qualities are:

Example 1.4: Eyes questionnaire

Within the population in Example 1.3 to find out what people mean by, and what their attitudes are to 'brown' and 'blue', and what sort of social values underlie these meanings and attitudes.

There are well-known problems with questionnaires – how the mode of question influences the mood of response, how far people tell the 'truth', how far they understand the question anyway, how far the social impact of a questionnaire will influence perception. Again, the aim is to control variables as much as possible. The difficulties increase as researchers get into closer contact with the people they are researching, in interviews, or when questionnaires are delivered face-to-face. The following example from my own experience confirms this:

Example 1.5: Egyptian interview

I was sitting in an Egyptian university faculty common room listening to a lecturer answering survey questions about the timetable in her department. The American interviewer was going through the questions with her, perhaps to ensure good researcher–subject relations. Later on the lecturer confided in me that what she had told him bore little relation to reality, but that she had not wished to disappoint him by telling him that she could not answer most of the questions. This was part of a nation-wide survey carried out by a US curriculum agency, upon which policy decisions in educational aid were based.

I do not think that the lecturer felt that she was ‘lying’. I feel that she was sincere in her response to what she considered a social commitment to being polite which outweighed the fact that she did not have all the information the researcher wanted. On the other hand, in this particular context educational resources were scarce; and she probably did not wish to reveal to this outsider that the official course timetable could never be maintained because lecturers spent all their time travelling by bus from the capital. This is only my interpretation of her behaviour. The point I wish to make is that people’s reasons for responding in the ways they do to questionnaires and interviews can be both far from what the researcher expects and mysterious.

For readers not from that part of the world, the Egyptian setting of Example 1.5 might imply ‘foreign’ society and therefore ‘exotic’ behaviour. The strangeness it invokes gives credence to the notions that things may not be as they seem and that there is a mysterious element in human behaviour. It is, however, a major tenet of qualitative research that all scenarios, even the most familiar, should be seen as strange, with layers of mystery that are always beyond the control of the researcher, which need always to be discovered. To avoid cultural chauvinism, which I shall talk about in Chapter 8, we must apply the discipline of seeing all societies and settings, including our own, as equally strange and complex. Indeed, observing what the Egyptian lecturer in the example says may make a British researcher begin to realise that it is not so different to what might happen in her own university when reporting to external quality assurance agencies.

A particular example of what should be learnt from research carried out in unfamiliar environments relates to a comment from Qureshi, who suggests that there is a ‘relational’ aspect of social life in Pakistan that makes the application of Western research ethics problematic. She explains that ‘the range of choices and degrees of freedom available’ to the researcher ‘are determined by how s/he is introduced to community members and what relational category/categories are assigned to him/her’ (2010: 90). My response to this is that we need to learn from her experience of research in Pakistan to understand more about ‘relational’ aspects of the social contexts we are more familiar with. I shall discuss further how research ethics responds to social context in Chapter 7. It is a major principle of this book that if

qualitative research methodology cannot learn from and then be applied to any social context it is failing as a methodology.

The qualitative areas of social life

I have moved quite a distance from the quantitative Example 1.4 to Example 1.5, which is in effect qualitative data in embryo, in that it describes actions within a specific setting and invites rather than tries to control the possibility of a rich array of variables. Example 1.5 presents research in terms of human relationships and invokes the need to discover as much about how research subjects feel about the information they provide as about the information itself. Indeed, the people about whom the research is carried out are less 'subjects' than just people who happen to be in the research setting. (See my discussion of 'subjects' and 'participants' in Chapters 7 and 8.)

It is these qualitative areas in social life – the backgrounds, interests and broader social perceptions – that defy quantitative research, which qualitative research addresses. Qualitative research does not pretend to solve the problems of quantitative research, but does not see them as constraints. Rather than finding ways to reduce the effect of uncontrollable social variables, it investigates them directly. So, examples of qualitative research about brown and blue eyes and Ford car buying might be:

Example 1.6: Eyes study

An exploration of what people mean by, and what their attitudes are to 'brown' and 'blue' eye colour, and of what sort of social values underlie these meanings and attitudes. The residents of three households of different class and ethnicity in a provincial town are studied. They are interviewed in groups on topics related to human attractiveness as displayed in their daily life, in advertising and in the media. The interviews are open-ended, allowing relevant topics and themes to be developed. They are followed up with further interviews to which the residents are invited to bring photographs of family and friends, advertising and the media as props, and with observation of interaction in settings that emerge as significant, e.g. wedding parties.

Example 1.7: Car study

An exploration of attitudes to Ford car adverts. A video of an advert is played in three public houses frequented by members of the target first-time-buyer group, and their comments recorded. This is followed up with group interviews which explore topics arising from the comments. The public houses are revisited one year later; and the same people are interviewed about which cars they bought and what this means to them.

The whole orientation of these two examples of qualitative research is quite different to that of the quantitative examples. Rather than controlling variables, these *studies* are open-ended and set up research opportunities designed to lead the researcher into unforeseen areas of discovery within the lives of the people she is investigating. Also, they look deeply into behaviour within specific social settings rather than at broad populations (Chapter 2). It also becomes apparent that the written study for qualitative research must account for how the research steps interact with the individual setting.

