2
What Is Qualitative Research?

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- **link your research topic to an appropriate methodology**
- **understand the advantages and disadvantages of both qualitative and quantitative methods**
- **recognize the value of (sometimes) using quantitative data in qualitative research**
- **understand the diverse approaches underlying contemporary qualitative research.**

To call yourself a 'qualitative' researcher settles surprisingly little. First, as we shall see at the end of this chapter, 'qualitative research' covers a wide range of different, even conflicting, activities. Second, if the description is being used merely as some sort of negative epithet (saying what we are *not*, i.e. non-quantitative), then I am not clear how useful it is. As Peter Grahame puts it:

> the notion that qualitative research is non-quantitative is true but uninformative: we need more than a negative definition. (1999: 4)

In this second sense, 'qualitative research' seems to promise that we will avoid or downplay statistical techniques and the mechanics of the kinds of quantitative methods used in, say, survey research or epidemiology. The danger in the term, however, is that it seems to assume a fixed preference or predefined evaluation of

TABLE 2.1 Qualitative or quantitative methods?

1	Imagine you want to study ambulance crews' responses to emergency calls. One way to do this would be to examine statistics giving the time which crews take to get to an emergency. However, such statistics may not tell the whole story. For instance, when does the timing of the emergency services' response begin (when the caller picks up the phone, or when the ambulance crew receives the information from the operator)? And isn't it also important to examine how operators and ambulance services grade the seriousness of calls? If so, qualitative research may be needed to investigate how statistics are collected, e.g. when timing starts and what locally counts as a 'serious' incident. Note that this is not just an issue of the statistics being biased (which quantitative researchers recognize) but also an issue of the inevitable (and necessary) intrusion of common-sense judgements into practical decision-making (Garfinkel,1967).
2	Say you are interested in what determines adolescents' diet. So you do a survey which asks them about the influences on their choice of food (e.g. parents, siblings, peer groups, advertisements etc.). But is 'influence' really a suitable way of describing the phenomenon? For instance, a qualitative study may show that eating patterns arise in a variety of contexts including negotiations with parents over such practical matters as who does the cooking and when the food is served. Hence young people's diet is not a simple outcome of different sets of 'influences' (Eldridge and Murcott, 2000).
3	Imagine you want to study decisions by the police to charge juvenile offenders with a crime. It looks like being found with a weapon will lead to a criminal charge. But what kind of weapon? To answer this question, you code official records, giving a code of '1' to the use of a firearm and a '2' to the use of a blunt instrument such as a baseball bat. But what are you to do if some offenders used *both* weapons (Marvasti, 2004: 9–10)? Do you just modify your coding system, or do you add a qualitative study of meetings where police and public prosecutors grade the 'seriousness' of an offence and the likelihood of obtaining a conviction in deciding whether to charge a juvenile with a crime (Sudnow, 1968a)?

what is 'good' (i.e. qualitative) and 'bad' (i.e. quantitative) research. In fact, the choice between different research methods should depend upon what you are trying to find out.

For instance, if you want to discover how people intend to vote, then a quantitative method, like a social survey, may seem the most appropriate choice. On the other hand, if you are concerned with exploring people's life histories or everyday behaviour, then qualitative methods may be favoured. Table 2.1 gives three more examples of how your research topic should guide your use of quantitative or qualitative methods.

Attempt Exercise 2.1 about now

Later in this chapter, we consider whether the kind of issues shown in Table 2.1 may sometimes make it sensible to adopt both quantitative and qualitative approaches. However, you also have to bear in mind that these methods are often evaluated differently. This is shown in Table 2.2 which is drawn from the terms used by speakers at a conference on research methods.

TABLE 2.2 Claimed features of qualitative and quantitative methods

Qualitative	Quantitative
Soft	Hard
Flexible	Fixed
Subjective	Objective
Political	Value-free
Case study	Survey
Speculative	Hypothesis testing
Grounded	Abstract

Source: Halfpenny, 1979: 799

Table 2.2 shows how imprecise, evaluative considerations come into play when researchers describe qualitative and quantitative methods. Depending on your point of view, Table 2.2 might suggest that quantitative research was superior because, for example, it is value-free. The implication here is that quantitative research simply objectively reports reality, whereas qualitative research is influenced by the researcher's political values. Conversely, other people might argue that such value freedom in social science is either undesirable or impossible.

The same sort of argument can arise about 'flexibility'. For some people, such flexibility encourages qualitative researchers to be innovative. For others, flexibility might be criticized as meaning lack of structure. Conversely, being 'fixed' gives such a structure to research but without flexibility.

However, this is by no means a balanced argument. Outside the social science community, there is little doubt that quantitative data rule the roost. Governments favour quantitative research because it mimics the research of its own agencies (Cicourel, 1964: 36). They want quick answers based on 'reliable' variables. Similarly, many research funding agencies call qualitative researchers 'journalists or soft scientists' whose work is 'termed unscientific, or only exploratory, or entirely personal and full of bias' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994: 4).

