

1

The Foundations of Qualitative Research

Dawn Snape and Liz Spencer

Defining qualitative research	2
The historical development of qualitative research	5
Key philosophical and methodological issues in qualitative research	12
The 'approach' within this book	18

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

First, it is important to recognise that there is no single, accepted way of doing qualitative research. Indeed, how researchers carry it out depends upon a range of factors including: their beliefs about the nature of the social world and what can be known about it (ontology), the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired (epistemology), the purpose(s) and goals of the research, the characteristics of the research participants, the audience for the research, the funders of the research, and the position and environment of the researchers themselves. This chapter considers how differences in the mix of these factors have led to distinctive approaches to qualitative research.

Second, it has been argued that it is important to be aware of the philosophical debates and the methodological developments arising from them in order to secure the quality of the research produced (and therefore the degree to which its findings are accepted, and by whom). Although this view is widely held by researchers from a range of different backgrounds, there is some divergence over how quality can and should be ensured in qualitative research. Some writers argue that different methodological approaches are

underpinned by particular philosophical assumptions and that researchers should maintain consistency between the philosophical starting point and the methods they adopt. Indeed, maintaining consistency is seen as one way of producing more 'valid' findings (Morse et al., 2001). By contrast, others believe that the methods associated with a range of philosophical positions each have something to offer. Thus, they argue that better quality work is produced if the full range of research tools and quality assurances available are considered (Seale, 1999). Despite these different perspectives, there is general agreement that an understanding of this background will encourage and contribute to better research practice.

Finally, as noted in the Preface, the practices and approach to qualitative research discussed in this book have developed and evolved within a particular research environment and culture. As the preceding discussion indicates, it is important to appreciate that there is no one right and accepted way of doing qualitative research and the methods we use reflect a particular mix of philosophy, research objectives, participants, funders and audiences relevant to applied policy research. It is therefore important that readers understand where and how we situate our approach within the broader field of qualitative research in order to assess the value and appropriateness of the research practices we describe for their own purposes. We have attempted to provide a clear indication of this at the end of the chapter.

Defining qualitative research

Most texts on qualitative research begin with some attempt to define what is meant by this term, either theoretically or practically, or both. We will follow in this time honoured tradition because it is important to understand the diversity inherent in this term and also because it is impossible to discuss qualitative research practice without defining what is meant by it. However, providing a precise definition of qualitative research is no mean feat. This reflects the fact that the term is used as an overarching category covering a wide range of approaches and methods found within different research disciplines.

Despite this diversity and the sometimes conflicting nature of underlying assumptions about its inherent qualities, a number of writers have attempted to capture the essence of qualitative research by offering working definitions or by identifying a set of key characteristics. In the second edition of their *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Denzin and Lincoln offer the following definition:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible. These practices ... turn the world into a series of representations including fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to

the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (2000: 3)

Some of the key defining qualities highlighted by Denzin and Lincoln are supported in other definitions. In particular, there is fairly wide consensus that qualitative research is a naturalistic, interpretative approach concerned with understanding the meanings which people attach to phenomena (actions, decisions, beliefs, values etc.) within their social worlds:

The way in which people being studied understand and interpret their social reality is one of the central motifs of qualitative research. (Bryman, 1988: 8)

Some researchers have also focused on key aspects of methodology as defining characteristics of qualitative research (see for example Bryman, 1988; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Holloway and Wheeler, 1996; Mason, 2002; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). These key aspects include: the overall research perspective and the importance of the participants' frames of reference; the flexible nature of research design; the volume and richness of qualitative data; the distinctive approaches to analysis and interpretation; and the kind of outputs that derive from qualitative research. Certain data collection methods have also been identified with qualitative research such as: observational methods, in-depth interviewing, group discussions, narratives, and the analysis of documentary evidence. However, it is important to note that practitioners of qualitative research vary considerably in the extent to which they rely on particular methods of data collection. Box 1.1 provides an overview of the methodological stances most commonly associated with qualitative research.

Finally, some writers define qualitative research in terms of what it is *not*. For example, Strauss and Corbin (1998) delineate qualitative research as any research not primarily based on counting or quantifying empirical material:

By the term 'qualitative research' we mean any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification. (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 11)

In order to avoid becoming overly focused on the variations that make simple definitions of qualitative research difficult to attain, it is perhaps helpful to highlight key elements which are commonly agreed to give qualitative research its distinctive character. These include:

- aims which are directed at providing an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world of research participants by learning about their social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives

BOX 1.1 METHODOLOGICAL STANCES ASSOCIATED WITH QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Perspective of the researcher and the researched

- Taking the 'emic' perspective, i.e. the perspective of the people being studied by penetrating their frames of meaning
- Viewing social life in terms of processes rather than in static terms
- Providing a holistic perspective within explained contexts
- Sustaining empathic neutrality whereby the researcher uses personal insight while taking a non-judgemental stance

Nature of research design

- Adopting a flexible research strategy
- Conducting naturalistic inquiry in real-world rather than experimental or manipulated settings (though methods vary in the extent to which they capture naturally occurring or generated data – see Chapter 2)

Nature of data generation

- Using methods of data generation which are flexible and sensitive to the social context in which the data are produced
- Using methods which usually involve close contact between the researcher and the people being studied, where the researcher is the primary instrument

