Chapter guide

Qualitative research is a research strategy that usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data. As a research strategy it is broadly inductivist, constructionist, and interpretivist, but qualitative researchers do not always subscribe to all three of these features. This chapter is concerned with outlining the main features of qualitative research, which has become an increasingly popular approach to social research. The chapter explores:

- the main steps in qualitative research; delineating the sequence of stages in qualitative research is more controversial than with quantitative research, because it exhibits somewhat less codification of the research process;
- the relationship between theory and research;
- the nature of concepts in qualitative research and their differences from concepts in quantitative research;
- how far reliability and validity are appropriate criteria for qualitative researchers and whether alternative criteria that are more tailored to the research strategy are necessary;
- the main preoccupations of qualitative researchers; five areas are identified in terms of an emphasis on: seeing through the eyes of research participants; description and context; process; flexibility and lack of structure; and concepts and theory as outcomes of the research process;
- some common criticisms of qualitative research;
- the main contrasts between qualitative and quantitative research;
- the stance of feminist researchers on qualitative research.

Introduction

I began Chapter 7 by noting that *quantitative* research had been outlined in Chapter 2 as a distinctive research strategy. Much the same kind of general point can be registered in relation to *qualitative* research. In Chapter 2 it was suggested that qualitative research differs from quantitative research in several ways. Most obviously, qualitative research tends to be concerned with words rather than numbers, but three further features were particularly noteworthy:

1. an inductive view of the relationship between theory and research, whereby the former is generated out of the latter (though see the section below on **abduction** as a qualification of this view);
2. an epistemological position described as interpretivist, meaning that, in contrast to the adoption of a natural scientific model in quantitative research, the stress is on the understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants; and
3. an ontological position described as constructionist, which implies that social properties are outcomes of the interactions between individuals, rather than phenomena 'out there' and separate from those involved in its construction.

As Bryman and Burgess (1999) observe, although there has been a proliferation of writings on qualitative research since the 1970s, stipulating what it is and is not as a distinct research strategy is by no means straightforward. They propose three reasons for this state of affairs.

1. As a term 'qualitative research' is sometimes taken to imply an approach to social research in which quantitative data are not collected or generated. Many writers on qualitative research are critical of such a rendition of qualitative research, because (as we will see) the distinctiveness of qualitative research does not reside solely in the absence of numbers.
2. Qualitative research has comprised different traditions and stances over the years (see Thinking deeply 17.1).

Moreover, research is still conducted and published that fits well with the earliest of the stages identified by Denzin and Lincoln (2005b) in Thinking deeply 17.1. For example, Venkatesh's (2008) popular ethnography of drugs gangs in Chicago, while displaying some characteristics of experimental writing (Stage 5), has many of the features associated with the first two stages.

3. Sometimes, qualitative research is discussed in terms of the ways in which it differs from quantitative research. A potential problem with this tactic is that it means that qualitative research ends up being addressed in terms of what quantitative research is *not*.

Silverman (1993) has been particularly critical of accounts of qualitative research that do not acknowledge the variety of forms that the research strategy can assume. In other words, writers like Silverman are critical of attempts to specify the nature of qualitative research as a general approach (see also Thinking deeply 17.1). However, unless we can talk to a certain degree about the nature of qualitative research, it is difficult to see how it is possible to refer to qualitative research as a distinctive research strategy. In much the same way that in Chapter 7 it was recognized that quantitative researchers employ different research designs, in writing about the characteristics of qualitative research we will need to be sensitive to the different orientations of qualitative researchers. Without at least a sense of what is common to a set of many if not most studies that might be described as qualitative, the very notion of qualitative research would be rendered problematic. Yet it is clear that, for many social scientists, it is a helpful and meaningful category that can be seen in a variety of ways. Examples are: the arrival of specialist journals, such as *Qualitative Sociology*, *Qualitative Research*, *Ethnography*, and *Qualitative Inquiry*; texts on qualitative research (e.g. Seale 1999; Silverman 2010); a *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, 2000, 2005a); and a series of books on different facets of qualitative research (the Sage Qualitative Research Methods Series).

Thinking deeply 17.1
The Nine Moments of Qualitative Research

Denzin and Lincoln (2005b) have suggested that qualitative research has progressed through a number of stages. They portray this as a history of qualitative research in North America. It is not clear why the stages are presented as relating only to North America, but the distinctions are worth drawing attention to because they relate closely to the suggestion that there are different traditions of qualitative research.

1. *The traditional period*. The early twentieth century up to the Second World War. This phase refers to the work of social anthropologists and the Chicago School. It refers to in-depth studies of 'slices of life' that portrayed those who were studied as strange or alien. It was heavily imbued with positivism.
2. *Modernist phase*. Post-Second World War to early 1970s. During this period, qualitative researchers built on the work of the traditional period but at the same time sought to enhance the rigour of qualitative enquiries and began to reflect on the nature of their craft. These investigations also showed a tendency towards positivism.
3. *Blurred genres*. 1970–86. This was a period when a variety of epistemological and ontological approaches, as well as theoretical ideas, were being explored as plausible bases for qualitative enquiries. According to Denzin and Lincoln, we see in this period a continued proclivity towards positivism, but with the beginnings of an interpretivist self-consciousness, influenced by Geertz's (1973a) insistence that qualitative researchers are involved in interpretations of the interpretations of those on whom they conduct their investigations.
4. *Crisis of representation*. Mid-1980s onwards. Most of the key writings associated with this moment occurred in the 1980s. It refers to a period in which qualitative social researchers in general (though much of the writing stemmed initially from social anthropology) developed greater self-awareness concerning in particular the fact that their accounts of their fieldwork are just one way of representing reality and that, moreover, their representations are heavily influenced by their social locations. The 'crisis of representation' then is the recognition that the researcher's written work has limited scientific authority. These ideas will be encountered again in the section on 'Writing ethnography' in Chapter 19.

The next three phases refer to 'a triple crisis' stemming from the fourth moment above.

5. *Postmodern period of experimental ethnographic writing*. Mid-1990s. Heavily influenced by postmodernism (see Key concept 17.1), work under this heading is characterized by an awareness of the different ways of representing research participants (often referred to as 'the other') when writing up findings. Qualitative researchers have tried different ways of representing the people on whom they conduct their investigations.
6. *Post-experimental enquiry*. 1995–2000. This period is associated mainly with the emergence of AltaMira Press, a publisher of qualitative research that encourages experimental and interdisciplinary writing. It describes itself as having a 'focus on interdisciplinary work, breaking long-standing boundaries' (**www.altamirapress.com/RLA/About** (accessed 11 October 2010)).
7. *The methodologically contested present*. 2000–4. This refers to a period in which there is considerable disagreement about how qualitative research should be conducted and the directions it should be heading. It is very much associated with the arrival of journals like *Qualitative Inquiry* and *Qualitative Research* that provide forums for these debates. While Denzin and Lincoln (2005b) date this period as 2000–4, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the contested methodological differences have not abated. One of the areas that has been a focus of the ongoing debates has been the issue of research quality criteria in relation to qualitative studies.
8. *Now*. 2005–. This period is characterized by a backlash against qualitative research with a reassertion in government circles of the value of traditional science. Some of these pressures are reviewed in Bryman (2008a).
9. *The fractured future*. Lincoln and Denzin (2005: 1123) also speculate about what the immediate future holds: 'Randomized field trials . . . will occupy the time of one group of researchers while the pursuit of a socially and culturally responsive, communitarian, justice-oriented set of studies will consume the meaningful working moments of the other.'

This timeline of phases is useful because it highlights the difficulty of characterizing 'qualitative research'. As Silverman (1993) observes, the term covers a number of different research methods and approaches to qualitative data that differ considerably. On the other hand, Denzin and Lincoln's 'moments' have to be treated with some caution. First, it has to be borne in mind that work that could be depicted in terms very similar to the first two phases continues to be conducted. Indeed, many of the qualitative investigations that serve as illustrations in Part Three are of this type. Although qualitative researchers may be more self-conscious nowadays about their influence on the research process and the significance of how they write, many qualitative studies are still characterized by realism, at least to some degree. Second, Denzin and Lincoln's later phases are associated too much with particular events—the arrival of a new publisher or new journals—which looks strange when viewed in relation to the several decades with which the earlier moments are associated. Third, their ninth and final moment seems to be concerned with a rift in social research in general rather than within qualitative research as such.

Key concept 17.1
What is postmodernism?

As noted in the main text, postmodernism is extremely difficult to pin down. Part of the problem is that, as an approach, postmodernism is at least two things. One is that it is an attempt to get to grips with the nature of modern society and culture. The other, which is the more relevant aspect for this book, is that it represents a way of thinking about and representing the nature of the social sciences and their claims to knowledge. In particular, it is a distinctive sensitivity regarding the representation of social scientific findings. Postmodernists tend to be deeply suspicious of notions that imply that it is possible to arrive at a definitive version of any reality. Reports of findings are viewed as versions of an external reality, so that the key issue becomes one of the plausibility of

those versions rather than whether they are right or wrong in any absolute sense. Typically, writers of a postmodernist persuasion have less to say about data-collection issues than about the writing and representation of social science findings, though it is probably the case that they are more sympathetic to qualitative than quantitative research (Alvesson 2002). Indeed, postmodernists have probably been most influential in qualitative research when discussing the nature of ethnographic accounts and questioning the ethnographer's implicit claim that he or she has provided a definitive account of a society. This thinking can be discerned in Van Maanen's (1988) implicit critique of 'realist tales' as he called them (see the section on 'Writing ethnography' in Chapter 19).

For postmodernists, there can be no sense of an objective reality out there waiting to be revealed to and uncovered by social scientists. That reality is always going to be accessed through narratives in the form of research reports that provide representations. With this shift in orientation came an interest in the language employed in research reports, like written ethnographies, to reveal the devices researchers use to convey the definitiveness of their findings (Delamont and Atkinson 2004). Postmodernists tend to emphasize the notion of reflexivity (see Key concept 17.5), which posits the significance of the researcher for the research process and consequently the tentativeness of any findings presented in a research report (since the researcher is always implicated in his or her findings). As this account of postmodernism implies, postmodernists tend to be deeply suspicious of any view of research that implies that there are or can be accepted foundations to knowledge, as is suggested by positivists (see Key concept 2.2). Postmodernism is a deeply disruptive stance on social research, in that it problematizes and questions our capacity ever to know anything. Views vary on postmodernism's current appeal.

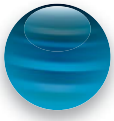
Several reasons might be proposed for the unease among some writers concerning the specification of the nature of qualitative research. Two reasons might be regarded as having particular importance. First, qualitative research subsumes several diverse research methods that differ from each other considerably. The following are the main research methods associated with qualitative research.

- *Ethnography/participant observation*. While some caution is advisable in treating ethnography and participant observation as synonyms, in many respects they refer to similar if not identical approaches to data collection in which the researcher is immersed in a social setting for some time in order to observe and listen with a view to gaining an appreciation of the culture of a social group. It has been employed in such social research classics as Whyte's (1955) study of street corner life in a slum community and Gans's (1962) research on a similar group in the throes of urban redevelopment.
- *Qualitative interviewing*. This is a very broad term to describe a wide range of interviewing styles (see Key concept 9.2 for an introduction). Moreover, qualitative researchers employing ethnography or participant observation typically engage in a substantial amount of qualitative interviewing.
- Focus groups (see Key concept 9.2).
- Language-based approaches to the collection of qualitative data, such as **discourse analysis** and **conversation analysis**.
- The collection and qualitative analysis of **texts** and documents.

Each of these approaches to data collection will be examined in Part Three. The picture with regard to the very different methods and sources that comprise qualitative research is made somewhat more complex by the fact that a multi-method approach is frequently employed. As noted above, researchers employing ethnography or participant observation frequently conduct qualitative interviews. However, they also often collect and analyse texts and documents as well. Thus, there is considerable variability in the collection of data among studies that are typically deemed to be qualitative. Of course, quantitative research also subsumes several different methods of data collection (these were covered in Part Two), but the inclusion of methods concerned with the analysis of language as a form of qualitative research implies somewhat greater variability.

A second reason why there is some resistance to a delineation of the nature of qualitative research is that the connection between theory and research is somewhat more ambiguous than in quantitative research. With the latter research strategy, theoretical issues drive the formulation of a research question, which in turn

drives the collection and analysis of data. Findings then feed back into the relevant theory. This is rather a caricature, because what counts as 'theory' is sometimes little more than the research literature relating to a certain issue or area. In qualitative research, theory is supposed to be an outcome of an investigation rather than something that precedes it. However, some writers, like Silverman (1993: 24), have argued that such a depiction of qualitative research is 'out of tune with the greater sophistication of contemporary field research design, born out of accumulated knowledge of interaction and greater concern with issues of reliability and validity'. This is particularly the case with conversation analysis, an approach to the study of language that will be examined in Chapter 22. However, qualitative research is more usually regarded as denoting an approach in which theory and categorization emerge out of the collection and analysis of data. The more general point being made is that such a difference within qualitative research may account for the unease about depicting the research strategy in terms of a set of stages.



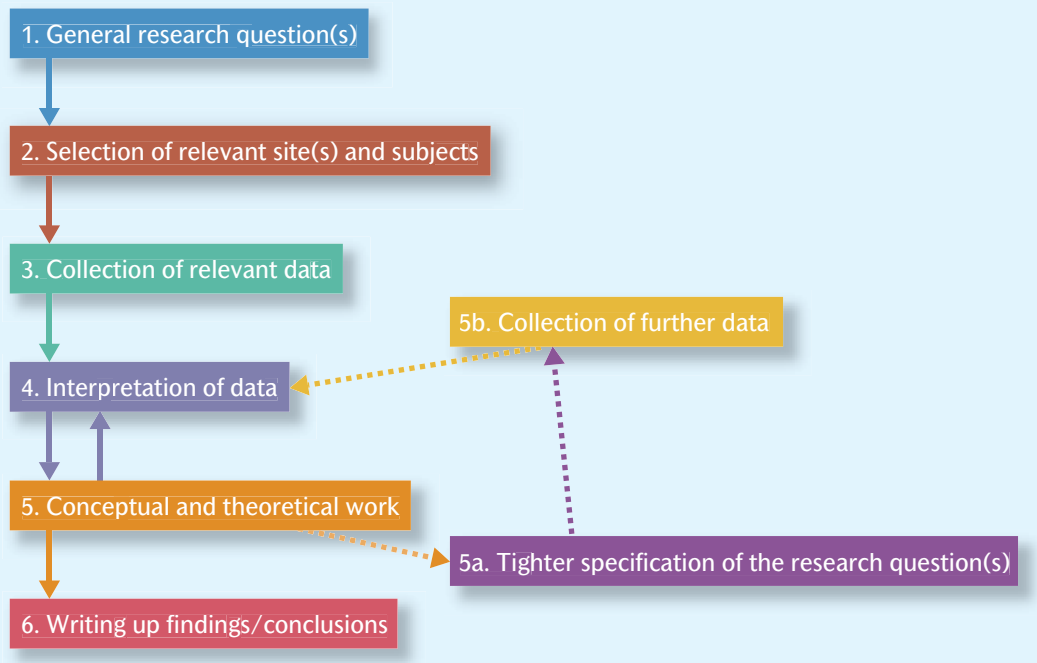
The main steps in qualitative research

The sequence outlined in Figure 17.1 provides a representation of how the qualitative research process can be visualized. In order to illustrate the steps, a published study by Foster (1995) of crime in communities will be used. This study was previously encountered in Research in focus 2.6.

- *Step 1. General research question(s)*. The starting point for Foster's (1995) study of crime in communities, particularly ones that contain predominantly public housing, is the high levels of crime in poorer areas. To the extent that it is a focus of attention, it is frequently assumed that communities with high levels of crime

Figure 17.1

An outline of the main steps of qualitative research



Thinking deeply 17.2
Research questions in qualitative research

Research questions in qualitative research are stated with varying degrees of explicitness. Sometimes, the research question is embedded within a general statement of the orientation of an article. Thus, the author of the research covered below in Research in focus 17.3 writes at the beginning of a long paragraph:

> The main proposition in this article is that different masculinities are produced through performances that draw on the different cultural resources that are available in each setting. (Swain 2004: 167)

Others opt for a more explicit treatment of research questions. Ashforth et al. (2007) were interested in the phenomenon of 'dirty work', a term first introduced nearly fifty years previously to refer to work that is tainted 'physically, socially or morally' (Hughes 1958: 122; quoted in Ashforth et al. 2007: 149). The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with managers in eighteen such occupations in order to explore how the work is 'normalized'—that is, how they develop ways of dealing with or reducing the significance of the taint of dirty work. After a discussion of the literature and their view of its implications for their own work, they write:

> In summary, our research questions were:
> *Research Question 1. What normalization challenges do managers in dirty work occupations face?*
> *Research Question 2. What tactics do managers report using to normalize dirty work?* (Ashforth et al. 2007: 151; italicized in original)

One factor that may affect the degree of explicitness with which research questions are stated is the outlet in which the research is published. Ashforth et al. (2007) published this article in the *Academy of Management Journal*, which in the past has tended to publish mainly empirical articles deriving from quantitative research. It may be that Ashforth et al. chose this format for presenting their research questions so that it would exhibit some of the characteristics of research questions or hypotheses in quantitative research that tend to be stated explicitly. As noted in Chapter 1, in their study of senior managers who retired early, Jones et al. (2010) stated their research questions explicitly though they were not formatted to stand out in the same way:

> to what extent do our respondents construct a new balance of activities? Do respondents construct new discourses of everyday life? Does the move by respondents into leisure retirement create new tensions in other parts of their lives? (Jones et al. 2010: 105).

