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What is Qualitative Research?

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Social life is full of experiences that prompt people to reexamine their surroundings. For example, an unpleasant public encounter may motivate us to try retrospectively to make sense of the event (i.e., we ask how and why things happened as they did). In many ways, all human beings are novice researchers who give meaning to, interpret, and predict their social world. This work of researching and theorizing about society encompasses an infinite number of topics. For instance, some may wonder about their personal relationships (e.g., ‘Why did my significant other not return my phone call?’), while others may be preoccupied with weightier matters of social justice (e.g., ‘How can we stop all the violence in the world?’) or, as is often the case, we may be interested in both personal and global issues.

The specific focus of questions aside, all human beings are interested in understanding and explaining everyday experiences. This basic sense of curiosity is the foundation of *social science research*, or what may be defined loosely as the act of re-examining the social world with the goal of better understanding or explaining why or how people behave. This elementary definition emphasizes the rediscovery process that is invariably embedded in research. In a sense, the word ‘research’ can literally be interpreted as ‘renewed search,’ or ‘re-examination.’ Naturally, most people are not inclined to invest time or effort to formally study their social environment. Social scientists, by profession, are in the business of exploring all aspects of human behavior and environment.

You may be beginning to wonder how one should go about doing social science research. That is, what criteria inform the questions we ask and where do we look for answers? Is it reasonable, for example, to conclude that an

imaginary man named Joe does not return his girlfriend's phone calls because of recent changes in the lunar cycle or misalignment of certain planets? Perhaps. What is considered a reasonable course of inquiry, to a large extent, depends on the investigator's disciplinary orientation. Certainly, for an astrologer, the arrangement of the constellations would be a very useful source of information. However, to the dismay of some, astrology does not meet the conventional requirements of *scientific investigation*, which require logically connecting certain systematic empirical facts or observations with an explanation of those facts. The notion that planetary movements cause human behavior leaves many logical questions unanswered. Alternatively, a more scientifically oriented discipline, such as abnormal psychology, might explain Joe's rude behavior in terms of his inability to empathize with the needs of others.

Therefore, it seems that the questions we ask about our social world and how we go about answering them depend on our disciplinary orientation. For the purpose of this book, we focus on the discipline of sociology and the qualitative methods employed by some of its practitioners. The first chapter begins with an overview of the field of sociology. We then explore the two perspectives of positivism and constructionism and their influence on social investigations. The final part of this chapter looks at some similarities and distinctions between quantitative and qualitative methods.

What is sociology?

Sociology is a social science that aims to empirically appreciate the complexity of human life. Embedded in this definition are the notions of science (strict adherence to systematic observations and logical explanations) and the complexity of everyday experience, which for sociologists, is not naturally self-evident and simple. In the broadest terms, sociology can be defined as an orientation that reveals 'the strange in the familiar' and 'places individuality in social context' (Macionis 2001: 2–5). For example, sociologists might explore why in the United States young people, who are eighteen or older, can be drafted into the military, be permitted to run for political office, and vote in elections, and yet the same individuals do not have the legal right to consume alcohol until they reach the age of twenty-one. In this case, seeing the strange in the familiar means questioning the peculiar nature of laws that trust eighteen-year-olds with guns, in defense of their country, while at the same time disallowing them from possessing or consuming a bottle of alcoholic beverage. Similarly, Durkheim's (1966) classic study of suicide is an example of how sociologists place an individual act in a social context. In particular, Durkheim's ingenious examination of suicide, a presumably psychological phenomenon, revealed that social factors, such as marital status and religious affiliation help predict the rate of suicide.

The discipline of sociology can also be defined in terms of its substantive focus. That is, sociology can be described as 'the systematic study of human

society' (Macionis: 2001: 1), but this definition is problematic in two ways. First, accepting that sociologists study society does very little to define the boundaries of the discipline. Society, as a field of study, offers an infinite number of topics. It is impossible to think of anything that is not, in some form or another, part of society. Indeed, the subject matter of sociological investigations ranges from healthcare, to race and gender, to crime and deviance, and to virtually anything that involves human action or thought. Second, identifying sociology as the study of all that is social does not explain how a sociological investigation might be different from a psychological or an anthropological one. It is for these reasons that this book emphasizes the analytical and investigative orientation of sociology rather than its substantive interest. (Of course, it is inevitable that disciplinary boundaries will be occasionally crossed in this text in an attempt to better illustrate certain methodological points.)