Nature of the research methods used

- Main qualitative methods include: observation, in-depth individual interviews, focus groups, biographical methods such as life histories and narratives, and analysis of documents and texts

Nature of analysis/interpretation

- Based on methods of analysis and explanation building which reflect the complexity, detail and context of the data
- Identifying emergent categories and theories from the data rather than imposing a priori categories and ideas
- Respecting the uniqueness of each case as well as conducting cross-case analysis
- Developing explanations at the level of meaning rather than cause

Nature of outputs

- Producing detailed descriptions and 'rounded understandings' which are based on, or offer an interpretation of, the perspectives of the participants in the social setting
- Mapping meanings, processes and contexts
- Answering 'what is', 'how' and 'why' questions
- Consideration of the influence of the researcher's perspectives

- samples that are small in scale and purposively selected on the basis of salient criteria

- data collection methods which usually involve close contact between the researcher and the research participants, which are interactive and developmental and allow for emergent issues to be explored
- data which are very detailed, information rich and extensive
- analysis which is open to emergent concepts and ideas and which may produce detailed description and classification, identify patterns of association, or develop typologies and explanations
- outputs which tend to focus on the interpretation of social meaning through mapping and 're-presenting' the social world of research participants.

As discussed in Chapter 2, qualitative methods are used to address research questions that require explanation or understanding of social phenomena and their contexts. They are particularly well suited to exploring issues that hold some complexity and to studying processes that occur over time.

We offer this simplified overview as a working definition of qualitative research to provide some parameters for the research practices described in the rest of this text. That notwithstanding, we recognise that the search for an all-inclusive definition of qualitative research goes on and will probably continue to do so given the array of approaches and beliefs it encompasses.

The historical development of qualitative research

The history of qualitative research should be recounted and appreciated within the wider context of the evolution of social research more generally. Against this wider backdrop, it is possible to see how approaches most closely associated with qualitative research were developed to overcome some of the perceived limitations of the prevailing methods used to study human behaviour. This account is provided here not to disparage or dismiss quantitative enquiry but to show how qualitative and quantitative traditions have developed in contrasting ways and the thinking that has underpinned them. Indeed, we would suggest that despite their different origins and assumptions, both qualitative and quantitative research methods have unique and valuable contributions to make to social research practice, a point we revisit later in the chapter.

The development of empiricism and positivism

We begin our history with the philosopher, René Descartes, who in 1637 wrote his *Discourse on Methodology* in which he focused on the importance of

objectivity and evidence in the search for truth. A key idea in his writing was that researchers should attempt to distance themselves from any influences that might corrupt their analytical capacity. Another important idea in social research was proposed by seventeenth-century writers such as Isaac Newton and Francis Bacon who asserted that knowledge about the world can be acquired through direct observation (induction) rather than deduced from abstract propositions. Similarly, David Hume (1711–76) who is associated with the founding of the empirical research tradition suggested that all knowledge about the world originates in our experiences and is derived through the senses. Evidence based on direct observation and collected in an objective and unbiased way are key tenets of empirical research.

Following in their footsteps, Auguste Comte (1798–1857) asserted that the social world can be studied in terms of invariant laws just like the natural world. This belief is the basis of a school of thought (or paradigm) known as 'positivism' which was a major influence in social research throughout the twentieth century. Although positivism has been interpreted in many different ways by social researchers, beliefs and practices associated with positivism usually include the following (Bryman, 1988):

- the methods of the natural sciences are appropriate for the study of social phenomenon
- only those phenomena which are observable can be counted as knowledge
- knowledge is developed inductively through the accumulation of verified facts
- hypotheses are derived deductively from scientific theories to be tested empirically (the scientific method)
- observations are the final arbiter in theoretical disputes
- facts and values are distinct, thus making it possible to conduct objective enquiry.

The development of interpretivism

Against this backdrop, the early development of ideas now associated particularly with qualitative research can be linked to the writing of Immanuel Kant who in 1781 published his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant argued that there are ways of knowing about the world other than direct observation and that people use these all the time. He proposed that:

- perception relates not only to the senses but to human interpretations of what our senses tell us
- our knowledge of the world is based on 'understanding' which arises from thinking about what happens to us, not just simply from having had particular experiences

- knowing and knowledge transcend basic empirical enquiry
- distinctions exist between 'scientific reason' (based strictly on causal determinism) and 'practical reason' (based on moral freedom and decision-making which involve less certainty).

Qualitative research has generally (though not exclusively) been associated with this set of beliefs. Those practising qualitative research have tended to place emphasis and value on the human, interpretative aspects of knowing about the social world and the significance of the investigator's own interpretations and understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

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

Max Weber (1864–1920) was very influenced by Dilthey's ideas and particularly his views on the importance of 'understanding' (or *verstehen*). However, rather than taking a strictly interpretivist stance, Weber tried to build a bridge between interpretivist and positivist approaches. He believed that an analysis of material conditions (as would be undertaken by those using a positivist approach) was important, but was not sufficient to a full understanding of people's lives. Instead, he emphasised that the researcher must understand the meaning of social actions within the context of the material conditions in which people live. He proposed two types of understanding: direct observational understanding, and explanatory or motivational understanding. He argued that there is a key difference in the purpose of understanding between the natural and social sciences. In the natural sciences, the purpose is to produce law-like propositions whereas in the social sciences, the aim is to understand subjectively meaningful experiences.

