

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PRACTICE

A GUIDE FOR SOCIAL
SCIENCE STUDENTS AND
RESEARCHERS

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THE FOUNDATIONS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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Chapter outline

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

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

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

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

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

The nature of qualitative research

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

As the quote above indicates, qualitative research is a very broad church and includes a wide range of approaches and methods found within different research disciplines. However, despite this diversity and the sometimes conflicting nature of underlying assumptions about its inherent qualities, a number of writers have attempted to capture the essence or defining characteristics of qualitative research (see for example, Barbour, 2008; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Flick, 2009; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Holloway and Wheeler, 2010; Silverman, 2011). At a general level, qualitative research is often described as a naturalistic, interpretative approach, concerned with exploring phenomena 'from the interior' (Flick, 2009) and taking the perspectives and accounts of research participants as a starting point. Denzin and Lincoln propose that in spite of the inherent diversity within qualitative research, it can be described as:

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

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

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

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

Box 1.1**COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

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

Key philosophical issues in social research

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

Ontology

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

In very broad terms, social science has been shaped by two overarching ontological positions in relation to these issues – realism and idealism. Realism is based on the idea that there is an external reality which exists independently of

people's beliefs about or understanding of it. In other words there is a distinction between the way the world is, and the meaning and interpretation of that world held by individuals. Idealism, on the other hand, asserts that reality is fundamentally mind-dependent: it is only knowable through the human mind and through socially constructed meanings, and no reality exists independently of these. Within these broad positions, a number of more nuanced perspectives can be identified. These are summarised in Box 1.2.

Box 1.2

ONTOLOGICAL POSITIONS

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

Realism

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

- *Naive realism* (Madill et al., 2000), or *shallow realism* (Blaikie, 2007) – reality can be observed directly and accurately
- *Cautious realism* (Blaikie, 2007) – reality can be known approximately or imperfectly rather than accurately
- *Depth realism* (Blaikie, 2007), *critical or transcendental realism* (Bhaskar, 1978; Robson, 2002) – reality consists of different levels – the empirical domain that is made of up what we experience through our senses, the actual domain that exists regardless of whether or not it is observed, and the real domain that refers to underlying processes and mechanisms
- *Subtle realism* (Blaikie, 2007; Hammersley, 1992) – an external reality exists but is only known through the human mind and socially constructed meanings
- *Materialism* is a variant of realism which recognises only material features, such as economic relations, or physical features of the world as holding reality. Values, beliefs or experiences are 'epiphenomena' – that is features that arise from, but do not shape, the material world.

Idealism

No external reality exists independent of our beliefs and understandings.

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

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

Epistemology

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

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

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

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

Box 1.3

EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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

For further descriptions of inductive and deductive approaches to knowledge and theory development, see Blaikie (2007) or Gilbert (2008). For summaries of theories of truth, see the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <http://plato.stanford.edu/>

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

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

Positivism and the scientific method

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

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

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

Positivist assumptions have since been refined and questioned by those working within both the natural sciences and quantitative social research. For example, during the 1930s and 1940s, Popper criticised the idea that general laws could be derived from observations on the grounds that it was always possible that a future observation might prove an exception to the rule. He argued for a deductive approach in which hypotheses were first derived from theory and then tested empirically. Although Popper himself advocated the use of falsification so that (null) hypotheses were set up in the hope that they would be rejected, many researchers devise hypotheses setting out relationships they expect to be confirmed. This approach to research, sometimes referred to as '**post-positivism**' or '**post-empiricism**' (Box 1.4), has been hugely influential in the development of quantitative research methods within social enquiry.