With this general definition of sociology in mind, the next question is: How is sociology done? Asking how a particular discipline investigates its topics of interest is another way of asking about its *methodology* (a general orientation about how research is done) and *methods* (specific research techniques used to study a topic) (Silverman 2001: 4). In most introductory texts the hows of investigation are discussed separately from the organizing principles and philosophical presuppositions (theory); however, in practice, the two are intricately linked in that one informs the other. Sociological investigations make use of different research methods depending on their theoretical orientations. For example, those who argue crime is caused by 'low self-control' (Hirschi and Gottfredson 1994) are likely to use questionnaires and other survey methods that are suitable for privately probing an individual's psyche. Conversely, the view that crime is a product of societal reaction (Becker 1963) necessitates observational techniques that will allow the researcher to peer into the subtleties of the social interaction and how they transform a person's self-concept from normal to deviant.

While numerous theories inform how sociologists approach and conceptualize their topics of interest, the two orienting frameworks of positivism and constructionism have been especially influential in shaping how social research is done. The following section offers a brief introduction to these approaches and their impact on qualitative methods.

Positivism versus constructionism

For sociologists, understanding and reporting how or why people behave as they do involves analyzing and presenting reality. In practice, this means sharing with an audience a convincing account of what was observed and its meaning. You may have noticed in your readings that sometimes two researchers studying the same sociological topic may arrive at different conclusions, or offer competing reports. For example, one study of prostitution might emphasize occupational and client-management skills (Heyl 1977), while another will

explain how victims of incest are more likely to become prostitutes (Pines and Silbert 1983). Which study is a true and real reflection of the topic? One way of answering this question is to use a moral compass to judge one approach as more socially responsible than the other, and therefore more accurate. The problem with using morality as an evaluation criterion is that it closes other avenues of interest. That is to say, moral positions typically don't require empirical support. In fact, a strictly moral agenda is somewhat antithetical to the idea of research, which, as defined earlier, requires a constant rethinking of what we know. As an alternative, we could bypass the dilemma of judging accuracy by replying that the two approaches reflect differing realities. If you will, they represent two truths, emerging from two theoretical perspectives, and serving different purposes. To elaborate on this point, let us explore two philosophical orientations that may have informed these studies of prostitution.

Both positivism and constructionism have to do with the nature of reality or assumptions about what is real and how it should be studied. Naturally, the average person takes reality for granted. In the everyday world, we know what is real and do not doubt its existence. This taken-for-granted view of reality is what one sociologist called the 'natural attitude' (Schutz 1967), or a way of understanding the social world that is based on common sense or what everyone intuitively knows and can agree on. It has been suggested that positivistic sociology is grounded in common sense (Filmer et al. 1972; Garfinkel 1967) or a vision of social reality that is based on self-evident truths that resemble physical laws of nature. As Hammersley and Atkinson suggest, positivistic social scientists:

- 1 view the methodological techniques of the physical sciences, physics in particular, as the ideal model for exploring the social world;
- 2 aim to uncover universal laws that provide probable causal explanations for human behavior, laws that presumably hold true across time and place; and
- 3 are exclusively interested in empirical observations that are described in the neutral or value-free language of science (1983: 4–5).

What are the practical implications of these assumptions for investigating the social world? In regard to the first condition, modeling social research after the natural sciences means treating the topic to be studied as something whose meaning is independent of human cognition, time, and place. For instance, in the study of prostitution, a positivistic researcher, Bill, would take for granted the common sense and widely accepted definition of prostitution (i.e., a crime in which sex is provided in exchange for material rewards). From here, he would proceed to the second condition of positivism, which is to uncover the causes of prostitution with a known probability of being right or wrong. Finally, in conducting this project, our hypothetical sociologist, Bill, would only be interested in empirical observations. That is, while he may admit to having personal feelings or judgments about the subject matter, he would take the

position that, as a trained observer, who reports findings in a factual style, his research is free from bias as long as he follows certain procedures.