For the general public, there is a mixture of respect and suspicion of quantitative data ('you can say anything you like with figures'; 'lies, damn lies and statistics'). This is reflected by the media. On the one hand, public opinion polls are treated as newsworthy – particularly immediately before elections. On the other hand, unemployment and inflation statistics are often viewed with suspicion – particularly when they appear to contradict your own experience (statistics which show that inflation has fallen may not be credible if you see prices going up for the goods you buy!).

For this reason, by the end of the twentieth century, in many Western countries, the assumed reliability of quantitative research was beginning to be under significant threat. The failure of surveys of voting intention in the British general election of 1992 (almost comparable to the similar failure of US telephone poll studies in the 1948 Truman–Dewey presidential race) made the public a little sceptical

about such statistics – even though the companies involved insisted they were providing only statements of current voting intentions and not predictions of the actual result.

Part of the public's scepticism about statistics may be due to the way that governments have chosen numbers selectively. For instance, while the US administration keeps statistics on US soldiers killed in Iraq, it publishes no data on the numbers of Iraqi citizens killed since the 2003 Iraq War. Or, to take a second example, in 2005 the British Chancellor of the Exchequer (the finance minister) announced a change in the years which constituted the present economic cycle. While this change appeared to be purely technical, it enabled the British Treasury to sanction increasing national debts which, under the previous methods, would have broken the Chancellor's 'golden rule' about public borrowing.

But such concerns may constitute only a 'blip' in the ongoing history of the dominance of quantitative research. Qualitative researchers still largely feel themselves to be second-class citizens whose work typically evokes suspicion, where the 'gold standard' is quantitative research.

However, so far we have been dealing with little more than empty terms, apparently related to whether or not researchers use statistics of some kind. If, as I already have argued, the value of a research method should properly be gauged solely in relation to what you are trying to find out, we need now to sketch out the uses and abuses of both quantitative *and* qualitative methods.

LINK

For articles on the qualitative–quantitative debate:
www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-e/inhalt1-01-e.htm

2.1 WHEN QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH IS APPROPRIATE

So far we have been assuming that quantitative research always involves studying official statistics or doing a survey. Before you can decide whether to use quantitative research, you need to know the range of options available to you. Bryman (1988) has discussed the five main methods of quantitative social science research and these are set out in Table 2.3.

To flesh out the bare bones of Table 2.3, I will use one example based on the quantitative analysis of official statistics. The example relates to data taken from the General Social Survey (GSS) carried out every year by the US National Opinion Research Center (NORC) and discussed by Procter (1993).

TABLE 2.3 Methods of quantitative research

Method	Features	Advantages
Social survey	Random samples Measured variables	Representative Tests hypotheses
Experiment	Experimental stimulus and control group not exposed to stimulus	Precise measurement
Official statistics	Analysis of previously collected data	Large datasets
'Structured' observation	Observations recorded on predetermined 'schedule'	Reliability of observations
Content analysis	Predetermined categories used to count content of mass media products	Reliability of measures

Source: adapted from Bryman, 1988: 11–12

TABLE 2.4 Respondent's occupation by father's occupation

		FATHER'S OCCUPATION	
		Non-manual	**Manual**
SON'S	Non-manual	63.4%	27.4%
OCCUPATION	Manual	36.6%	72.6%

Source: adapted from Procter, 1993: 246

Procter shows how you can use these data to calculate the relationship between two or more variables. Sociologists have long been interested in 'social mobility' – the movement between different statuses in society either within one lifetime or between generations. The GSS data can be used to calculate the latter, as Table 2.4 shows.

In Table 2.4, we are shown the relationship between father's occupation and son's occupation. In this case, the father's occupation is the 'independent' variable because it is treated as the possible cause of the son's occupation (the 'dependent' variable). That is why the figures in the table need to be read downwards and not across.

Table 2.4 appears to show a strong association (or 'correlation') between father's and son's occupations. For instance, of the group with non-manual fathers, 63.4% were themselves in non-manual jobs. However, among sons with fathers in manual occupations, only 27.4% had obtained non-manual work. Because the sample of over 1000 people was randomly recruited, we can be confident, within specifiable limits, that this correlation is unlikely to be obtained by chance.

However, quantitative researchers are reluctant to move from statements of correlation to causal statements. For instance, both father's and son's occupations may be associated with another variable (say inherited wealth) which lies behind the apparent link between occupations of father and son. Because of such an 'antecedent' variable, we cannot confidently state that father's occupation is a significant *cause* of son's occupation. Indeed, because this antecedent variable causes both of the others to vary together, the association between the occupations of fathers and sons is misleading or 'spurious'.