The researchers went on to investigate these research questions by collecting qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. The formulation of research questions in qualitative research, much as in quantitative research, is closely connected to the relevant literature. The research questions will be to a significant extent prompted and stimulated by the literature. The key points to consider are what it is you want to find out about and why it is important to know the answer. The literature will be central to both considerations. However, by no means all qualitative researchers agree about the importance of research questions at the outset of an investigation. Some exponents of grounded theory (see Key concept 17.2) advocate a much more open-ended strategy of beginning with a blank slate. As such, the literature becomes significant at later stages of helping to inform theoretical ideas as they emerge from the data and as a way of contextualizing the significance of the findings. There is considerable disagreement over the desirability of deferring a literature review. Dunne (2011) advocates a reflexive approach to reviewing the literature in grounded theory whereby the researcher reflects on the ways in which the literature may have influenced and moulded his or her understanding of the field. The literature review is such an expected element of social science writing that not to include one risks confusing or alienating reviewers or examiners. Also, the literature review does serve some useful purposes (as outlined in Chapter 5), such as making sure that you are not reinventing the wheel and learning from other researchers' methodological and other lapses of judgement, so there are practical risks associated with deferring contact with the literature.

tend to have low levels of social control. But Foster argues that we know very little about how informal social control operates in such communities and what its significance for crime is. She also notes that council estates are frequently presumed to be crime prone but that there is little evidence on 'the diversity in experience and attitudes of residents within individual estates' (Foster 1995: 563). It would be easy to presume that, to the extent that council estates are prone to high crime levels, they exhibit low levels of social control. Thus Foster formulates a general set of concerns revolving around council estates and their crime proneness and the possible role and dynamics of social control in the process. She also notes that some writers have suggested that the propensity to crime in council estates may be in part attributed to flaws in the design of the estates.

- *Step 2. Selection of relevant site(s) and subjects*. The research was conducted on a London council estate (with the fictitious name 'Riverside'), which had a high level of crime and which exhibited the kinds of housing features that are frequently associated with a propensity to crime. Relevant research participants, such as residents, were identified.
- *Step 3. Collection of relevant data*. Foster describes her research as 'ethnographic'. She spent eighteen months 'getting involved in as many aspects of life there as possible from attending tenant meetings, the mothers and toddlers group, and activities for young people, to socializing with some of the residents in the local pub' (Foster 1995: 566). Foster also tells us that 'extended interviews' were conducted with forty-five residents of Riverside (and another London estate, but the majority were from Riverside) and twenty-five 'officials', such as police and housing officers. Foster's account of her research methods suggests that she is likely to have generated two types of data: fieldwork notes based on her ethnographic observation of life in the community and detailed notes (and most probably transcripts) of interviews undertaken.
- *Step 4. Interpretation of data*. One of the key findings to emerge from the data is the fact that, in spite of the fact that Riverside has a high crime rate, it is not perceived as a problem in this regard by Riverside residents. For example, she quotes from an interview with an elderly tenant: 'They used to say that they couldn't let the flats [apartments] here . . . but I mean as far as muggings or anything like that you don't hear of nothing like that even now' (Foster 1995: 568). Instead, housing problems loomed larger in the minds of residents than crime. She also found that 'hidden economy' crimes were prevalent on the estate and that much crime was tolerated by residents. She also observes that, contrary to expectations about estates like Riverside, there was clear evidence of informal social control mechanisms at work, such as shaming practices.
- *Step 5. Conceptual and theoretical work*. No new concepts seem to emerge from Foster's research, but her findings enable her to tie together some of the elements outlined above under Step 1. For example, she writes:

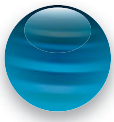
> Crime then need not be damaging *per se* providing other factors cushion its impact. On Riverside these included support networks in which tenants felt that someone was watching out for their properties and provided links with people to whom they could turn if they were in trouble. Consequently while generalized fears about crime remained prevalent, familiarity and support went some way to reducing the potential for hostile encounters. (Foster 1995: 580)

It is this step, coupled with the interpretation of data, that forms the study's findings.

- *Steps 5a. Tighter specification of the research question(s), and 5b. Collection of further data*. There is no specific evidence from Foster's account that she followed a process in which she collected further data after she had built up early interpretations of her data. When this occurs, as it sometimes does in research within a grounded theory framework, there can be an interplay between interpretation and theorizing, on the one hand, and data collection, on the other. Such a strategy is frequently referred to as an *iterative* one. She does write at one point that some residents and officials were interviewed twice and in some cases even three times in the course of her research. This raises the possibility that she was re-interviewing certain individuals in the light of her emerging ideas about her data, but this can only be a speculation.
- *Step 6. Writing up findings/conclusions*. There is no real difference between the significance of writing up in quantitative research and qualitative research, so that exactly the same points made in relation to Step 11 in Figure 7.1 apply here. An audience has to be convinced about the credibility and significance of the interpretations offered. Researchers are not and cannot be simply conduits for the things they see and

the words they hear. The salience of what researchers have seen and heard has to be impressed on the audience. Foster does this by making clear to her audience that her findings have implications for policies regarding estates and crime and for our understanding of the links between housing, community, and crime. A key point to emerge from her work, which she emphasizes at several points in the article and hammers home in her concluding section, is that being an insider to Riverside allowed her to see that a community that may be regarded by outsiders as having a high propensity towards crime should not be presumed to be seen in this way by members of that community.

Two particularly distinctive aspects of the sequence of steps in qualitative research are the highly related issues of the links between theory and concepts with research data. It is to these issues that we now turn.



Theory and research

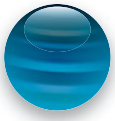
Most qualitative researchers when writing about their craft emphasize a preference for treating theory as something that emerges out of the collection and analysis of data. As will be seen in Chapter 24, practitioners of **grounded theory**—a frequently cited approach to the analysis of qualitative data—especially stress the importance of allowing theoretical ideas to emerge out of one's data. But some qualitative researchers argue that qualitative data can and should have an important role in relation to the *testing* of theories as well. Silverman (1993), in particular, has argued that in more recent times qualitative researchers have become increasingly interested in the testing of theories and that this is a reflection of the growing maturity of the strategy. Certainly, there is no reason why qualitative research cannot be employed in order to test theories that are specified in advance of data collection. In any case, much qualitative research entails the testing of theories in the course of the research process. So, in Figure 17.1, the loop back from Step 5a, 'Tighter specification of the research question(s)', to Step 5b, 'Collection of further data', implies that a theoretical position may emerge in the course of research and may spur the collection of further data to test that theory. This kind of oscillation between testing emerging theories and collecting data is a particularly distinctive feature of grounded theory. It is presented as a dashed line in Figure 17.1, because it is not as necessary a feature of the process of qualitative research as the other steps.

Key concept 17.2
What is grounded theory?

Grounded theory has been defined as 'theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process. In this method, data collection, analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another' (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 12). Thus, two central features of grounded theory are that it is concerned with the development of theory out of data and that the approach is iterative, or recursive, as it is sometimes called, meaning that data collection and analysis proceed in tandem, repeatedly referring back to each other.

As the discussion in this chapter shows, the two originators of the approach—Glaser and Strauss—eventually disagreed on the path on which Strauss was taking grounded theory. A further complication is that there is a lack of agreement on what grounded theory is. To some writers it is a distinct method or approach to qualitative research in its own right; to others, it is an approach to the generation of theory. It is this second view of grounded theory that is taken in this chapter. Grounded theory is not a theory—it is an approach to the generation of theory out of data. Usually, 'data' is taken to refer to qualitative data, but grounded theory can be used in connection with different kinds of data. One final complication to be noted is that, although it has just been suggested that grounded theory is a strategy for generating theory out of data, in many cases, reports using a grounded theory approach generate concepts rather than theory as such.

One key point that is implied by Figure 17.1 is that the typical sequence of steps in qualitative research entails the generation of theories rather than the testing of theories that are specified at the outset. Silverman (1993) is undoubtedly correct that pre-specified theories *can be* and sometimes *are* tested with qualitative data, but the generation of theory tends to be the preferred approach.



Concepts in qualitative research

A central feature of Chapter 7 was the discussion of concepts and their measurement. For most qualitative researchers, developing measures of concepts will not be a significant consideration, but concepts are very much part of the landscape in qualitative research. However, the way in which concepts are developed and employed is often rather different from that implied in the quantitative research strategy. Blumer's (1954) distinction between 'definitive' and **sensitizing concepts** captures aspects of the different ways in which concepts are thought about.

Blumer (1954) argued stridently against the use of definitive concepts in social research. The idea of definitive concepts is typified by the way in which, in quantitative research, a concept, once developed, becomes fixed through the elaboration of indicators. For Blumer, such an approach entailed the application of a straitjacket on the social world, because the concept in question comes to be seen exclusively in terms of the indicators that have been developed for it. Fine nuances in the form that the concept can assume or alternative ways of viewing the concept and its manifestations are sidelined. In other words, definitive concepts are excessively concerned with what is common to the phenomena that the concept is supposed to subsume rather than with variety. Instead, Blumer (1954: 7) recommended that social researchers should recognize that the concepts they use are sensitizing concepts in that they provide 'a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances'. For Blumer, then, concepts should be employed in such a way that they give a very general sense of what to look for and act as a means for uncovering the variety of forms that the phenomena to which they refer can assume. In providing a critique of definitive concepts, it is clear that Blumer had in mind the concept-indicator model described in Chapter 7. In other words, his views entailed in large part a critique of quantitative research and a programmatic statement that would form a springboard for an alternative approach that nowadays we would recognize as qualitative research.

Blumer's distinction is not without its problems. It is not at all clear how far a very general formulation of a concept can be regarded as a useful guide to empirical enquiry. If it is too general, it will simply fail to provide a useful starting point because its guidelines are too broad; if too narrow, it is likely to repeat some of the difficulties Blumer identified in relation to definitive concepts. However, his general view of concepts has attracted some support, because his preference for not imposing preordained schemes on the social world chimes with that of many qualitative researchers. As the example in Research in focus 17.1 suggests, the researcher frequently starts out with a broad outline of a concept, which is revised and narrowed during the course of data collection. For subsequent researchers, the concept may be taken up and revised as it is employed in connection with different social contexts or in relation to somewhat different research questions.

Research in focus 17.1

The emergence of a concept in qualitative research: the case of emotional labour

Hochschild's (1983) idea of emotional labour—labour that 'requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (1983: 7)—has become a very influential concept in the sociology of work and in the developing area of the sociology of emotions. Somewhat ironically for a predominantly qualitative study, Hochschild's initial conceptualization appears to have

emerged from a questionnaire she distributed to 261 university students. Within the questionnaire were two requests: 'Describe a real situation that was important to you in which you experienced a deep emotion' and 'Describe as fully and concretely as possible a real situation that was important to you in which you either changed the situation to fit your feelings or changed your feelings to fit the situation' (1983: 13). Thus, although a self-completion questionnaire was employed, the resulting data were qualitative. The data were analysed in terms of the idea of emotion *work*, which is the same as emotional labour but occurs in a private context. Emotional labour is essentially emotion work that is performed as part of one's paid employment. In order to develop the idea of emotional labour, Hochschild looked to the world of work. The main occupation she studied was the flight attendant. Several sources of data on emotional labour among flight attendants were employed. She gained access to Delta Airlines, a large American airline, and in the course of her investigations she:

- watched sessions for training attendants and had many conversations with both trainees and experienced attendants during the sessions;
- interviewed various personnel, such as managers in various sections, and advertising agents;
- examined Delta advertisements spanning thirty years;
- observed the flight attendant recruitment process at Pan American Airways, since she had not been allowed to do this at Delta;
- conducted 'open-ended interviews lasting three to five hours each with thirty flight attendants in the San Francisco Bay Area' (Hochschild 1983: 15).

In order to forge a comparison with a contrasting occupational group that is nonetheless also involved in emotional labour, Hochschild also interviewed five debt-collectors. In her book, she explores such topics as the human costs of emotional labour and the issue of gender in relation to it. It is clear that Hochschild's concept of emotional labour began as a somewhat imprecise idea that emerged out of a concern with emotion work and that was gradually developed in order to address its wider significance. The concept has been picked up by other qualitative researchers in the sociology of work. For example, Leidner (1993) has explored through ethnographic studies of a McDonald's restaurant and an insurance company the ways in which organizations seek to 'routinize' the display of emotional labour.

Reliability and validity in qualitative research

In Chapters 3 and 7 it was noted that reliability and validity are important criteria in establishing and assessing the quality of research for the quantitative researcher. However, there has been some discussion among qualitative researchers concerning their relevance for qualitative research. Moreover, even writers who do take the view that the criteria are relevant have considered the possibility that the meanings of the terms need to be altered. For example, the issue of measurement validity almost by definition seems to carry connotations of measurement. Since measurement is not a major preoccupation among qualitative researchers, the issue of validity would seem to have little bearing on such studies. As foreshadowed briefly in Chapter 3, a number of different stances have been taken by qualitative researchers in relation to these issues.

Adapting reliability and validity for qualitative research

One stance is to assimilate reliability and validity into qualitative research with little change of meaning other than playing down the salience of measurement issues. Mason (1996: 21), for example, argues that reliability, validity, and generalizability (which is the main component of external validity—see Chapter 3) 'are different kinds of measures of the quality, rigour and wider potential of research, which are achieved according to certain methodological and disciplinary conventions and principles'. She sticks very closely to the meaning that these criteria have in quantitative research, where they have been largely developed. Thus, validity refers to whether 'you are observing, identifying, or "measuring" what you

say you are' (Mason 1996: 24). LeCompte and Goetz (1982) and Kirk and Miller (1986) also write about reliability and validity in relation to qualitative research but invest the terms with a somewhat different meaning from Mason. LeCompte and Goetz write about the following.

- *External reliability*, by which they mean the degree to which a study can be replicated. This is a difficult criterion to meet in qualitative research, since, as LeCompte and Goetz recognize, it is impossible to 'freeze' a social setting and the circumstances of an initial study to make it replicable in the sense in which the term is usually employed (see Chapter 7). However, they suggest several strategies that can be introduced in order to approach the requirements of external reliability. For example, they suggest that a qualitative researcher replicating ethnographic research needs to adopt a similar social role to that adopted by the original researcher. Otherwise what a researcher conducting a replication sees and hears will not be comparable to the original research.
- *Internal reliability*, by which they mean whether, when there is more than one observer, members of the research team agree about what they see and hear. This is a similar notion to *inter-observer consistency* (see Key concept 7.3).
- *Internal validity*, by which they mean whether there is a good match between researchers' observations and the theoretical ideas they develop. LeCompte and Goetz argue that internal validity tends to be a strength of qualitative research, particularly ethnographic research, because the prolonged participation in the social life of a group over a long period of time allows the researcher to ensure a high level of congruence between concepts and observations.
- *External validity*, which refers to the degree to which findings can be generalized across social settings. LeCompte and Goetz argue that, unlike internal validity, external validity represents a problem for qualitative researchers because of their tendency to employ case studies and small samples.

As this brief treatment suggests, qualitative researchers have tended to employ the terms reliability and validity in very similar ways to quantitative researchers when seeking to develop criteria for assessing research.

Alternative criteria for evaluating qualitative research

However, a second position in relation to reliability and validity in qualitative research can be discerned. Some writers have suggested that qualitative studies should be judged or evaluated according to quite different criteria from those used by quantitative researchers. Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba and Lincoln (1994) propose that it is necessary to specify terms and ways of establishing and assessing the quality of qualitative research that provide an alternative to reliability and validity. They propose two primary criteria for assessing a qualitative study: *trustworthiness* and *authenticity*.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is made up of four criteria, each of which has an equivalent criterion in quantitative research:

1. *credibility*, which parallels internal validity;
2. *transferability*, which parallels external validity;
3. *dependability*, which parallels reliability;
4. *confirmability*, which parallels objectivity.

A major reason for Guba and Lincoln's unease about the simple application of reliability and validity standards to qualitative research is that the criteria presuppose that a single absolute account of social reality is feasible. In other words, they are critical of the view (described in Chapter 2 as *realist*) that there are absolute truths about the social world that it is the job of the social scientist to reveal. Instead, they argue that there can be more than one and possibly several accounts.

Credibility

The significance of this stress on multiple accounts of social reality is especially evident in the trustworthiness criterion of *credibility*. After all, if there can be several possible accounts of an aspect of social reality, it is the feasibility or credibility of the account that a researcher arrives at that is going to determine its acceptability to others. The establishment of the credibility of findings entails both ensuring that research is carried out according to the canons of good practice *and* submitting research findings to the members of the social world who were studied for confirmation that the investigator has correctly understood that social world. This latter technique is often referred to as **respondent validation** or *member validation* (see Key concept 17.3). Another technique they recommend is **triangulation** (see Key concept 17.4).

Transferability

Because qualitative research typically entails the intensive study of a small group, or of individuals sharing

Key concept 17.3
What is respondent validation?

Respondent validation, which is also sometimes called member validation, is a process whereby a researcher provides the people on whom he or she has conducted research with an account of his or her findings. The aim of the exercise is to seek corroboration or otherwise of the account that the researcher has arrived at. Respondent validation has been particularly popular among qualitative researchers, because they frequently want to ensure that there is a good correspondence between their findings and the perspectives and experiences of their research participants. The form that respondent validation can assume varies. There are several different forms of respondent validation.

- The researcher provides each research participant with an account of what he or she has said to the researcher in an interview and conversations, or of what the researcher observed by watching that person in the course of an observational study. For example, Bloor (1978, 1997) reports that he carried out observations of ear, nose, and throat (ENT) consultants concerning their approaches to making decisions about the assessment of patients. He submitted a report to each consultant on his or her practices.
- The researcher feeds back to a group of people or an organization his or her impressions and findings in relation to that group or organization. Bloor (1997) says that, for his research on therapeutic communities, he conducted group discussions (which were taped) with community members to gauge reactions to draft research reports.
- The researcher feeds back to a group of people or an organization some of his or her writings that are based on a study of that group or organization (for example, articles, book chapters). Ball (1984) asked teachers in a school in which he had conducted ethnographic research to comment on draft articles and chapters, and similarly Willis (1977) asked the young working-class males who were the focus of his ethnography to comment on draft chapters, as did Skeggs (1994) for her parallel study of young working-class women (see Research in focus 19.7 for further details).

In each case, the goal is to seek confirmation that the researcher's findings and impressions are congruent with the views of those on whom the research was conducted and to seek out areas in which there is a lack of correspondence and the reasons for it. However, the idea is not without practical difficulties.

- Respondent validation may occasion defensive reactions on the part of research participants and even censorship.
- Bloor (1997: 45) observes that, because some approaches to enquiry may result in research participants developing relationships with the researcher of 'fondness and mutual regard', there may be a reluctance to be critical.
- It is highly questionable whether research participants can validate a researcher's analysis, since this entails inferences being made for an audience of social science peers. This means that, even though the first two methods of respondent validation may receive a corroborative response, the researcher still has to make a further leap, through the development of concepts and theories, in providing a social science frame for the resulting publications. If the third method of respondent validation is employed, it is unlikely that the social scientific analyses will be meaningful to research participants. Hobbs (1993) fed back some of his writings on entrepreneurship in London's East End to his informants, and it is clear that they made little sense of what he had written. Similarly, Skeggs (1994: 86) reports: ' "Can't understand a bloody word it says" was the most common response' (see Research in focus 19.7 for further details of this study).