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

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

Box 1.4

POSITIVISM AND POST-POSITIVISM

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

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

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

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

An underlying issue in all these philosophical debates surrounds the conception of 'scientific' investigation and what it constitutes. Indeed, some have suggested that there is a 'story book' image of scientific enquiry (Reason and Rowan, 1981), a scientific 'fairy tale' (Mitroff, 1974), in which depictions of the way scientific investigation is carried out bear no resemblance to the reality of what innovative scientists actually do. There are also challenges to the idea that the natural sciences – physics and mathematics in particular – should be taken as the originating disciplines for defining what counts as 'scientific' (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997; Sloman, 1976). Such debates have gained considerable momentum over recent decades and perhaps most crucially there is now a body of literature which argues

that the natural world is not as stable and law-like as has been supposed (Firestein, 2012; Lewin, 1999; Ness, 2012; Williams, 2000) and that scientists often employ inductive as well as deductive methods. All of these issues raise important questions about the status of 'scientific method' around which so much epistemological debate in the social sciences has taken place.

Key developments and traditions in qualitative research

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

Interpretivism and the origins of qualitative research

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

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

research should explore 'lived experiences' in order to reveal the connections between the social, cultural and historical aspects of people's lives and to see the context in which particular actions take place.

Box 1.5

INTERPRETIVISM AND CONSTRUCTIONISM

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

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

Max Weber (1864–1920) was very influenced by Dilthey's ideas and particularly his views on the importance of 'understanding'. However, rather than taking a strictly interpretivist stance, Weber tried to build a bridge between interpretivist and positivist approaches. He believed that an analysis of material conditions (as would be undertaken by those using a positivist approach, for example by observing or recording evidence of deprivation or affluence) was important, but was not sufficient to a full understanding of people's lives. Instead, he emphasised that the researcher must understand the meaning of social actions within the context of the material conditions in which people live. He proposed two types of understanding – direct observational understanding,

and explanatory or motivational understanding. He argued that there is a key difference in the purpose of understanding between the natural and social sciences. In the natural sciences, the purpose is to produce law-like propositions whereas in the social sciences, the aim is to understand subjectively meaningful experiences.

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

Advancement and diversification of qualitative research

From the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, qualitative research methods developed, diversified and became more widely adopted across the social sciences. Within sociology and anthropology, early qualitative research often took the form of ethnographic work, which flourished in both America and Britain. **Ethnography** involves understanding the social world or culture – the shared behaviours, beliefs and values – of particular groups, typically via immersion in their community. Early examples of ethnographers include Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson and Franz Boas, all of whom studied 'native' populations abroad, and Robert Park and the work of the Chicago school where the focus was on the life and culture of local groups in the city about whom little was known. Later, in the middle of the twentieth century, many community studies were carried out, including those by Young and Willmott and by Frankenburg in the UK, for example. During this period, qualitative researchers began to engage with the participants who were the subjects of their research more directly – gathering their views through interviews rather than simply inferring meaning from observation or relying on the accounts of intermediaries. While Weber believed that the poor were unable to speak for themselves (Alasuutari et al., 2008), Malinowski is credited with taking anthropology 'off the verandah'.

Sociology also saw the influence of **phenomenology** (describing the meaning people attach to a particular phenomenon, concept or idea), based on the ideas of Husserl and Schutz, which led to the development of **ethnomethodology** (Garfinkel, 1967; Silverman, 1972) – the study of how, in practice, people construct social order

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

In psychology the use of qualitative methods came much later than in sociology because of the disciplinary emphasis placed on scientific enquiry and the use of experimental methods. Some of the earliest uses of qualitative methods in psychology, around the middle of the twentieth century, occurred in the fields of **personal construct theory** – the study of psychological constructs that people use to define and attach meaning to their thinking and behaviour (see for example Bannister and Mair, 1968; Harré and Secorde, 1972; Kelly, 1955). Other long-standing strands of enquiry took place in **ethogenics**, concerned with the roles and rules through which people choose to act or not act (Harré and Secorde, 1972; Marsh et al., 1978) and **protocol analysis** which explores the 'thinking' processes that are manifest when people are engaged in cognitive tasks (see Gilhooly and Green, 1996). But it was not until the latter part of the twentieth century that qualitative methods were more systematically used and more widely accepted within psychological research practice (Henwood and Nicholson, 1995; Richardson, 1996). Since then, there has been what has been termed an 'explosion' of interest in qualitative research and a rapid growth in its applications within psychological enquiry (Bannister et al., 1994; Robson, 2002; Smith et al., 1995). Qualitative methods are increasingly used in specialist research fields such as those concerned with occupational, forensic, educational, health and clinical psychology (see for example Harper and Thompson, 2012). **Interpretative phenomenological analysis** (IPA), which is concerned with capturing people's accounts and reflections to explore and interpret the meanings attached and the 'sense' that is made of them, plays an increasingly central role in psychological qualitative research (Smith et al., 2009). Other predominant methodologies include **grounded theory**, **discourse analysis** and **conversation analysis**, but approaches are continually being developed to aid psychological understanding (Smith et al., 2009; Willig and Stainton-Rogers, 2008).