Nonetheless, in his attempt to predict the causes of prostitution, our colleague, Bill, may have left a number of important questions unanswered. Namely, not just why, but how does one become a prostitute? Do prostitutes believe that their actions are criminal? Are these acts indeed universally criminal, or do they vary culturally and situationally? And finally, can we really take Bill's words about being neutral at face value? Is anyone really capable of stripping their writing and thoughts of subjective biases? As discussed later in this chapter, Bill will most likely deal with these questions by fine-tuning his measurement techniques (e.g., surveys and variables) to ensure accuracy of the results, but for many sociologists, these technical solutions are not enough. They view positivistic answers to these and similar questions about how we know what we know (i.e., epistemology) as theoretically vacuous and thus have turned to the alternative philosophical school of constructionism for more analytically sound explanations.

As the name would indicate, constructionists are concerned with how human interaction helps to create social reality, or as Schwandt puts it, constructionists believe that as human beings 'we do not find or discover knowledge so much as we construct or make it' (2000: 197). Before going further into the details of constructionism, it must be noted that the concept encompasses a wide range of approaches in the discipline of sociology. In some circles, the term 'symbolic interactionism' or 'interpretivism' are used to refer to the basic tenets of constructionism, among others, 'postmodernism' may be a more familiar idiom (for a detailed discussion see Lincoln and Guba 2000; Schwandt 2000). The sometimes subtle, sometimes profound, differences between these schools of thought and the significance of their particular names are of no immediate interest here. Generally, most sociologists would agree that constructionism, as an alternative and a reaction to positivism, is predicated on the assumptions that our knowledge of social reality is: 1. subjective; 2. situationally and culturally variable; and 3. ideologically conscious. To better understand these premises, let us return to the example of prostitution.

First, investigating this topic in a constructionist framework requires sensitivity to our own, as well the research participants' subjective standpoints or perspectives. We must pay particular attention to how respondents understand and give meaning to their own experiences. At the same time, as constructionists, rather than suppressing personal feelings, we might explicitly and deliberately include them in the analysis. Within a constructionist model, subjective interpretations are not a source of bias, instead they are considered a piece of the empirical puzzle that helps us understand how people 'accomplish' social reality (Garfinkel 1967). Notice that unlike the positivistic orientation, the emphasis here is not on 'why' but on 'how' prostitution is socially constructed. To put it another way, constructionists are more interested in the work or practices that go into creating the social world and less in its causes (Gubrium and Holstein 1997a).

Second, in the example of prostitution, instead of searching for universal laws of human behavior constructionists would be more inclined to look at how the meaning and practical consequences of having sex for objects of value varies from one situation or from one culture to another. Consequently, they might ask: Should wives who use sex as a way of gaining financial leverage in a marriage be defined as prostitutes? If not, what social practices allow them not to be seen as sex workers? Similarly, constructionists might ask: Does prostitution have the same meaning in other countries? How do we explain cultures in which it is not illegal to have sex for money? Clearly, such questions guide the research project in a different direction from the search for universal and enduring causes of this behavior.

The third assumption that a constructionist researcher would consider is how taken-for-granted existing knowledge about prostitution coincides or conflicts with the research findings to promote one ideological position as opposed to another. If the researcher is a feminist, for instance, the question might be: Do the realities that are portrayed in the study help emancipate oppressed women? Or will the work have the unintended consequence of convincing the public that prostitution is a so-called victimless crime that deserves no further attention from policy makers? Subsequently, could the research results be used to advance the position that society is not responsible for the plight of needy women, who sell their bodies to survive life on the streets? The point is that the constructionist emphasis on how reality is produced lends itself to political scrutiny of all facets of the research enterprise. Such dilemmas are rarely of practical consequence for positivists, who view the social world as comprised of a set of facts that simply need to be uncovered and described in objective and neutral terms.