Key concept 17.4
What is triangulation?

Triangulation entails using more than one method or source of data in the study of social phenomena. The term has been employed somewhat more broadly by Denzin (1970: 310) to refer to an approach that uses 'multiple observers, theoretical perspectives, sources of data, and methodologies', but the emphasis has tended to be on methods of investigation and sources of data. One of the reasons for the advocacy by Webb et al. (1966) of a greater use of unobtrusive methods was their potential in relation to a strategy of triangulation (see Key concept 14.3). Triangulation can operate within and across research strategies. It was originally conceptualized by Webb et al. (1966) as an approach to the development of measures of concepts, whereby more than one method would be employed in the development of measures, resulting in greater confidence in findings. As such, triangulation was very much associated with a quantitative research strategy. However, triangulation can also take place within a qualitative research strategy. In fact, ethnographers often check out their observations with interview questions to determine whether they might have misunderstood what they had seen. Bloor (1997) reports that he tackled the process of death certification in a Scottish city in two ways: interviewing clinicians with a responsibility for certifying causes of deaths, and asking the same people to complete dummy death certificates based on case summaries he had prepared. Increasingly, triangulation is also being used to refer to a process of cross-checking findings deriving from both quantitative and qualitative research (Deacon et al. 1998). Triangulation represents just one way in which it may be useful to think about the integration of these two research strategies and is covered in Chapter 27 in the context of mixed methods research.

certain characteristics (that is, depth rather than the breadth that is a preoccupation in quantitative research), qualitative findings tend to be oriented to the contextual uniqueness and significance of the aspect of the social world being studied. As Lincoln and Guba (1985: 316) put it, whether findings 'hold in some other context, or even in the same context at some other time, is an empirical issue'. Instead, qualitative researchers are encouraged to produce what Geertz (1973a) calls **thick description**—that is, rich accounts of the details of a culture. Lincoln and Guba argue that a thick description provides others with what they refer to as a database for making judgements about the possible transferability of findings to other milieux.

Dependability

As a parallel to reliability in quantitative research, Lincoln and Guba propose the idea of dependability and argue that, to establish the merit of research in terms of this criterion of trustworthiness, researchers should adopt an 'auditing' approach. This entails ensuring that complete records are kept of all phases of the research process—problem formulation, selection of research participants, fieldwork notes, interview transcripts, data analysis decisions, and so on—in an accessible manner. Peers would then act as auditors, possibly during the course of the research and certainly at the end to establish how far proper procedures are being and have been followed. This would include assessing the degree to which theoretical inferences can be justified. Auditing has not become a popular approach to enhancing the dependability of qualitative research. A rare example is a study of behaviour at an American 'swap meet', where second-hand goods are bought and sold (Belk et al. 1988). A team of three researchers collected data over four days through observation, interviews, photography, and video-recording. The researchers conducted several trustworthiness tests, such as respondent validation and triangulation. But, in addition, they submitted their draft manuscript and entire data set to three peers, whose task 'was to criticize the project for lack of sufficient data for drawing its conclusions if they saw such a void' (Belk et al. 1988: 456). The study highlights some problems associated with the auditing idea. One is that it is very demanding for the auditors, bearing in mind that qualitative research frequently generates extremely large data sets, and it may be that this is a major reason why it has not become a pervasive approach to validation.

Confirmability

Confirmability is concerned with ensuring that, while recognizing that complete objectivity is impossible in social research, the researcher can be shown to have acted in good faith; in other words, it should be apparent that he or she has not overtly allowed personal values or theoretical inclinations manifestly to sway the conduct of

the research and the findings deriving from it. Lincoln and Guba propose that establishing confirmability should be one of the objectives of auditors.

Authenticity

In addition to these four trustworthiness criteria, Lincoln and Guba suggest criteria of *authenticity*. These criteria raise a wider set of issues concerning the wider political impact of research. These are the criteria:

- *Fairness*. Does the research fairly represent different viewpoints among members of the social setting?
- *Ontological authenticity*. Does the research help members to arrive at a better understanding of their social milieu?
- *Educative authenticity*. Does the research help members to appreciate better the perspectives of other members of their social setting?
- *Catalytic authenticity*. Has the research acted as an impetus to members to engage in action to change their circumstances?
- *Tactical authenticity*. Has the research empowered members to take the steps necessary for engaging in action?

The authenticity criteria are thought-provoking but have not been influential, and their emphasis on the wider impact of research is controversial. They have certain points of affinity with **action research** (see Key concept 17.6), which by and large has not been a popular form of social research, though it has had some impact in fields like organization studies and education. The emphasis on practical outcomes differentiates it from most social research.

Recent discussions about quality criteria for qualitative research

The main point of discussing Lincoln and Guba's ideas is that they differ from writers like LeCompte and Goetz in seeking criteria for evaluating qualitative research that represent a departure from those employed by quantitative researchers. The issue of research quality in relation to qualitative investigations has become a rather contested area in recent years, with several schemes of criteria being proposed as possible alternatives to reliability and validity as criteria and to schemes like Lincoln and Guba's list. For example, Yardley (2000) has proposed the following four criteria:

- *Sensitivity to context*: sensitivity not just to the context of the social setting in which the research is conducted but also to potentially relevant theoretical positions and ethical issues.
- *Commitment and rigour*: substantial engagement with the subject matter, having the necessary skills, and thorough data collection and analysis.
- *Transparency and coherence*: research methods clearly specified, clearly articulated argument, and a reflexive stance (see Key concept 17.5 on **reflexivity**).
- *Impact and importance*: importance of having an impact on and significance for theory, the community on which the research is conducted and for practitioners.

When compiling these criteria, Yardley had in mind health researchers who are likely to emphasize the impact of a study, which probably accounts for the presence of the last of these four criteria—impact and importance—which has some affinities with Lincoln and Guba's authenticity criteria.

Key concept 17.5
What is reflexivity?

Reflexivity has several meanings in the social sciences. The term is employed by ethnomethodologists to refer to the way in which speech and action are constitutive of the social world in which they are located; in other words, they do more than merely act as indicators of deeper phenomena (see Chapter 22). The other meaning of the term carries the connotation that social researchers should be reflective about the implications of their methods, values, biases, and decisions for the knowledge of the social world they generate. Relatedly, reflexivity entails a sensitivity to the researcher's cultural, political, and social context. As such, 'knowledge' from a reflexive position is always a reflection of a researcher's location in time and social space. This notion is especially explicit in Pink's (2001) formulation of a reflexive approach to the use of visual images (see Chapter 19) and in Plummer's (2001) delineation of a reflexive approach to life histories (see the section on 'Life history and oral history interviewing' in Chapter 20).

There has been evidence of a growing reflexivity in social research in the form of an industry of books that collect together inside stories of the research process that detail the nuts and bolts of research as distinct from the often sanitized portrayal in research articles. An early volume edited by P. Hammond (1964) paved the way for a large number of imitators (e.g. Bell and Newby 1977; Bell and Roberts 1984; Bryman 1988b), and the confessional tales referred to in Chapter 19 are invariably manifestations of this development. Therefore, the rise of reflexivity largely predates the growing awareness of postmodern thinking since the late 1980s. What distinguishes the reflexivity that has followed in the wake of postmodernism is a greater awareness and acknowledgement of the role of the researcher as part and parcel of the construction of knowledge. In other words, the reflexive attitude within postmodernism is highly critical of the notion that the researcher is someone who extracts knowledge from observations and conversations with others and then transmits knowledge to an audience. The researcher is viewed as implicated in the construction of knowledge through the stance that he or she assumes in relation to the observed and through the ways in which an account is transmitted in the form of a text. This understanding entails an acknowledgement of the implications and significance of the researcher's choices as both observer and writer.

However, reflexivity is a notoriously slippery concept. Lynch (2000) has complained that too often it is assumed that a reflexive position is somehow superior to an unreflexive one. The case for the superiority of reflexivity is rarely made. Moreover, he points out that the term has different meanings. One of these is methodological reflexivity, which comes closest to the kind of reflexivity that is being referred to in this chapter. However, this meaning has a number of sub-meanings, three of which are especially prominent in methodological writings.

1. *Philosophical self-reflection*: an introspection involving 'an inward-looking, sometimes confessional and self-critical examination of one's own beliefs and assumptions' (Lynch 2000: 29).
2. *Methodological self-consciousness*: taking account of one's relationships with those whom one studies.
3. *Methodological self-criticism*: the confessional style of ethnographic writing (see Chapter 19), but Lynch notes that the injunction to be self-critical that is associated with such ethnographic writing is much more pervasive in academic disciplines.

The term 'reflexivity' has to be used with a degree of caution, as Lynch's discussion implies.

Perhaps in response to the proliferation of different lists of qualitative research criteria and also because of the lack of agreed criteria, Spencer et al. (2003) have produced an extremely comprehensive list (see Thinking deeply 17.3). This list of quality criteria draws on the schemes that already existed at the time of their research and also on consultations with researchers in various fields. These consultations were in the form of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with practising researchers and writers on social research methods. In fact, I was one of the interviewees and also a focus group participant.

The fact that qualitative researchers have been seeking to make progress in formulating quality criteria appropriate to their approach does not mean that this necessarily has an impact on the reception of their research. Pratt (2008) has shown that many qualitative researchers believe that their work continues to be judged by criteria associated with validity and reliability that were introduced in Chapter 3 and that tend to be viewed as more appropriate to quantitative research. This tendency has implications for the nature of the research that does get published in academic journals, in that it gives an advantage to those researchers working within a quantitative research tradition. In other words, although qualitative researchers have sought to develop what they deem to be appropriate criteria, the impact on the evaluation of research is not as great as might be expected.

Between quantitative and qualitative research criteria

Hammersley (1992a) lies midway between the preference for adapting quantitative research criteria and the preference for alternative quality criteria when assessing the quality of qualitative investigations. He proposes that validity is an important criterion but reformulates it somewhat. For Hammersley, validity means that an empirical account must be plausible and credible and should take into account the amount and kind of

Thinking deeply 17.3
Using checklists for appraising quality in qualitative research?

Spencer et al. (2003) were commissioned to produce a report for the UK government's Cabinet Office that aimed to provide a framework for assessing the quality of evaluation research studies that derived from qualitative investigations. Although their report focused upon evaluation research (see Key concept 3.5), they drew on considerations relating more generally to qualitative research, so that their scheme has a relevance beyond evaluation research.

The authors produced what is probably the most comprehensive list of criteria around. Here are the criteria that they suggest should be used when appraising the quality of a qualitative research study. In the case of each criterion, the original wording has been used.

1. How credible are the findings?
2. Has knowledge/understanding been extended by the research?
3. How well does the evaluation address its original aims and purposes?
4. Scope for drawing wider influences—how well is this explained?
5. How clear is the basis of the evaluative appraisal?
6. How defensible is the research design?
7. How well defended is the sample design/target selection of cases/documents?
8. Sample composition/case inclusion—how well is the eventual coverage described?
9. How well was the data collection carried out?
10. How well has the approach to, and formulation of, the analysis been conveyed?
11. Contexts of data sources—how well are they retained and portrayed?
12. How well has diversity of perspective and content been explored?
13. How well has detail, depth and complexity (richness?) of the data been conveyed?
14. How clear are the links between data, interpretation and conclusions—i.e. how well can the route to any conclusions be seen?
15. How clear and coherent is the reporting?
16. How clear are the assumptions/theoretical perspectives/values that have shaped the form and output of the evaluation?
17. What evidence is there of attention to ethical issues?
18. How adequately has the research process been documented?

Each of these eighteen criteria comes with 'quality indicators' that are designed to help in the appraisal of a study. What is not clear is how such a framework should be used. It has the appearance of a checklist, but, as Spencer et al. (2003: 90) note, there is resistance within the qualitative research community to the possibly rigid application of any list of criteria that a checklist would entail. The researchers found that the idea of checklists of quality criteria was generally regarded rather negatively by interviewees. In fact, Spencer et al. do not promote their framework as a checklist, noting various concerns about their use in qualitative research, such as the risk of checklists becoming too prescriptive or of being applied too rigidly. However, the fact that the authors do not treat their work as leading to a checklist does not mean that the framework cannot or should not be used in that way. Indeed, around the same time that Spencer and his colleagues published their report, Michael Quinn Patton, a leading qualitative evaluation researcher, published online a list of criteria that *was* designed to be used as a checklist—see: **www.wmich.edu/evalctr/archive_checklists/qec.pdf** (accessed 7 February 2011).

What do *you* think? Can checklists be valuable for appraising the quality of qualitative studies? If your answer is no, why is that? Is it something to do with the nature of qualitative research that makes checklists of quality

inappropriate? Might checklists be more valuable in appraising the quality of quantitative research? The full report by Spencer *et al.* can be found at:
www.civilservice.gov.uk/Assets/a_quality_framework_tcm6-7314.pdf (accessed 11 October 2010).

There has been a proliferation of various schemes for appraising and/or thinking about quality criteria for qualitative research. These schemes often include similar criteria to those produced by Spencer et al. but repackage them in various ways. For example, Tracy (2010) stipulates eight criteria:

1. Worthy topic—relevant, interesting, significant, etc.
2. Rich rigour—rich data supplied in abundance and appropriately
3. Sincerity—the researcher is reflexive (see Key concept 17.5) about values and biases and is transparent in approach
4. Credibility—implements practices such as thick descriptions, triangulation (see Key concept 17.4), and respondent validation (see Key concept 17.3)
5. Resonance—has an affecting impact on readers
6. Significant contribution—makes an impact in terms of such outcomes as theory, practice, and morality
7. Ethical—considers and engages in ethical practices
8. Meaningful coherence—addresses what it claims to address, uses appropriate methods, and links research questions, literature, findings and interpretations.

These eight criteria cover similar ground to the Spencer et al. scheme but bundle them together differently. The notion of 'resonance' is possibly the main element that is not explicitly outlined in their scheme. Stige, Malterud, and Midtgarden (2009) have also produced a list of what appear to be criteria for qualitative research and which cover similar ground to Spencer et al. and Tracey. However, Stige et al. argue that that the items they outline should be thought of as an agenda for dialogue about qualitative research rather than as strict criteria around which there is a consensus. Thus, these authors are inviting us to think about qualitative research quality criteria differently.

evidence used in relation to an account. In proposing this criterion, Hammersley's position shares with realism (see Key concept 2.3) the notion that there is an external social reality that can be accessed by the researcher. However, he simultaneously shares with the critics of the empirical realist position the rejection of the notion that such access is direct and in particular that the researcher can act as a mirror on the social world, reflecting its image back to an audience. Instead, the researcher is always engaged in representations or constructions of that world. The plausibility and credibility of a researcher's 'truth claims' then become the main considerations in evaluating qualitative research. Hammersley's *subtle realist* account, as he calls it, entails recognizing that we can never be absolutely certain about the truth of any account, since we have no completely incontrovertible way of gaining direct access to the reality on which it is based. Therefore, he argues, 'we must judge the validity of claims [about truth] on the basis of the adequacy of the evidence offered in support of them' (1992a: 69). This means that an account can be held to be 'valid or true if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain or theorise' (1992a: 69).

Hammersley also suggests *relevance* as an important criterion of qualitative research. Relevance is taken to be assessed from the vantage point of the importance of a topic within its substantive field or the contribution it makes to the literature on that field. Hammersley also discusses the question of whether the concerns of practitioners (that is, people who are part of the social setting being investigated and who are likely to have a vested interest in the research question and the implications of findings deriving from it) might be an aspect of considerations of relevance. In this way, his approach touches on the kinds of consideration that are addressed by Guba and Lincoln's authenticity criteria (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Guba and Lincoln 1994). However, he recognizes

Key concept 17.6
What is action research?

There is no single type of action research, but broadly it can be defined as an approach in which the action researcher and members of a social setting collaborate in the diagnosis of a problem and in the development of a solution based on the diagnosis. It can take a variety of forms, from the action researcher being hired by a client to work on the diagnosis to and solution of a problem, to working with a group of individuals who are identified as needing to develop a capacity for independent action. The collection of data is likely to be involved in the formulation of the diagnosis of a problem and in the emergence of a solution. In action research, the investigator becomes part of the field of study. Action research can involve the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. Gibson (2004: 5) describes a Canadian project that was interested in the social and cultural factors that have an impact on the prevention and treatment of tuberculosis (TB) among 'foreign-born and aboriginal populations'. The idea for the project came from a nurse in a TB clinic who garnered support from the groups most affected by the disease. An advisory committee, which drew its membership from the local community in a province of Alberta, as well as from community, government, and academic constituencies, was formed. Two representatives from each of the ten distinct socio-cultural communities were recruited and acted as research associates. Following training, they collected data through interviews and analysed some of the resulting data. Interviews were conducted in relation to four groups: TB sufferers; people on prophylaxis; people who refused prophylaxis; and 'those with a more distant history of TB in their country of origin or on aboriginal reserves' (Gibson 2004: 5). The research associates, members of the advisory committee, and academic staff analysed the interview data. The findings revealed that, while the health care system deals well with active TB cases, it is less effective in relation to prevention in relation to communities at risk. It also revealed that health professionals often fail to identify TB because it is not prevalent in Western nations. The advisory group then produced a plan to disseminate its findings and developed other initiatives including 'an information video, a community education nurse position, and TB fact sheet in their various languages' (Gibson 2004: 5).

Action research is more common in some social science areas than others. It is more common in fields such as business and management research and social policy than others. It is sometimes dismissed by academics for lacking rigour and for being too partisan in approach. However, it is advocated by some researchers because of its commitment to involving people in the diagnosis of and solutions to problems rather than imposing on them solutions to predefined problems.

Action research should not be confused with *evaluation research* (Key concept 3.5), which usually denotes the study of the impact of an intervention, such as a new social policy or a new innovation in organizations. The research referred to in Research in focus 17.6 was conducted broadly with an evaluation research frame of reference in that it was concerned to evaluate the impact of the introduction of performance appraisal in British universities.

that the kinds of research questions and findings that might be of interest to practitioners and researchers are likely to be somewhat different. As Hammersley notes, practitioners are likely to be interested in research that helps them to understand or address problems with which they are confronted. These may not be (and perhaps are unlikely to be) at the forefront of a researcher's set of preoccupations. However, there may be occasions when researchers can combine the two and may even be able to use this capability as a means of securing access to organizations in which they wish to conduct research (see Chapter 19 for a further discussion of access issues).