These differences can be summarised in the following way:

- **Quantitative research** has a tendency to count occurrences across a large population. It uses statistics and replicability to validate generalisation from survey samples and experiments. It attempts to reduce contaminating social variables.
- **Qualitative research** looks deep into the quality of social life. It locates the study within particular settings, which provide opportunities for exploring all possible social variables, and set manageable boundaries. An initial foray into the social setting leads to further, more informed exploration as themes and focuses emerge.

While quantitative research seeks to control and pin down, the qualitative mode maintains that we can explore, catch glimpses, illuminate and then try to interpret bits of reality. Interpretation is as far as we can go. This places less of a burden of proof on qualitative research, which instead builds gradual pictures. The pictures are themselves only interpretations – approximations – basic attempts to represent what is in fact a much more complex reality – paintings that represent our own impressions, rather than photographs of what is ‘really’ there. They are created by collecting a number of instances of social life. In the eyes study in Example 1.6, the whole research enterprise is designed around researchable instances – groups talking about human attractiveness – which in themselves point to further instances – groups referring to artefacts they bring with them. The same is true of Example 1.7.

There is, however, the very problematic burden of how to manage *subjectivity* in such a way that scientific rigour is preserved – and also how to account for this management in the written study.

Managing subjectivity

Qualitative research is increasingly in use in a wide range of academic and professional areas. It develops from aspects of anthropology and sociology and represents a broad view that to understand human affairs it is insufficient to rely on quantitative survey and statistics, and necessary instead to delve deep into the subjective qualities that govern behaviour. One reason for this growth may be that it is becoming apparent to everyone that the statistical quantitative statements of opinion polls, government, opposition and ‘independent’ scientific reports, and what ‘research has shown’, can tell many quite different stories and be at the mercy of political ‘spin’. Characteristic of this realisation of the limitations of pre-scribed method is the following extract from educational research:

[A] careful, objective, step-by-step model of the research process is actually a fraud and ... within natural science as well as social science, the standard way in which research methods are taught and real research is often written up for publication perpetuates what is in fact a myth of objectivity. (Walford, 1991: 1)

Instead, what actually happens is very different to the apparently regular methods that are reported. Day-to-day research comprises shortcuts, hunches, serendipity and opportunism. Walford's account of Watson's research into DNA reveals how his findings developed from 'the lucky turns of events, the guesswork, the rivalries between researchers and personal involvement and compromise' (1991: 1). Walford states that qualitative researchers have also contributed to an illusion of objectivity in previous years by making their procedures appear more straightforward than they really are. Research needs to be accompanied by accounts of how it was really done (2). His collection of papers is a breakthrough in that it involves researchers revisiting previous projects to reveal how they negotiated complex procedures to deal with the 'messy' reality of the scenarios being studied. It is a celebration of the way in which qualitative research works through ongoing dialogue with different social worlds. This is relevant to the issue of writing because, as a result of this breakthrough, qualitative researchers are increasingly expected to come out and tell it as it really happened.

Developing rigour through writing

While quantitative research makes it difficult to respond to uncontrolled variables, qualitative research invites the unexpected. Decisions about research instruments are made in gradual response to the nature of the social setting being investigated as its nature is revealed. This means that every qualitative research design will be different. Whereas the rigour in quantitative research is in the disciplined application of prescribed rules for instrument design, the rigour in qualitative research is in the principled development of strategy to suit the scenario being studied. In quantitative research the source of validity is more likely to be known; for example, details of the population (in samples), what sort of questions (in survey questionnaires), which statistics, the composition of groups (in experiments), which variables are being included and excluded, and what groups are exposed to in experiments. In contrast, the qualitative researcher needs to tell her reader about the strategies that were employed in a wide range of areas:

- **Choice of social setting:** how it represented the research topic in its role in society, how feasible and substantial it was (e.g. access, duration, depth, breadth).
- **Choice of research activities:** how they suited the social setting, how they were appropriate to researcher-subject relationships, how they formed a coherent strategy.
- **Choice of themes and focuses:** how they emerged, why they are significant, how far they are representative of the social setting.
- **Dedication to and thoroughness of field work:** how and to what extent the field was engaged with (e.g. strategies for 'being there'), how data was recorded and catalogued.
- **Overall:** the need to articulate a judicious balance between opportunism and principle.

Qualitative research therefore has to *show its workings* every single time (Chapter 3). The researcher needs to justify every move – demonstrating particularly how the overall strategy is appropriate to the social setting and the researcher–subject relationships within it, and the steps taken for thorough engagement.

This concept of ‘showing one’s workings’ reminds me of doing maths problems at school. One was never allowed just to give the right answer, which was not considered valid unless the steps taken to get to it were very clearly and properly laid out. Showing the method one had used was the proof that the answer had not been copied from the key at the back of the book or obtained from someone else. The importance of showing one’s workings is the reason for focusing so much on writing in this book, because how far the written study is successful in justifying the choices that have been made will make or break the justification of the validity of the study.

Judicious balance

This concern with how far research strategies are appropriate to the setting and the people in it will also be a recurring theme throughout this book. For the moment it is necessary to talk briefly about the nature of the balance this demands.

There are two sides to qualitative research. To meet the exigencies of the social situation being studied freedom is needed to explore creatively the best way to approach the scenario. In the eyes study in Example 1.6 there are many possible ways to go forward. On the other hand, the researcher must be prepared to account carefully for every move made. These two sides represent the judicious balance between *taking the opportunity* to encounter the research setting while *maintaining the principles* of social science.