The school of thought that stresses the importance of interpretation as well as observation in understanding the social world is known as 'interpretivism'. This has been seen as integral to the qualitative tradition. The interrelatedness of different aspects of people's lives is a very important focus of qualitative research and psychological, social, historical and cultural factors are all recognised as playing an important part in shaping people's understanding of their world. Qualitative research practice has reflected this in the use of methods which attempt to provide a holistic understanding of research participants' views and actions in the context of their lives overall.

The development of qualitative research methods and challenges to the scientific method

From the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century qualitative research methods developed and became more widely adopted. They evolved as researchers became more sophisticated and aware of the research process, but also as they responded to challenges from other methodologies and paradigms, particularly positivism and postmodern critiques.

Within sociology and anthropology, early qualitative research often took the form of ethnographic work which flourished in both America and Britain. Early examples of ethnographers include Malinowski, Radcliffe Brown, Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson and Franz Boas, all of whom studied 'native' populations abroad, and Robert Park and the work of the Chicago school where the focus was on the life and culture of local groups in the city about whom little was known. Later, in the middle of the twentieth century, many community studies were carried out including those by Young and Willmott and by Frankenburg in the UK, for example. Sociology also saw the development of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Silverman, 1972) – the study of how, in practice, people construct social order and make sense of their social world and symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934; Thomas, 1931) – the study of symbolic meanings and interpretations attached to social actions and environments. Within historical studies there has been a strong tradition in the use of oral history (Plummer, 2001; Thompson, 2000) – the use of people's 'life stories' in understanding experiences and social constructions.

Throughout this period, however, survey research methods also became more widespread and quantitative researchers were increasingly influenced by positivism, modelling their approach on the methods of the natural sciences. Positivism became the dominant paradigm within social research and qualitative research was often criticised as 'soft' and 'unscientific'. In response to these criticisms, some qualitative researchers (for example Bogdan and Taylor, 1975; Cicourel, 1964; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) attempted to formalise their methods, stressing the importance of rigour in data collection and analysis. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) refer to this period as the 'modernist' phase.

By the 1970s, however, positivism itself and the legitimacy of social research based on the 'scientific method' began to be debated. Particular concerns arose in relation to:

- whether it is possible to 'control' variables in experimental research involving human 'subjects' to achieve unambiguous results
- whether the elimination of contextual variables in controlled experimental conditions is an appropriate way to study human behaviour
- whether it is appropriate to disregard the meaning and purpose of behaviour

- whether overarching theories of the world and aggregated data have any relevance and applicability to the lives of individuals
- whether emphasis on hypothesis testing neglects the importance of discovery through alternative understandings.

These challenges encouraged the use of qualitative research as a means of overcoming some of the perceived limitations associated with the scientific method. In practice, this meant that qualitative methods began to be seen as a more valid and valuable approach to research. Qualitative research began to be adopted (in a somewhat patchy way) across a range of disciplines, including those which have traditionally relied upon the use of controlled experiments to study human behaviour (such as social psychology, clinical research).

In addition to criticisms of positivism, new approaches also challenged some of the basic assumptions of qualitative research. One such challenge has come from postmodern critiques, such as poststructuralism and deconstruction, which not only question the notion of objectivity but also maintain that the concepts of meaning and reality are problematic. It is argued that there are no fixed or overarching meanings because meanings are a product of time and place. The researcher cannot produce a definitive account or explanation, and any attempt to do so is a form of tyranny because it suppresses diversity. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) claimed that this resulted in a crisis for social researchers: the researcher cannot capture the social world of another, or give an authoritative account of his or her findings, because there are no fixed meanings to be captured.

Another challenge came from critical theory in the form of Neo Marxism and, subsequently, feminism, and race research which maintain that material conditions, social, political, gender and cultural factors have a major influence on people's lives. Within these approaches, research findings are analysed primarily according to the concepts of race, class or gender, rather than the analysis being open to concepts which emerge from the data. The value of the findings is judged in terms of their political and emancipatory effects, rather than simply the extent to which they portray and explain the social world of participants.

One of the responses to these challenges was a call for greater equality between the researcher and research participants, a perspective particularly emphasised in feminist research. Feminist researchers argued that there was a power imbalance in the way that research was structured and conducted (Bowles and Klein, 1983; Oakley, 1981; Roberts, 1981) and this led to questioning and some refinement of both the researcher's and the participants' roles. Similarly, in other arenas, social research was increasingly being viewed as a collaborative process and researchers were developing ways to involve the study population in setting the research agenda (Reason, 1994; Whyte, 1991; Reason and Rowan, 1981). At the same time, the use of 'action research' – whereby research findings feed directly back into the environments

from which they are generated – was widening, inspired by similar demands for more participatory and emancipatory research processes.