Along these lines Procter (1993: 248–9) makes the interesting observation that there appears to be a marked correlation between the price of rum in Barbados and the level of Methodist ministers' salaries, i.e. in any given year, both go up or down together. However, we should not jump to the conclusion that this means that rum distillers fund the Methodist Church. As Procter points out, both the price of rum and ministers' salaries may simply be responding to inflationary pressures. Hence the initial correlation is 'spurious'.

Attempt Exercise 2.2 about now

While looking at Tables 2.3 and 2.4, you may have been struck by the extent to which quantitative social research uses the same language that you may have been taught in say physics, chemistry or biology. As Bryman notes:

> Quantitative research is … a genre which uses a special language … [similar] to the ways in which scientists talk about how they investigate the natural order – variables, control, measurement, experiment. (1988: 12)

Sometimes, this has led critics to claim that quantitative research ignores the differences between the natural and social worlds by failing to understand the 'meanings' that are brought to social life. This charge is often associated with critics who label quantitative research as 'positivistic' (e.g. Filmer et al., 1972).

Unfortunately, **positivism** is a very slippery and emotive term. Not only is it difficult to define but there are very few quantitative researchers who would accept it (see Marsh, 1982: ch. 3). Instead, most quantitative researchers would argue that they do not aim to produce a science of laws (like physics) but simply seek to produce a set of cumulative generalizations based on the critical sifting of data, i.e. a 'science' as defined above.

As I argue, at this level, many of the apparent differences between quantitative and qualitative research should disappear – although some qualitative researchers remain insistent that they want nothing to do with even such a limited version of science

(see Section 2.7). By contrast, in my view at least, qualitative researchers should celebrate rather than criticize quantitative researchers' aim to assemble and sift their data critically (see Chapter 8). They occasionally also need to reconsider whether qualitative methods might be inappropriate for a particular research question.

Take a research topic which appeared in a recent newspaper job advertisement: how is psycho-social adversity related to asthma morbidity and care? The advert explained that this problem would be studied by means of qualitative interviews. My immediate question was: how can qualitative interviews help to address the topic at hand? The problem is not that people with asthma will be unable to answer questions about their past or, of course, that they are likely to lie or mislead the interviewer. Rather, like all of us, when faced with an outcome (in this case, a chronic illness), they will document their past in a way which fits it, highlighting certain features and downplaying others. In other words, the interviewer will be inviting a retrospective 'rewriting of history' (Garfinkel, 1967) with an unknown bearing on the causal problem with which this research is concerned.

This is not to deny that valuable data may be gathered from such a qualitative study. Rather it is to say that it will address an altogether different issue – **narratives** (of illness, in this case) in which 'causes' and 'associations' work as rhetorical moves. By contrast, a quantitative study would seem to be much more appropriate to the research question proposed. Quantitative surveys can be used on much larger samples than qualitative interviews, allowing inferences to be made to wider populations. Moreover, such surveys have standardized, **reliable** measures to ascertain the 'facts' with which this study is concerned. Indeed, why should a large-scale quantitative study be restricted to surveys or interviews? If I wanted reliable, generalizable knowledge about the relation between these two **variables** (psycho-social adversity and asthma morbidity), I would start by looking at hospital records.

2.2 THE NONSENSE OF QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

Procter's attempt to control for spurious correlations was possible because of the quantitative style of his research. This has the disadvantage of being dependent upon survey methods with all their attendant difficulties. As Fielding and Fielding argue: 'the most advanced survey procedures themselves only manipulate data that had to be gained at some point by asking people' (1986: 12). As we will see in Chapter 4, what people say in answer to interview questions does not have a stable relationship to how they behave in naturally occurring situations. Again, Fielding and Fielding make the relevant point: 'researchers who generalize from a sample survey to a larger population ignore the possible disparity between the discourse of actors about some topical issue and the way they respond to questions in a formal context' (1986: 21).

CASE STUDY
Are artists sex-crazed lunatics?

Here is a newspaper report on the results of a questionnaire survey comparing artists to the general public:

> artists are more likely to share key behavioural traits with schizophrenics and [to] have on average twice as many sexual partners as the rest of the population.

This is how this study was carried out:

> The psychologists sent a questionnaire to a range of artists by advertising in a major visual art magazine and writing to published poets … other questionnaires were passed to the general population by pushing them through letterboxes at random … another set of questionnaires was filled out by a group of patients diagnosed with schizophrenia.
>
> ('Mental illness link to art and sex', *The Guardian*, 30 November 2005)

Of course, the problem with this quantitative approach is that answers to such questionnaires may be highly unreliable. One critic puts it even more strongly:

> What a pile of crap. Those responsible should be shot. Better still, they should be forced to have several thousand sexual partners. Preferably schizoid artists, bad, ugly, psychotic ones. Then shot.
>
> For a start, they've only polled 425 people by placing adverts and randomly posting questionnaires in artists' whingepapers, read only by those snivelling in the evolutionary foot bath of the artistic gene pool. You should never expect people to tell the truth about their sexual shenanigans. They lie. Always. They lie to themselves – why would they tell the truth to you? (Dinos Chapman, The Guardian, 1 December 2005)