Consider the car study in Example 1.7. The writer of this research would have to explain in the written study why *three* public houses were visited, and why a *particular* three. It may be that the three were selected not just because of the clientele, but also because the researcher had access to and a relationship with them that would enable her to play videos without undue disruption. This is *opportunism*; but the *principle* of maintaining appropriate relations with people in the research setting is fulfilled. Then comes the question, why show the videos in pubs anyway? Here the researcher needs to explain the principles behind exposing the people in the research setting to the videos when they are in a familiar setting which is also relevant to the discussion of car buying. Important data here could be observed behaviour while watching the video. On the other hand, there might be no opportunity to show the video to so many people in any other location. There is also the question of on what basis video watching was followed with interviews, and why group interviews. It would not be sufficient to say that group interviews are established research tools *per se*. Nothing is done in qualitative research simply because it ‘is done’. The researcher would need to demonstrate how the data collected from the video stage led her to interviews of a particular type and content. Bailey et al., talking about the role of qualitative research in social geography, make the point

that ‘there is a need for most researchers to be more explicit about their research processes: to offer a rationale and further detail on issues such as respondent selection, key changes in research direction and analytical procedures’ (1999: 169, citing Baxter and Eyles). This *accountability* for opportunities taken is also demonstrated in the *protocols* of research writing which govern the syntax of referencing and citing evidence (Chapters 3 and 5), and making appropriate claims (Chapter 8).

Research as social action

There are several issues involved in the balance between creative opportunity and maintaining scientific principle:

- Creative exploration makes qualitative research akin to the research we all do in *everyday life*.
- As in the rest of everyday life, researchers, like other people, are ideologically motivated.
- Approaching the research setting appropriately involves interaction between the *culture* of the setting and the *culture* of research.
- Accounting for the research strategy, to demonstrate how the judicious balance is maintained, requires careful articulation which resides in the *conventions* of research language.
- All in all, qualitative research is learning culture.

I shall look at these issues in turn. Taken together they support the notion that research, like many other aspects of professional and private life, is part of social action. As Cameron et al. (1992: 5) comment, ‘researchers cannot help being socially located persons’. By ‘socially located’ they mean part and parcel of all the influences and interests of society. Researchers cannot put themselves above other people. They must struggle as people to interact with people. Thus, the written study also becomes an account of personal struggle to make sense of complex human situations within which the researcher herself often becomes implicated.

Research and everyday life

In many ways qualitative research is what we all do in everyday life. We have continually to solve problems about how we should behave with other people in a wide range of settings. To do this we need to research not only how others behave but also how we should behave with them. Schutz (1964) characterises this natural research as what happens when a ‘stranger’ approaches a social group that she wishes to join or to deal with. It might be taking a new job or dealing with car mechanics for the first time and having to learn new rules of behaviour. This would involve analysing behaviour and language, working out how and when to be formal or informal, learning new technical terms, specialist turns of phrase, what constitutes humour, when to be serious and when not – attitudes, values, relative status. An instance of this is learning the culture of the common room in the institution where I currently work.

Example 1.8: Common room

I first encountered my colleagues as a group in the common room at coffee time. Although they were my compatriots, with similar class and educational background, and although I had worked in similar institutions before, there were cultural features peculiar to this particular setting that I needed to observe. For example, colleagues came and went without greetings or leave-taking. It seemed understood on leaving that there was a pressing work engagement that needed no explanation. Also, talk about work had to be announced first. Much of this could not be learnt just by watching. It was necessary to watch for clues, form *hypotheses* – calculated guesses – about appropriate behaviour, then try things out, observe the result, then confirm, adapt or reject the hypothesis.

Another case I will always remember because of the persistence and courage of the person involved is as follows:

Example 1.9: Restaurant

A young Egyptian woman was living in the capital for the first time. She had never been to a restaurant before. In order to work out how to do this she first watched customers coming and going from across the street. As she gained confidence she went and stood just inside the door of the restaurant, which was sufficiently large and crowded for her not to be noticed. Here she watched and listened to how customers sat down and ordered. Eventually she learnt enough to sit down and order herself – to try out the hypotheses she had formulated as a result of her observations.

This example from Egypt shows a particularly varied society in which movement from province to capital precipitates startling cultural difference and demonstrates the acuteness of the need for personal research.

It can be appreciated that the ‘interpretive practice’ implicit in qualitative research is the ‘work of everyday life’ and involves ‘the constellation of procedures, conditions, and resources through which reality is apprehended, understood, organised, and represented’ (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997: 114). We have to interpret the behaviour of others, and do qualitative research whenever we interact with them.

A significant factor here is what the researcher brings to the situation. Even in Example 1.9, where there was no prior experience of restaurants, the researcher brought with her a wealth of social knowledge from her previous experience of how people behave in all institutional situations. She has knowledge of how culture works that she can apply to any setting. Lankshear et al. explain that ‘whatever particular set of institutions and social relations a given human being is born into, s/he is thereby born into a cultural milieu, a discursive universe’ (1997: 18) which

provides ‘resources’ with which ‘to engage in meaning-making activity’ (19). In other words, everyone has an innate ability to research culture, the resources for which are already present in existing cultural experience.

