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INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Research is concerned with asking and answering relevant and researchable questions. To be referred to as social scientific research, the investigation should stick to the rules of the game called science. This book addresses the rules of the game for qualitative researchers and in particular how they are to shape their analytical activities. To begin the chapter, we draw the contours of qualitative research by briefly comparing it with quantitative research within the social sciences. Then we focus on the diversity within qualitative research and elaborate on the grounded theory approach that has mainly inspired the representation of qualitative research in this book and in particular how we look at qualitative data analysis. Considering the multiplicity of research types, why do scientists often pose the same sort of research questions and choose to work with more or less the same tools in their projects? At the end of the chapter we will outline the qualitative research process, position qualitative data analysis and give a summary of the contents of the book.

LEARNING AIMS

At the end of this chapter you will be able to:

- Mention the necessary preparations when initiating scientific research
- Distinguish between quantitative and qualitative research
- Explain the role of theory in deductive and inductive approaches to research
- Define what is commonly referred to as a paradigm
- Know what paradigmatic issues qualitative researchers mostly agree on
- Outline the origins and purposes of the grounded theory approach
- Define qualitative research and elaborate on its three key elements
- Reproduce the steps of the qualitative research process and place data analysis within this process

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Preparatory thoughts

If there is one activity in which thinking needs to precede doing, it is in a social science research enterprise. Science is only recognized and accepted as such when researchers stick to the rules that apply to conducting scientific research, the most important of these being that the study is theoretically informed, that it uses a systematic procedure, that approved methods and techniques are used, and that the study is documented in a way that allows others to assess the findings. This means that there is a lot to decide upon when thinking of starting a qualitative research project, such as: How will we deal with theory? What theories can be keys to our research? What steps are we going to take in the research as a whole? What steps will we use for analysis? How will we collect the data? What are common instruments for ensuring quality? Exactly what needs to be reported to convince our readers? Before exploring these issues, we will briefly look at some aspects which are probably already common knowledge to you.

It is evident that you have to come up with a research topic that is of interest to you and will engage you. Just as important, the topic needs to be viable to turn it into a small- or moderate-scale scientific research project. Studying the literature and talking to experts can lead you to research questions that lend themselves to scientific methods. And although all scientific research is about posing and answering questions, this cannot be reversed: not all endeavours to find answers are worth the label 'research' let alone earn the label 'scientific'. For scientific research the questions asked need to be related to theory in some way, and the answers need to be found by the use of systematic methods that must be adequately documented.

You will have to find out what type of research is needed to answer your questions as well. The choice to use qualitative research methods has implications for your way of working, for the research design, the use of theory, the sample, the data collection methods, the data analysis, and the final publication. You may be in doubt about what research type matches best with your questions, or you may consider using a combination of both qualitative and quantitative research. In the next section, a comparison is made between qualitative and quantitative research to sharpen our insight in what it means to work within the qualitative approach. Whatever you choose, you have to convincingly legitimize the choice.

Answering the research questions in social scientific research is always done with a specific purpose. In other words, there is a reason why you want to answer these particular research questions. Whatever it is that you want to know, you must consider why you need this particular knowledge and what you need it for. If it is something you want to do, you must consider what problem you are trying to solve and who will benefit from the results. If your aim is predominantly to gain knowledge, it is referred to as fundamental research. If it is predominantly aimed at the use of knowledge to change or improve situations, then it is referred to as applied research. A qualitative research can be a fundamental one as well as an applied one.

Now that some preparatory thoughts have been put into your mind, we will elaborate on them with the aim to sharpen the contours of qualitative research and to delineate the focus of this book. We will start with a comparison between

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quantitative and qualitative research, because by concentrating on the commonalities and differences we will better understand what is meant by qualitative research. This might suggest that qualitative research is one clearly defined research approach. However, this is not the case. We will briefly look at different traditions and types of research and then we will specify the area of qualitative research that is covered in the book. Next we will formulate a definition and touch upon the distinguishable features of qualitative research. Finally, we will present an overview of the qualitative research process including the analytic stage, which is the focus of this book, and have a look at where the different aspects of the research process will be dealt with in the rest of the book.

Considering quantitative or qualitative research

To get a better grasp on qualitative research we will look at two example studies that initially start with interest in the same research topic but use different research methods (Box 1.1 and 1.2). Both cases are concerned with partners who care for their spouses who have a severe illness. The outcome of each study is very different because the researchers use different approaches. The first study is an example of a quantitative research, whereas the second study applies qualitative research methods.