The case study illustrates why a dependence on purely quantitative methods may neglect the social and cultural construction of the 'variables' which quantitative research seeks to correlate. As Kirk and Miller (1986) argue, 'attitudes', for instance, do not simply attach to the inside of people's heads and researching them depends on making a whole series of analytical assumptions. They conclude:

> The survey researcher who discusses is not wrong to do so. Rather, the researcher is wrong if he or she fails to acknowledge the theoretical basis on which it is meaningful to make measurements of such entities and to do so with survey questions. (1986: 15)

According to its critics, much quantitative research leads to the use of a set of *ad hoc* procedures to define, count and analyze its variables (Blumer, 1956; Cicourel, 1964; Silverman, 1975). The implication is that quantitative researchers unknowingly use

the methods of everyday life, even as they claim scientific objectivity (Cicourel, 1964; Garfinkel, 1967). This is why some qualitative researchers have preferred to describe how, in everyday life, we actually go about defining, counting and analyzing.

Let me try to concretize this critique by means of a single example. More than 30 years ago, two American sociologists, Peter Blau and Richard Schoenherr, conducted a study of several large organizations. The study is interesting for our present purposes because it is explicitly based on a critique of qualitative methods. In these authors' view, too much research in the 1960s had used qualitative methods to describe 'informal' aspects of organization – like how employees perceive their organization and act according to these perceptions rather than according to the organizational 'rulebook'.

Blau and Schoenherr (1971) suggested that the time was ripe to switch the balance and to concentrate on 'formal' organization, like how jobs are officially defined and how many 'levels' exist in the organizational hierarchy. Such features can then be seen as **variables** and statistical correlations can be produced which are both reliable and valid.

Look at how such an apparently simple, quantitative logic worked out in practice. Blau and Schoenherr used as their data organizational wallcharts which show hierarchies and job functions. Unfortunately, from their point of view, as a revealing early chapter acknowledges, these wallcharts are often ambiguous and vary in structure from one organization to another. Consequently, it was necessary to discuss their meaning in interviews with 'key informants' in each organization. Using this information, Blau and Schoenherr constructed standardized measures of various aspects of organizational structure such as 'hierarchy' and 'job specificity'. The result of all this was a set of statistical correlations which convincingly show the relationship between the variables that Blau and Schoenherr constructed.

Unfortunately, given the indeterminacy of the data they were working with, the authors engaged in a series of sensible but undoubtedly *ad hoc* decisions in order to standardize the different forms in which people talk about their own organization. For instance, they decided to integrate into one category the two grades of 'clerk' that appear on one organization's wallchart of authority.

This decision was guided by a statistical logic that demanded clearly defined, 'reliable' measures. However, the researchers' decision has an unknown relationship to how participants in the organization concerned actually relate to this wallchart and how or when they invoke it. Indeed, Blau and Schoenherr are prevented from examining such matters by their decision to stay at a purely 'structural' level and to avoid 'informal' behaviour. This means that their own interpretation of the meaning of the statistical correlations so obtained, while no doubt statistically rigorous, is equally *ad hoc*.

What we have here is a nice case of 'the cart leading the horse'. Blau and Schoenherr adopt a purely statistical logic precisely in order to replace commonsense understandings by scientific explanations based on apparently reliable,

TABLE 2.5 The limits of quantitative methods

1 Say you are interested in racial discrimination and think of doing a quantitative study. First, you will need an **operational definition** of your topic, e.g. should racial discrimination be defined legally? Should you follow the perspective of the victims and potential aggressors, or should you yourself define the term? Whatever you decide, your research will be stuck with how you define the phenomenon at the outset (Marvasti, 2004: 11).
2 Imagine you want to discover whether small children who are able to empathize with others will make good teachers. So you administer a psychological questionnaire to a sample of such children. Then you conduct a **laboratory study** to see whether those who score highly on 'empathy' are best at instructing other children on how to complete a simple task such as constructing a toy tower (O'Malley, 2005). However, do your questionnaire answers tell you anything about how 'empathy' is displayed and recognized in everyday life? Moreover, when you watch a video of the lab study, you will need to decide whether or not the instruction was successful in any particular case. But this raises a set of difficulties. If a child being tutored successfully completes the tower, how do you know this was due to the other child's tutoring? Moreover, how did the tutored child define what they were being taught? The very speed at which researchers code the behaviour of the tutor and tutee may underplay how the recipient of the action codes the activity.