Meanwhile, the importance of ‘situating’ the perspective of the researcher was being emphasised. This was to encourage a more reflexive approach to research findings rather than the traditional approach in which the researcher takes an authoritative, ‘neutral’ stance. Alongside this, others have attempted to find ways of letting research participants tell their own story directly, rather than writing about their lives as an outsider. To some extent, this was a basic tenet of the tradition of oral history even though the researcher often interpreted the life stories given to develop their historical perspective. But by the use of narrative and biographical methods had been a major growth in the use of narrative and biographical methods (Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Roberts, 2002). This was partly to provide greater understanding of phenomena in the context of people’s own accounts of their personal development and histories but also because of the previously described challenges to ways of involving study participants in generating research evidence.

Within psychology, the other primary social science concerned with the understanding of human phenomena, the growth of qualitative methods has taken place much later than in sociology. Some of the earliest uses of qualitative methods, developed around the middle of the twentieth century, occurred in the fields of personal construct theory – the study of psychological constructs that people use to define and attach meaning to their thinking and behaviour (see for example Bannister and Mair, 1968; Harré and Secorde, 1972; Kelly, 1955). Other longstanding strands of enquiry took place in ethnogenics which is concerned with the roles and rules through which people choose to act or not act (Harré and Secorde, 1972; Marsh et al., 1978); and protocol analysis which explores the ‘thinking’ processes that are manifest when people are engaged in cognitive tasks (see Gilhooly and Green, 1996). But it was not until the late 1980s that qualitative methods were being more systematically used in psychological research. Even then there was still deep resistance to qualitative research as a method of investigation (see Richardson, 1996) despite increasing calls for more interpretative and participatory approaches (Reason and Rowan, 1981). Psychology, as a discipline, was still deeply locked into emulating scientific enquiry with a heavy emphasis on the experimental method.

As a consequence, it was only within the last decade of the twentieth century that qualitative methods were more widely accepted within British psychological research practice (Nicholson, 1991; Richardson, 1996). Since then, there has been what has been termed an ‘explosion’ of interest in qualitative research and rapid growth in its applications within psychological enquiry (Bannister et al., 1994; Henwood and Nicholson, 1995; Robson, 2002; Smith et al., 1995). Qualitative methods are being used in a number of fields of psychology although with particular interest in the fields of cognitive and social psychology. Increasingly ethnomethodological approaches, discourse

analysis and grounded theory are being used as methodological approaches in psychological investigation (Richardson, 1996). Qualitative methods are also being used in more applied fields like clinical and educational psychology.

In the context of discussing the psychological uses of qualitative research, it is important to acknowledge the role played by market research in developing qualitative methods for applied purposes. As Walker (1985) describes, there is extensive use of qualitative methods in the market research industry and many of the techniques developed there have been transferred to other social science settings. The use of projective techniques for understanding the imagery surrounding phenomena is one example, the ever increasing applications of focus groups another.

As qualitative research has evolved over the course of the twentieth century, responding to different challenges, a number of ‘schools’ or approaches have emerged as outlined above. In order to give a sense of the diversity of approaches now used within the field of qualitative research, Box 1.2 summarises the central aims and disciplinary origins of a range of these different traditions.

Key philosophical and methodological issues in qualitative research

Ontology

As this brief history of qualitative research demonstrates, deciding how to study the social world has always raised a number of key philosophical debates. Some of these issues relate to ‘ontology’ and are concerned with beliefs about what there is to know about the world. Within social research, key ontological questions concern: whether or not social reality exists independently of human conceptions and interpretations; whether there is a common, shared, social reality or just multiple context-specific realities; and whether or not social behaviour is governed by ‘laws’ that can be seen as immutable or generalisable.

As has been indicated, one of the key ontological debates surrounds whether there is a captive social reality and how it should be constructed. In broad terms, there are three distinct positions, realism, materialism and idealism. *Realism* claims that there is an external reality which exists independently of people’s beliefs or understanding about it. In other words there is a distinction between the way the world is and the meaning and interpretation of that world held by individuals. *Materialism* also claims that there is a real world but that only material features, such as economic relations, or physical features of that world hold reality. Values, beliefs or experiences are ‘epiphenomena’ – that is features that arise from, but do not shape, the material world. *Idealism*, on the other hand, asserts that reality is only knowable through the human mind and through socially constructed meanings.

BOX 1.2 TRADITIONS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Research tradition	Disciplinary origins	Aims
Ethnography	Anthropology/ sociology	Understanding the social world of people being studied through immersion in their community to produce detailed description of people, their culture and beliefs.
Phenomenology/ ethnomethodology	Philosophy/ sociology	Understanding the 'constructs' people use in everyday life to make sense of their world. Uncovering meanings contained within conversation or text.
Leading to <i>Conversation analysis</i>	Sociology/ linguistics	Analysing the way different conversations are structured and the meanings they contain
<i>Discourse analysis</i>	Sociology	Examining the way knowledge is produced within different discourses and the performances, linguistic styles and rhetorical devices used in particular accounts
<i>Protocol analysis</i>	Psychology	Examining and drawing inference about the cognitive processes that underlie the performance of tasks
Symbolic interactionism	Sociology/social psychology	Exploring behaviour and social roles to understand how people interpret and react to their environment
Leading to <i>Grounded theory</i>	Sociology	Developing 'emergent' theories of social action through the identification of analytical categories and the relationships between them
<i>Ethnogenics</i>	Social psychology	Exploring the underlying structure of behavioural acts by investigating the meaning people attach to them
Constructivism	Sociology	Displaying 'multiple constructed realities' through the shared investigation (by researchers and participants) of meanings and explanations
Critical theory	Sociology	Identifying ways in which material conditions (economic, political, gender, ethnic) influence beliefs, behaviour and experiences