I chose the controversial example of prostitution to illustrate the differences between constructionism and positivism, but the distinctions are equally applicable to less sensational topics. For instance, a researcher studying the notion of 'fun' at a theme park could follow a positivistic or constructionist path. As a positivist, she could ask what factors cause people to come to a theme park? She might then proceed to ask her respondents if they suffer from a great deal of stress and if they come to the park for relief. Her analysis might lead to the conclusion that people reduce mental strain by going to amusement parks and riding a roller coaster, for example. A constructionist, by contrast, might ask what constitutes 'fun?' How do people construct the experience of being jolted up and down and side to side on a roller coaster as 'fun?'

An interesting constructionist analysis of 'fun' can be found in Beth A. Quinn's (2002) article based on interviews with 43 office workers. Quinn shows the many interpretations of the seemingly harmless behavior of ogling women. Consider how one respondent describes this ritual:

When a group of guys goes to a bar or a nightclub and they try to be manly.... A few of us always found [it] funny [when] a woman would walk by and a guy would be like, 'I can have her.' [pause] 'Yeah, OK, we want to see it!' [laugh] (Quinn 2002: 392)

Quinn argues that by constructing this behavior as simply ‘fun,’ men discount other possible meanings, such as how girl watching becomes a way of socializing men into their masculine roles and how it objectifies women. Thus from a constructionist perspective, ‘fun’ is not an inherently meaningful social category, but its significance is derived from the social interactions in which it is used.

Having discussed the differences between positivism and constructionism, we must acknowledge that the two have much in common. In particular, both orientations are empirically grounded; they both view direct contact with the social world as a prerequisite for conducting and reporting sociological research. Unlike a philosopher who speculates about the nature of reality without necessarily setting foot outside his office, as social scientists, constructionists and positivists base their reports on systematic, empirical observations gleaned from the social world. The two perspectives are also similar in that they yield useful information, depending on the task at hand. Returning to the theme park example, if you were commissioned by a consumer watchdog group to do the study, you might consider a research design that combines positivist and constructionist concerns. This will allow, for example, for testing of the park owners’ claims about stress reduction benefits, and it will generate a better understanding of what consumers want.

Finally, as Silverman (2000: 5) notes, within each analytical approach and its methodological correlates, there are variations and inconsistencies. Positivists are not unanimous on the philosophy of science, the same is true for many constructionists. The two analytical frameworks should be thought of as points of emphasis rather than diametrically opposed standpoints (Silverman 2000). The differences and similarities between positivism and constructionism are summarized in Table 1.1.

Quantitative and qualitative methods

As theoretical orientations positivism and constructionism have considerable methodological implications for sociological research. In particular, the qualitative/quantitative debate in sociology, to some degree, has its roots in the analytical distinctions discussed above. On the most basic level, *quantitative research* involves the use of methodological techniques that represent the human experience in numerical categories, sometimes referred to as statistics. Conversely, *qualitative research* provides detailed description and analysis of the quality, or the substance, of the human experience. However, there is much overlap between the two, both in practice and theory. Thus, these methodological approaches should not be viewed as diametrical opposites. As is the case with the positivistic/constructionist debate, quantitative and qualitative methods do not represent disciplinary absolutes, much less moral ones. Indeed, some researchers opt for what is referred to as ‘mixed methods’ (Creswell 2003), which combines qualitative and qualitative techniques.