Overview of the issue of criteria

There is a recognition—albeit to varying degrees—that a simple application of the quantitative researcher's criteria of reliability and validity to qualitative research is not desirable, but writers vary in the degree to which they propose a complete overhaul of those criteria. Nor do the

three positions outlined above—adapting quantitative research criteria, alternative criteria, and Hammersley's subtle realism—represent the full range of possible stances on this issue (Hammersley 1992a; Seale 1999). To a large extent, the differences between the three positions reflect divergences in the degree to which a realist position is broadly accepted or rejected. Writers on qualitative research who apply the ideas of reliability and validity with little if any adaptation broadly position themselves as realists—that is, as saying that social reality can be captured by qualitative researchers through their concepts and theories. Lincoln and Guba reject this view, arguing instead that qualitative researchers' concepts and theories are representations and that there may, therefore, be other equally credible representations of the same phenomena. Hammersley's position occupies a middle ground in terms of the axis, with realism at one end and anti-realism at the other, in that, while acknowledging the existence of social phenomena that are part of an external reality, he disavows any suggestion that it is possible to reproduce that reality for the audiences of social scientific endeavour. Most qualitative researchers nowadays probably operate around the midpoint on this realism axis, though without necessarily endorsing Hammersley's views. Typically, they treat their accounts as one of a number of possible representations rather than as definitive versions of social reality. They also bolster those accounts through some of the strategies advocated by Lincoln and Guba, such as thick descriptions, respondent validation exercises, and triangulation.

To a certain extent, traditional quantitative research criteria have made something of a comeback since the late 1990s. One issue is to do with the perception of qualitative research. For one thing, to reject notions such as reliability and validity could be taken by some constituencies (such as funding bodies) as indicative of a lack of concern with rigour, which is not a desirable impression to create. Consequently, there has been some evidence of increased concern with such issues. Armstrong et al. (1997) report the result of an exercise in what they call 'inter-rater reliability', which involved the analysis by six experienced researchers of a focus group transcript. The transcript related to research concerned with links between perceptions of disability and genetic screening. The focus group was made up of sufferers of cystic fibrosis (CF), and the participants were asked to discuss genetic screening. The raters were asked to extract prominent themes from transcripts, which is one of the main ways of analysing qualitative data (see Chapter 24). They tended to identify similar themes but differed in how themes were 'packaged'. One theme that was identified was 'visibility'. This theme was identified as a theme in transcripts by all researchers and refers to the invisibility of genetic disorders. The CF sufferers felt disadvantaged relative to other disabled groups because of the invisibility of their disorder and felt that the public were more sympathetic to and more inclined to recognize visible disabilities. However, some analysts linked it to other issues: two linked it with stigma; one to problems of managing invisibility. In a sense the results are somewhat inconclusive but are interesting for this discussion because they reveal an interest among qualitative researchers in reliability. A more recent and similar exercise is described in Research in focus 17.2.

Research in focus 17.2
Reliability for qualitative researchers

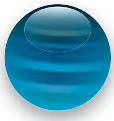
Gladney et al. (2003) report the findings of an exercise in which two multidisciplinary teams of researchers were asked to analyse qualitative interviews with eighty Texas school students. The interviews were concerned with reflections on violence on television; reasons for violence among some young people; and reasons for some young people *not* being violent. One group of raters read interview transcripts of the interviews; the other group listened to the audio-taped recordings. Thus, the dice were slightly loaded in favour of different themes being identified by the two groups. In spite of this there was remarkable consistency between the two groups in the themes identified. For example, in response to the question 'Why are some young people violent?', Group One identified the following themes: family/parental influence; peer influence; social influence; media influence; and coping. Group Two's themes were: the way they were raised; media influence; appearance; anger, revenge, protection; and environmental or peer influence. Such findings are quite reassuring and are interesting because of their clear interest in reliability in a qualitative research context. Interestingly, exercises such as this can be viewed as a form of what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call *auditing*.

Student experience
Thinking about reliability

Hannah Creane was concerned about the reliability of her categorization of her qualitative data and enlisted others to check out her thinking.

> There was a slight concern when I was grouping data together that my categorization was of an arbitrary nature, and so I could be making assumptions and theorizing on the basis of highly subjective categories. However, I tried to make sure that all the categories I used were relevant, and I checked them over with other people to make sure they made sense in relation to the research and the questions I was dealing with.

To read more about Hannah's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: ***www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/***



The main preoccupations of qualitative researchers

As was noted in Chapter 7, quantitative and qualitative research can be viewed as exhibiting a set of distinctive but contrasting preoccupations. These preoccupations reflect epistemologically grounded beliefs about what constitutes acceptable knowledge. In Chapter 2, it was suggested that at the level of epistemology, whereas quantitative research is profoundly influenced by a natural science approach to what should count as acceptable knowledge, qualitative researchers are more influenced by interpretivism (see Key concept 2.4). This position can itself be viewed as the product of the confluence of three related stances: Weber's notion of *Verstehen*; symbolic interactionism; and phenomenology. In this section, five distinctive preoccupations among qualitative researchers will be outlined and examined.

Seeing through the eyes of the people being studied

An underlying premiss of many qualitative researchers is that the subject matter of the social sciences (that is, people and their social world) does differ from the subject matter of the natural sciences. A key difference is that the objects of analysis of the natural sciences (atoms, molecules, gases, chemicals, metals, and so on) cannot attribute meaning to events and to their environment. However, people *do*. This argument is especially evident in the work of Schutz and can particularly be seen in the passage quoted on page 30, where Schutz draws attention to the fact that, unlike the objects of the natural sciences, the objects of the social sciences—people—are capable of attributing meaning to their environment. Consequently, many qualitative researchers have suggested that a methodology is required for studying people that reflects these differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences. As a result, many qualitative researchers express a commitment to viewing events and the social world through the eyes of the people that they study. The social world must be interpreted from the perspective of the people being studied, rather than as though those subjects were incapable of their own reflections on the social world. The epistemology underlying qualitative research has been expressed by the authors of one widely read text as involving two central tenets: '(1) . . . face-to-face interaction is the fullest condition of participating in the mind of another human being, and (2) . . . you must participate in the mind of another human being (in sociological terms, "take the role of the other") to acquire social knowledge' (Lofland and Lofland 1995: 16).

It is not surprising, therefore, that many researchers make claims in their reports of their investigations about having sought to take the views of the people they studied as the point of departure. This tendency reveals itself in frequent references to empathy and seeing through others' eyes. Here are some examples.

- Fielding (1982) carried out research on members of the National Front, a British extreme right-wing political party. In spite of his feelings of revulsion for the racist doctrine, he sought to examine the party's position 'as a moral posture and its members' interpretations were to be illuminated by an empathetic immersion in their world. In the process of "telling it

like it was for them", I could reproduce an account from which outsiders could understand the ideology's persuasiveness to people so placed' (Fielding 1982: 83).

- Armstrong (1993) carried out ethnographic research on football hooliganism through participant observation with Sheffield United supporters. He describes his work as located in '*Verstehende* sociology—trying to think oneself into the situations of the people one is interested in . . . in this case the "Hooligan". This approach involves recognizing social and historical phenomena as beyond any single or simple identifying cause and attempting to make sense from the social actors' viewpoint' (Armstrong 1993: 5–6).
- In the opening sentence of their book, which is based on an ethnographic study of the work of itinerant technical contractors in the USA, Barley and Kunda (2004: p. ix) write: 'As ethnographers, our agenda is to depict the world of technical contracting from the perspective of those who live in it.' They go on to claim that their work 'is the story of contracting told from the participants' perspectives' (2004: 30).
- For their research on teenaged girls' views on and experiences of violence, Burman et al. (2001: 447) 'sought to ground the study in young women's experiences of violence, hearing their accounts and privileging their subjective views'.

Student experience
Importance of seeing through research participants' eyes

Rebecca Barnes was attracted to qualitative research for her research on violence in same-sex relationships because there had been only quantitative research in this area and because she wanted to understand the phenomenon in her research participants' own words.

> I chose a qualitative research design for a number of reasons. First, I was aware that very little qualitative research exists in my field of research, and at the time that I started my research, I could not find any comprehensive qualitative studies of woman-to-woman partner abuse in the UK. Thus, I wanted my research to contribute towards filling this gap, on a national and international level. I also chose a qualitative research design because I wanted to achieve an in-depth understanding of the experiences of woman-to-woman partner abuse that women reported in their own words and using their own frames of reference. I also set out to achieve a more textured analysis of the dynamics of abuse and the different impacts that being abused has upon women, and how these may change over time.

To read more about Rebecca's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: ***www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/***

This predilection for seeing through the eyes of the people studied in the course of qualitative research is often accompanied by the closely related goal of seeking to probe beneath surface appearances. After all, by taking the position of the people you are studying, the prospect is raised that they might view things differently from what an outsider with little direct contact might have expected. This stance reveals itself in:

- Foster's (1995) research on a high crime community, which was not perceived as such by its inhabitants;
- Skeggs's (1994: 74) study of young working-class women, showing that they were not 'ideological dupes of both social class and femininity';
- A. Taylor's (1993: 8) study of intravenous female drug-users, showing the people she studied are not 'pathetic, inadequate individuals' but 'rational, active people making decisions based on the contingencies of both their drug using careers and their roles and status in society';
- Armstrong's (1993: 11) quest in his research on football hooliganism to 'see beyond mere appearances' and his finding that, contrary to the popular view, hooligans are not a highly organized group led by a clearly identifiable group of ringleaders;
- O'Reilly's (2000) ethnography of British expatriates on the Costa del Sol in Spain, in which she shows how the widely held view that this group is deeply dissatisfied with their lives in the sun and long to return is by no means an accurate portrayal in terms of how they view themselves and their situation.

The empathetic stance of seeking to see through the eyes of one's research participants is very much in tune with interpretivism and demonstrates well the epistemological links with phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and *Verstehen*. However, it is not without practical problems. For example: the risk of 'going native' and losing sight of what you are studying (see Key concept 19.3); the problem of how far the researcher should go, such as the potential problem of participating in illegal or dangerous activities, which could be a risk in research like that engaged in by Taylor and Armstrong; and the possibility that the researcher will be able to see through the eyes of only some of the people who form part of a social scene but not others, such as only people of the same gender. These and other practical difficulties will be addressed in the chapters that follow.

Abductive reasoning

Precisely because in much qualitative research the perspectives of those one is studying are the empirical point of departure, many writers argue that the kind of reasoning involved is better described not as inductive reasoning but as *abductive* reasoning (e.g. N. Blaikie 2004a; Charmaz 2006). With **abduction** the researcher grounds a theoretical understanding of the contexts and people he or she is studying in the language, meanings, and perspectives that form their worldview. The crucial step in abduction is that, having described and understood the world from his or her participants' perspectives, the researcher must come to a social scientific account of the social world as seen from those perspectives. Further, arriving at a social scientific account must not lose touch with the world as it is seen by those whose voices provided the data. On the face of it, this looks like an inductive logic, and indeed there is an element of induction in this process. However, what distinguishes abduction is that the theoretical account is grounded in the worldview of those one researches. Abduction is broadly inductive in approach but is worth distinguishing by virtue of its reliance on explanation and understanding on participants' worldviews.

Description and the emphasis on context

Qualitative researchers are much more inclined than quantitative researchers to provide a great deal of descriptive detail when reporting the fruits of their research. This is not to say that they are exclusively concerned with description. They *are* concerned with explanation, and indeed the extent to which qualitative researchers ask 'why?' questions is frequently understated. For example, Skeggs (1997: 22) has written that her first question for her research on young working-class women was 'why do women, who are clearly not just victims of some ideological conspiracy, consent to a system of class and gender oppression which appears to offer few rewards and little benefit?' (see Research in focus 19.7 for further details of this study).

Many qualitative studies provide a detailed account of what goes on in the setting being investigated. Very often qualitative studies seem to be full of apparently trivial details. However, these details are frequently important for the qualitative researcher, because of their significance for their subjects and also because the details provide an account of the context within which people's behaviour takes place. It was with this point in mind that Geertz (1973a) recommended the provision of **thick descriptions** of social settings, events, and often individuals. As a result of this emphasis on description, qualitative studies are often full of detailed information about the social worlds being examined. On the surface, some of this detail may appear irrelevant, and, indeed, there is a risk of the researcher becoming too embroiled in descriptive detail. Lofland and Lofland (1995: 164–5), for example, warn against the sin of what they call 'descriptive excess' in qualitative research, whereby the amount of detail overwhelms or inhibits the analysis of data.

One of the main reasons why qualitative researchers are keen to provide considerable descriptive detail is that they typically emphasize the importance of the contextual understanding of social behaviour. This means that behaviour, values, or whatever must be understood in context. This recommendation means that we cannot understand the behaviour of members of a social group other than in terms of the specific environment in which they operate. In this way, behaviour that may appear odd or irrational can make perfect sense when we understand the particular context within which that behaviour takes place. The emphasis on context in qualitative research goes back to many of the classic studies in social anthropology, which often demonstrated how a particular practice, such as the magical ritual that may accompany the sowing of seeds, made little sense unless we understand the belief systems of that society. One of the chief reasons for the emphasis on descriptive detail is that it is often precisely this detail that provides the mapping of context in terms of which behaviour is understood. The propensity for description can also be interpreted as a manifestation of the naturalism that pervades much qualitative research (see Key concept 3.4), because it places a premium on detailed, rich descriptions of social settings.

Research in focus 17.3
Contextual understanding in an ethnographic study of three schools

Swain (2004) conducted an ethnographic study of three junior schools in the UK in the late 1990s. Ethnography is discussed in Chapter 19. Because it compared findings from three schools, this was a multiple-case study, which drew on the strengths of using a comparative design in that it was possible to explore the significance of context across the three schools. The schools were different in terms of the social characteristics of the pupils they recruited: Highwoods Independent's pupils were mainly upper middle class; pupils at Petersfield Junior were predominantly middle class; and Westmoor Abbey Junior's pupils were mainly working class (the school names are pseudonyms). Swain (2004: 169) describes his data-collection methods as involving non-participant observation of pupils in lessons and around the school and 'loosely structured interviews' with pupils based on 'nominated friendship groups'. In this article, Swain was interested in the ways in which boys construct what it means to be masculine in the school and draws primarily on data collected on boys rather than on girls. Swain shows that masculinity was inseparable from the achievement of status among school peer groups and that the body was the means of expressing masculinity. The significance of context emerges in connection with Swain's account of how the body was used to convey masculinity in the three schools: at Highwoods, sport was the medium through which the body expressed masculinity; at Westmoor Abbey, the emphasis was macho and frequently took on a violent tone; and, at Petersfield, it was speed and strength (predominantly in the playground rather than on the sports field). Context reveals itself in the different resources in the three schools that students must draw upon to perform masculinity.

Conducting qualitative research in more than one setting can be helpful in identifying the significance of context and the ways in which it influences behaviour and ways of thinking. Research in focus 17.3 provides an illustration of a multiple-case study that demonstrates this potential.

Emphasis on process

Qualitative research tends to view social life in terms of processes. This tendency reveals itself in a number of different ways. One of the main ways is that there is often a concern to show how events and patterns unfold over time. As a result, qualitative evidence often conveys a strong sense of change and flux. As Pettigrew (1997: 338) usefully puts it, process is 'a sequence of individual and collective events, actions, and activities unfolding over time in context'. Qualitative research that is based in ethnographic methods is particularly associated with this emphasis on process (although, ironically, British social anthropology, which is often associated with the early development of ethnographic research, is sometimes thought of as presenting a static picture of social reality by virtue of its association with functionalism). It is the element of participant observation that is a key feature of ethnography that is especially instrumental in generating this feature.

Ethnographers are typically immersed in a social setting for a long time—frequently years. Consequently, they are able to observe the ways in which events develop over time or the ways in which the different elements of a social system (values, beliefs, behaviour, and so on) interconnect. Such findings can inject a sense of process by seeing social life in terms of streams of interdependent events and elements (see Research in focus 17.4 for an example).

This is not to say, however, that ethnographers are the only qualitative researchers who inject a sense of process into our understanding of social life. It can also be achieved through semi-structured and unstructured interviewing, by asking participants to reflect on the processes leading up to or following on from an event. McKee and Bell (1985: 388; see also Thinking deeply 3.3), for example, show, through the use of a 'largely unstructured, conversational interview style' with forty-five couples in which the man was unemployed, the accommodations that are made over time by both husbands and wives to the fact of male unemployment. The various accommodations are not an immediate effect of unemployment but are gradual and incremental responses over time. The life-history approach is an example of a form of qualitative research. One of the best-known studies of this kind is O. Lewis's (1961) study of a poor Mexican family. Lewis carried out extended taped

Research in focus 17.4
Process in (strike) action

Waddington (1994) describes his experiences associated with his participant observation of a strike at the Ansells brewery in Birmingham in the 1980s. As a participant observer, he was involved in 'attending picket lines, mass meetings and planning discussions, and accompanying the strikers on flying picketing and intelligence gathering manœuvres' (1994: 113). In addition to observation, he carried out informal interviews and linked these data to other sources, such as 'material deriving from newspaper archives, company and trade union documents, letters and richly detailed minutes of trade union–management meetings' (1994: 115). As a result, he was able to show 'how the contemporary beliefs, values and attitudes of the workforce, and the mutual feelings of animosity and distrust between employees and management, were shaped by a sequence of historical events stretching back over 20 years' (1994: 115). We can see in this example the development of a sense of process in three ways: through observation of the strike over its entirety, so that developments and interconnections between events could be brought out; through connecting these events with historical and other data, so that the links between the strike and previous and other events and actions could be outlined; and through the sketching of the context (in the form of the past, as well as current beliefs and values) and its links with behaviour during the strike.

interviews with the family members to reconstruct their life histories. For his study of disasters in the UK, and in particular of the fire at a holiday leisure complex on the Isle of Man, Turner (1994) employed published documents to arrive at a reconstruction of the events leading up to the fire and a theoretical understanding of those events. Thus, the emphasis on process in qualitative research can be seen in the use of quite different approaches to data collection.

Thus, process may be investigated in real time through participant observation (see Research in focus 17.4 for an example) or, as in the examples described in the previous paragraph, it may be arrived at through retrospective interviewing or through constructing a processual account through the examination of documents.