As new qualitative approaches and schools were emerging, survey research and other social statistical methods also became more widespread and sophisticated,

broadly framed within positivist principles. Within this context, qualitative research was often criticised as 'soft' and 'unscientific'. In response to these criticisms, some qualitative researchers (for example Bogdan and Taylor, 1975; Cicourel, 1964; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) attempted to formalise their methods, stressing the importance of rigour in data collection and analysis.

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

- whether it is possible to 'control' variables in experimental social research involving people to achieve unambiguous results
- whether the elimination of contextual variables in controlled experimental conditions is an appropriate way to study human behaviour
- whether it is appropriate to disregard the meaning and purpose of behaviour in controlled experimental studies
- whether overarching theories of the world and aggregated data have any relevance and applicability to the lives of individuals
- whether emphasis on hypothesis testing neglects the importance of discovery through alternative understandings.

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

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

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

This questioning of beliefs about the world and what we can know about it results in the postmodern assertion that there are no fixed or overarching meanings, because all meanings are a product of time and place. Denzin and Lincoln

(1994, 2000) claimed that this resulted in a crisis for social researchers – the researcher cannot capture the social world of another, or give an authoritative account of their findings, because there are no fixed meanings to be captured. However, Silverman suggests that it is possible to learn from the insights of postmodernism – particularly the view that ‘facts’ are socially constructed in particular contexts – without drowning in ‘a whirlpool of intellectual nihilism’ (2010: 108).

Postmodernism’s emphasis on setting knowledge claims ‘within the conditions of the world today and in the multiple perspectives of class, race, gender and other group affiliations’ (Creswell, 2013: 27) links it with the range of perspectives associated with critical theory. **Critical theory** is concerned with empowering people to overcome social circumstances that constrain them. It tends to be used as an umbrella term covering various more specific research movements, drawing on theories including **neo-Marxism** and, subsequently, **feminism**, **social models of disability**, **critical race theory**, and **‘queer theory’**, each of which maintain that social and cultural factors have a major influence on people’s lives. Within these approaches, research findings tend to be analysed primarily according to the concepts of race, class, gender, disability or sexual orientation rather than the analysis being open to whatever concepts emerge from the data. The value of findings from such research is often judged in terms of their political and emancipatory effects, rather than the extent to which they portray and explain the social world of participants.

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

In recent years, participatory research has diversified from ‘user involvement’ (where users are involved in the research process in some capacity) to include ‘user-led’ or ‘user-controlled’ research (Wallcraft et al., 2009). Growing from interest in the ‘active citizen’ and in advancing the influence of those using public services (especially health and social care), user-controlled research aims to empower participants and service users and to prioritise broader political and social change (Beresford, 2007; Faulkner, 2012). This is embodied by the call within the disability field for ‘nothing about us without us’, which has been applied to research as well as policy and decision-making. However, these participatory and user-led approaches

have not been without challenges, including how to avoid tokenism (Cook, 2012) and balancing participant involvement with maintaining quality (see for example discussion in Brownlie et al., 2006).