Discovering and doing culture

To understand the nature of this innate cultural competence and how the researcher is as involved in culture making as anyone else, it is necessary to explore for a moment what is meant by ‘culture’. What has been a more established view of separate often national or ethnic cultures is unhelpful to qualitative researchers because it brings with it sometimes essentialist prescribed profiles of groups and types of people. Qualitative research instead needs to look at culture as an operational category that helps us think of people as groups, but allows the details to emerge, while recognising that the concept of ‘culture’ is itself socially and ideologically constructed within a global politics of positioning (Holliday, 2011: 4). I shall look at this issue in more detail in Chapter 8, within the context of reducing people in the research setting to prescribed stereotypes.

The only ‘factual’ aspect of culture is that it is a set of procedures that underpin how people everywhere come together in groups. A meaningful concept of ‘culture’ is therefore the composite of cohesive behaviour within any social grouping from a neighbourhood to a work group (Beales et al., 1967: 8). When a researcher looks at an unfamiliar social grouping, it can be said to have ‘a culture’ when there is a discernible set of behaviours and understandings connected with group cohesion. There are therefore underlying universal processes that underpin everyday small culture formation that we all share and that enable us to read and engage with culture wherever we find it (Holliday, 2013: 3). I shall look at the operational nature of this engagement in Chapter 2.

Culture in this sense is a dynamic, ongoing group process that operates in changing circumstances to enable group members to make sense of and operate meaningfully within those circumstances. Beales et al. suggest that ‘the outstanding characteristic of a cultural system is that it is in process; it moves’ (1967: 5). It is ‘the sum total of all the processes, happenings, or activities in which a given set or several sets of people habitually engage’ (9). As an uncountable qualitative aspect of group life, culture constitutes a social ‘tool-kit’ which emerges to ‘solve problems’ when required (Crane, 1994: 11) in a continually shifting milieu. It is this tool-kit that the researcher also uses, which is brought to the common room and the restaurant in Example 1.8 and Example 1.9. Making and researching culture are integrated in the same competence; and indeed, as soon as the Egyptian woman approaches the restaurant, she is also contributing to its culture as it adapts, perhaps only very slightly, to her presence.

The researcher approaching the new cultural setting, whether a group of colleagues or a first restaurant, has as much potential affinity with it as the people already there. She may be a ‘stranger’ for a while, but will gradually be seduced into all the ‘thinking-as-usual’ that makes the people already there feel secure. There is a danger here for the

qualitative researcher. She has to work hard to discipline herself to capture the essence of being a stranger at the moment when everything is noticed and seems strange, before the new culture being approached becomes too familiar, and to deal with how it might change because of her presence. Schutz conceives a particular methodology in the stranger's attempts to proceed without sharing the 'thinking-as-usual' ability of the members of the new group, thus seeing what is behind the cultural symbols for behaviour that have become routine and tacit in the group. The stranger 'becomes essentially the [woman or] man who has to place in question nearly everything that seems unquestionable to the members of the approached group' (1964: 96).

A basic difference between everyday qualitative research and scientific qualitative research is that in the latter the researcher must take on the discipline of *making the familiar strange*. Even where the research scenario is familiar, the researcher must find ways of recovering the stranger position. This is central to qualitative research, and its impact on how the researcher applies caution in writing will be addressed in Chapter 8. As well as having implications for the way in which the researcher must discipline her perceptions, this also has implications for the written study, where she must take care to communicate to the reader the sense of strangeness of what she has seen. This involves a highly strategised articulation of carefully selected data, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

Research, language and writing

It becomes clear from this tour of qualitative research as social action that the writing of qualitative research is not going to be an easy task. Showing one's workings, being as transparent as possible about how the research is constructed in relation to the research setting, enables evaluation of its cultural and ideological appropriateness. This is not enough though. Because the writing of the research is a product of a discourse community that cannot avoid ideology, it has to be carried out in a very self-conscious way. Atkinson asserts rightly that 'sociologists pay close attention to their own textual practices, as well as those of the people they study' (1990: 6) because:

Texts do not simply and transparently report an independent order of reality. Rather, the texts themselves are implicated in the work of reality construction. ... There is no possibility of a neutral text. The text - the research paper or monograph, say - is just as much an artefact of convention and contrivance as is any other cultural product. (7)

Hence the purpose of this book – an exploration of how to write as 'simply and transparently' *as is possible* within the ideological minefield of qualitative research. The academic writing conventions of social research will thus be presented as a highly refined language and code of conduct designed to achieve this result.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the very act of interpretation within qualitative research is itself integrated with the act of writing. Denzin, largely following

Lévi-Strauss' notion of 'field-worker-as-*bricoleur*', describes how 'moving from the field to the text to the reader' is central to the whole qualitative research process in which 'interpretation requires the telling of a story, or a narrative that states "things happen this way because" or "this happened, after this happened, because this happened first"' (1994: 500, his emphasis). So, 'the problems of writing are not different from the problems of method or fieldwork' (501).

Paradigms, strategies and methods

Any venture into the literature will reveal that qualitative research is presented under a confusing array of different and variable headings. Different texts on the subject will always deal with these in different ways and use different terms; and researchers should not feel intimidated by this. I find Denzin and Lincoln's (2000b) use of *paradigms*, *strategies of enquiry* and *methods of collecting and analysing data* helpful in sorting out bigger from smaller entities of approach and practice.