Flexibility and limited structure

Many qualitative researchers are disdainful of approaches to research that entail the imposition of predetermined formats on the social world. This position is largely to do with the preference for seeing through the eyes of the people being studied. After all, if a structured method of data collection is employed, since this is bound to be the product of an investigator's ruminations about the object of enquiry, certain decisions must have been made about what he or she expects to find and about the nature of the social reality that would be encountered. Therefore, the researcher is limited in the degree to which he or she can genuinely adopt the worldview of the people being studied. Consequently, most qualitative researchers prefer a research orientation that entails as little prior contamination of the social world as possible. To do otherwise risks imposing an inappropriate frame of reference on people. Keeping structure to a minimum is supposed to enhance the opportunity of genuinely revealing the perspectives of the people you are studying. Also, in the process, aspects of people's social world that are particularly important to them, but that might not even have crossed the mind of a researcher unacquainted with it, are more likely to be forthcoming. As a result, qualitative research tends to be a strategy that tries not to delimit areas of enquiry too much and to ask fairly general rather than specific research questions (see Thinking deeply 17.2). For example, Dacin, Munir, and Tracey (2010: 1399) justify their selection of a qualitative research approach to investigate whether Cambridge University dining rituals serve to perpetuate the British class system on the grounds that it 'allowed us to build our understanding of the properly contextualized experiences of those involved in the dining ritual, rather than imposing a particular framework upon them'.

Because of the preference for an unstructured approach to the collection of data, qualitative researchers adopt methods of research that do not require the investigator to develop highly specific research questions in advance and therefore to devise instruments specifically for those questions to be answered. Ethnography, with its emphasis on participant observation, is particularly well suited to this orientation. It allows researchers to submerge themselves in a social setting with a fairly general research focus in mind and gradually to formulate a narrower emphasis by making as many observations of that setting as possible. They can then formulate more

specific research questions out of their collected data. Similarly, interviewing is an extremely prominent method in the qualitative researcher's armoury, but it is not of the kind we encountered in the course of most of Chapter 9—namely, the structured interview. Instead, qualitative researchers prefer less structured approaches to interviewing, as we will see in Chapter 20. Blumer's (1954) argument for sensititizing rather than definitive concepts (that is, the kind employed by quantitative researchers) is symptomatic of the preference for a more open-ended, and hence less structured, approach.

An advantage of the unstructured nature of most qualitative enquiry (that is, in addition to the prospect of gaining access to people's worldviews) is that it offers the prospect of flexibility. The researcher can change direction in the course of his or her investigation much more easily than in quantitative research, which tends to have a built-in momentum once the data collection is under way: if you send out hundreds of postal questionnaires and realize after you have started to get some back that there is an issue that you would have liked to investigate, you are not going to find it easy to retrieve the situation. Structured interviewing and structured observation can involve some flexibility, but the requirement to make interviews as comparable as possible for survey investigations limits the extent to which this can happen. O'Reilly (2000) has written that her research on the British on the Costa del Sol shifted in two ways over the duration of her participant observation: from an emphasis on the elderly to expatriates of all ages; and from an emphasis on permanent residents to less permanent forms of migration, such as tourism. These changes in emphasis occurred because of the limitations of just focusing on the elderly and on permanent migrants, since these groups were not necessarily as distinctive as might have been supposed. Similarly, Kathleen Gerson has explained that, in her research on changing forms of the family, she conducted an early interview with a young man who had been brought up in his early years in a traditional household that underwent a considerable change during his childhood. This led her to change her focus from an emphasis on family structures to processes of change in the family (Gerson and Horowitz 2002). See Research in focus 17.5 for a further illustration of the ways in which the unstructured data-collection style of qualitative research can be used to suggest alternative avenues of enquiry or ways of thinking about the phenomenon being investigated.

Concepts and theory grounded in data

This issue has already been addressed in much of the exposition of qualitative research above. For qualitative researchers, concepts and theories are usually inductively arrived at from the data that are collected (see Research in focus 17.1 and 17.6).

Research in focus 17.5
Flexibility in action

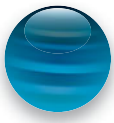
In the course of a study of young people with learning difficulties using qualitative interviews, C. A. Davies (1999) reports that she found that on many occasions her interviewees mentioned food in the course of conversations. Initially, she followed these conversations up largely in order to establish rapport with these young people. However, she gradually came to realize that in fact food was of considerable significance for her research, because it represented a lens through which her participants viewed their anxieties about the ways people attempted to control them. Food was also a focus for their strategies of resistance to control.

Research in focus 17.6
Emerging concepts

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, most UK universities were in the throes of introducing staff appraisal schemes for both academic and academic-related staff. Staff appraisal is employed to review the appraisee's performance and activities over a period of usually one or two years. Along with some colleagues, I undertook an evaluation of staff appraisal schemes in four universities (Bryman et al. 1994). The research entailed the collection of both

quantitative and qualitative data within the framework of a comparative research design. The qualitative data were derived from large numbers of interviews with appraisers, appraisees, senior managers, and many others. In the course of conducting the interviews and analysing the subsequent data we became increasingly aware of a cynicism among many of the people we interviewed. This attitude revealed itself in several ways, such as: a view that appraisal had been introduced just to pacify the government; a belief that nothing happened of any significance in the aftermath of an appraisal meeting; the view that it was not benefiting universities; and a suggestion that many participants to the appraisal process were just going through the motions. As one of the interviewees said in relation to this last feature: 'It's like going through the motions of it [appraisal]. It's just get it over with and signed and dated and filed and that's the end of it' (quoted in Bryman et al. 1994: 180).

On the basis of these findings, it was suggested that the attitudes towards appraisal and the behaviour of those involved in appraisal were characterized by *procedural compliance*, which was defined as 'a response to an organizational innovation in which the technical requirements of the innovation . . . are broadly adhered to, but where there are substantial reservations about its efficacy and only partial commitment to it, so that there is a tendency for the procedures associated with the innovation to be adhered to with less than a total commitment to its aims' (Bryman et al. 1994: 178).



The critique of qualitative research

In a similar way to the criticisms that have been levelled at quantitative research mainly by qualitative researchers, a parallel critique has been built up of qualitative research. Some of the more common ones follow.

Qualitative research is too subjective

Quantitative researchers sometimes criticize qualitative research as being too impressionistic and subjective. By these criticisms they usually mean that qualitative findings rely too much on the researcher's often unsystematic views about what is significant and important, and also upon the close personal relationships that the researcher frequently strikes up with the people studied. Precisely because qualitative research often begins in a relatively open-ended way and entails a gradual narrowing-down of research questions or problems, the consumer of the writings deriving from the research is given few clues as to why one area was the chosen area upon which attention was focused rather than another. By contrast, quantitative researchers point to the tendency for the problem formulation stage in their work to be more explicitly stated in terms of such matters as the existing literature on that topic and key theoretical ideas.

Difficult to replicate

Quantitative researchers also often argue that these tendencies are even more of a problem because of the difficulty of replicating a qualitative study, although replication in the social sciences is by no means a straightforward matter regardless of this particular issue (see Chapter 7). Precisely because it is unstructured and often reliant upon the qualitative researcher's ingenuity, it is almost impossible to conduct a true replication, since there are hardly any standard procedures to be followed. In qualitative research, the investigator him- or herself is the main instrument of data collection, so that what is observed and heard and also what the researcher decides to concentrate upon are very much products of his or her predilections. There are several possible components of this criticism: what qualitative researchers (especially perhaps in ethnography) choose to focus upon while in the field is a product of what strikes them as significant, whereas other researchers are likely to empathize with other issues; the responses of participants (people being observed or interviewed) to qualitative researchers is likely to be affected by the characteristics of the researcher (personality, age, gender, and so on); and, because of the unstructured nature of qualitative data, interpretation will be profoundly influenced by the subjective leanings of a researcher. Because of such factors, it is difficult—not to say impossible—to replicate qualitative findings. The difficulties ethnographers experience when they revisit grounds previously trodden by another researcher (often referred to as a 'restudy') do not inspire confidence in the replicability of qualitative research (Bryman 1994).

Problems of generalization

It is often suggested that the scope of the findings of qualitative investigations is restricted. When participant observation is used or when qualitative interviews are conducted with a small number of individuals in a certain organization or locality, they argue that it is impossible to know how the findings can be generalized to other settings. How can just one or two cases be representative of all cases? In other words, can we really treat Holdaway's (1982) research on the police in Sheffield as representative of all police forces, or Armstrong's (1998) research on Sheffield United supporters as representative of all football supporters, or Waddington's (1994) study of a strike as generalizable to all lengthy strikes? In the case of research based on interviews rather than participation, can we treat interviewees who have not been selected through a probability procedure or even quota sampling as representative? Are A. Taylor's (1993) female intravenous drug-users typical of all members of that category or are Skeggs's (1994; see Research in focus 19.7) young working-class women typical?

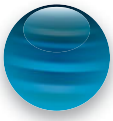
The answer in all these cases is, of course, emphatically 'no'. A case study is not a sample of one drawn from a known population. Similarly, the people who are interviewed in qualitative research are not meant to be representative of a population, and indeed, in some cases, like female intravenous drug-users, we may find it more or less impossible to enumerate the population in any precise manner. Instead, the findings of qualitative research are to generalize to theory rather than to populations. It is 'the cogency of the theoretical reasoning' (J. C. Mitchell 1983: 207), rather than statistical criteria, that is decisive in considering the generalizability of the findings of qualitative research. In other words, it is the quality of the theoretical inferences that are made out of qualitative data that is crucial to the assessment of generalization. As noted in Chapter 3, this view of generalization is called 'analytic generalization' by Yin (2009) and 'theoretical generalization' by J. C. Mitchell (1983).

However, not all writers on the issue of generalization in relation to qualitative research (and case study research in particular) accept this view. M. Williams (2000: 215) has argued that, in many cases, qualitative researchers are in a position to produce what he calls *moderatum* generalizations—that is, ones in which aspects of the focus of enquiry (a group of drug-users, a group of football hooligans, a strike) 'can be seen to be instances of a broader set of recognizable features'. In addition, Williams argues that not only is it the case that qualitative researchers *can* make such generalizations but that in fact they often *do* make them. Thus, when generating findings relating to the hooligans who follow a certain football club, a researcher will often draw comparisons with findings by other researchers relating to comparable groups. Indeed, the researcher may also draw comparisons and linkages with still other groups: followers of other professional sports teams or violent groups that are not linked to sport. When forging such comparisons and linkages, the researcher is engaging in *moderatum* generalization. *Moderatum* generalizations will always be limited and somewhat more tentative than those associated with statistical generalizations of the kind associated with probability sampling (see Chapter 8). On the other hand, they do permit a modicum of generalization and help to counter the view that generalization beyond the immediate evidence and the case is impossible in qualitative research.

These three criticisms reflect many of the preoccupations of quantitative research that were discussed in Chapter 7. A further criticism that is often made of qualitative research, but that is perhaps less influenced by quantitative research criteria, is the suggestion that qualitative research frequently lacks transparency in how the research was conducted.

Lack of transparency

It is sometimes difficult to establish from qualitative research what the researcher actually *did* and how he or she arrived at the study's conclusions. For example, qualitative research reports are sometimes unclear about such matters as how people were chosen for observation or interview. This deficiency contrasts sharply with the sometimes laborious accounts of sampling procedures in reports of quantitative research. However, it does not seem plausible to suggest that outlining in some detail the ways in which research participants are selected constitutes the application of quantitative research criteria. Readers have a right to know how far research participants were selected to correspond to a wide range of people. Also, the process of qualitative data analysis is frequently unclear (Bryman and Burgess 1994a). It is often not obvious how the analysis was conducted—in other words, what the researcher was actually doing when the data were analysed and therefore how the study's conclusions were arrived at. To a large extent, these areas of a lack of transparency are increasingly being addressed by qualitative researchers. It is striking that when O'Cathain et al. (2008) examined issues of quality in mixed methods research in the health services field, the qualitative methods were more likely not to be described fully (and sometimes not at all) than the quantitative components.



Is it always like this?

This was a heading that was employed in Chapter 7 in relation to quantitative research, but it is perhaps less easy to answer in relation to qualitative research. To a large extent, this is because qualitative research is less codified than quantitative research—that is, it is less influenced by strict guidelines and directions about how to go about data collection and analysis. As a result, and this may be noticed by readers of the chapters that follow this one, accounts of qualitative research are frequently less prescriptive in tone than those encountered in relation to quantitative research. Instead, they often exhibit more of a descriptive tenor, outlining the different ways qualitative researchers have gone about research or suggesting alternative ways of conducting research or analysis based on the writer's own experiences or those of others. To a large extent, this picture is changing, in that there is a growing number of books that seek to make clear-cut recommendations about how qualitative research should be carried out.

However, if we look at some of the preoccupations of qualitative research that were described above, we can see certain ways in which there are departures from the practices that are implied by these preoccupations. One of the main departures is that qualitative research is sometimes a lot more focused than is implied by the suggestion that the researcher begins with general research questions and narrows it down so that theory and concepts are arrived at during and after the data collection. There is no *necessary* reason why qualitative research cannot be employed to investigate a specific research problem. For example, Hammersley et al. (1985) describe a study that was designed to explore the impact of external assessments on schools. More specifically, they wanted to examine the contention, which was based on other studies of schools, that 'external examinations lead to lecturing and note-taking on the part of secondary-school teachers and instrumental attitudes among their pupils' (Hammersley et al. 1985: 58). This contention was examined through a comparison of two schools that varied considerably in the emphasis they placed on examinations. This study exhibits a comparative research design (see Chapter 3), with its accent on a comparison of two cases. However, at the same time that qualitative research is sometimes more focused than is implied by the suggestion that it begins with general research questions, it is sometimes more open-ended and unfocused than this suggests. As noted in Thinking deeply 17.2, some grounded theory practitioners advocate beginning with a blank slate so that theoretical ideas emerge out of the data. However, grounded theory practitioners are not alone in this approach, for it is by no means uncommon for qualitative researchers to begin with a general focus. For example, Barley and Kunda's (2004) ethnography of technical contractors does not appear to have any research questions but seeks instead to shed light on the world of these contractors and to demonstrate the implications of some of their findings for issues in the sociology of work.

A further way in which qualitative research differs from the standard model is in connection with the notion of a lack of structure in approaches to collecting and analysing data. As will be seen in Chapter 22, techniques like conversation analysis entail the application of a highly codified method for analysing talk. Moreover, the growing use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (**CAQDAS**), which will be the subject of Chapter 25, is leading to greater transparency in the procedures used for analysing qualitative data. This greater transparency may be leading to greater codification in qualitative data analysis than has previously been the case.

Some contrasts between quantitative and qualitative research

Several writers have explored the contrasts between quantitative and qualitative research by devising tables that allow the differences to be brought out (e.g. Halfpenny 1979; Bryman 1988a; Hammersley 1992b). Table 17.1 attempts to draw out the chief contrasting features:

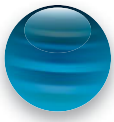
- *Numbers vs Words*. Quantitative researchers are often portrayed as preoccupied with applying measurement procedures to social life, while qualitative researchers are seen as using words in the presentation of analyses of society.
- *Point of view of researcher vs Point of view of participants*. In quantitative research, the investigator is in the driving seat. The set of concerns that he or she brings to an investigation structures the investigation. In qualitative research, the perspective of those being studied—what they see as important and significant—provides the point of orientation.
- *Researcher is distant vs Researcher is close*. This dimension is to do with the relationship between researchers and their research participants. In quantitative research, researchers are uninvolved with their subjects and in some cases, as in research based on postal questionnaires or on hired interviewers, may have no contact with them at all. Sometimes, this lack of a relationship with the subjects of an investigation is regarded as desirable by quantitative researchers, because they feel that their objectivity might be compromised if they become too involved with the people they study. The qualitative researcher seeks close involvement with the people being investigated, so that he or she can genuinely understand the world through their eyes.
- *Theory and concepts tested in research vs Theory and concepts emergent from data*. Quantitative researchers typically bring a set of concepts to bear on the research instruments being employed, so that theoretical work precedes the collection of data, whereas in qualitative research concepts and theoretical elaboration emerge out of data collection.
- *Static vs Process*. Quantitative research is frequently depicted as presenting a static image of social reality with its emphasis on relationships between variables. Change and connections between events over time tend not to surface, other than in a mechanistic fashion. Qualitative research is often depicted as attuned to the unfolding of events over time and to the interconnections between the actions of participants of social settings.
- *Structured vs Unstructured*. Quantitative research is typically highly structured, so that the investigator is able to examine the precise concepts and issues that are the focus of the study; in qualitative research the approach is invariably unstructured, so that the possibility of getting at actors' meanings and of concepts emerging out of data collection is enhanced.
- *Generalization vs Contextual understanding*. Whereas quantitative researchers want their findings to be generalizable to the relevant population, the qualitative researcher seeks an understanding of behaviour, values, beliefs, and so on in terms of the context in which the research is conducted.
- *Hard, reliable data vs Rich, deep data*. Quantitative data are often depicted as 'hard' in the sense of being robust and unambiguous, owing to the precision offered by measurement. Qualitative researchers claim, by contrast, that their contextual approach and their often prolonged involvement in a setting engender rich data.
- *Macro vs Micro*. Quantitative researchers are often depicted as involved in uncovering large-scale social trends and connections between variables, whereas qualitative researchers are seen as being concerned with small-scale aspects of social reality, such as interaction.
- *Behaviour vs Meaning*. It is sometimes suggested that the quantitative researcher is concerned with people's behaviour and the qualitative researcher with the meaning of action.
- *Artificial settings vs Natural settings*. Whereas quantitative researchers conduct research in a contrived context, qualitative researchers investigate people in natural environments.

Table 17.1

Some common contrasts between quantitative and qualitative research

Quantitative	Qualitative
Numbers	Words
Point of view of researcher	Points of view of participants
Researcher distant	Researcher close
Theory testing	Theory emergent
Static	Process
Structured	Unstructured
Generalization	Contextual understanding
Hard, reliable data	Rich, deep data
Macro	Micro
Behaviour	Meaning
Artificial settings	Natural settings

However, as we will see in Chapter 26, while these contrasts depict reasonably well the differences between quantitative and qualitative research, they should not be viewed as constituting hard-and-fast distinctions. As I show there, qualitative research can be employed to test theories, while quantitative research is often a good deal more exploratory than is typically assumed. Indeed, the section on 'Reverse operationism' in Chapter 7 implies that in quantitative research concepts often emerge out of the data that are collected (see page 180). Also, it is by no means always appropriate to characterize qualitative researchers as collecting their data in natural (rather than artificial) settings. This may be an appropriate depiction of research that entails participant observation, but a lot of qualitative research involves interviewing and interviews do not constitute natural settings, even though the interviews tend to be less structured than in survey research. Further, quantitative and qualitative research are not so poles apart that they cannot be combined, as the discussion in Chapter 27 of mixed methods research implies.