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

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

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

Box 1.6

Traditions and approaches in qualitative research

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

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

Choosing an approach

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

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

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

If researchers are comfortable making an ideological commitment to a particular tradition, regardless of their research topic, then that is their choice, but others should not be forced into a theoretical or methodological straitjacket. Seale and colleagues distinguish between the political, external role of methodological tradition to legitimise what is done – 'the armed wing of science' – and its procedural or

internal role to help guide a researcher through the process of generating rigorously based knowledge (Seale et al., 2007: 7). They go on to advocate a flexible approach to research design that takes account of the aims and context of a study. Drawing on the philosophy of William James and George Herbert Mead, they argue for **pragmatism** – choosing the approach that best fits the specific research question. Far from being an ‘anything goes’ perspective, Seale et al. argue that pragmatism forces the researcher to be cautious and self-conscious about what they do. Patton (2002) also argues in favour of pragmatism, and Barbour (2008) claims there is ‘no shame’ in hybrid approaches, encouraging her students to take a broadly social constructionist approach, while integrating more macro elements related to social, economic, political or policy contexts if they wish.

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

The ‘approach’ within this book

Earlier in this chapter we noted the importance of situating the approach described in the subsequent chapters within the broader methodological debate. The authors and editors of this book all either work, or have worked, at NatCen Social Research, an independent UK-based centre for social research. Much of our research concerns social policy and has an applied, rather than a wholly theoretical, focus. In this section, we describe the main parameters within which we – and, we believe, many other researchers working in social policy research, in other settings – commonly operate, and the beliefs which typically underlie our work.

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

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

Whether associated with a particular label or not, adopting an approach that draws on many different traditions should not imply that there are no theoretical or philosophical considerations underpinning our choices and approach. We set out below a brief summary of the broad philosophical parameters within which we work and which determine the approach and methods described in this book.

Realism

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

that external reality is itself diverse and multifaceted and it is the aim of research to capture that reality in all its complexity and depth.

Interpretivism and the role of theory

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

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

Pragmatism

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

Reflexivity

We aim to achieve an 'empathic neutrality' in the conduct of our research. This means that we strive to avoid obvious, conscious or systematic bias and to be as neutral as possible in the collection, interpretation and presentation of data. However, we recognise that this aspiration can never fully be attained – all research will be influenced by the researcher and there is no completely 'neutral' or 'objective'

knowledge. In this context, researchers aim to be reflexive about their role and the influence of their beliefs and behaviours on the research process. When working in an applied context, research commissioners welcome information about the reliance they can place on qualitative findings but rarely require researchers to be explicit about their own beliefs and values. As such, it is important that researchers themselves reflect on potential sources of bias and report on these alongside technical details of a study's conduct.

Rigour

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

Inferential status

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

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

KEY POINTS

- Qualitative research covers a broad range of approaches which are linked to different beliefs about what there is to know about the social world and how to find out about it. Although definitions vary, the aims of qualitative research are generally directed at providing an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world, by learning about people's social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives and histories.
- The history of qualitative research must be understood in the context of wider developments in research methods generally and social research methods in particular. The development of qualitative research was strongly influenced by ideas about the importance of understanding human behaviours in their social and material contexts; and by the need to understand the meanings that people attach to their own experiences. 'Interpretivism', which is integral to the

qualitative research tradition, developed in response to some of the perceived limitations associated with 'positivism', the approach traditionally associated with statistical social science.

- Qualitative research has seen many developments over the course of the twentieth century and a large number of different 'schools' have emerged. Those that have been most formative include ethnography, phenomenology and ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism and grounded theory, constructionism and critical theory. There has also been a widening of interest in the use of qualitative methods in disciplines that previously relied on quantitative research and experimental methods, and in more applied fields. This is part of a broader recognition that researchers may need to adopt a more pragmatic stance in their research and draw on different resources available to them (both qualitative and quantitative) to address research questions.

KEY TERMS

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

Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired.

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

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

Further reading

- Blaikie, N. (2007) *Approaches to Social Inquiry*, 2nd edition, Cambridge: Polity.
 Creswell, J.W. (2013) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 3rd edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, especially Chapter 2.
 Hughes, J. and Sharrock, W. (1997) *The Philosophy of Social Research*, London: Routledge.

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

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

Online resources

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

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