TABLE 2.6 Some criticisms of quantitative research

1 Quantitative research can amount to a 'quick fix', involving little or no contact with people or the 'field'.
2 Statistical correlations may be based upon 'variables' that, in the context of naturally occurring interaction, are arbitrarily defined.
3 After-the-fact speculation about the meaning of correlations can involve the very common-sense processes of reasoning that science tries to avoid (see Cicourel, 1964: 14, 21).
4 The pursuit of 'measurable' phenomena can mean that unperceived values creep into research by simply taking on board highly problematic and unreliable concepts such as 'discrimination' or 'empathy'.
5 While it is important to test hypotheses, a purely statistical logic can make the development of hypotheses a trivial matter and fail to help in generating hypotheses from data (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967, discussed in Section 3.2.8).

quantifiable variables. However, despite themselves, they inevitably appeal to common-sense knowledge both in defining their 'variables' and in interpreting their correlations. So the quantitative desire to establish 'operational' definitions at an early stage of social research can be an arbitrary process which deflects attention away from the everyday sense-making procedures of people in specific milieux. As a consequence, the 'hard' data on social structures which quantitative researchers claim to provide can turn out to be a mirage (see also Cicourel, 1964). This is illustrated by the two examples in Table 2.5.

These brief (non-random!) examples should allow you to understand the kind of criticisms that are often directed at purely quantitative research by more qualitative 'types'. Because space is short, Table 2.6 attempts to summarize these criticisms.

It should be noted that Table 2.6 contains simply complaints made about *some* quantitative research. Moreover, because quantitative researchers are rarely 'dopes', many treat such matters seriously and try to overcome them. So, for instance, epidemiologists, who study official statistics about disease, and criminologists are only too aware of the problematic character of what gets recorded as, say, a psychiatric disorder (Prior, 2004) or a criminal offence (Noaks and Wincup, 2004). Equally,

good quantitative researchers are conscious of the problems involved in interpreting statistical correlations in relation to what the variables involved 'mean' to the participants (see Marsh, 1982: ch. 5).

In the light of this qualification, I conclude this section by observing that an insistence that any research worth its salt should follow a purely quantitative logic would simply rule out the study of many interesting phenomena relating to what people actually do in their day-to-day lives, whether in homes, offices or other public and private places. But, as the next section shows, a balanced view should accept the strengths, as well as the limitations, of quantitative research.

2.3 THE SENSE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative researchers suggest that we should not assume that techniques used in quantitative research are the *only* way of establishing the validity of findings from qualitative or field research. This means that a number of practices which originate from quantitative studies may be *inappropriate* to qualitative research. These include the assumptions that social science research can only be valid if based on operational definitions of variables, experimental data, official statistics or the random sampling of populations and that quantified data are the only valid or generalizable social facts.

Critics of quantitative research argue that these assumptions have a number of defects (see Cicourel, 1964; Denzin, 1970; Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Gubrium, 1988). These critics note that experiments, official statistics and survey data may simply be inappropriate to some of the tasks of social science. For instance, they exclude the observation of behaviour in everyday situations. Hence, while quantification may *sometimes* be useful, it can conceal as well as reveal basic social processes.

Consider the problem of counting attitudes in surveys. Do we all have coherent attitudes on any topics which await the researcher's questions? And how do 'attitudes' relate to what we actually do – our practices? Or think of official statistics on cause of death compared to studies of how hospital staff (Sudnow, 1968b), pathologists and statistical clerks (Prior, 1987) attend to deaths. Note that this is *not* to argue that such statistics may be biased. Instead, it is to suggest that there are areas of social reality which such statistics cannot measure.

The main strength of qualitative research is its ability to study phenomena which are simply unavailable elsewhere. Quantitative researchers are rightly concerned to establish correlations between variables. However, while their approach can tell us a lot about inputs and outputs to some phenomenon (e.g. counselling), it has to be satisfied with a purely 'operational' definition of the phenomenon and does not have the resources to describe how that phenomenon is locally constituted (see Figure 2.1). As a result, its contribution to social problems is necessarily lopsided and limited.

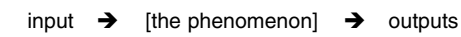

FIGURE 2.1 THE MISSING PHENOMENON IN QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

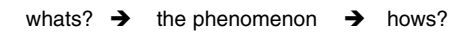

FIGURE 2.2 THE PHENOMENON REAPPEARS

As we saw from the counselling data in Chapter 1, one real strength of qualitative research is that it can use **naturally occurring** data to find the sequences ('how') in which participants' meanings ('what') are deployed and thereby establish the character of some phenomenon (see Figure 2.2).

Figures 2.1 and 2.2 show that there are gains and losses in quantitative researchers' tendency to define phenomena at the outset through the use of operational definitions. Such definitions aid measurement but they can lose sight of the way that social phenomena become what they are in particular contexts and sequences of action. As we saw in Chapter 1, **contextual sensitivity** means that qualitative researchers can look at how an apparently stable phenomenon (e.g. a tribe, an organization or a family) is actually put together by its participants.