Methods and strategies

The methods of collecting and analysing data are the smaller things that we do to carry out our investigation, such as interviewing, observing, describing, interpreting documents, conversation analysis, content analysis, discourse analysis, semiotic analysis, creative nonfiction, personal narrative, and so on. These are all specialist in their nature and may require specialist training. They do not, however, stand alone as modes of practice. How they are carried out, the purpose for which they are used, what they hope to produce, and their overall orientation will depend on the larger context of the particular strategy of enquiry that is being employed.

Strategies of enquiry, which I think we can also call methodologies, include larger entities in the research approach. Examples of these are: *case study*, which can be described as the study of a specific 'bounded system' – e.g. a person or an institution (Stake, 2005: 444); *ethnography*, which explores 'the nature of a specific social phenomenon' and is characterised by 'unstructured data', 'a small number of cases', 'interpretation of the meanings and functions' and 'participant observation' (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994: 248); *ethnomethodology*, which has a 'focus on how members actually "do" social life ... the mechanisms by which they concretely construct and sustain social entities such as gender, self, or family' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2005: 486); *phenomenology*, which has a 'focus on the ways that the life world – the world every individual takes for granted – is experienced by its members', and where 'attention to this life world is to first "bracket" it', to 'set aside belief in its reality in order to bring its apprehension into focus' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2005: 485); *grounded theory*, 'that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed' with 'continuous interplay between analysis and data collection' (Strauss and Corbin, 1994: 273); and *participatory action research*, which

'emphasises the political aspects of knowledge production' (Reason, 1994: 328) and 'involves the individual practitioner in continually reflecting on his or her own behaviour-in-action' so that 'other members of the community do the same' (331).

A very important point to make about these strategies is that they do not represent tight categories; and researchers do not have to choose *between* them.¹ I think that it is evident in the characteristics that I have listed for each strategy in the previous paragraph that these are by no means mutually exclusive. Case studies can be ethnographic or not, and do not have to be qualitative at all. Whether or not to do a case study is not a decision about methodology but about the particular characteristics of what is being studied. In other words, some social phenomena are better suited to case studies than to other strategies of enquiry. Although ethnography is often associated closely with participant observation, so are many other aspects of social research. There is no reason why ethnography cannot embrace the principles of grounded theory or phenomenology, and vice versa, and take the form of a case study. Indeed, each of the writers cited in the previous paragraph take great pains to show the approximate nature of the areas they describe.

This interplay of different strategies of enquiry is shown in Figure 1.1. The strategies included are by no means an exhaustive list, the aim being to indicate the nature of the spread of possibilities. Clustered between them are investigatory principles that they all share to varying degrees but that are aligned more to some strategies than others. It is a little bit like looking out over the same terrain from different mountaintops. In many ways, each strategy necessitates bringing others with it. It is noticeable that among the investigatory principles there is a definite coherence of approach – perhaps more pragmatic towards the right of the figure and more philosophical towards the left. I would place my own personal approach towards the centre of the field, looking more from the vantage point of ethnography and influenced by phenomenology, but with grounded theory in the background, and strongly heeding the principles of auto/biography.

There will however be exceptions to this fluidity in strategies that are more prone to being methodised by being expressed in tightly lock-stepped and specialised procedures. I would interpret such occurrences, perhaps of phenomenology, grounded theory or action research, as more to do with the structures of particular professional bodies than with the broader philosophical underpinnings of the strategy, and consider them to inhibit the principles of qualitative research. Researchers also need to take care regarding the claims they are making regarding what they are doing. There is a difference between doing *an* ethnography (which usually involves a sustained engagement with a particular social setting), and employing an *ethnographic* approach, or between a full-blown narrative enquiry (in which narratives would be the core data), and employing a narrative approach to interviews.

¹A discussion about the fluid nature of strategies of enquiry can be found in Atkinson and Hammersley (1994: 249), Denzin and Lincoln (2000a), Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 31, 41), and Stake (2005: 443).

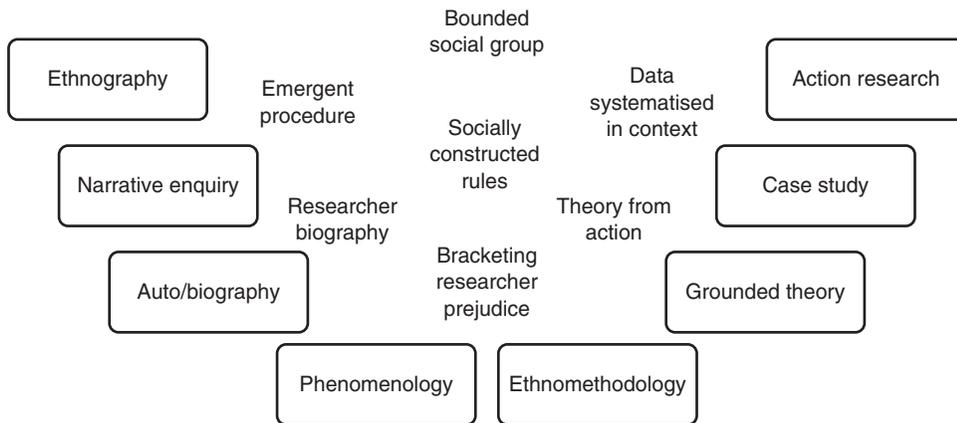


Figure 1.1 A terrain of strategies of investigation

Paradigms

There is also a strong sense, in all the strategies of enquiry, of a movement away from ‘traditional’ forms of social research by locating research within the meanings people give to their worlds, and of allowing this meaning to emerge. The term ‘interpretive’ appears in almost every strategy. It is this sort of sensibility that belongs to the domain of paradigm. Kuhn defines paradigms as ‘universally recognised scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners’ (1970: viii) and ‘the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques’ shared by the community that provide ‘concrete puzzle-solutions’ (175). Paradigms therefore present the larger environment within which the strategies of enquiry, and the methods of collecting and analysing data that they employ, find a deeper meaning within the community of qualitative researchers.