BOX 1.1 A QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH ON PARTNER RELATIONS

Kuijer, Buunk and Ybema (2001) studied the partner relationship from an equity theory viewpoint. This theory poses that a situation of inequity arises when the ratio between the outcomes and investments of one partner are different from those of the other partner. When someone is struck by a severe illness, such as cancer, the balance between giving and taking in a relationship may shift. It is assumed that on the one hand the patient is less able to contribute, and on the other hand receives more help and support from the partner. On the basis of this theory two hypotheses were formed, to be tested in the investigation. The first hypothesis was that people who, in terms of outcomes, receive a lot (patients) or a little (partners) in comparison, will feel respectively either advantaged or disadvantaged in their relationship. The second hypothesis was that experienced inequity is correlated with dissatisfaction with the relationship.

The researchers decided to use questionnaire research, as well as other strategies of investigation such as the experiment. There are existing questionnaires which validly measure the variables that the researchers are interested in. For example, there is a nine-item questionnaire which measures relationship satisfaction. Additionally, there is a measure devised to assess physical fitness. In order to measure equity, participants were asked to rate giving and taking in the relationship

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on a five-point scale ranging from 'My partner does a lot more for me than I do for him/her' through 'My partner does the same for me as I do for him/her' to 'My partner does a lot less for me than I do for him/her'. The research involved the participation of 106 cancer patients and their partners, as well as a control group of 80 healthy couples.

One of the outcomes of this study was that patients generally feel advantaged in the relationship. The hypothesis that partners feel disadvantaged was not confirmed. Various explanations were provided for these findings. It is possible that partners take into account the limitations which are imposed upon the patient by the disease, and that they are grateful for any support the patient is able to offer. In accordance with equity theory, patients reported the most anger when they were feeling disadvantaged. They reported the most guilt when they were in an advantaged situation. When the patient was in bad physical shape, partners reported being satisfied with the relationship, regardless of whether they feel advantaged, disadvantaged or equally treated. Partners seem to think it is only fair that they are doing more for the patient than the patient is doing for them. In such situations, the patient's need is more important than equity in the relationship.

BOX 1.2 A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON PARTNER RELATIONS

Boeije, Duijnstee and Grypdonck (2003) investigated the relationship between individuals who suffer from multiple sclerosis, a severe neurological disease, and their partners who provide care. Previous research has shown that partners of people with multiple sclerosis often feel heavily burdened as a consequence of the debilitating character of the illness. Although a lot has been written about the burden of caring, a number of studies were also found which focus on the benefits of caring. These latter studies suggest a balance between giving and taking. Additionally, the perspective of the receivers of care often does not seem to be accounted for. Based on the findings of the literature study, the researchers examined what it is that binds both partners to the relationship, and in particular, what both partners do to continue the caring within the relationship.

Seventeen couples participated in this study. The partners were interviewed separately. The interviews were recorded on tape and transcribed. The interview questions dealt with issues which had predominantly been taken from the literature. The carers were asked how they fulfil their role, what changes have been made in their lives, how their partners handle the situation, what motivation they have to go on, and what doubts they may have. The patients were asked what it is like to receive care from their partners, how their spouse deals with the situation, and what their role is in the relationship.

Analysis of the collected data yielded three elements that link partners to one another. First, both the afflicted and the carer viewed the situation as inevitable; the reason being that they either have the disease or promised to care for their partner upon marriage. Second, both partners felt that they are in it together, and realized that the reverse could have been the case as well. In terms of exchange theory, this is known as 'hypothetical trade' or 'hypothetical reciprocity'. Third, both partners expressed the desire to postpone institutionalizing the ill partner to a nursing home as long as possible.

The examples demonstrate that different approaches and methods can be used to study the same subject. In the first example a quantitative research is carried out. Literature and previously selected theory are used to deduce hypotheses. These hypotheses, or propositions, are tested by means of the research. The building blocks of hypotheses and the relationships between them are interesting attributes, commonly referred to as 'variables'. In Box 1.1 these are, among others, the severity of the illness, relationship satisfaction, experienced equity and feelings of anger and guilt. Observations are made on a sizable number of cases, in this case couples, mainly by means of standardized measures. Results are reached by working with numbers, and statistical criteria are used to determine whether the results offer support for the hypotheses or not. Subsequently, the findings are fed back into the theory in an attempt to explain the results and reflect on the implications.

Box 1.2 is an example of qualitative research. Here, literature including theory is used mainly to understand what is going on in the field and to discover theoretical perspectives, including proper concepts to look at the social phenomenon of interest. Data collection takes place by means of semi-structured measuring instruments that are tailored to the research subject and refined as the research progresses. In general, the research sample should accurately represent the research subject and must be studied intensively. During data analysis, the textual accounts of interviews or observations are searched for common themes and regularities. The findings consist of descriptions of the field using the various relevant, theoretical concepts necessary to interpret the participants' view of their social world and their behaviour.