These three positions have been continually debated but also modified so that they are understood in less extreme terms. For example, Bhasker (1978) argues for 'critical realism', Hammersley (1992) for 'subtle realism' in which social phenomena are believed to exist independently of people's representations of them but are only accessible through those representations. Meanwhile, there are also differing positions within idealism. Some idealists maintain that it is possible for meanings and representations to be shared or collective, while those holding a relativist position argue that there is no single reality, only a series of social constructions (see Hughes and Sharrock, 1997 for a fuller discussion of these two positions). Materialism is the most difficult position to sustain within qualitative research because qualitative research focuses directly on meaning and interpretation. Nevertheless, critical theorists might be considered to be neo-materialists in that they believe that social structures based on class, race or gender are experienced as having an external, immutable reality.

An underlying ontological issue has concerned whether the social and natural worlds exist in similar ways or whether the social world is very different because it is open to subjective interpretation. Some early commentators believed that the social world was similar to the physical world and was governed by universal, causal laws. Most contemporary qualitative researchers maintain that the social world is regulated by normative expectations and shared understandings and hence the laws that govern it are not immutable.

Epistemology

'Epistemology' is concerned with ways of knowing and learning about the social world and focuses on questions such as: how can we know about reality and what is the basis of our knowledge? There are three main issues around which there is debate in social research.

The first concerns the relationship between the researcher and the researched. In the natural science model, phenomena are seen as independent of and unaffected by the behaviour of the researcher, consequently the researcher can be objective in his or her approach and the investigation can be viewed as value free. While some qualitative researchers subscribe to this model, others believe that, in the social world, people are affected by the process of being studied and that the relationship between the researcher and social phenomena is interactive. In this case, the researcher cannot be objective and cannot produce an objective or 'privileged' account. Findings are either mediated through the researcher ('value-mediated'), or they can be negotiated and agreed between the researcher and research participants. Between these two positions, some researchers propose 'empathic neutrality', a position that recognises that research cannot be value free but which

Influence of these assumptions on the ways data are collected and analysed is one strand of the 'reflexivity' called for on the part of researchers. The second relates to the impact of the research process on the participants and the evidence produced (see Chapter 10).

A second point at issue surrounds theories about 'truth'. This links back to views about similarities or differences between the natural and social worlds. In the natural sciences, the dominant theory of truth is one of correspondence – that is, there is a match between observations or readings of the natural world and an independent reality. An alternative view, known as the intersubjective or coherence theory of truth, and proposed as more appropriate for the study of the social world, suggests that this 'independent' reality can only be gauged in a consensual rather than an absolute way. If several reports confirm a statement then it can be considered true as a representation of a socially constructed reality. Finally, there are those who argue for a pragmatic theory of truth, which rests on the premise that an interpretation is true if it leads to, or provides assistance to take, actions that produce the desired or predicted results.

A final area of debate concerns the way in which knowledge is acquired. The main options are through induction by looking for patterns and association derived from observations of the world; or through deduction whereby propositions or hypotheses are reached theoretically, through a logically derived process. In other words inductive processes involve using evidence as the genesis of a conclusion; deductive processes use evidence in support of a conclusion. Although qualitative research is often seen as an inductive approach, it is not a singularly defining characteristic of qualitative research. Inductive reasoning is used in other forms of enquiry and the processes of sampling and generalisation from qualitative research involve both induction and deduction.

When comparing quantitative and qualitative methodologies, it is common for these to be equated with different positions on the merits of scientific enquiry. The former is seen to investigate the social world in ways which emulate the 'scientific method' as used in the natural sciences, with an emphasis on hypothesis testing, causal explanations, generalisation and prediction. By contrast, qualitative methods are seen to reject the natural science model and to concentrate on understanding, rich description and emergent concepts and theories. Again, however, this distinction is not clear cut: some qualitative approaches have sought to emulate natural science models, and not all quantitative studies are based on hypothesis testing but can produce purely descriptive and inductive statistics.

An underlying difficulty in all these debates surrounds the conception of 'scientific' investigation and what it constitutes. There is much debate about what 'science' is and what that means for both methods of research enquiry and the 'empirical' nature of the evidence they produce (Chalmers, 1982). Indeed, some suggest that there is a 'story book' image of scientific enquiry (Reason and Rowan, 1981), a scientific 'fairytale' (Mittelman, 1978) or 'scientific

deceptions of the way scientific investigation is carried out bear no resemblance to the reality of what innovative scientists actually do. There is also questioning of the natural sciences – physics and mathematics in particular – as the originating disciplines for defining what counts as 'scientific' (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997; Sloman, 1976). It has been suggested that had the definition of 'scientific' method been based on other natural sciences, such as zoology or botany, in which historical perspectives and classification are integral to rigorous investigation, then it might have been differently conceived. Perhaps most crucially, there are now serious challenges to the view that the natural world is as stable and law-like as has been supposed (Jick, 1987; Lewin, 1993; Williams, 2000). All of these issues raise important questions about the status of 'scientific method' around which so much epistemological debate in the social sciences has taken place.