Kuhn’s major thesis is that paradigms change through a process of successive revolutions. Figure 1.2 presents such a paradigm change, moving from an older positivism on the left to the postmodern revolution on the right. In this book, I place qualitative research firmly within the postmodern paradigm, in which can be found the interpretivist approach referred to above and which includes critical theory, feminism, queer theory, auto/biography, post-structuralism and constructivism. At the same time, quite a lot of qualitative research has been placed within a postpositivist mode that carries elements of the positivist paradigm on the left of the figure. I shall first present a critique of postpositivist qualitative research and explain why there is a view within the field that it is problematic² and then

²Critiques of postpositivism and naturalism can be found in Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 11), Guba and Lincoln (2005), Gubrium and Holstein (1997: vi), Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 1), Janesick (2000: 393), Miller et al. (1998: 401) and Scott and Usher (1999: 15).

→→Paradigm revolution→→		
Positivism	Postpositivist qualitative (Naturalism)	Postmodern qualitative (Critical theory, constructivism, feminism)
<p>Beliefs Conviction about what it is important to look for Confidence in established research instruments Reality is not so problematic if the research instruments are adequate; and conclusive results are feasible</p>	<p>Reality is still quite plain to see and can be checked out The same basic scientific method applies</p>	<p>Reality and science is socially constructed Researchers are part of research settings Investigation must be in reflexive, self-critical, creative dialogue What is important to look for should emerge Research procedures can be developed to fit the social setting as it is revealed Reality contains mysteries to which the researcher must submit, and can do no more than interpret</p>
<p>Steps First decide the research focus (e.g. testing a specific hypothesis) Then devise and pilot research instruments (e.g. survey questionnaire or experiment)</p>	<p>Work out the research questions, devise and pilot the instruments, then go into the field Get the sample, ask the questions, report the answers Describe</p>	<p>Initial foray into the social setting leads to further, more informed exploration as themes and focuses emerge Devise research instruments during the process</p>
<p>Rigour Disciplined application of established rules for statistics, experiment and survey design</p>	<p>The data is self-evident Thorough sampling, coding, member checking, triangulation Probable truth is supported by <i>extensive</i>, substantiated record of <i>real settings</i> and the adherence to verbatim data Researchers do not interfere with real settings The results are the direct answers to the research questions</p>	<p>Principled development of research strategy to suit the scenario being studied as it is revealed Intervention between the research questions and fieldwork to ensure that the unexpected is able to emerge Reflexive struggle with emerging meanings Thick description</p>

Figure 1.2 Paradigms

deal with the implications and importance of placing qualitative research within a postmodern paradigm.

It would be a mistake to think of postpositivism as the same sort of radical break from positivism as postmodernism is from modernism, and post-structuralism is

from structuralism. Instead, postpositivism has been critiqued for being a short and incomplete step away from positivism. In many ways, postpositivism is a lingering recidivism that pulls qualitative research back towards principles and practices that do not suit it. As Figure 1.2 shows, postpositivism takes on the positivist belief in a reality that can be represented objectively. Verbatim transcripts are thought to be hard data than can be member-checked and triangulated for truth; there is much concern with representative sampling; and validity is naïvely thought to be gained by means of minimal researcher interference through an unobtrusive ‘fly on the wall’ approach. Hence, written studies tend to minimise recognition of the authorial presence of the researcher.

Postpositivism gains status within qualitative research by assuming the mantle of naturalism: by claiming to be able to capture the natural social world as it really is. The researcher is naïvely thought to be able to do this by getting fully involved in the research setting for a sustained period until representativeness and exhaustiveness are confirmed, i.e. when the same features begin to emerge again and again. The data thus needs to be collected until it tells nothing new, as evidence that there is maximum coverage and that nothing has been overlooked. Postmodernists thus criticise naturalists for naïvely overlooking inevitable ideological and cultural influences on the research process, and for actually believing that it is possible to minimise observer effect and see a virgin setting ‘like it is’ without biasing preconceptions or theoretical prejudices.

At the institutional level, it can still be quite difficult for postmodern researchers to assert their voice in university departments and in funding opportunities where postpositivist naturalism has achieved established objectivist status. Miller et al. (1998) demonstrate this very well in their study of how researchers are constrained in the way in which they are allowed to write by research committees and supervisors in university departments. They talk about a deep conflict within qualitative research itself, between postpositivist naturalism and what I have described here as a postmodern paradigm connected to the degree to which researchers can express their own voice. A particular area of conflict here is the degree to which researchers are allowed to come out and present their own voice in writing, which is looked at in detail in Chapter 6.

The postmodern break

In contrast, postmodern qualitative researchers ‘portray people as constructing the social world’ and researchers as ‘themselves constructing the social world through their interpretations of it’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 11). So whereas naturalists believe that meaningful social worlds can be discovered by ‘being there’, postmodernists ‘argue that there is no “there” until it has been constructed’ (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997: 38). ‘Every act of “seeing” or “saying” is unavoidably conditioned by cultural, institutional, and interactional contingencies’ (vi). In my view

this is therefore an understanding that the social world, to which the researcher also belongs, is socially and ideologically constructed.