LINK

For more on why sequences of action are important, see my paper at:
http:/www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-e/inhalt3-05-e.htm

TIP

When researching any phenomenon, try putting it into inverted commas as an aid to thinking about what that phenomenon comes to be in a particular context. This may lead you to see that you are faced with a set of phenomena which can be marked by hyphens, e.g. the family-in the household; the family-in public; the family-as depicted by the media; the family-as portrayed in criminal sentencing etc. This approach is also a useful way of narrowing down your research problem.

2.4 THE NONSENSE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Unfortunately, contextual sensitivity is not always shown by qualitative researchers. Sometimes, they forget to put phenomena into inverted commas and chase some 'essential' object often apparently located inside people's heads like

perceptions ➔ [the phenomenon] ➔ responses

FIGURE 2.3 THE MISSING PHENOMENON IN (SOME) QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

'meaning' or 'experience'. For instance, some qualitative researchers use open-ended interviews, like TV chat show hosts, to try to tap directly the perceptions of individuals. This **romantic** approach can make unavailable the situations and contexts to which their subjects refer (see Figure 2.3).

It was bad enough when romanticism was just the basis for some qualitative research and all chat shows. Now it's being used to justify wasting billions of dollars. Despite all the evidence that unmanned space missions give you far more bangs per buck, on BBC World News I recently heard a professor at the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) support President Bush's plans for a manned Mars mission by saying: 'Actually having a human being experience being on Mars is important. That means that millions of people on Earth can experience it too.'

This idea of a totally new experience, as we saw in Chapter 1, is the dream of upmarket tourists. In the context of space travel, it ignores the way in which both astronauts and TV viewers will necessarily draw on pre-existing images (ranging from *Star Wars* to previous visits to strange places) in order to make sense of what they see on a distant planet.

It is not just (some) qualitative researchers who misunderstand the potential of what they are doing. Qualitative research is regularly miscategorized by others. For instance, in many quantitatively oriented social science methodology textbooks, qualitative research is often treated as a relatively minor methodology. As such, it is suggested that it should only be contemplated at early or 'exploratory' stages of a study. Viewed from this perspective, qualitative research can be used to familiarize oneself with a setting before the serious sampling and counting begin.

This view is expressed in the following extract from an early text. Note how the authors refer to 'nonquantified data' – implying that quantitative data are the standard form:

> The inspection of *nonquantified* data may be particularly helpful if it is done periodically throughout a study rather than postponed to the end of the statistical analysis. Frequently, a single incident noted by a perceptive observer contains the clue to an understanding of a phenomenon. If the social scientist becomes aware of this implication at a moment when he can still add to his material or exploit further the data he has already collected, he may considerably enrich the quality of his conclusions. (Selltiz et al., 1964: 435, my emphasis)

Despite these authors' 'friendly' view of the uses of 'nonquantified' data, they assume that 'statistical analysis' is the bedrock of research. A similar focus is to be found, a quarter of a century later, in another mainly quantitative text:

> Field research is essentially a matter of immersing oneself in a naturally occurring … set of events in order to gain firsthand knowledge of the situation. (Singleton et al., 1988: 11)

Note the emphasis on 'immersion' and its implicit contrast with later, more focused research. This is underlined in the authors' subsequent identification of qualitative or field research with 'exploration' and 'description' (1988: 296) and their approval of the use of field research 'when one knows relatively little about the subject under investigation' (1988: 298–9).

These reservations have some basis given the fact that qualitative research is, by definition, stronger on long descriptive narratives than on statistical tables. The problem that then arises is how such a researcher goes about categorizing the events or activities described. This is sometimes known as the problem of **reliability**. As Hammersley puts it, reliability:

> refers to the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions. (1992: 67)

The issue of consistency particularly arises because shortage of space means that many qualitative studies provide readers with little more than brief, persuasive, data extracts. As Bryman notes about the typical observational study:

> field notes or extended transcripts are rarely available; these would be very helpful in order to allow the reader to formulate his or her own hunches about the perspective of the people who have been studied. (1988: 77)

Moreover, even when people's activities are audio or video recorded and transcribed, the reliability of the interpretation of transcripts may be gravely weakened by a failure to note apparently trivial, but often crucial, pauses, overlaps or body movements. For instance, a study of medical consultations was concerned to establish whether cancer patients had understood that their condition was fatal. When researchers first listened to tapes of relevant hospital consultations, they sometimes felt that there was no evidence that the patients had picked up their doctors' often guarded statements about their prognosis. However, when the tapes were retranscribed, it was demonstrated that patients used very soft utterances (like 'yes' or more usually 'mm') to mark that they were taking up this information. Equally, doctors would monitor patients' silences and rephrase their prognosis statements (see Clavarino et al., 1995).

Some qualitative researchers argue that a concern for the reliability of observations arises only within the quantitative research tradition. Because what they call the 'positivist' position sees no difference between the natural and social worlds, reliable measures of social life are only needed by such 'positivists'. Conversely, it is argued, once we treat social reality as always in flux, then it makes no sense to

worry about whether our research instruments measure accurately (e.g. Marshall and Rossman, 1989).