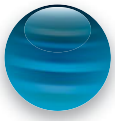
Some similarities between quantitative and qualitative research

It is also worth bearing in mind the ways in which quantitative and qualitative research are *similar* rather than different. Hardy and Bryman (2004) have pointed out that, although there clearly are differences between quantitative and qualitative research, it should also be recognized that there are similarities too. They draw attention to the following points:

- *Both are concerned with data reduction*. Both quantitative and qualitative researchers collect large amounts of data. These large amounts of data represent a problem for researchers, because they then have to distil the data. By reducing the amount of data, they can then begin to make sense of the data. In quantitative research, the process of data reduction takes the form of statistical analysis—something like a mean or a frequency table is a way of reducing the amount of data on large numbers of people. In qualitative data analysis, as will be seen in Chapter 24, qualitative researchers develop concepts out of their often rich data.
- *Both are concerned with answering research questions*. Although the nature of the kinds of research questions asked in quantitative and qualitative research are typically different (more specific in quantitative research, more open-ended in qualitative research), they are both fundamentally concerned with answering questions about the nature of social reality.
- *Both are concerned with relating data analysis to the research literature*. Both quantitative and qualitative researchers are typically concerned to relate their findings to points thrown up by the literature relating to the topics on which they work. In other words, the researcher's findings take on significance in large part when they are related to the literature.
- *Both are concerned with variation*. In different ways, both quantitative and qualitative researchers seek to uncover and then to represent the variation that they uncover. This means that both groups of researchers are keen to explore how people (or whatever the unit of analysis is) differ and to explore some of the factors connected to that variation, although, once again, the *form* that the variation takes differs.
- *Both treat frequency as a springboard for analysis*. In quantitative research, frequency is a core outcome of collecting data, as the investigator typically wants to reveal the relative frequency with which certain types of behaviour occur or how many newspaper articles emphasize a certain issue in their articles. In qualitative research, issues of frequency arise in the fact that, in reports of findings in publications, terms like 'often' or 'most' are commonly employed. Also, when analysing qualitative data, the frequency with which certain themes occur commonly acts as a catalyst for which ones tend to be emphasized when writing up findings.
- *Both seek to ensure that deliberate distortion does not occur*. Very few social researchers nowadays subscribe to the view that it is possible to be an entirely objective dispassionate student of social life. Further, sometimes researchers can be partisan (see Chapter 6). However, that does not imply that 'anything goes'. In particular, researchers seek to ensure that 'wilful bias' (Hammersley and Gomm 2000) or what Hardy and Bryman (2004: 7) call 'consciously motivated misrepresentation' does not occur.

- *Both argue for the importance of transparency*. Both quantitative and qualitative researchers seek to be clear about their research procedures and how their findings were arrived at. This allows others to judge the quality and importance of their work. In the past, it has sometimes been suggested that qualitative researchers could be opaque about how they went about their investigations, but increasingly transparency surfaces as an expectation.
- *Both must address the question of error*. In Chapter 9, the significance of error for quantitative research (or, more specifically, survey research) and steps that can be taken to reduce its likelihood were introduced. For the quantitative researcher, error must be reduced as far as possible so that variation that is uncovered is real variation and not the product of problems with how questions are asked or how research instruments are administered. In qualitative research, the investigator seeks to reduce error by ensuring that, for example, there is a good fit between his or her concepts and the evidence that has been amassed.
- *Research methods should be appropriate to the research questions*. This point is not addressed by Hardy and Bryman (2004), but a further issue is that both groups of researchers seek to ensure that, when they specify research questions, they select research methods and approaches to the analysis of data that are appropriate to those questions.

These tend to be rather general points of similarity, but they are an important corrective to any view that portrays them as completely different. There *are* differences between quantitative and qualitative research but that is not to say that there are no points of similarity.



Feminism and qualitative research

A further dimension that could have been included in the section on 'Some contrasts between quantitative and qualitative research' is that, in the view of some writers, qualitative research is associated with a feminist sensitivity, and that, by implication, quantitative research is viewed by many feminists as incompatible with feminism. This issue was briefly signposted in Chapter 2. The link between feminism and qualitative research is by no means a cut-and-dried issue, in that, although it became something of an orthodoxy among some writers, it has not found favour with all feminists. Indeed, there are signs at the time of writing that views on the issue are changing.

The notion that there is an affinity between feminism and qualitative research has at least two main components to it: a view that quantitative research is inherently incompatible with feminism, and a view that qualitative research provides greater opportunity for a feminist sensitivity to come to the fore. Quantitative research is frequently viewed as incompatible with feminism for the following reasons.

- According to Mies (1993), quantitative research suppresses the voices of women either by ignoring them or by submerging them in a torrent of facts and statistics.
- The criteria of valid knowledge associated with quantitative research are ones that turn women, when they are the focus of research, into objects. This means that women are again subjected to exploitation, in that knowledge and experience are extracted from them with nothing in return, even when the research is conducted by women (Mies 1993).
- The emphasis on controlling variables further exacerbates this last problem, and indeed the very idea of control is viewed as a masculine approach.
- The use of predetermined categories in quantitative research results in an emphasis on what is already known and consequently in 'the silencing of women's own voices' (Maynard 1998: 18).
- The criteria of valid knowledge associated with quantitative research also mean that women are to be researched in a value-neutral way, when in fact the goals of feminist research should be to conduct research specifically *for* women.
- It is sometimes suggested that the quest for universal laws is inconsistent with feminism's emphasis on the situated nature of social reality, which is seen as embedded in the various social identities (based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and so on) that are unique to individuals (Miner-Rubino et al. 2007).

By contrast, qualitative research has been viewed by many feminists as either more compatible with feminism's central tenets or as more capable of being adapted to those tenets. Thus, in contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research allows:

- women's voices to be heard;
- exploitation to be reduced by giving as well as receiving in the course of fieldwork;
- women *not* to be treated as objects to be controlled by the researcher's technical procedures; and
- the emancipatory goals of feminism to be realized. For example, Skeggs (2001: 429) has observed that one of the earliest principles on which feminist research was based was that it should 'alleviate the conditions of oppression'.

How qualitative research achieves these goals will be addressed particularly in relation to the next four chapters, since the issues and arguments vary somewhat from one method to the other. Skeggs (2001: 429–30) argues that the political goals of feminist research led to a preference for qualitative research 'to focus on women's experience and to listen and explore the shared meanings between women with an aim to reformulate traditional research agendas'. However, there are risks with this prioritization of women's experience. In feminist standpoint epistemology, a perspective that places a particular emphasis on experience from the standpoint of women, this prioritization is especially pronounced. However, as Letherby (2003: 46) has suggested, this position 'can and has been used to replace male supremacy with female supremacy and [to] support binary oppositions'. She suggests that, for many analysts, this is likely to be viewed as an unhelpful position to take.

Student experience
Feminism and the research relationship

For Erin Sanders, the prospect of using a feminist approach drawing on qualitative research was attractive in terms of her personal value commitments. However, as this passage shows, she recognized that there are dilemmas and that the issue of feminist research being less exploitative than other approaches should not be exaggerated.

> A number of ethical questions emerged reinterviewing sex workers. Because I was employing feminist methodologies . . . I wanted to truly engage with the women that I spoke to, rather than employing a more positivist methodology that would mandate a sense of distance. I felt that feminist methodologies would allow a more balanced research experience—and would enable me to share information about myself to help offset the inherent power imbalance in the research relationship. However, it became evident to me that, employing a variety of 'traditional' feminist methodologies, there was still a power differential. I had hoped to avoid exploiting the women I interviewed for my own personal gain, but I am not sure that this actually happened. I'm not sure that it is ever possible to overcome the power imbalance in the research relationship, especially when I, as a 'White', 'Western' woman, research an 'Other'. From an ethical perspective, it seems to me that the research relationship fosters an exploitative relationship in a number of ways, and I will have to seriously consider how (or if) I can avoid these in future.

To read more about Erin's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: ***www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/brymansrm4e/***

In fact, the issue of qualitative research as providing the opportunity for a feminist approach has somewhat different aspects when looking at ethnography, qualitative interviewing, and focus groups—the topics of Chapters 19–21. However, it ought also to be recognized that there has been a softening of attitude among some feminist writers towards quantitative research in recent years. Examples of this softening are as follows.

- There is a recognition that many of the worst excesses of discrimination against women might not have come to light so clearly were it not for the collection and analysis of statistics revealing discrimination (Maynard 1994; Oakley 1998). The very presence of factual evidence of this kind has allowed the case for equal opportunities legislation to be made much more sharply, although, needless to say, there is much more that still needs to be done in this field.

- Quantitative research can be enlisted as an aid to implementing social change for feminists. Miner-Rubino et al. (2007) suggest that knowing about the distribution of attitudes and behaviour in a sample can be used to establish the most appropriate course of action for social change.
- J. Scott (2010) has observed that one reason why qualitative research has tended to be preferred among many feminist researchers is that they have tended to be interested in women's experiences. Qualitative research is well attuned to such study. However, this represents only part of the picture when it comes to understanding inequalities, because investigating the experience of gender inequality and discrimination neglects the wider picture of the wider social structures in which those experiences are embedded. Also needed is large-scale quantitative evidence of the extent and form of gender inequality and discrimination. She shows how survey evidence can do this. For example, discussing one set of data, she shows that, 'although overall there has been a decrease in the downward mobility of women across childbirth, if women have longer breaks out of the work force or return after childbirth to a part-time job, the occupational penalties in terms of downward mobility have *increased* over time' (J. Scott 2010: 229). Such evidence can be of considerable significance from a feminist perspective, even though in itself it does not address women's experiences. What is crucial is that the research questions that drive a feminist quantitative project are informed by a feminist perspective.
- As Jayaratne and Stewart (1991) and Maynard (1994, 1998) have pointed out, at the very least it is difficult to see why feminist research that combines quantitative and qualitative research would be incompatible with the feminist cause.
- There has also been a recognition of the fact that qualitative research is not *ipso facto* feminist in orientation. If, for example, ethnography, which is covered in Chapter 19, provided for a feminist sensitivity, we would expect fields like social anthropology, which have been virtually founded on the approach, to be almost inherently feminist, which is patently not the case (Reinharz 1992: 47–8). If this is so, the question of appropriate approaches to feminist research would seem to reside in the *application* of methods rather than something that is inherent in them. Consequently, some writers have preferred to write about *feminist research practice* rather than about *feminist methods* (Maynard 1998: 128).

These issues will be returned to in Chapters 19–21.

Key points

- There is disagreement over what precisely qualitative research is.
- Qualitative research does not lend itself to the delineation of a clear set of linear steps.
- It tends to be a more open-ended research strategy than is typically the case with quantitative research.
- Theories and concepts are viewed as outcomes of the research process.
- There is considerable unease about the simple application of the reliability and validity criteria associated with quantitative research to qualitative research. Indeed, some writers prefer to use alternative criteria that have parallels with reliability and validity.
- Most qualitative researchers reveal a preference for seeing through the eyes of research participants.
- Several writers have depicted qualitative research as having a far greater affinity with a feminist standpoint than quantitative research can exhibit.

Questions for review

- What are some of the difficulties with providing a general account of the nature of qualitative research?
- Outline some of the traditions of qualitative research.
- How compelling is Denzin and Lincoln's (2005b) marking-out of distinct 'moments' in the history of qualitative research?
- What are some of the main research methods associated with qualitative research?

The main steps in qualitative research

- Does a research question in qualitative research have the same significance and characteristics as in quantitative research?

Theory and research

- Is the approach to theory in qualitative research inductive or deductive?

Concepts in qualitative research

- What is the difference between definitive and sensitizing concepts?

Reliability and validity in qualitative research

- How have some writers adapted the notions of reliability and validity to qualitative research?
- Why have some writers sought alternative criteria for the evaluation of qualitative research?
- Evaluate Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria.
- Would it be useful to develop quality criteria into checklists?
- What is respondent validation?
- What is triangulation?

The main preoccupations of qualitative researchers

- Outline the main preoccupations of qualitative researchers.
- How do these preoccupations differ from those of quantitative researchers, which were considered in Chapter 7?

The critique of qualitative research

- What are some of the main criticisms that are frequently levelled at qualitative research?
- To what extent do these criticisms reflect the preoccupations of quantitative research?

Is it always like this?

- Can qualitative research be employed in relation to hypothesis testing?

Some contrasts between quantitative and qualitative research

- 'The difference between quantitative and qualitative research revolves entirely around the concern with numbers in the former and with words in the latter.' How far do you agree with this statement?

Some similarities between quantitative and qualitative research

- Does it make sense to describe quantitative and qualitative research as being characterized by both differences *and* similarities?

Feminism and qualitative research

- Why have many feminist researchers preferred qualitative research?
- Is there no role for quantitative research in relation to feminist research?

Online Resource Centre

www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book to enrich your understanding of the nature of qualitative research. Consult web links, test yourself using multiple choice questions, and gain further guidance and inspiration from the Student Researcher's Toolkit.

18

Sampling in qualitative research

Chapter outline

Chapter guide

This chapter outlines some of the main ways of thinking about conducting sampling in qualitative research. Whereas, in survey research, there is an emphasis on probability sampling, qualitative researchers tend to emphasize the importance of *purposive sampling* for their work. Purposive sampling places the investigator's research questions at the heart of the sampling considerations. This chapter explores:

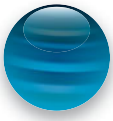
- the significance of a consideration of levels of sampling;
- the nature of purposive sampling and the reasons for the emphasis on it among many qualitative researchers;
- theoretical sampling, which is a key ingredient of the grounded theory approach, and the nature of theoretical saturation, which is one of the main elements of this sampling strategy;
- the importance of not assuming that theoretical and purposive sampling are the same thing;
- the generic purposive sampling approach as a means of distinguishing theoretical sampling from purposive sampling in general;
- the use of more than one sampling approach in qualitative research.

Introduction

In much the same way that, in quantitative research, the discussion of sampling revolves around **probability sampling**, discussions of sampling in qualitative research tend to revolve around the notion of **purposive sampling** (see Key concept 18.1). This type of sampling is essentially to do with the selection of units (which may be people, organizations, documents, departments, and so on), with direct reference to the research questions being asked. The idea is that the research questions should give an indication of what units need to be sampled. Research questions are likely to provide guidelines as to what categories of people (or whatever the unit of analysis is) need to be the focus of attention and therefore sampled. In this chapter, purposive sampling will act as the master concept around which different sampling approaches in qualitative research can be distinguished.

Probability sampling may be used in qualitative research, though it is more likely to occur in interview-based rather than in ethnographic qualitative studies. There is no obvious rule of thumb that might be used to help the qualitative researcher in deciding when it might be appropriate to employ probability sampling, but two criteria might be envisaged. First, if it is highly significant or important for the qualitative researcher to be able to generalize to a wider population, probability sampling is likely to be a more compelling sampling approach. This might occur when the audience for one's work is one for whom generalizability in the traditional sense of the word is important. Second, if the research questions do not suggest that particular categories of people (or whatever the unit of analysis is) should be sampled, there may be a case for sampling randomly.

However, probability sampling is rarely used in qualitative research. In many cases, it is not feasible, because of the constraints of ongoing fieldwork and also because it can be difficult and often impossible to map 'the population' from which a random sample might be taken—that is, to create a sampling frame. However, the reason why qualitative researchers rarely seek to generate random samples is not due to these technical constraints but because, like researchers basing their investigations on qualitative interviewing, they typically want to ensure that they gain access to as wide a range of individuals relevant to their research questions as possible, so that many different perspectives and ranges of activity are the focus of attention.

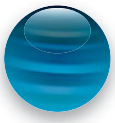


Levels of sampling

Writers on sampling in qualitative research sometimes provide lists of the different sampling approaches that may be found (see Key concept 18.2 for some of the main types that are frequently identified). While these are useful, they sometimes intermingle two different levels of sampling, an issue that is particularly relevant to the consideration of sampling in qualitative research based on single case study or multiple case study designs. With such research designs, the researcher must first select the case or cases; subsequently, the researcher must sample units within the case. When sampling contexts or cases, qualitative researchers have a number of principles of purposive sampling on which to draw. To a significant extent, the ideas and principles behind these were introduced in Chapter 3 in connection with the different types of case, particularly following Yin's (2009) classification. An example is a study by Savage et al. (2005) of the ways in which people retain a sense of place in the face of growing globalization. The authors sampled four areas in the Greater Manchester area and then sampled households within each of the four areas. In fact, in this research there are three levels. First, the authors justify their selection of Manchester as a site for the examination of globalization and a sense of local belonging by showing that it 'exemplifies the tensions and ambivalences of globalization itself' (Savage et al. 2005: 14). In terms of the categorization of types of case presented in Chapter 3, Manchester is therefore an exemplifying case. Subsequently, there were two levels of sampling: of contexts and then of participants.

1. *Sampling of context*. The researchers 'selected four contrasting residential areas in and around Manchester, whose residents had different combinations of economic and/or cultural capital and we deliberately did not seek to examine those in poor or working-class areas' (Savage et al. 2005: 15). The four sampled areas—Cheadle, Chorlton, Ramsbottom, and Wilmslow—were therefore purposively selected in line with the researchers' focus on local belonging in an era of globalization. Each is an exemplifying case in its own right, since the four areas 'were chosen to exemplify different kinds of social mix' (Savage et al. 2005: 17). The areas were sampled on the basis of statistical data and the researchers' 'local investigations'. We see here a common strategy when sampling for multiple case studies: sampling for both heterogeneity (the different social mixes of the four areas) and homogeneity (all within Greater Manchester and therefore a common heritage).
2. *Sampling of participants*. Savage et al. write that they sought to generate a sample within each area that exemplified the population under consideration. Using the electoral register as a sampling frame, they sampled 1 in 3 of certain streets and then arranged interviews with individuals in households. They interviewed 186 people across the 4 areas using a semi-structured interview guide, achieving a 34 per cent response rate. Their sampling strategy allowed them to examine similarities and differences among interviewees within each area and between areas.