It is worth drawing our attention to the use of theory in both types of research. Theory here is viewed as an attempt to describe, understand and explain a certain social phenomenon. The use of social theory is often seen as the main difference between quantitative and qualitative research (Bryman, 2008). In quantitative research a deductive process is employed, which means that theory is the starting point for formulating hypotheses that will be tested in research. The outcome of this process, of course, says something about the theory that was tested. In qualitative research inductive thinking is paramount, which means that a social phenomenon is explored in order to find empirical patterns that can function as the beginning of a theory. The choice of whether you test a theory or build one naturally influences how the research is carried out. In practice, however, it is never this black and white. Quantitative research can be used to explore scientific domains and make use of an inductive approach as

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well, while in qualitative research existing theory can be used more deductively as a background to see whether it applies to other settings or contexts (see Chapter 6).

The choice of research method, either quantitative or qualitative, tells us something about what we think research in the social sciences should look like. In fact, there are systems of beliefs and practices that guide a field of study regarding social science research methodology. Such a framework for thinking about research design, measurement, analysis and personal involvement that is shared by members of a specialty area is called a 'paradigm' (Morgan, 2007). Paradigms reflect issues related to the nature of social reality and to the nature of knowledge. The nature of social reality, referred to as 'ontology', attempts to answer the question whether the social world is regarded as something external to social actors or as something that people are in the process of fashioning (Bryman, 2008). The nature of knowledge, referred to as 'epistemology', is concerned with whether there is one single route to truth or that diverse methods are needed to grasp the meaning of social experience.

Qualitative research generally starts with the assumptions that individuals have an active role in the construction of social reality and that research methods that can capture this process of social construction are required. The ontological stance of constructivism asserts that social entities are not pre-given but that human beings attach meaning to their social reality and that as a result human action should be considered meaningful. Some researchers study how people construct reality with the use of language, such as specific arguments, rhetoric devices and words, and others study how people construct reality while interpreting the acts of others and the world around them and grafting their own behaviour on these interpretations. This epistemological stance can be termed 'interpretivism'.

Groups of researchers working within a current system of beliefs, i.e. a paradigm, do not often cross the borders of that system. They are used to working within the practices that the system prescribes, allows and rewards. A research group that is used to employ quantitative methods will usually ask research questions that can better be answered with the use of quantitative methods. The same holds for a group of qualitative researchers that will usually ask research questions for which qualitative methods are best suited. A research group would normally pose and frame research questions that fit their usual way of working. If, however, they come across questions that cannot be answered with the methods they usually employ, they can either decide not to pose these questions at all or they can employ alternative methods. This could lead to combined quantitative and qualitative research in one single research project, which is described in more detail in Chapter 8.

In Box 1.3 some history is provided about the relationship between quantitative and qualitative research and the position of qualitative research in contemporary social science.

BOX 1.3 THE POSITION OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN THE SCIENTIFIC WORLD

Quantitative and qualitative researchers have not always worked peacefully alongside one another. A paradigm war existed between quantitative and qualitative researchers, in which the stakes were the acknowledgement of qualitative

research as a scientific endeavour and the superiority of certain methods of inquiry over others (Hutchinson, 2001). In many countries quantitative research still holds a dominant position in the field of academic research. History shows that scientific research develops in movements and is subject to trends as well. Some perspectives and methods become obsolete or are used less, whereas others increase in popularity and come to be regarded as state of the art. It seems that the separation between quantitative and qualitative research is fading and that the combined use of the two methods in a single project is gaining popularity (see Chapter 8) (Morgan, 2007).

Qualitative research is blossoming at many universities and institutions. In a special issue of the on-line journal *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, Knoblauch, Flick, & Maeder (2005) describe the state of the art of qualitative methods in different countries in Europe, and in the same issue its use in Europe is compared with that of the United States. Next to potentially different developments between countries, the various disciplines such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, educational science, social geography, political studies and linguistics have developed their own uses of qualitative methods. Furthermore, applied studies have embraced them and established focal points in the fields of, for instance, health sciences, criminology, business studies, management, women's studies, communication science and nursing science.

The qualitative approach has proven to be useful for research questions in a wide range of areas. As qualitative research becomes more accepted and established, it is increasingly being conducted by formally funded research groups (Barry et al., 1999). Qualitative research programmes consisting of collaborative and multidisciplinary research projects are strived for (Hutchinson, 2001). With the development of more extensive programmes it is likely that researchers will work in teams rather than alone, which should lead to improved morale and job satisfaction, productivity and quality of research (Barry et al., 1999).