The naturalist position that validity is related to degree of saturation may therefore be over-simplistic. When a researcher has the opportunity for long-term exposure to a setting it is easy to see the quantity of data as a major factor. It may, however, be that this model obscures other sources of validity. At the opposite end of the spectrum to extended ethnographic study, one must remember that there are also very small studies such as Monsey's ethnography of how people interact with vending machines (Spradley, 1980: 54), and:

the use of small samples, even one or two subjects, including the researcher's self - on different grounds - such as whether lives are information-rich and provide substantial material from which to weave a better understanding of important issues. (Merrill and West, 2009: 104)

Much of the qualitative work I use as examples comprises shorter, smaller, more 'micro' studies, in professional- and study-oriented research where there is often insufficient time, access or opportunity for saturation.

Also, because she reflexively seeks to acknowledge in what way she is the arch designer of data collection, and how she disturbs the surface of the culture she is investigating, the postmodern researcher is in a position to dig deeper and reveal the hidden and the counter. This paradigm shift in qualitative research parallels the way in which anthropological ethnographers have become critical of their long tradition of unselfconsciously 'writing culture' and have begun to acknowledge how the authorial voice 'inscribes' the making of 'polished' texts (Clifford, 1986: 2; Emerson et al., 2001: 352); and even more recently there is an assertion that researchers still need to take courage to allow their true voices to emerge. Blackman, 'as a male researcher studying female participants', explains how the written study needs to explore the hitherto 'hidden ethnography' of the 'emotional relations developed between the researcher and the researched' if we are to 'advance understanding of how studies are carried out and theory constructed' (2007: 699).

The recognition that both the field of study and the methods of investigation are socially constructed must also accept that they are subject to the ideologies and discourses that motivate human behaviour. I find Stuart Hall's definitions useful here. Ideology 'produces a certain kind of knowledge about a subject and certain attitudes towards it' (1996: 186). A discourse is 'a group of statements which provide a language for talking about' the subject, and 'makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way. It also limits the other ways in which the topic can be constructed' (201, citing Foucault). Ideologies are well-known as being political or religious; but they can also relate to the nature of science and knowledge. A post-modern paradigm recognises that its difference with positivism is ideological and

that the ways that we talk about research within our professional and institutional communities, and the politics and conflicts that emerge from this, as referred to above, are constructed discourses that represent these ideologies. Gubrium and Holstein describe discourses about research as 'knowledge factories – places where the work of knowledge construction takes place' (1997: 3). Kuhn's (1970) treatise on how the internal politics, culture and ideology of a scientific community can influence the development of scientific thinking, has had a major impact on our understanding in this respect.

Also, whatever the participants in our research choose to show researchers – through what they say and how they behave in front of them – will amount to discourses that represent ideology, even if they are not aware of this. This is why it is possible that the conversation between the researcher and the participants in the research can result in new knowledge for both parties as discourses are explored and revealed. Speaking about auto/biography, Merrill and West tell us that such domains of knowledge are arrived at through 'the interrelationship between the constructions of our own lives' as researchers, 'through autobiography and the construction of others' lives through biography', and that 'we cannot, in a sense, write stories of others without reflecting our own histories, social and cultural locations as well as subjectivities and values' (2009: 5). This constructivism recognises that the researcher and participants in interviews co-construct what is being said and that the researcher is therefore implicated in the subjective power relations of the event (Block, 2000; Miller, 2011).

Stuart Hall relates his discussion of ideology and discourse (above) to a global politics of modernity versus inferiority set around respective perceptions of 'the West' and 'the non-West'. In this respect, there has been considerable effort within the postmodern break to liberate qualitative research from the sins of nineteenth-century anthropology, where simplistic cultural definitions of subject peoples were used to justify European colonisation and an imagined 'objective way of representing the dark-skinned Other to the White world' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 1).³ While this agenda may seem to be a thing of the past, there continue to be essentialist traps, where research participants can still be reduced to cultural stereotypes. This might certainly be the case in postpositivist research where there might be a desire for the certainty of cultural labels. Chapter 8 will look at this in some detail. Chapter 7 deals with how the discourse of the researcher can dominate the research setting and make presumptions about who people are when these are more the preoccupation of the researcher than what actually emerges from the data. On the other hand, the postpositivist researcher might be too willing to take what their participants say at face value. Easy questions about cultural

³The implicatedness of ethnographic research in the colonial narrative is described in Asad (1973), Comaroff and Comaroff (1992), Florean (2007), Jack (2009), Morawska and Spohn (1994), Nzimiro (1979), Sangari (1994, 1995), and Schudson (1994: 37).

identity will still generate easy answers that are more to do with the global position and politics that we are brought up with than with the actuality of daily life (Holliday, 2013).

The positioning of methods and strategies

To return for a moment to the smaller choices of methods of collecting and analysing data and strategies of investigation, I have made the point that there is huge choice but that this choice must be oriented within the beliefs and values of the paradigm. This is relevant to the popular concept of mixed methods. I find useful Creswell's discussion about how the concept of mixed methods relates to paradigms, and especially to his consideration of the suggestion that it might be a 'category mistake' to base the concept on the essential difference between quantitative and qualitative research, when 'all research designs – such as surveys, document analysis, experiments and quasi-experiments – could accommodate data coded as numbers and words' and quantitative data often requires qualitative judgement and relation to context (2011: 272).