The sampling of areas and then participants is a common strategy in qualitative research. It can be seen in the research by Butler and Robson (2001), covered in Research in focus 2.1, which entailed sampling three London areas and then interviewees within each. In this way, there were two levels of purposive sampling: of contexts/cases (that is, the areas) and of 'gentrifiers'. It can also be seen in Swain's (2004) ethnographic study of friendship groups in schools that was examined in Research in focus 17.3. In this research, it was important for him to study the construction of masculinity in schools of contrasting socio-economic background. Since his research question implied that the construction of masculinity draws on the cultural resources that are available in a setting, it was important to demonstrate the operation of this process of social construction by exploring different social settings, since the cultural resources would be different in each setting. Since friendship groups were likely to be important contexts within which masculinities were constructed and reinforced, the sampling of students for interview was implemented by drawing on nominated friendship groups. In this research, there were two levels of sampling—of contexts/cases (that is, the schools) and then of participants (that is, of students).



Purposive sampling

Most sampling in qualitative research entails purposive sampling of some kind. What links the various kinds of purposive sampling approach is that the sampling is conducted with reference to the goals of the research, so that units of analysis are selected in terms of criteria that will allow the research questions to be answered. This term is explained in Key concept 18.1.

Key concept 18.1
What is purposive sampling?

Purposive sampling is a non-probability form of sampling. The researcher does not seek to sample research participants on a random basis. The goal of purposive sampling is to sample cases/participants in a strategic way, so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed. Very often, the researcher will want to sample in order to ensure that there is a good deal of variety in the resulting sample, so that sample members differ from each other in terms of key characteristics relevant to the research question. Because it is a non-probability sampling approach, purposive sampling does not allow the researcher to generalize to a population. Although a purposive sample is not a random sample, it is not a convenience sample either (see Chapter 8 on convenience sampling). A convenience sample is simply available by chance to the researcher, whereas in purposive sampling the researcher samples with his or her research goals in mind. In purposive sampling, sites, like organizations, and people (or whatever the unit of analysis is) within sites are selected because of their relevance to the research questions. The researcher needs to be clear in his or her mind what the criteria are that will be relevant to the inclusion or exclusion of units of analysis (whether the 'units' are sites, people, or something else). Examples of purposive sampling in qualitative research are theoretical sampling (see Key concept 18.3) and snowball sampling (see Research in focus 18.2 for an example). In quantitative research, quota sampling is a form of purposive sampling procedure.

In order to contextualize the discussion, I will draw on two useful distinctions that have been employed in relation to purposive sampling. First, Teddlie and Yu (2007) distinguish a sampling approach that they refer to as sequential sampling, which implies a distinction between sequential and non-sequential approaches. Non-sequential approaches to sampling might be termed 'fixed sampling strategies'. With a sequential approach, sampling is an evolving process in that the researcher usually begins with an initial sample and gradually adds to the sample as befits the research questions. Units are selected by virtue of their relevance to the research questions, and the sample is gradually added to as the investigation evolves. With a fixed purposive sampling strategy, the sample is more or less established at the outset of the research, and there is little or no adding to the sample as the research proceeds. The research questions guide the sampling approach, but the sample is more or less fixed early on in the research process.

Second, Hood (2007) distinguishes between a priori and contingent sampling approaches. A purposive sampling approach is contingent when the criteria for sampling units of analysis evolve over the course of the research. The research questions again guide the sampling of participants, but the relevant sampling criteria shift over the course of the research as the research questions change or multiply. With an a priori purposive sample, the criteria for selecting participants are established at the outset of the research. The criteria will again be ones that are designed to answer the research questions, but the criteria do not evolve as the research progresses.

Theoretical sampling

One form of purposive sampling is **theoretical sampling** (see Key concept 18.3), advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) in the context of an approach to qualitative data analysis they developed

Key concept 18.2
Some purposive sampling approaches

The following is a list of some prominent types of purposive sample that have been identified by writers such as Patton (1990) and Palys (2008):

1. *Extreme or deviant case sampling*. Sampling cases that are unusual or that are unusually at the far end(s) of a particular dimension of interest.
2. *Typical case sampling*. Sampling a case because it exemplifies a dimension of interest.
3. *Critical case sampling*. Sampling a crucial case that permits a logical inference about the phenomenon of interest—for example, a case might be chosen precisely because it is anticipated that it might allow a theory to be tested.
4. *Maximum variation sampling*. Sampling to ensure as wide a variation as possible in terms of the dimension of interest.
5. *Criterion sampling*. Sampling all units (cases or individuals) that meet a particular criterion.
6. *Theoretical sampling*. See Key concept 18.3.
7. *Snowball sampling*. See Research in focus 18.2.
8. *Opportunistic sampling*. Capitalizing on opportunities to collect data from certain individuals, contact with whom is largely unforeseen but who may provide data relevant to the research question.
9. *Stratified purposive sampling*. Sampling of usually typical cases or individuals within subgroups of interest.

The first three purposive sampling approaches are ones that are particularly likely to be employed in connection with the selection of cases or contexts. The others are likely to be used in connection with the sampling of individuals as well as cases or contexts.

Key concept 18.3
What is theoretical sampling?

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967: 45), theoretical sampling 'is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. The process of data collection is *controlled* by the emerging theory, whether substantive or formal.' This definition conveys a crucial characteristic of theoretical sampling—namely, that it is an ongoing process rather than a distinct and single stage, as it is, for example, in probability sampling. Moreover, it is important to realize that it is not just people who are the 'objects' of sampling, as can be seen in a more recent definition: 'Data gathering driven by concepts derived from the evolving theory and based on the concept of "making comparisons", whose purpose is to go to places, people, or events that will maximize opportunities to discover variations among concepts and to densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions' (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 201). For Charmaz (2000: 519), theoretical sampling is a 'defining property of grounded theory' and is concerned with the refinement of the theoretical categories that emerge in the course of analysing data that have been collected, rather than boosting sample size. Theoretical sampling differs from generic purposive sampling, which is outlined below, in that its practitioners emphasize using it to provide a springboard for the generation of theory and the refinement of theoretical categories. It is iterative in the sense that it is not a one off but an ongoing process that entails several stages. It emphasizes **theoretical saturation** (see Key concept 18.4) as a criterion for deciding when to cease collecting new data on a particular theoretical idea and to move on to the investigation of some ramifications of the emerging theory.

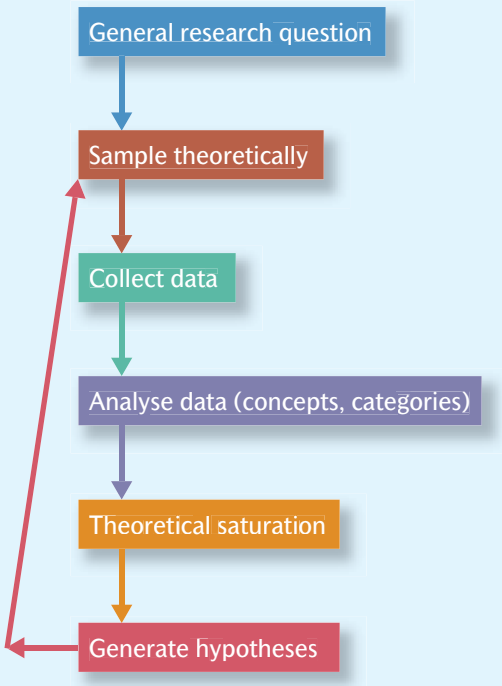
known as grounded theory. In Glaser and Strauss's view, because of its reliance on statistical rather than theoretical criteria, probability sampling is not appropriate to qualitative research. Theoretical sampling is meant to be an alternative strategy. As they put it: 'Theoretical sampling is done in order to discover categories and their properties and to suggest the interrelationships into a theory. Statistical sampling is done to obtain accurate evidence on distributions of people among categories to be used in descriptions and verifications' (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 62). What distinguishes theoretical sampling from other sampling approaches is the emphasis on the selection of cases and units with reference to the quest for the generation of a theoretical understanding. Figure 18.1 outlines the main steps in theoretical sampling.

In grounded theory, you carry on collecting data (observing, interviewing, collecting documents) through theoretical sampling until **theoretical saturation** (see Key concept 18.4) has been achieved. This means that: successive interviews/observations have both formed the basis for the creation of a category and confirmed its importance; there is no need to continue with data collection in relation to that category or cluster of categories; instead, the researcher should move on and generate hypotheses out of the categories that are building up and then move on to collecting data in relation to these hypotheses. As Charmaz (2006) puts it, when new data no longer stimulate new theoretical understandings or new dimensions of the principal theoretical categories, the relevant categories are saturated. Proponents of grounded theory argue that there is a great deal of redundancy in statistical sampling. For example, committing yourself to interviewing *x* per cent of an organization's members may mean that you end up wasting time and resources because you could have confirmed the significance of a concept and/or its connections with other concepts by using a much smaller sample. Instead, grounded theory advocates that you sample in terms of what is relevant to and meaningful for your theory. The key is to ensure you sample so as to test your emerging theoretical ideas. The approach is supposed to be an iterative one—that is, one in which there is a movement backwards and forwards between sampling and theoretical reflection, but it may be that the researcher feels that his or her categories achieve theoretical saturation (see Key concept 18.4) at a relatively early stage. For example, for their research on organization dress, which is referred to in Research in focus 20.7, Rafaeli et al. (1997: 14) employed initially a stratified random sampling approach (see above), but then evaluated their data 'after completing interviews with the 20 individuals selected and concluded that, because we had reached theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss 1967), no additional interviews were necessary'. The use of theoretical saturation as a criterion for deciding when to cease further sampling does not necessarily imply that a theoretical sampling approach has been employed. This is suggested by the quotation from Rafaeli et al., where there is no suggestion of an iterative movement between sampling and theory development. What we see here is an approach that is more redolent of what I call below a generic purposive sampling approach than of theoretical sampling.

A sampling approach that is more in tune with Glaser and Strauss's (1967) idea of theoretical sampling is provided by Finch and Mason's (1990) account of their Family Obligations Project (see Research in focus 18.1). The chief virtue of theoretical sampling is that the emphasis is upon using theoretical reflection on data as the guide to whether more data are needed. It therefore places a premium on theorizing rather than the statistical adequacy of a sample, which may be a limited guide to sample selection in many instances.

Figure 18.1

The process of theoretical sampling



Key concept 18.4
What is theoretical saturation?

The key idea is that you carry on sampling theoretically until a category has been saturated with data. 'This means, until (*a*) no new or relevant data seem to be emerging regarding a category, (*b*) the category is well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions demonstrating variation, and (*c*) the relationships among categories are well established and validated' (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 212). In the language of grounded theory, a category operates at a somewhat higher level of abstraction than a concept in that it may group together several concepts that have common features denoted by the category. Saturation does not mean, as is sometimes suggested, that the researcher develops a sense of déjà vu when listening to what people say in interviews but that new data no longer suggest new insights into an emergent theory or no longer suggest new dimensions of theoretical categories.

Research in focus 18.1
Theoretical sampling in a study of family obligations

Finch and Mason's (1990: 26) Family Obligations Project was a study of 'patterns of support, aid and assistance . . . between adult kin' in Manchester. Initially, survey research, using a structured interview, was conducted and yielded nearly 1,000 completed interviews. A sample of these interviewees was then approached to be interviewed by semi-structured interview. The initial sample for this phase of the investigation was selected purposively—that is, with specific target subgroups in mind. These were divorced and/or remarried people and the youngest group at the time of the survey (18–24 years of age). Their rationale for this purposive selection is as follows: 'Since fieldwork was principally to be concerned with understanding the process of negotiation between relatives, we decided that it would be much more useful to focus upon individuals who might currently or recently have been involved in processes of negotiation and renegotiation of family relationships' (1990: 33).

Finch and Mason sampled 5 at a time from the total of each of these subgroups who were willing to be interviewed again (112 in the divorced/remarried subgroup and 117 young adults). Individuals were sampled using random numbers. In addition, the authors wanted to interview the kin groups of individuals from the initial social survey as providing examples of 'negotiations between relatives over issues concerning financial or material support' (1990: 38). They decided to conduct two further interviews with the focal person in a negotiation over family obligations and one interview with each of that person's relatives. However, the sampling strategy was based on the selection not of individuals as cases but of *situations*. In order to make the data comparable, they searched out individuals and their kin who had been identified in the survey—for example, as having moved back into their parents' home following a divorce. A further element in their sampling strategy was that the authors 'tried to keep an eye on the range of experiences that [they] were studying, and to identify any obvious gaps' (1990: 43). As a result of this ongoing 'stocktaking exercise', as they call it, they identified certain gaps in their data: men, because by and large they were the focus of interviews as part of kin networks rather than initial **key informants** in their own right; unemployed people, particularly because of high levels at the time of the research; ethnic minorities; social classes I, IV, and V; widows and widowers; and stepchildren and stepgrandparents. As Finch and Mason's experience shows, the process of theoretical sampling is not only one that gives priority to theoretical significance in sampling decisions, but is also one that forces researchers to sharpen their reflections on their findings during the fieldwork process.

The ideas of theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation will be encountered again when grounded theory is examined in greater detail in the context of qualitative data analysis in Chapter 24.

Generic purposive sampling

Hood (2007: 152) has usefully pointed out that there is a tendency among many writers and researchers to 'identify all things qualitative with "grounded theory"'. This is particularly the case with the notion of theoretical sampling, which is often treated as synonymous with purposive sampling when in fact it is one form of purposive sampling (see Key concept 18.3). Hood usefully contrasts grounded theory with what she calls a 'generic inductive qualitative model', which is relatively open-ended and emphasizes the generation of concepts and theories but does not entail (among other things) the iterative style of grounded theory. Sampling considerations are particularly prominent in this contrast between grounded theory and the generic inductive qualitative model. Whereas, as we have seen, theoretical sampling is a sequential sampling process whereby sampling is conducted in order to develop theoretical categories and inferences, in the generic inductive qualitative model, sampling is conducted purposively but not necessarily with regard to the generation of theory and theoretical categories. I am going to call this sampling approach *generic purposive sampling*, a category that subsumes several of the sampling strategies identified in Key concept 18.2, though not theoretical sampling. Generic purposive sampling may be employed in a sequential or in a fixed manner and the criteria for selecting cases or individuals may be formed a priori (for example, socio-demographic criteria) or be contingent or a mixture of both. In most of the examples discussed in this book, generic purposive sampling is fixed and a priori. However, the criteria employed are ones that are informed by the research questions. When using a generic purposive sampling approach with respect to the selection of cases or contexts, the researcher establishes criteria concerning the kinds of cases needed to address the research questions, identifies appropriate cases, and then samples from those cases that have been identified. When contexts are being sampled, as in the examples cited above in the work of Butler and Robson (2001), Swain (2004), and Savage et al. (2005), it is common for some form of generic purposive sampling to be employed. In the case of the study by Savage et al., each of the four sampled areas had to be predominantly middle class but had to vary in terms of social mix. These were criteria specified at the outset that determined the sampling of areas. In Swain's (2004) ethnographic research, the three schools were selected to reveal variation in terms of two criteria: type of school (state versus fee-paying) and the social characteristics of the intake.

Generic purposive sampling (or variations of it) is often employed in relation to the selection of participants. The initial sample that provided the basis for the twenty participants in the study by Jones et al. (2010) that was referred to several times in Chapter 1 (see in particular Table 1.1) was generated by searching for senior managers who had taken early retirement in the database of several organizations. Thus, two criteria appear to have been established from the outset on an a priori basis—being a senior manager and an early retiree. For her study of new forms of mediated communication and their implications for interaction, Rettie (2009) focused upon mobile phone communication. She conducted semi-structured interviews with thirty-two UK adults who spent at least £15 per month on their mobile phones. For their study of the meaning of work–life balance issues for trade union representatives in two sectors (retailing and media), Rigby and O'Brien-Smith (2010) selected a purposive sample based on three criteria: making sure that representatives were at each of three levels (national officials, full-time officials, and lay representatives); union respondents were at 'better organised workplaces' (2010: 206); and there was variety in the geographical location of the representatives who were interviewed. Finally, for the research referred to in Research in focus 20.8, the authors purposively sampled employees from each of six quite different organizations. They write: 'We aimed for diversity in terms of age, organization and occupation, and approximately equal numbers of men and women. Our assumption was that this would maximize the likelihood of accessing variation and highlight any common core of experience more than a homogeneous sample would' (Bosley et al. 2009: 1499). What we see in all these examples is a quest for appropriate samples in terms of the research questions in which the researcher is interested.

Generic purposive sampling in a mixed methods context

Sometimes, when conducting a mixed methods investigation involving both quantitative and qualitative research, the findings from a survey might be used as the basis for the selection of a purposive sample. For example, in a study of social policy researchers in the UK, an e-survey was conducted that sought respondents' views on a wide variety of issues concerning criteria for

evaluating the quality of social policy research (Sempik et al. 2007; Bryman et al. 2008). Respondents were asked whether they would be prepared to be interviewed by telephone so that issues could be probed more deeply and other issues that had not been explored in the e-survey could be addressed. Of the 251 respondents who replied to the online questionnaire, 90 agreed to be interviewed. On the basis of their replies, 28 of the 90 respondents were interviewed by telephone using a semi-structured interview approach. The 28 interviewees were selected to reflect a variety of orientations to social policy research and to the evaluation of research quality. For example, one criterion was derived from where the respondent stood on the issue of whether he or she felt that social policy research should contribute to policy and practice or to knowledge or to a combination of both. This sampling strategy allowed interviewees to be selected purposively in terms of criteria that were central to the main topic of the research—the appraisal of research quality.

Another example is afforded by the Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion (CCSE) project referred to in Research in focus 2.9. The researchers selected interviewees from among those who had indicated in the course of responding to the survey interview that they were prepared to be interviewed. The authors write:

> The selection of households aimed to reflect the current diversity of household (or family) life in Britain. A further aim of the analysis is to explore the significance of the internal dynamics of the household for the formation of cultural tastes and the formation and transmission of cultural capital. (**www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/cultural-capital-and-social-exclusion/methodology.php** (accessed 27 September 2010))

In order to achieve these aims, the authors selected households for the qualitative phase of the research so that there was a distribution of households in terms of:

Student experience
Purposive sampling for a student project

Several of the students who completed questionnaires about their investigations used a form of purposive sampling when they were conducting qualitative research. Isabella Robbins provided a particularly detailed account of how she went about purposive sampling of mothers for her study of decision-making in relation to childhood vaccinations and the reasons for some of her choices. Her sampling strategy entailed a generic purposive sampling approach.