Many qualitative research resources are at our disposal. There are many institutions worldwide organizing conferences, workshops, training courses and so on. Numerous text books, handbooks and software packages for qualitative data analysis are readily available. Additionally, there are many electronic sources such as websites, journals, listservs, discussion groups and message boards. (For many such resources see Janesick, 2004 and Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006). A popular new branch is mixed methods research, in which qualitative research is conducted in the context of a combination of quantitative and qualitative research (see Chapter 8). For both beginning and more experienced researchers, there is plenty of gold to be unearthed in various areas of scientific research.

Diversity in qualitative research

Qualitative researchers generally agree upon the assumptions attached to constructivism and interpretivism, but there are many nuances, traditions and specifics which cause

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the qualitative research practice to be very diverse. As mentioned above, some researchers are particularly interested in the use of language and communicative processes, as in, for example, conversation analysis and discourse analysis. In these types of research the analysis of data is language oriented. Other researchers are interested in understanding how people give meaning to their lives by interpreting their thoughts, experiences, actions and expressions. Some traditions that fall within this category are ethnography, phenomenology, biographical research, grounded theory, narrative analysis, case-studies and participatory research. Their analyses are geared towards the interpretation of human experiences and behaviour. They will use textual data as well, but for them language as such is not their key interest. Language is considered an important vehicle to express meaning.

TIP

Authors of methodological textbooks usually favour a certain approach, whether phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography or some other tradition. Readers may deduce the preference from the information that the author gives on each, as well as from the terminology that is used in describing the particular type of research. Researchers are well advised to select a book which matches their own perspective and approach.

This book is mostly inspired by and dedicated to the grounded theory approach. The pioneers of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss, described the origins of this approach in their book *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). They aimed to rekindle the vitality in empirical research with this research strategy, and as such their book must be read as a polemic. First, it is a polemic on social science research which, in those times, was dominated by hypothesis testing and, was devoid of any connection to everyday reality according to Glaser and Strauss. Second, they felt that ethnographic research was too preoccupied with description instead of explanation of social phenomena, and wanted to provide researchers with an alternative research strategy (Seale, 1999). With their methodology they made an important contribution to the systematic approach to qualitative research in general, and, more specifically, to the systematic approach of qualitative analysis.

Glaser and Strauss offered a methodology in which the data became centre-stage in reaching a theoretical description of a phenomenon and explaining it. The data are systematically generated and analysed step-by-step in order to develop a theory. In the beginning the research has mainly an explorative nature, but as the research progresses, data generation becomes more aimed at verifying results found earlier on in the research process. Then comparative cases are sought to expand, confirm or deepen the assertions. This is referred to as 'theoretical sampling', since the choice for new cases depends on the theoretical needs of the researcher (see Chapter 2). The resulting theory will match the situations that are investigated, as it is directly derived from and supported by, and therefore grounded in, the collected data.

Its emphasis on theory development sets grounded theory apart from other branches of qualitative research. Originally, grounded theory was framed in terms of a series of cycles in which the researcher moves back and forth among the data collection and the analysis (see Chapter 7). The data are analysed with a technique called ‘coding’, in which relevant parts of the data are indicated and labelled. By constant comparison of the newly collected data with the initial results, the process gradually advances from coding parts of the data to conceptual categories, and subsequently to conceptual modelling or theory development (Harry, Sturges & Klingner, 2005).

Many researchers were initially drawn to this novel procedure, which held the promise that theory could be shaped (Seale, 1999). The method enabled researchers to discover the basic psychological processes that the participants were involved in and the strategies they used in dealing with events. Additionally, many methodological principles were outlined, such as constant comparison, theoretical sampling and saturation. However, as it is not immediately clear how to employ for instance constant comparison, more concrete guidelines, and possibly examples, methods and techniques, need to be developed in order to put the grounded theory approach into practice. Glaser and Strauss, their colleagues and others developed the approach over time, and a number of different variants of the approach exist today (Strauss & Corbin, 2007; Charmaz, 2006; Strauss, 1987; Glaser, 1978).

Ideally, the contours of a theoretical model emerge during the process of investigation. In practice, the findings of many grounded theory studies do not represent a social theory. Outcomes of this type of research often can be depicted as a ‘thematic survey’, giving descriptions of themes and the variety within themes as presented by participants of a particular population (see Chapter 8). Several discussions have been waged over the expectations and the application of grounded theory in practice (Charmaz, 2006; Walker & Myrick, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 2005; Dey, 2004; Eaves, 2001). Still, grounded theory is a popular approach and has influenced this book to a high degree. Box 1.4 provides a summary of Glaser and Strauss’ classical study with which they demonstrated what their grounded theory approach, as a research strategy, was capable of (Glaser & Strauss, 1965).