It is important to recognise that there are no definitive answers to these many philosophical questions. They simply relate to different views of the social world and different beliefs about how, in practice, it can and should be studied. The purpose here is to highlight the different stances that social researchers may take on these issues and to show how different beliefs give rise to different research practices. These are summarised in Box 1.3. It is left to the reader to decide where he or she stands on these larger questions and to consider the implications of this for his or her own research practice.

Pragmatism and the 'toolkit' approach to social research

The diverse ontological and epistemological perspectives within the qualitative tradition, and the adoption of positivist ideals among some qualitative researchers, indicate that qualitative and quantitative methods should not necessarily be seen as opposed approaches to research. On a practical level, some researchers have begun to emphasise the importance of appreciating that qualitative and quantitative research methods can and should be seen as part of the social researcher's 'toolkit'. They are encouraging greater acceptance of pragmatism in choosing the appropriate method for addressing specific research questions, rather than focusing too much on the underlying philosophical debates (Seale, 1999).

According to this view, qualitative and quantitative research should not be seen as competing and contradictory, but should instead be viewed as complementary strategies appropriate to different types of research questions or issues. In the latter part of the twentieth century, there was much discussion and development of 'multi-method, transdisciplinary' research which employs a range of different methods and draws on expertise from a range of alternate disciplines, as appropriate to the research questions. In an attempt to overcome the previously entrenched epistemological positions of positivism and interpretivism, some have begun to examine more closely not only the philosophical, but also the practical realities of each.

BOX 1.3 KEY ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL STANCES**ONTOLOGICAL STANCES**

The nature of the world and what we can know about it

Realism

- an external reality exists independent of our beliefs or understanding
- a clear distinction exists between beliefs about the world and the way the world is

Materialism (a variant of realism)

- an external reality exists independent of our beliefs or understanding
- only the material or physical world is considered 'real'
- mental phenomena (e.g. beliefs) arise from the material world

Subtle realism/critical realism (a variant of realism, influenced by idealism)

- an external reality exists independent of our beliefs and understanding
- reality is only knowable through the human mind and socially constructed meanings

Idealism

- no external reality exists independent of our beliefs and understanding
- reality is only knowable through the human mind and socially constructed meanings

Subtle idealism (a variant acknowledging collective understandings)

- reality is only knowable through socially constructed meanings
- meanings are shared and there is a collective or objective mind

Relativism (a variant of idealism)

- reality is only knowable through socially constructed meanings
- there is no single shared social reality; only a series of alternative social constructions

EPISTEMOLOGICAL STANCES

How it is possible to know about the world

Positivism

- the world is independent of and unaffected by the researcher
- facts and values are distinct, thus making it possible to conduct objective, value free inquiry
- observations are the final arbiter in theoretical disputes
- the methods of the natural sciences (e.g. hypothesis testing, causal explanations and modelling) are appropriate for the study of social phenomena because human behaviour is governed by law-like regularities

(Continued)

BOX 1.3 (Continued)**Interpretivism**

- the researcher and the social world impact on each other
- facts and values are not distinct and findings are inevitably influenced by the researcher's perspective and values, thus making it impossible to conduct objective, value free research, although the researcher can declare and be transparent about his or her assumptions
- the methods of the natural sciences are not appropriate because the social world is not governed by law-like regularities but is mediated through meaning and human agency; consequently the social researcher is concerned to explore and understand the social world using both the participants and the researcher's understanding

Those in favour of transdisciplinary, multi-method research strategies have suggested that purism about the epistemological origins of a particular approach may undermine our ability to choose and implement the most appropriate research design for answering the research questions posed. Indeed, some feel that philosophical positions have been allowed to undermine pragmatic considerations and that a more helpful balance might be struck between philosophy and pragmatism (Bryman, 1988; Silverman, 1993). This has led to the suggestion that different research methods should be viewed as part of a research toolkit, including both qualitative and quantitative techniques. The tools thus available to the researcher can be used as appropriate in different research contexts and to address different research questions.

While the need to move towards more transdisciplinary and multi-method research is increasingly being proposed, the ways in which this is envisaged vary. Some have suggested that it is possible and appropriate to mix methods associated with different paradigms within the same study. Others, however, have argued that multi-method research designs should only extend to the use of different methods from within the same paradigm. The latter would appear to limit the potential for combining qualitative and quantitative methods within the same study. Indeed, there is some debate about whether mixing methods across paradigms may lead to a lack of analytical clarity because each method relies on different assumptions in data collection and produces different types of data which may be difficult to reconcile. Ultimately, most authors on this subject have deferred to readers to draw their own conclusions about the value of these different arguments and to choose for themselves whether they will espouse pragmatism or adhere more strictly to particular epistemological stances. For those choosing the former, a range of strategies for combining qualitative and quantitative methods have been suggested (see Chapter 2).