My view is that there is no need to think of mixing methods as a separate strategy of enquiry because within the postmodern paradigm we will always employ whatever means seem appropriate to get to the understandings that we seek. Not dwelling on an incompatibility between quantitative and qualitative certainly helps here. I see no reason why any of the methods of enquiry, for example listed in Figure 1.1, cannot incorporate quantitative methods. An excellent example of this is Hayre's study of radiographers in which he incorporates X-ray experiments and statistical analysis within an overall ethnographic design 'to provide a holistic picture of the clinical environment' (2016: 17). He asserts that:

The use of ethnography and experimentation is ... not a 'mixed approach'; ethnography has been used as an 'umbrella methodology' encompassing the use of induction and hypothetical-deduction to capture radiographic practices. (73)

In my interview with him, and in his text, he further rationalises the power of the postmodern ethnography to incorporate experiment-based data.

My personal conclusion to this discussion is that there does need to be an 'umbrella' strategy of investigation or methodology within any research project that drives whatever methods of data collection and analysis are used whether they are quantitative or qualitative. This means that within a postmodern paradigm the understanding that both the social phenomena being investigated and the methodology for investigating them are socially and ideologically constructed will apply also to quantitative methods. This also strengthens my feeling that it is not the division between quantitative and qualitative that is the most important, but the overall understanding of the nature of the social world as socially and ideologically constructed and how we therefore research it, which should influence all the methods we use.

Creativity, discipline and positioning the researcher

The postmodern break enables a far greater variety in procedure and scope, in which data is presented more creatively, with more openness about who the researcher is and how she spins validity through argument, as will be seen in Chapter 5. This makes it possible to devise a qualitative research approach for almost every conceivable scenario. It is therefore very clear that one does not *begin* by choosing a method. Methods can be sufficiently flexible to grow naturally from the research question, and in turn from the nature of the social setting in which the research is carried out. Janesick warns against the dangers of what she terms 'methodolatry, a combination of method and idolatry, to describe a preoccupation with selecting and defending methods to the exclusion of the actual substance of the story being told' (2000: 390). Her association between qualitative research and dance illustrates well the mixing of creativity and discipline. The major point is that it is in the writing of the research that sense is made of how the research is crafted to suit the question and the setting, and how the rigour of the process is then made clear and accountable.

To demonstrate the essence of qualitative research I have used Schutz's notion of the stranger approaching a new culture. In this chapter I have tried to 'approach' qualitative research in a similar way. In the rest of the book I would also like to think of the researcher as writer 'approaching' her own research experience in the same way. Essential to Schutz's phenomenology is allowing nothing to be taken for granted. Like the stranger learning culture, the qualitative researcher as writer should see every part of what she has done in the field as a fresh phenomenon. The same 'bracketing' – setting aside judgements about the expected 'nature', 'essence', 'reality' of things (Schutz, 1970: 316) – should be applied to the research experience itself.

Because their research is known to be ideological and ethnocentric, and in itself a culture of institutional behaviour, qualitative researchers must never forget to approach their own actions as strangers, holding up everything for scrutiny, accounting for every action – and seeing how they speak and write what they have done as integral to the whole. In this way they should gain, in the words of C. Wright Mills, a 'sociological imagination' by *locating* themselves and their actions critically within a wider community or world scenario. 'In a word, by their reflection and by their sensibility, they realise the cultural meaning of the social sciences' and of their place within this meaning (1970: 14).

Conclusion and activities

This chapter has looked at the nature of qualitative research within a postmodern paradigm. This leaves behind a postpositivist or naturalist approach that has clung to positivist notions of objectivity and representativeness that has imagined the researcher as a distant onlooker. Instead, the researcher is implicated in the research very much as she is in the observation of and engagement with everyday

life. Qualitative research therefore becomes a creative managing of a subjective engagement with the people in the research setting. This means that the traditional distinction between quantitative and qualitative is less important than how researchers understand their position within an understanding of the social world as socially and ideologically constructed.

Activities

1. Consider Examples 1.6 and 1.7.
 - a) What are the key concepts and activities that separate them from Examples 1.2-1.4?
 - b) What is the rationale behind the stages of each research project?
 - c) In what way do they represent the building of complex pictures, and what is the value of this for understanding the social world?
 - d) What would the researcher need to explain to demonstrate rigorous strategy?
2. Consider Examples 1.8 and 1.9.
 - a) Describe similar events from your own experience of having approached a new small culture.
 - b) What understandings of this culture did you gain which insiders did not seem to have?
 - c) At what point did you stop seeing things strangely and did they become part of the 'thinking-as-usual' world?
 - d) How are these relevant to qualitative research?
3. Consider Figure 1.1. Where would you position a piece of research that you want to do? From this position, what can you learn from the rest of the terrain?
4. Consider Figure 1.2.
 - a) Why is there a dotted line between the first and second columns?
 - b) What sort of research would be the proper application of column 1?
 - c) Why would the right-hand column consider the middle column naïve?
 - d) Would it be possible to call the right-hand column in any way scientific?
5. In what ways does your current or intended research project have the postmodern features described in this chapter?