BOX 1.4 ORIGINS OF GROUNDED THEORY: AWARENESS OF DYING

In *Awareness of dying*, Glaser and Strauss describe a theory on the method of communication between hospital staff, dying patients and their relatives (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). Some of the questions which arose during their investigation, and which are still relevant today, were: Should patients be told that they are dying, or should they not be made aware of this? Under which circumstances is such an awareness beneficial, and to whom? How much strain does it put on the family? Which feelings arise when one knows one is about to die, and how does one handle these feelings?

The core concept that Glaser and Strauss identified in their theory is ‘awareness context’. Awareness context refers to ‘who knows what’ regarding the

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imminent death. This theory acknowledges that the behaviour of all involved individuals is dependent on what each person knows about the situation at a given moment, as well as on the knowledge about what others in the situation know. Therefore, the core concept explains diverse communication events in the hospital. The researchers distinguished between four possible awareness contexts from the patient's perspective:

1. Closed awareness context
2. Awareness context based on suspicion
3. Awareness context based on mutual pretending
4. Open awareness context

Subsequently, they indicated what the characteristics of each of the contexts were, what consequences were attached to each context, and how each of the participants might change the situation. Structural prerequisites which are a part of an awareness context may change. For instance, the patient's physical condition may deteriorate which may indicate to everyone how serious the situation really is. This may lead to a shift from one awareness context to another. These prerequisites may have to do with the patient, hospital staff members, the family or the organization.

The researchers describe how hospitalized patients often fail to see that their death is imminent, even though hospital staff may know that this is the case. This situation is described as 'closed awareness'. In order to maintain the context of closed awareness, staff members have to maintain a neutral facial expression when they discover something which upsets them. Additionally, they are not permitted to speak loudly about the patient's condition, and they have to convince the patients that they do not believe they are dying. This awareness may shift to an 'awareness based on suspicion' when the patient develops new symptoms, when the doctor decides to tell the patient or when staff members accidentally tell the patient.

With their grounded theory on awareness contexts, the authors offer a theoretical lens which facilitates understanding of the thinking and acting of the parties involved. The authors would rather show the process of dying than death itself, and they preferred describing contexts to the more static attitudes towards dying.

Defining and delineating qualitative research in this book

As the term 'qualitative research' is well-known and widely used, it is also used in this book. With regard to the diversity within qualitative research, a definition and delineation are necessary to make clear what we mean by it.

TIP

Although qualitative research is a commonly used term for the research which is addressed in this book, a large number of other terms are available, such as interpretative research, naturalistic research, constructivistic research, ethnographic or intensive research, fieldwork, and participatory research or participant observation. The difficulty is that these terms are sometimes used as synonyms and on other occasions are used to indicate different philosophical stances, specific research methods or particular methods of data collection. When reading publications, find out which term is used and what is meant by it. When searching for publications of qualitative research you can use some of the above-mentioned terms as alternative key words. In some cases they will produce different results.

We use a definition of qualitative research that reflects the focus of the book, namely qualitative data analysis, and our view on qualitative data analysis as inextricably connected with all other parts of the research. The following definition is used:

The purpose of qualitative research is to describe and understand social phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. The research questions are studied through flexible methods enabling contact with the people involved to an extent that is necessary to grasp what is going on in the field. The methods produce rich, descriptive data that need to be interpreted through the identification and coding of themes and categories leading to findings that can contribute to theoretical knowledge and practical use.

The definition has three key elements, namely: 1) looking for meaning, 2) using flexible research methods enabling contact, and 3) providing qualitative findings. Before elaborating on these three elements, an example is presented in Box 1.5. This example will then be used to explain the three elements.

BOX 1.5 TEENAGE MOTHERS

Horowitz (1995) reports in her research on the implementation of a one-year welfare programme for African-American teenage mothers in an American town. Many teenage mothers are still in school and dependent on welfare. When they do not finish high school, their job prospects are limited and it becomes difficult for them to build a financially independent life. This is the first meaning of the subtitle of Horowitz's book: citizens or dependents? The programme provides education and training of skills, and is aimed at employment for the participating girls. Horowitz attempts to describe the culture of the teenage mothers and staff members in the programme, in order for the reader to develop an understanding of their world.

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The researcher believes that the goal of the programme can be realized through daily contact between the staff members and participants. She investigates how caregivers shape the relationships with the teenage mothers, and on which image of the mothers these relationships are based. She also wants to get a better picture of the world the teenage mothers live in, for instance the way in which they raise their children, how they experience going to school, how they maintain relationships with the child's father and how they spend their free time. To find out 'what was really going on' she uses participant observation and attends staff meetings, follows classes, has conversations with staff members, joins the girls for lunch and talks with them informally.