> Recruitment of participants was planned to take place in my own locality, for the pragmatic reason of fitting in the collection of fieldwork with my own complex obligations. I planned to recruit mothers with contrasting socio-economic profiles, the reason being, to help make key comparisons and test and develop theoretical propositions. My plan was to recruit twenty mothers from working-class and twenty mothers from middle-class profiles in order to yield approximately forty interviews. I acknowledge that assigning the profile of class is problematic, and even more so for women whose working status is interrupted by motherhood. Their socio-economic profiles were assigned based on the mothers' current or previous job using the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) schema.
>
> Vaccination rates are known to differ in terms of socio-demographic profiles. In line with this, I gained access to parent and toddler groups in identifiable working-class and middle-class areas of Nottingham . . . Mothers were recruited through Parent and Toddler groups in areas with socio-economic profiles. Names of the groups and their organizers were identified from a local council publication, supplemented by other publications offering information regarding services offered to parents and children in the locality.

One of the features that is striking about this account is that Isabella employed statistics about vaccination rates as a springboard for her choices of criteria of whom to interview.

To read more about Isabella's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: ***www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/***

their profiles in terms of answers to questions on cultural capital; presence of dependent children; variety of geographical areas; and variety of types of household (Bennett et al. 2009: 276).

Snowball sampling

Snowball sampling is a sampling technique in which the researcher samples initially a small group of people relevant to the research questions, and these sampled participants propose other participants who have had the experience or characteristics relevant to the research. These participants will then suggest others and so on. As noted in Chapter 8, it is sometimes (though rarely) used in survey research when probability sampling is more or less impossible. It is also sometimes recommended when networks of individuals are the focus of attention (Coleman 1958). In fact, Noy (2008) points out that snowball sampling is frequently presented as a strategy to be employed when probability sampling is impossible or not feasible—for example, when trying to sample hard-to-reach populations because of the absence of a sampling frame. This is often how it is represented in discussions of its use in survey research and sometimes in qualitative research too (see Research in focus 8.5). However, Noy observes from his studies of Israeli backpackers and of Israeli semi-professional male drivers that one advantage the technique offers is that it is able simultaneously to capitalize on and to reveal the connectedness of individuals in networks. Snowball sampling was employed in my study of visitors to Disney theme parks and by Scheper-Hughes in her ethnography of the illicit trade in organs (see Research in focus 18.2).

Research in focus 18.2
A snowball sample

For her study of a highly sensitive and covert area—the global trade in organs—Scheper-Hughes (2004: 31) describes her sampling approach as follows (although using the term 'she', Scheper-Hughes is referring to herself):

> Using the traditional method of 'snowballing'—one patient, one surgeon, one hospital, one mortuary, one eye bank leading to the next—she begins to uncover a string of clues that will eventually take her from Brazil to Argentina and Cuba, and from South Africa to Israel, the West Bank and Turkey, and from Moldova in Eastern Europe to the Philippines in Southeast Asia. Finally, the clues lead her back to transplant units in Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York City.

Through this sampling procedure, she was able to interview a wide diversity of people involved in the organs trade—transplant surgeons, nurses, procurement specialists, police officers, health ministers, and so on as well as kidney donors in several countries, kidney hunters, kidney buyers, and organ brokers. In addition, she was able to observe many of the transactions that took place.

The sampling of informants in ethnographic research is sometimes a combination of opportunistic sampling and snowball sampling. Much of the time ethnographers are forced to gather information from whatever sources are available to them. Very often they face opposition or at least indifference to their research and are relieved to glean information or views from whoever is prepared to divulge such details. This seems to have been the essence of Armstrong's (1993: 21) strategy in the context of football hooliganism when he tried to 'locate individuals within the group networks that constituted the Blades'. However, as the lengthy quotation from his work on page 440 suggests, he was regularly able to secure from his informants details of others whom it would be useful for him to consult. Similarly, A. Taylor (1993: 16) has written in connection with her study of female drug-users that her research participants were

> eventually obtained by a mix of 'snowballing techniques' . . . and my almost continuous presence in the area. . . . Rather than ask to be introduced or given names of others I could contact, when I met a woman I would spend as much time with her as she would allow, participating in her daily round, and through this come to meet others in her social circle. My continued presence in the area also led other women drug users to approach me when I was alone . . . In addition, the drug worker in the area would mention my presence and interest to women with whom he came in contact and facilitate introductions where possible.

Student experience
Snowball sampling for a student project

Jonathan Smetherham used snowball sampling for his ethnographic study of a non-governmental organization (NGO) in rural Nicaragua. He writes:

> Snowball sampling was used as I was living amongst the community for 7 weeks & contacts would be made almost every day through my activities as a volunteer. By spending time talking to local residents, I would be introduced to others and made aware of further areas of the community that I would benefit from visiting.

To read more about Jonathan's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: ***www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/***

Sample size

One of the problems that the qualitative researcher faces is that it can be difficult to establish at the outset how many people will be interviewed if theoretical considerations guide selection. It is impossible to know, for example, how many people should be interviewed before theoretical saturation has been achieved. To a certain extent, this is not helped by the fact that the criteria for recognizing or establishing when or whether saturation has been achieved are rarely articulated in detail (Guest et al. 2006). Also, as an investigation proceeds, it may become apparent that groups will need to be interviewed who were not anticipated at the outset. Morse (2004a) gives the example of a study of sudden infant death syndrome, which was initially to focus on parents but which, as a result of interviews with them, had to be broadened to include professionals. This necessity arose because parents' accounts flagged the importance of there being uncertainty about which groups of professionals had primary responsibility in such circumstances. With probability sampling, such considerations can be specified, taking into account the size of the population and time and cost constraints.

As a rule of thumb, however, the broader the scope of a qualitative study and the more comparisons between groups in the sample that are required, the more interviews will need to be carried out (Warren 2002; Morse 2004b). Taking the second of these two criteria, if several comparisons are likely to be wanted—between males and females, different age groups, different types of research participants in terms of locally relevant factors—a larger sample is likely to be necessary. Also, in a study of the experience of relationship breakdown, fewer respondents are likely to be necessary if the emphasis is on those who have been formally married as opposed to the more general category of being in a relationship. Nonetheless, Warren (2002: 99) makes the interesting remark that, for a qualitative interview study to be published, the minimum number of interviews required seems to be between twenty and thirty. This suggests that, although there is an emphasis on the importance of sampling purposively in qualitative research, minimum levels of acceptability operate, although there are almost certainly exceptions to Warren's rule (for example, very intensive interviews of the kind conducted in life story interviews, where there may be just one or two interviewees). Moreover, by no means all practitioners would agree with Warren's figure. Gerson and Horowitz (2002: 223) write that 'fewer than 60 interviews cannot support convincing conclusions and more than 150 produce too much material to analyse effectively and expeditiously'. The differences between these authors suggest how difficult it can be to try to specify minimum sample sizes (see also Guest et al. (2006) and Mason (2010) for other summaries of some researchers' suggestions on this issue). The size of sample that is able to support convincing conclusions is likely to vary somewhat from situation to situation in purposive sampling terms, and qualitative researchers have to recognize that they are engaged in a delicate balancing act:

> In general, sample sizes in qualitative research should not be so small as to make it difficult to achieve data saturation, theoretical saturation, or informational redundancy. At the same time, the sample should not be so large that it is difficult to undertake a deep, case-oriented analysis. (Onwuegbuzie and Collins 2007: 289)

Given the ranges of opinion about appropriate sample sizes, it is not surprising that, when Mason (2010) examined the abstracts of doctoral theses derived from interview-based qualitative research in Great Britain and Ireland, he found that the 560 theses varied in sample size from 1 to 95, with a mean of 31 and a median of 28. The difference between the mean and median suggests that the mean is being inflated by some rather large samples. Mason refers to a study (an online paper whose link no longer worked when I tried to access it) that reviewed 50 grounded theory-based research articles, which found sample sizes to vary between 5 and 350.

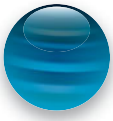
It is also likely that the orientation of the researchers and the purposes of their research will be significant. Crouch and McKenzie (2006) make a virtue of small sample sizes by arguing that samples of fewer than twenty increase the qualitative researcher's chances of getting close involvement with their participants in interview-based studies and generating fine-grained data, features that were significant for their study of long-term cancer survivors. What is likely to be crucial is to justify rigorously any sample size. In other words, rather than rely on others' impressions of suitable sample sizes in qualitative research, it is almost certainly better to be clear about the sampling method you employed, why you used it, and why the sample size you achieved is appropriate. It may be that the reason why you feel that a sample of a certain size is adequate is because you feel you have achieved theoretical saturation, a term that, while strongly linked to grounded theory, is often used by researchers operating within a variety of approaches. If saturation is the criterion for sample size, specifying minima or maxima for sample sizes is pointless. Essentially, the criterion for sample size is whatever it takes to achieve saturation. The problem is that, as several writers observe (e.g. Guest et al. 2006; Mason 2010), saturation is often *claimed* but not justified or explained (Bowen 2008). See Thinking deeply 18.1 for more on this issue.

Thinking deeply 18.1
Saturation and sample size

As noted in the text, it is very difficult to know in advance how many interviews you need to conduct if theoretical saturation (see Key concept 18.4) is employed as a principle for assessing the adequacy of a sample. Further, the criteria for deciding when theoretical saturation has been achieved are more or less absent. In response to these conundrums, Guest et al. (2006) conducted some experiments with data they had collected from in-depth interviews with women in two West African countries. They had conducted and transcribed sixty interviews. They analysed the process of what they call 'data saturation', which means the number of interviews 'needed to get a reliable sense of thematic exhaustion and variability within [their] data set' (Guest et al. 2006: 65). Interestingly, they found that, by and large, data saturation was achieved once around twelve transcripts had been thematically analysed. Taking the transcripts from just one of the two West African countries, by the time twelve interviews had been examined, 92 per cent of the codes used for this batch of transcripts had been generated. Also, the codes generally did not require significant revision after twelve interviews, implying that saturation of categories was arrived at quite quickly. However, as the authors note, their sample was relatively homogenous (women at high risk of contracting HIV), and the research was narrow in scope (how these women discuss sex). Consequently, it may be that saturation was achieved at an earlier point than with qualitative studies drawing on more heterogeneous samples and with broad research foci. The experiment is instructive in terms of implying that research based on qualitative interviews can be based on quite small samples, when theoretical saturation is used as a criterion for deciding on the adequacy of the sample. What is now needed are similar experiments with different samples and topics.

Related to this issue is that you need to be sure that you do not generalize inappropriately from your data. Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2010) observe that for the most part there are two kinds of generalization that may be inferred from a qualitative study. One is analytic generalization, which is much the same as theoretical generalization (J. C. Mitchell 1983). These two terms were encountered in Chapters 3 and 17. The other they call 'case-to-case transfer', which refers to making generalizations from one case to another case that is broadly similar. This is more or less the same as the notion of *moderatum* generalization (M. Williams 2000), which was referred to in Chapter 17. Generalization to a population may be legitimate when a probability sampling procedure

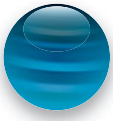
has been employed. Onwuegbuzie and Leech analysed all 125 empirical articles that had been published in the *Qualitative Report*, an academic journal that has been in publication since 1990. They found that 29.6 per cent of the articles contained generalizations that illegitimately went beyond the sample participants. In other words, just under one-third of articles made inferences to a population beyond the study's participants. As the authors note, when this occurs, there is an inconsistency between the design of the research and the interpretations that are made about the resulting data. There is clearly a lesson here about the need to be clear about what you can and cannot infer from a sample of any kind, something that applies to sampling in quantitative research too.



Not just people

Sampling is not just about people but also about sampling other things. For one thing, principles of purposive sampling can be applied to things like documents, in much the same way that probability sampling can be applied to different kinds of phenomena to generate a representative sample. However, there is another dimension to sampling in qualitative research that is worth bearing in mind. This is to do with needing to sample the different contexts within which interviewing or observation take place. Writing about ethnographic research, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) mention time and context as needing to be considered in the context of sampling. Attending to *time* means that the ethnographer must make sure that people or events are observed at different times of the day and different days of the week. To do otherwise risks drawing inferences about certain people's behaviour or about events that are valid only for mornings or for weekdays rather than weekends. It is impossible to be an ethnographer all the time for several reasons: need to take time out to write up notes; other commitments (work or domestic); and body imperatives (eating, sleeping, and so on). When the group in question operates a different cycle from the ethnographer's normal regime (such as night shifts in a hospital or going to nightclubs), the requirement to time sample may necessitate a considerable change of habit.

It can also be important to sample in terms of *context*. People's behaviour is influenced by contextual factors, so that it is important to ensure that such behaviour is observed in a variety of locations. For example, one of the important features of research on football hooliganism is that, of course, those engaged in such activity are not full-time football hooligans. In order to understand the culture and worldview of football hooligans, writers like Armstrong (1993) and Giulianotti (1995; Research in focus 19.2) had to ensure that they interacted with them not just around the time of football matches, but also in a variety of contexts (pubs, general socializing), which also meant at different times.



Using more than one sampling approach

Purposive sampling often involves more than one of the approaches outlined above. For example, it is quite common for snowball sampling to be preceded by another form of purposive sampling. In effect, the process entails sampling initial participants without using a snowball approach and then using these initial contacts to broaden out through a snowballing method. Thus, in their study of the role of power in the branding of a tourist destination—the Gold Coast in Australia—Marzano and Scott (2009) initially purposively sampled key stakeholders in the branding process. These were individuals who had key roles in the agencies responsible for and with an interest in the branding of this tourist destination. As a result of the snowballing process, people like senior managers in hotels and theme parks were also identified and became candidates for inclusion in the research, which was conducted by semi-structured interview. To give a further and in some ways similar example, Vasquez and Wetzel (2009) report the results of a study of racial identities among two US ethnic groups. When collecting data on one of these groups—Potawatomi Indians—the researchers collected data from an initial group

of interviewees who had been selected by virtue of their formal positions in the life of Potawatomi Nation. These are described as 'elected officials, directors of key programmes, and community members' (Vasquez and Wetzel 2009: 1560). Thereafter, snowball sampling took over to broaden out the scope of the research, with 113 individuals being interviewed. In both of these studies, individuals were initially selected because they occupied a position relevant to the investigation, and this primary sample was then used to suggest further relevant participants to expand the research. In both cases, a generic purposive sample (based on individuals who met a criterion—occupancy of structural positions relevant to the research) was selected, and then a snowballing approach was employed.

A further sense in which more than one sampling approach may be employed is when researchers appear to aim for an element of both purposiveness and representativeness in their approach. As an example, Savage et al. (2005) used an electoral register to sample one in three of certain streets and then arranged interviews with individuals in households. Their search was for interviewees who would exemplify the social make-up of each of the four Manchester areas. Similarly, Butler and Robson (2001) aimed to interview seventy-five 'gentrifiers' in each of the three London areas and used the electoral register to locate individuals who could be identified as appropriate to their research. They write: 'we believe that our respondents are largely representative of the middle-class populations in each of our areas' (Butler and Robson 2001: 2148). For her study of hair salons and barbers referred to in Research in focus 2.3, R. S. Cohen (2010) constructed an initial sample by listing all salons in the city by postcode and interviewing at least one person in each establishment. There was then a second stage, which was more suggestive of purposive sampling, where data derived from the survey were employed to select interviewees from four categories of salon that were relevant to the research questions and that had not been sufficiently covered in the first sampling stage: 'salons containing chair-renting, chain-salons, barbershops, and salons with primarily ethnic minority clients' (R. S. Cohen 2010: 204).

There is evidence of a quest for both purposiveness and representativeness in these three studies. With the work of both Savage et al. and Butler and Robson, the purposiveness reveals itself mainly in the search for areas with appropriate characteristics; in the case of Cohen's research, the purposiveness reveals itself in the boosting of the sample with additional interviewees likely to be relevant to the research questions. At the same time, there is a strong sense of wanting to generate a sample with at least a semblance of representativeness. This is quite an interesting development, since sampling in qualitative research, as we have seen, is primarily associated with purposive sampling. At the same time, it raises an interesting question that may at least in part lie behind the use of representativeness in these studies. Given that, when you sample purposively, in many cases several individuals (or whatever the unit of analysis is) will be eligible for inclusion, how do you decide which one or ones to include? In other words, if my research questions direct me to select a subsample that has criteria *a* and *b* and another subsample that has criteria *a* and *c*, so that I can compare them, how do I choose between the individuals who meet each of the two pairs of criteria? Sampling for at least a modicum of representativeness, as these researchers appear to have done, may be one way of making such a decision.

Key points

- Purposive sampling is the fundamental principle for selecting cases and individuals in qualitative research.
- Purposive sampling places the investigation's research questions at the forefront of sampling considerations.
- It is important to bear in mind that purposive sampling will entail considerations of the levels at which sampling needs to take place.
- It is important to distinguish between theoretical sampling and the generic purposive sampling approach, as they are sometimes treated synonymously.
- Theoretical saturation is a useful principle for making decisions about sample size, but there is evidence that it is often claimed rather than demonstrated.

Questions for review

- How does purposive sampling differ from probability sampling and why do many qualitative researchers prefer to use the former?

Levels of sampling

- Why might it be significant to distinguish between the different levels at which sampling can take place in a qualitative research project?

Purposive sampling

- Why is theoretical sampling such an important facet of grounded theory?
- How does theoretical sampling differ from the generic purposive sampling approach?
- Why is theoretical saturation such an important ingredient of theoretical sampling?
- What are the main reasons for considering the use of snowball sampling?

Sample size

- Why do writers seem to disagree so much on what is a minimum acceptable sample size in qualitative research?
- To what extent does theoretical sampling assist the qualitative researcher in making decisions about sample size?

Not just people

- Why might it be important to remember in purposive sampling that it is not just people who are candidates for consideration in sampling issues?

Using more than one sampling approach

- How might it be useful to select people purposively following a survey?

Online Resource Centre

www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book to enrich your understanding of research designs. Consult web links, test yourself using multiple choice questions, and gain further guidance and inspiration from the Student Researcher's Toolkit.