TABLE 1.1 *Points of emphasis and commonality of positivism and constructionism*

	Positivism	Constructionism	Common themes
<i>Theoretical stance on social reality</i>	How can we use objective research methods to capture the essence of social reality?	How is reality socially constructed?	Importance of empirical data
<i>Goal of research</i>	What are the universal laws that explain the causes of human behavior?	How do situational and cultural variations shape reality?	Production of knowledge
<i>Enduring question</i>	How can we improve the standardized and neutral language used to report research findings?	What are the ideological and practical consequences of writing and research?	Internal variations and logical inconsistencies

The two methods are similar in at least two respects. First, they are both built on empirical or observable reality. Regardless of their methodological and theoretical differences, qualitative and quantitative researchers agree that social research should be based on the stuff of the real world: interactions, interviews, documents, or observations from, and related to, the social world that we all agree is out there. Where philosophers may contemplate the very existence of the world, sociologists, regardless of their particular theoretical position, accept that there is a reality worthy of further investigation. The second point of commonality among all sociologists is their shared conviction that the scientific study of society should have a certain logic and consistency. This means that social research, qualitative or quantitative, requires *scientific rigor*, or systematic adherence to certain rules and procedures, whatever they may be for the individual investigator. As Silverman notes: 'it is not a choice between polar opposites that faces us, but a decision about balance and intellectual breadth and rigour. Where used intelligently and appropriately, there is no reason why quantification has to be totally shunned...' (1985: 17).

The quantitative/qualitative distinction can also be criticized from a utilitarian perspective. In particular, ideological or philosophical commitment to a particular approach can be replaced with the more practical mandate of 'using what works.' From this point of view, choosing a research method is not about deciding right from wrong, or truth from falsehood; instead, the goal should be to select an approach that is suitable for the task at hand. As one researcher puts it,

We are not faced, then, with a stark choice between words and numbers, or even between precise and imprecise data; but rather with a range from more to less precise data.... [O]ur decisions ... should depend on the nature of what we are trying to describe, on the likely accuracy of our descriptions, on our purposes, and on the resources available to us; not on ideological commitment to one methodological paradigm or another. (Hammersley 1992: 163, as cited in Silverman 2000: 12)

Methods are *tools* for doing research, and one need not be committed to them anymore than is necessary to pledge one's allegiance to a screwdriver over a hammer. It follows, then, that if, for example, we are interested in comparing suicide rates for men and women, we should use numerical data. Indeed, looking at such data reveals that in the United Kingdom, for example, the rate of suicide in 1996 is over three times greater for men compared to women—11 per 100,00 for men versus three for women (Schmidtke et al. 1999: 84). Alternatively, if the question is how do men and women emotionally respond and cope with the news of a loved one committing suicide, it might be more practical to gather descriptive data that can demonstrate the quality of the experience for the grieving person. In the next section we consider differences in the design of qualitative and quantitative studies.

Differences in research design

Research design refers to the steps that researchers follow to complete their study from start to finish. These include:

- asking a research question based on a theoretical orientation
- selection of research respondents and data collection
- data analysis
- reporting the results

All social science research involves these steps, but the order in which they are followed and their interdependence varies from qualitative to quantitative studies.

One of the first steps in conducting research is the selection of participants or respondents. For quantitative researchers, the preconditions of statistical analysis require that respondents be selected randomly. The process is referred to as *sampling* and the people or objects selected from a specified population are called a *sample*. Another requirement of statistical analysis is that the sample be large and representative, the rationale being that small sample sizes increase the probability of biased results or error. In qualitative research, by contrast, who is included in the study is less about technical requirements and more about theoretical considerations. Sampling procedures in qualitative research are sometimes referred to as *purposive*, meaning that the theoretical purpose of the project, rather than a strict methodological mandate, determines the selection process. Furthermore, in some cases, such as when researching drug dealers, random sampling is simply impractical and a purposive sample may be the only option.

Another difference between quantitative and qualitative research designs is how the data is recorded. Most numerical researchers quantify their observations using a pre-coded form referred to as a *survey*. My personal experience with surveys came from a study of juvenile offenders who were charged with adult criminal offenses (Frazier et al. 1999). One of our goals was to isolate the