One of the insights the study yields is that the caregivers who are actively shaping the programme hold different perspectives on their work. There are two distinguishable groups, which Horowitz refers to as 'the arbiters' and 'the mediators'. The arbiters, who stand in a hierarchical relationship with the participants, convey a strict separation between the work and private settings. The private life which the girls lead as friend, mother, daughter and girlfriend, and the fact that they are entitled to social benefits are considered to be 'dirty laundry'. The mediators, on the other hand, attempt to create a basis of trust within the programme, by allowing the mothers to talk about anything that is on their mind. They emphasize that the making of choices and taking into account how others view them is important. Mediators value motherhood and education equally.

The girls experience their relationship to the two groups differently. During the arbiters' classes, they do not expose themselves. In contrast, they show more initiative and tell more about themselves in the mediators' classes. They indicate that the arbiters do not treat them with respect and look down on them, whereas the mediators treat them as equals.

The research demonstrates that the staff members carry a large responsibility for obtaining cooperation of the participants and making the programme succeed. The effectiveness of programmes like this is debated. With her research Horowitz has explicitly tried to become involved in the debate concerning welfare policy, citizenship and social facilities. She intended to demonstrate how social policy functions in practice: on paper, a programme can often be interpreted in various different ways. Because the implementation of the programme is usually left up to the discretion of the involved participants, this can lead to difficulties in reaching the programme's goals.

Looking for meaning

The starting point for a qualitative inquiry, and thus for a qualitative analysis, is to discover the meaning that people award to their social worlds and to understand the meaning of their social behaviour. The focus of qualitative methods on 'what it all

means for the people involved' is often a main attraction for qualitative researchers (see Chapter 2). In order to find out about the participants' point of view, qualitative social scientists have to collect data that capture this view, and when analysing the data they will have to be sensitive to extract only what is relevant. People talk about their social reality, they express their opinions on what they think is happening, they share experiences, show what they feel, demonstrate what they do. So there is an already interpreted reality from which researchers must then make their interpretation of how participants understand their daily life.

But meaning-giving processes do not yield everything required for analysis. There are also socially 'hardened' ways of thinking, feeling and acting. For instance, debates about teenage pregnancies in westernized societies revolve around the mother's childhood, the mother's education, the quality of the child's upbringing and the stability of family life. This has led to the creation of systems that help teenagers deal with parenthood and provide support for them to finish school. In addition, there are talk shows and websites for teenage mothers and fathers that allow them to exchange their experiences. This fits in beautifully with William Isaac Thomas's famous formulation, taken from his 1928 study (cf. Jorgensen, 1989: 14): 'If people define a situation as real, it is real in its consequences'. In other words, institutions, welfare programmes and websites reflect how teenage pregnancies are conceptualized, i.e. that the mother and her baby are a problem to society. This is the broader context that qualitative researchers have to consider.

Using flexible methods that enable contact with participants

It is characteristic for a qualitative undertaking that the participant's perspective is not (entirely) known before the inquiry. Field work, as a consequence, requires a constant redefinition of what is problematic and needs a logic and process of inquiry that is flexible and open-ended (Jorgensen, 1989). As opposed to, for instance, laboratory research, the qualitative research design has an emerging nature, and methods of data collection are used that enable close contact with the field of research (see Chapters 2 and 4). Horowitz (1995) achieved immersion in the field by extensive participant observation of different layers of the social programme. Glaser and Strauss (1965) were able to collect crucial information in communication about dying due to their prolonged participant observation on different hospital wards.

This flexible approach holds true for the analysis as well (see Chapters 5 to 7). As far as an inductive approach is concerned, it is generally unknown beforehand what data will be generated and what the frame of analysis will look like. Therefore improvisation, creativity and flexibility must be allowed for in the analysis stage as well. The results and the focus of the analysis will slowly develop or emerge during the research process. Analysis of qualitative data is interlinked with data collection and sampling in several small cycles. Each cycle fuels the next one in order to build knowledge. However, openness is counterbalanced by a thorough preparation consisting of an appropriate literature search, well-formulated

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research questions, adequately developed instruments and a well-structured analysis plan (see Chapter 2).

Providing qualitative findings

When researchers guide readers through a different cultural world, they have to provide the readers with a description of daily life. Not just a description, but a detailed account of what the setting looks like, what keeps people busy and what they take for granted. Qualitative researchers have different means with which to do this, for instance paraphrasing what they heard, presenting excerpts of their field notes, offering fragments from interviews or showing photographs (see Chapter 10). However, researchers cannot present 'raw data' alone, such as a transcribed interview; instead they are required to re-interpret the information while preserving the participant's meaning. It is while analysing the data that they reduce, select, interpret and decide what they will use to convey their message to the reader.