Although some have attempted to focus more on the tools available to researchers than the philosophical assumptions underlying different

research methods, others remain sceptical about this approach. Within disciplines based on natural 'science' particularly (for example, clinical research or psychological research), debate continues as to whether and how it is appropriate to use qualitative research methods which start from a different set of assumptions about the nature of reality and ways of knowing than those traditionally espoused in these fields (Stange, p. 351 in Crabtree and Miller, 1999). A key dilemma concerns whether it is feasible to maintain a positivist stance to research undertaken using quantitative methods while also accepting the more interpretivist or constructivist stances which tend to underpin some qualitative methods. It is said that combining both approaches in a single study poses particular difficulties unless the researcher neglects the epistemological bases of the different methods and adopts a largely pragmatic stance focusing on research methods as techniques divorced from their philosophical foundations (Richardson, 1996). This remains an area of ongoing controversy that has yet to be adequately resolved even among proponents of multi-method, transdisciplinary approaches to research.

The 'approach' within this book

Earlier in the chapter we indicated the importance of situating the approach described in the subsequent chapters, which has been developed in the domain of applied social policy, within broader methodological debate. In this section, we therefore indicate the main parameters within which researchers working in this tradition operate, and the beliefs which underlie their work. It is important to stress, however, that different research environments will vary in how they can be placed and individual researchers will differ in where they would situate themselves. For us all, beliefs and practices evolve.

First, it is perhaps useful to stress two key aspects of the context in which the use of qualitative methods within social policy has developed. A primary factor is that research is commissioned and funded by public bodies (government departments being by far the largest spenders) which intend to use that research in the design and development of policy and practice. As funders, they have certain requirements of the research they commission. Influential, too, is the fact that the dominant research paradigm within this context was, and to some extent remains, quantitative. Those funding and commissioning qualitative research also make extensive use of quantitative data. Many of the organisations and institutes which practice qualitative research within the applied policy context have strong traditions of conducting quantitative research, and many individual research practitioners are skilled in both methods.

These features mean that particular emphasis is placed in applied policy research on producing qualitative evidence that has been rigorously collected

and analysed, is valid, able to support wider inference, as neutral and defensible as possible and clearly defensible in terms of how interpretations have been reached. It also means that emphasis is placed on research findings which are accessible and which can be translated into policy planning and implementation.

What is important to note here is that adherence to these principles and our approach to implementing them means that we do not fit neatly into any one recognised 'school' of qualitative research and instead, we borrow from many different traditions within the social research field generally. This eclecticism can be a significant strength. However, in the existing literature, practising researchers appear reluctant to acknowledge and delineate the boundaries of their beliefs and practices where these do not mesh with existing recognised traditions of qualitative research. As a result, certain practices are generally acknowledged or aspired to, but the beliefs underlying these practices are rarely explicitly discussed or debated.

This gives rise to what has been informally termed 'generic qualitative research' (Morse, 1998); that is research which appears to have been carried out without reference to other qualitative research traditions and where the beliefs of researchers and their relationship to their research practice is never explicitly discussed. According to some researchers, not having the opportunity to assess the degree of consistency between the researchers' beliefs and the research practices used makes it impossible to evaluate the quality of research.

The following sections therefore map the key parameters within which we carry out qualitative research for applied social policy purposes. As far as can be judged, these same parameters would apply to many other individuals and institutions that carry out qualitative research within the same field.

Ontological position (or what it is possible to know about the world)

In terms of ontological position, or what we believe it is possible to know about the world, we adhere most closely to what Hammesley (1992) describes as 'subtle realism'. That is, we accept that the social world does exist independently of individual subjective understanding, but that it is only accessible to us via the respondents' interpretations (which may then be further interpreted by the researcher). We emphasise the critical importance of respondents' own interpretations of the relevant research issues and accept that their different vantage points will yield different types of understanding. But we do not feel that diverse perspectives negate the existence of an external reality which can be 'captured'. Rather, we believe that that external reality is itself diverse and multifaceted. The diversity of perspectives thus adds richness to our understanding of the various ways in which that reality has been experienced, and our underlying aim is to apprehend

and convey as full a picture as possible of the nature of that multifaceted reality.

Epistemological position (or how it is possible to find out about the world)

Our epistemological stance reflects the fact that the historical context is largely one of quantitative research. Our approach therefore draws on aspects of the scientific method, particularly in its most recent conceptions, but has been adapted to suit the nature of qualitative data and the goals of qualitative research. To an extent a parallel adaptation has to occur in quantitative research since specific features of the scientific method are not necessarily reflected in, nor appropriate for, statistical social enquiry. Thus, we can pinpoint a number of features traditionally associated with empirical research that influence the conduct of applied social policy research.

A key feature is a striving to be as objective and neutral as possible in the collection, interpretation and presentation of qualitative data. Researchers generally take particular care in data collection to minimise the extent to which the researcher influences the views of research participants during the course of interviews or focus groups. Although individual researchers have different perspectives on this issue, researchers generally do *not* divulge personal information about themselves during data collection and are trained to use open, non-leading questioning techniques. We also recognise that while researchers can 'strive' for neutrality and objectivity, we can never attain this aspiration fully (nor indeed, do we believe that this is possible in other types of social research). This relates back to our ontological stance of subtle realism where we acknowledge that personal interpretations are important both in terms of study participants' perspectives of reality, and in terms of researchers' understanding and portrayal of study participants' views.