factors that cause legal authorities to recommend a minor for adult judicial processing. Our data came from official, statistical sources as well as from lengthy court and police descriptions of the crime and the juvenile offender's background. On the official court and police reports, with the exception of demographics such as age, all the information was descriptive. To transform these documents into data suitable for statistical analysis, I was provided with a survey instrument containing nearly 1000 items. My job was to peruse endless pages of official records and code the information on the form. For example, if the minor offender had used a firearm during an offense that would be coded as '1,' a blunt weapon, such as a baseball bat, would get coded as '2,' etc. But the principal investigators and I soon realized that no matter how inclusive the survey was, many details of the case simply did not fit a pre-coded, standardized format. For instance, we might have difficulty recording a case in which the offender began beating his victim with a baseball bat and then pulled out a firearm and shot his victim. Should this case be coded as a '1' or '2?' I suppose we could have simply added more *variables* (items whose values vary from one case to another (Macionis 2000: 25)) to the survey, but the problem was that the survey was already nearly ten pages long and extremely tedious and time-consuming to fill out. To remedy this problem, we opted to supplement the form with a qualitative narrative or a storied description of the case to capture all its details and nuances. That is precisely how most qualitative researchers collect and record data. Their data is composed of detailed descriptions of the case instead of numerical codes. (It should be noted that, as discussed in Chapter 5, some branches of qualitative research, such as content analysis, quantify data that was originally collected in descriptive form.)

The third distinction between the two methods has to do with data analysis. Clearly, the dominant mode of representing research findings among quantitative sociologists is statistical analysis. This formulaic approach, which is often misunderstood by both sociologists and laymen, lays claim to an ever expanding and diverse body of procedures. Among its various forms are:

- 1 descriptive or univariate statistics (analyzing one variable at a time);
- 2 bivariate statistics (exploring the relationship between two variables); and
- 3 multivariate statistics (testing relationships among several variables).

Other dimensions of statistical analysis have to do with variable types (numerical or categorical) and sampling procedures used to collect the data. Needless to say that the subject matter has filled numerous scholarly volumes and has become the basis of much dreaded undergraduate and graduate courses in statistics.

Conversely, the analysis of descriptive data is less formulaic. While, as discussed throughout this book, data analysis procedures vary from one branch of qualitative research to another, there are some common themes. Specifically, qualitative researchers in general are more attentive to the role social or cultural *context* plays in all aspects of the research enterprise from forming a

research question, to data collection, and to writing and reporting the findings (Bamberger 1999). Where context for quantitative researchers is treated as interference or noise (a set of intervening variables to be controlled), for qualitative researcher context is a constitutive element that shapes the meaning of what is reported.

Lastly, qualitative and quantitative methods differ in their views of the place and significance of social theory. For quantitative researchers, theory is somewhat detached from methods. (There are exceptions to this statement. For example, some advanced statistical techniques, such as multiple regression equations, are based on elaborate theoretical models.) For the most part, quantitative researchers introduce theory mainly in the initial phase of their research report to establish the rationale for the project and return to it at the end to advance the policy implications of their work. Theoretical concerns during data collection and analysis are couched in terms of statistical and measurement problems.

For instance, a quantitative study of racial discrimination would initially consider the theoretical implications of defining the issue. The operational definition of the topic would undergo extensive analytical work (Should racial discrimination be defined from the perspective of the victims, potential aggressors, or the researchers? Should it be all encompassing or focus on a few dimensions of public life?). However, once quantitative researchers agree on a definition, the measurement and analysis commence with little reflection on the definitional problems that informed the project in the initial phase. Random samples are selected, data is collected, and statistical techniques applied to show the frequency and intensity of racial discrimination according to the predetermined criteria. Toward the end of the project and in the obligatory 'call for further research,' the investigators might return to their original conceptualization of the problem to propose new hypotheses (educated guesses) or to explain why the findings did or did not support the original expectations. This process, which is sometimes referred to as the *hypothetical deductive method* (Babbie 2002: 36–38), is not typical of qualitative research.

Qualitative research tends to be more focused on the reflexive, or the give-and-take relationship, between social theory and methods. Conceptually, most qualitative researchers do not detach *how* they collect data from *what* data they collect. Returning to the example of racial discrimination, a qualitative study, not unlike a quantitative one, might begin by considering the meaning of the topic under analysis, but it would not foreclose the search for meaning by settling on a fixed definition. Instead, the attention to the fluid and interactive nature of the phenomenon would be a recurring theme in every step of the research. Indeed, for some investigators situational variation in the meaning of racial discrimination might be considered a finding in its own right. In this sense, qualitative research has the potential to be theoretically more rigorous than its numerical counterpart.