Sometimes researchers not only aim to describe what is happening, but also want to explain how it works and why it is that things work that way. In Horowitz's research, the explanations are given in various layers. First, she explains the chance of success of the programme in terms of the message that staff members convey to the participating mothers. Staff members who work with the citizen-orientation of the girls, as the mediators do, have a bigger chance of success than the staff members who operate as arbiters. Horowitz suggests the reasons that some staff members act as mediators whereas others act as arbiters, lies in the way that each caregiver interprets the formal goal set by the programme to be congruent with his or her experiences as a middle-class African-American.

Second, microscopic insights can be placed against theoretical and societal backgrounds or macroscopic conditions to explain the research findings (Strauss, 1987). The programme for teenage mothers was formulated following demonstration projects. However, decisions made at policy level may translate into practice very differently than was first expected. The interactions at the micro-level are crucial in determining the success of the programme. Reflection may also be related to the circumstances of African-American residents in American society, an ethnic group of which both the staff members as well as the participants are comprised. It is in the analysis stage that the researcher can connect macroscopic and microscopic data. In doing so the qualitative methodology can generate practical and theoretical truths about human life grounded in the realities of daily existence (Jorgensen, 1989).

Overview of the qualitative research process

Qualitative data analysis is considered as an ongoing process occurring over the life cycle of a research project. The research process is the backbone of the book and schematically depicted in Figure 1.1; the diagram runs from the bottom upward.

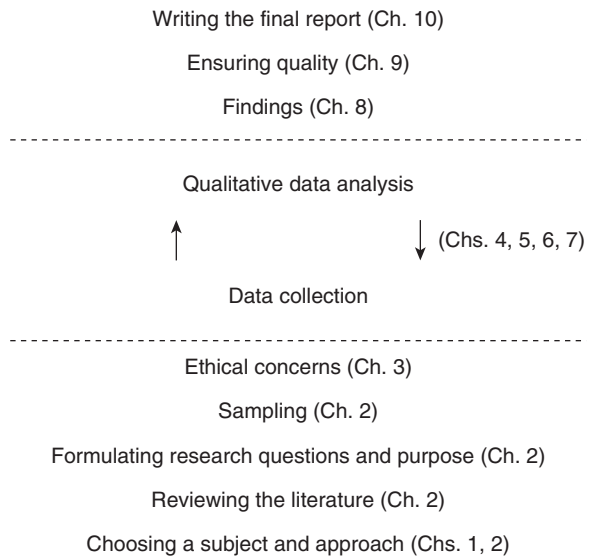


FIGURE 1.1 OVERVIEW OF THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PROCESS

The choice of a topic, the research design, ethical issues and data collection are things to be considered at the beginning of each research project. They are dealt with in Chapters 1 to 4, which detail the initial start-up. The heart of the matter of qualitative data analysis is described in Chapters 5 to 7. Chapters 8 to 10 outline the final stages, where the analysis is concluded by a reflection on the findings and their uses, the application of quality procedures and reporting the findings. The core of analysis is depicted between the two horizontal lines and is fully explained starting in Chapter 5. A more detailed summary of each chapter follows.

Chapter 2 deals with the planning of the research, often written down in a research proposal. It describes the kinds of research questions that can be answered with qualitative research and various types of research goals of qualitative researchers. The writing of the provisional literature review is addressed in particular with concern to the generation of a 'skeletal framework' that plays an important part in qualitative data analysis. Sampling is addressed, including widely used strategies like purposive sampling and theoretical selection. The chapter ends with participant recruitment and strategies of gaining access to the field.

In Chapter 3 ethical issues and guidelines are elaborated on. The existing guidelines have predominantly been developed with an eye on survey and experimental research. Qualitative research has its own challenges with respect to ethical issues regarding the sensitivity of the subjects to be studied as well as the methods to be used. The basic rules for researchers and their professional codes should make all researchers aware of ethical issues and how to make the right decisions in balancing harm and benefits. Emphasis is given to ethical issues in qualitative research for participants as well as issues for researchers, such as uncertainty and stress. The benefits of participating are also examined. Ethical issues surrounding data analysis are described here too.

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Data collection is the subject of Chapter 4. After defining the meaning of data in social science research, this chapter describes some commonly used methods in qualitative research, namely participant observation, interviewing, focus groups and collecting visual data. It highlights the skills required to gather the right kind of data to enable an interpretive reading of the data, such as the level of detail and use of the participant's words and activities. The interchange between data collection and data analysis is discussed along with methods for writing memos and recording ideas throughout the research process. Finally, a description is given of data management (both preparation and storage).