Reflexivity is important in striving for objectivity and neutrality. We try to reflect upon ways in which bias might creep into our qualitative research practice, and acknowledge that our own backgrounds and beliefs can be relevant here. However, while policy customers welcome guidance about the reliance they can place on particular research findings, they generally make no requirement to know the values and beliefs of the researchers they fund. It is therefore important that researchers provide as much information as possible, in terms of both technical details of conduct and potential bias, so that others can scrutinise the 'objectivity' of the investigation.

Other tenets of the scientific method that we strive to achieve relate to reliability and validity. We accept that differences in the nature of quantitative and qualitative data mean that these terms should not be applied in a standard way to both types of research. Nevertheless, we believe that both are important features of qualitative research, and attainable aspirations. They are also essential elements when considering ways in which wider inference

in addition to aspects of our epistemological stance relating to the scientific method, the approach embraces aspects of interpretivism and pragmatism. Our acceptance of interpretivism is reflected in practices which emphasise the importance of understanding people's perspectives in the context of the conditions and circumstances of their lives. We therefore seek to obtain thick description and as much detailed information as possible about people's lives (from their own perspectives and, to a more limited extent, our own observations either of the circumstances in which they live or their engagement with the research issues). We also see the researcher's interpretations as important provided that these can be clearly delineated from those of the participants. In evolving our interpretations, we adhere as closely as possible to their accounts, but acknowledge that deeper insights can be obtained by synthesising, interlocking and comparing the accounts of a number of respondents. We also utilise other forms of inferential and theoretical thinking to place our interpretations in a broader context. The process of interpretation is discussed in Chapter 9.

Acknowledgement is also made of the importance of accessibility of research findings to research funders and commissioners, and to those whose policies and practices it is intended to inform. This means that our interpretation is grounded in the accounts of individual respondents, but employs language, conceptualisation and categorisation that is not their own. Where our interpretations move beyond the explicit data provided by individual respondents, we place great importance on ensuring that the building blocks used by researchers in arriving at their interpretations are clearly visible to the reader. This means that in our reporting, we take care to show how more abstract interpretations offered by the research relate specifically to the data provided by study participants.

Lastly, we align ourselves with other pragmatists because we believe in the value of choosing the most appropriate research method or methods to address specific research questions. We are more interested in ensuring a suitable 'fit' between the research methods used and the research questions posed than we are in the degree of philosophical coherence of the epistemological positions typically associated with different research methods. We believe that quality and rigour in research practice have more to do with choosing the right research tools for the job than with limiting ourselves to combining only those research methods which are viewed as philosophically consistent.

This means that we are happy to combine qualitative and quantitative methods in the same study where this is viewed as necessary and helpful in answering the research questions posed. We acknowledge that qualitative and quantitative data do not calibrate exactly, but see this as a manifestation of the different ways in which each method contributes to an understanding of the research question. Inconsistency and contradiction need to be acknowledged and explanations for them sought, but we do not believe this undermines the value of either. But, more crucially, we see the quest for

replication in evidence produced by different research methods as a false trail. Instead our search is for complementary extension – that is using different forms of evidence to build greater understanding and insight of the social world than is possible from one approach alone.

KEY POINTS

- Qualitative research covers a broad range of approaches which are linked to different beliefs about what there is to know about the social world and how to find out about it. Although definitions vary, the aims of qualitative research are generally directed at providing an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world, by learning about people's social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives and histories.
- The history of qualitative research must be understood in the context of wider developments in research methods generally and social research methods in particular. The development of qualitative research was strongly influenced by ideas about the importance of understanding human behaviour in their social and material contexts; and by the need to understand the meanings that people attach to their own experiences. 'Interpretivism', which is integral to the qualitative research tradition, is seen to overcome some of the perceived limitations associated with 'positivism', the tradition most commonly associated with statistical social enquiry.
- Qualitative research has seen many developments over the course of the twentieth century and a number of different 'schools' have emerged. Those that have been most formative include ethnography, phenomenology and ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism and grounded theory, constructivism and critical theory. There has also been a widening of interest in the use of qualitative methods in disciplines that previously relied on quantitative research and experimental methods and in more applied fields. This is part of a broader recognition that researchers may need to adopt a more pragmatic stance in their research and draw on different resources available to them (both qualitative and quantitative) to address research questions.

KEY TERMS

Ontology is concerned with the nature of the social world and what can be known about it. A key ontological debate concerns whether

there is a captive social reality and how it should be constructed on which there are three distinct positions. **Realism** claims that there is an external reality which exists independently of people's beliefs or understanding about it; **materialism** holds that there is a real world but that only material features of that world hold reality; and **idealism** asserts that reality is only knowable through the human mind and socially constructed meanings. Qualitative researchers vary in their ontological stances but there is a common understanding that the social world is governed by normative expectations and shared understandings and hence the laws that govern it are not immutable.

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

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

Further reading

- Bryman, A. (1988) *Quantity and Quality in Social Research*. London: Unwin Hyman
- Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (2000) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. In particular, 'Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research' and Y.S. Lincoln and E.G. Guba's 'Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions and emerging confidences'
- Hammersey, M. (1992) *What's Wrong with Ethnography?*. London: Routledge
- Hughes, J. and Sharrock, W. (1997) *The Philosophy of Social Research*. London: Longman
- Seale, C. (1999) *The Quality of Qualitative Research*. Oxford: Blackwell