Such a position would rule out any systematic research since it implies that we cannot assume any stable properties in the social world. However, if we concede the possible existence of such properties, why shouldn't other work replicate these properties? As Kirk and Miller argue:

> Qualitative researchers can no longer afford to beg the issue of reliability. While the forte of field research will always lie in its capability to sort out the validity of propositions, its results will (reasonably) go ignored minus attention to reliability. For reliability to be calculated, it is incumbent on the scientific investigator to document his or her procedure. (1986: 72)

A second criticism of qualitative research relates to how sound are the explanations it offers. This is sometimes known as the problem of **anecdotalism**, revealed in the way in which research reports sometimes appeal to a few telling 'examples' of some apparent phenomenon, without any attempt to analyze less clear (or even contradictory) data (Silverman, 1989a). This problem is expressed very clearly by Bryman:

> There is a tendency towards an anecdotal approach to the use of data in relation to conclusions or explanations in qualitative research. Brief conversations, snippets from unstructured interviews … are used to provide evidence of a particular contention. There are grounds for disquiet in that the representativeness or generality of these fragments is rarely addressed. (1988: 77)

This complaint of 'anecdotalism' questions the **validity** of much qualitative research. 'Validity' is another word for truth (see Chapter 8). Sometimes one doubts the validity of an explanation because the researcher has clearly made no attempt to deal with contrary cases. Sometimes the extended immersion in the 'field', so typical of qualitative research, leads to a certain preciousness about the validity of the researcher's own interpretation of 'their' tribe or organization. Or sometimes the demands of journal editors for shorter and shorter articles simply mean that the researcher is reluctantly led only to use 'telling' examples – something that can happen in much the same way in the natural sciences where, for instance, laboratory assistants have been shown to select 'perfect' slides for their professor's important lecture (see Lynch, 1984).

Attempt Exercise 2.3 about now

Despite these common problems, doubts about the reliability and validity of qualitative research have led many quantitative researchers to downplay the value

of the former. However, as we have seen, this kind of 'damning by faint praise' has been more than balanced by criticisms of quantitative research offered by many qualitative researchers.

So far we have tended to assume that you face an either/or choice between qualitative and quantitative methods. However, this is rarely the case. In particular, I want to draw your attention, in the next two sections of this chapter, to two ways of working with both kinds of data:

- combining qualitative and quantitative studies in order to address your research topic
- using simple, quantitative tabulations as a means of achieving greater validity for your qualitative study.

2.5 COMBINING QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

There are three main ways to combine quantitative and qualitative research:

1 Using qualitative research to explore a particular topic in order to set up a quantitative study. For example, if you are designing a questionnaire on racial prejudice, it may be useful to begin by holding semi-structured interviews with community leaders and police officers together with **focus groups** composed of members of different ethnic communities.
2 Beginning with a quantitative study in order to establish a **sample** of respondents and to establish the broad contours of the field. Then using qualitative research to look in depth at a key issue using some of the earlier sample.
3 Engaging in a qualitative study which uses quantitative data to locate the results in a broader context.

In Section 2.4, we saw how quantitative researchers justified approach 1. However, since this book is aimed at qualitative researchers, I will say no more about this approach and I will focus on 2 and 3. In doing so, I will use two illuminating studies drawn from the work of Julia Brannen (2004).

2.5.1 From quantitative to qualitative research

Brannen (2004: 319) was interested in women's return to employment following maternity leave and their children's experience of different kinds of day care. The initial broad aims of the study, defined before Brannen joined the project, were:

> to describe the histories and experiences of the mothers and children; to assess their welfare and development, including the type and stability of nonparental care … a variety of [quantitative] methods to be used, including interviews, observations and developmental assessments. (Brannen and Moss, 1991: 18)

As she notes, this meant that the study was initially conceptualized in quantitative terms, using statistical methods of analysis to examine the effects of maternal employment on women and children. However, she argued that this focus on mothers made the original study one-sided by leaving out fathers and tending to assume that care by mothers was the desired norm. As she puts it:

> In terms of conceptual focus, an important shift took place … away from a focus upon mothers to a focus upon the household. In exploring the reasons why mothers were employed (or not) in children's early years, we also sought to understand the contribution fathers made and the ways in which mothers viewed men's breadwinning and their contribution to fatherhood, care work and domestic labour. (Brannen, 2004: 318)

As a result, the research now sought to problematize the theoretical assumptions which had thus far underpinned the existing mainly psychological research literature on 'working mothers' which 'took mother care as the desired norm and assumed that nonmaternal care was bad for children' (2004: 318).

Although the researchers did not have the resources to interview the fathers directly, and observation of parent–child relationships largely continued to focus on mothers, changes were made in the study's design and methodology. The interviewers were now asked to adopt a flexible, in-depth mode of interviewing in which the research participants were encouraged to speak at length and to introduce and articulate their own concerns. The new data showed how mothers made sense of their situations and responsibilities and the ways in which they and their households actively organized and construed employment and parenthood.