Chapter 5 sets the stage for qualitative data analysis by defining it and looking closely at its basics, namely segmenting and reassembling the data. This chapter elaborates on the mental activities that a researcher is engaged in when analysing qualitative data. A definition of analysis is given, thinking and doing are emphasized, and three important principles are explained: constant comparison, analytic induction and theoretical sensitivity. These principles form the basis of the analysis process. At the end of the chapter this cumulates into the presentation of the spiral of analysis, a step-by-step model for qualitative analysis that will be integrated into Figure 1.1. The basic ideas of the model are explained and it shows that data collection, sampling and analysis are intertwined.

Chapter 6 is the practical sequel to the theoretical overview given in Chapter 5. The spiral of analysis is the backbone of this chapter that deals with open coding, axial coding and selective coding. All steps in the spiral of analysis are translated to practical and 'how to' methods and techniques. Here we learn how to build on the bedrock of the previous chapter. The main activities are coding, reading, interpreting, comparing, verifying, selecting and writing. In the text useful 'frequently asked questions' (FAQs) are included. Where relevant, the use of software tools is mentioned. The chapter finishes with a reflection on what is achieved by coding the raw data and how it transforms them into findings.

Chapter 7 is invaluable since it describes a number of aids for the most difficult part of the analysis process: reassembling the data in order to answer the research questions. Ten heuristic devices, including matrices, coding families, visual diagrams, searching and counting, and typologies are reviewed. A comprehensive example of an analysis in the shape of a 'think aloud' report follows. Attention is given to two special types of data; focus group data and visual data. Next, a description follows of the current software tools for code-and-retrieve and theory-building.

Chapter 8 clarifies what results can be expected at the end of qualitative research. These results can consist of descriptions, conceptual clarifications or theory. The chapter touches on mistakes in qualitative research as well as on opinions that claim that sound results cannot be produced by blurred traditions. Then attention is paid to the use of qualitative research in mixed methods designs. This is a rapidly growing field of interest that can lead to fruitful cooperation between quantitative and qualitative researchers in the future. Finally, some words are dedicated to the use of qualitative research and what its results can add to science and society.

Chapter 9 describes how the problem with quality in qualitative research is related to its flexible nature, the difficulty with repeating the research and the role of the

researcher. Further on, three opinions on quality are addressed and one is supported. Then the chapter continues with quality procedures, like triangulation, member validation, methodological accountability, reflection on the researcher's role and multiple researchers. Checklists and review criteria for publication are given, relating specifically to the analysis, and external validity or generalisation is addressed. The chapter ends with challenges for qualitative research in relation to journalism and the use of scientific rhetoric.

In Chapter 10, the writing of the research report is addressed. Alternative ways of writing are reviewed, including images as 'writing', but emphasis is placed on traditional writing and its structure. The chapter demonstrates the entire course of action, starting with raw material, through transcription, analysis and editing, to the final report. The position of the researcher as a writer is considered, as well as the position of the researcher with respect to the participants. Writing the common parts of a research report is given attention: the introduction, method section, results and discussion. If we consider the results section 'the movie', the method section can be considered as 'the making of' part of the movie. The book comes to an end with details of the procedure of publishing the report.

Readings I learnt much from

- Bryman, A. (2008). *Social research methods* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Creswell, J.W. (2006). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five traditions* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (2005). Introduction. Entering the field of qualitative research. In: N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.) (pp. 1–17). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Doing your own qualitative research project

Step 1: Thinking about your research

1. Write two pages of text about a subject that is really of interest to you and that you would like to examine. Write down why it fascinates you. To come up with a topic think about:
 - Your interest or fascination (What news items grab your interest? What's on your book shelves? What do you talk about with friends and parents? Which (college) courses really inspired you? What do you fancy as the perfect job for you? In short, what keeps you going?).
 - Projects faculty in your department are currently involved in.
 - Sponsored research programmes. You do not need to apply for these grants, but the subjects might inspire you.
 - The literature, in particular interesting scientific books and articles.

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2. Familiarize yourself with the topic. Is a scientific enquiry appropriate for this topic? Does the topic lead to research questions that can best be answered with qualitative methods (see also Chapter 2)?
3. Search for some research reports about the topic to acquaint yourself with that field of study. What exactly has been examined? What type of research was used, i.e. dominantly quantitative or qualitative research? Are specific qualitative traditions of research mentioned? Are there any suggestions for further research?
4. What attracts you most in the qualitative research reports that you found, and do you think you are able to learn and use the necessary research skills? If not, what steps are necessary to prepare yourself for this task?
5. Try to detect a convergence between your topic of interest and your favourite approach. Remember: a research project is more fun when the topic interests you and the approach suits you.