Table 1.2 summarizes the differences between quantitative and qualitative methods.

TABLE 1.2 *Comparison of qualitative and quantitative methods*

Research activity	Quantitative	Qualitative
Selection of research participants	Random sampling	Theoretical or purposive sampling
Data collection	Pre-coded surveys or other formulaic techniques	Direct, fluid, observational techniques
Data analysis	Statistical analysis aimed at highlighting universal cause and effect relationships	Analysis focused on context-specific meanings and social practices
The role of conceptual framework	Separates theory from methods	Views theory and methods as inseparable

Source: adapted from Bamberger 1999: 11–13

In the remainder of this book we focus on the vast array of qualitative methods in the field of sociology. Specifically, Chapters 2–4 introduce interviews, ethnography, and visual analysis, respectively. Chapter 5 looks at several ways in which qualitative data could be analyzed. Chapter 6 offers suggestions for writing qualitative research reports. The book ends with a chapter on research ethics.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter began with a broad consideration of the idea of research and proceeded to explain how the discipline of sociology informs research questions and the methods for investigating them. The chapter also described the two philosophical orientations of positivism and constructionism and showed how they parallel qualitative and quantitative methodologies in sociology.

One of the main goals of this chapter was to outline the theoretical foundations of the two research perspectives of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. It was suggested that quantitative sociology emphasizes technical rigor (systematic adherence to the mechanics of doing research) and qualitative sociology conceptual rigor (systematic adherence to the theory of doing research). However, it is important to keep in mind that oppositions in academic texts, not unlike the ones in everyday life, serve as useful starting points for learning the basics. As you gain more knowledge and experience about the field, it is very likely that you will move beyond simplistic dichotomies. In practice, many scholars in sociology make use of both techniques, depending on the topic of their interest and other contingencies.

At the very least, there is wisdom in knowing the opposition. Criticizing what one is not fully knowledgeable of and accepting the opposing view without careful examination is unnecessary at best and embarrassingly unlearned at worst. Extensive learning about various fields of knowledge

should precede a strong commitment to them. It is usually the case that the more one learns about the opposing sides of a given issue, the more blurred the divisions become. Positivism and constructionism, as well as qualitative and quantitative perspectives, should not be thought of as philosophical or methodological opposites. Instead, they are different ways of doing research with the common goal of exploring the social world and generating knowledge. The remainder of this book provides an introductory understanding of how qualitative sociology achieves this goal through its various research techniques.

SUGGESTED READINGS

For an excellent text on the theories and methods of qualitative research in sociology see Silverman's *Qualitative Methodology & Sociology* (1985). Earl Babbie's *The Basics of Social Research* (2002) offers a general and accessible survey of the many research methods used by social scientists. For an introductory text about the discipline of sociology John Macionis's *Sociology* (2001) is a useful resource. Finally, if you are interested in the basics of sociological theory George Ritzer's *Sociological Theory* (2000) provides a comprehensive and readable introduction to all the major theories.

EXERCISE 1.1

OBJECTIVE: To apply and evaluate qualitative and quantitative methods.

DESCRIPTION: In this exercise, you are researching how gender is represented on television. While watching your favorite show, record the number of times men and women appear in advertisements, the estimated cost of what they are promoting, and the adjectives used to describe the products. Are there any differences between men and women in terms of their number of appearances? Is there a relationship between the cost of the product being promoted and the gender of its promoter?

Now, consider the qualitative descriptions of the products. Are there any differences in the way men and women use language to describe these products? For example, which gender is more likely to make references to aesthetic features of the product, and which is more likely to refer to its durability and strength

What conclusions can you draw based on your analysis? Comparing the numerical method with the qualitative one, in your opinion, which approach is more informative about the way gender is portrayed on television? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each?