These new qualitative data revealed previously concealed ambiguities in the questionnaire data. For instance:

> In many cases a good deal of criticism or ambivalence was expressed, especially when women recounted particular incidents. Critical comments, however, were often retracted or qualified in response to direct global questions concerning satisfaction with husbands' participation … In this way the contradictions were confronted, and the processes identified by which dissatisfaction was played down or explained away. (Brannen and Moss, 1991: 20)

Brannen's study revealed a fruitful way of following up a questionnaire survey with more detailed, qualitative research. As Brannen and Moss put it:

> the qualitative data fleshed out the coded responses … or added new meanings. For example, examination of the way in which women described decisions concerning the return to employment led to an understanding that those who did not return did not regard it as a decision at all, while those who intended a return saw it as an individual rather than a household decision. If the issues had simply been addressed quantitatively, such insights would have been lost. (1991: 19)

However, this did not mean that the questionnaire data were useless. Instead:

> The quantitative data proved particularly useful to establish patterns of behaviour, both cross-sectionally and over time – for example occupational mobility, the sharing of domestic work and social network contact. (1991: 19)

LINK

For another example of fruitfully combining qualitative and quantitative data, go to:
www.children-go-online.net
This is the report of a large-scale study of Internet use by UK children. It was based on a three-stage research design:

1 *qualitative*: 14 focus groups with 9- to 19-year-olds, in home observations and online panels
2 *quantitative*: interview and questionnaire survey of 1511 and 906 parents
3 *qualitative*: 13 more focus groups with children in light of the quantitative findings.

2.5.2 From qualitative data to its broader contexts

In the late 1990s, Brannen was engaged with researchers from five countries on a cross-national study of young people's views of work and family life with respect to their futures (Brannen et al., 2002). The data collection method involved a qualitative approach – focus groups and individual interviews with different groups of young people aged 18 to 30, selected according to life course phase relating to education and employment and also according to educational and occupational level (Brannen, 2004: 322).

However, when it came to interpreting the cross-national data, Brannen and her fellow researchers realized that they needed to know more about the structural and institutional contexts in each country. To discover these facts, they examined official statistics in each of the five countries studied.

This study shows a fruitful way of using quantitative data to establish the background to the findings of a qualitative study. It is also an approach which may be

used by student researchers. For instance, if you are doing a few open-ended interviews on employment prospects with your fellow students, it may make sense to consult census data to see how far your small sample is representative and also to look at official statistics on the career paths of college graduates.

However, it is usually not so sensible for students to supplement a qualitative study with their own piece of quantitative research. Remember that, in the previous study I described, Brannen had the advantage of a team of researchers who had already designed and carried out a quantitative questionnaire survey. By contrast, the following tip reminds you of the more limited resources and time of the student researcher.

TIP

- Combining qualitative and quantitative data can be tempting because this approach seems to give you a fuller picture. However, you need to be aware that multiple sources of data mean that you will have to learn many more data analysis skills. You will also need to avoid the temptation to move to another dataset when you are having difficulties in analyzing one set of material.
- Often the desire to use multiple methods arises because you want to get at many different aspects of a phenomenon. However, this may mean that you have not yet sufficiently narrowed down your topic. Sometimes a better approach is to treat the analysis of different kinds of data as a 'dry run' for your main study. As such, it is a useful test of the kind of data which you can most easily gather and analyze.
- 'Mapping' one set of data upon another is a more or less complicated task depending on your analytic framework (see **triangulation**). In particular, if you treat social reality as constructed in different ways in different contexts, then you cannot appeal to a single 'phenomenon' which all your data apparently represent.

2.6 QUANTITATIVE MEASURES IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

> By our pragmatic view, qualitative research does imply a commitment to field activities. It does not imply a commitment to innumeracy. (Kirk and Miller, 1986: 10)

Among people starting out on a research project, a story has got about that no good qualitative researcher should dirty their hands with numbers. Sometimes this feeling has been supported by sound critiques of the rationale underlying some quantitative analyses (Blumer, 1956; Cicourel, 1964). Even here, however, the story has been better on critique than on the development of positive, alternative strategies.

The various forms of qualitative research, through which attempts are made to describe social processes, share a single defect. The critical reader is forced to ponder whether the researcher has selected only those fragments of data which

support his argument. Where deviant cases are cited and explained (cf. Strong, 1979a; C. Heath, 1981), the reader feels more confident about the analysis. But doubts should still remain about the persuasiveness of claims made on the basis of a few selected examples.

In this part of the chapter I want to make some practical suggestions about how quantitative data can be incorporated into qualitative research. These suggestions flow from my own research experience in a number of studies, one of which is briefly discussed shortly.

I do not attempt here to defend quantitative or positivistic research as such. I am not concerned with research designs which centre on quantitative methods and/or are indifferent to the interpretivist problem of meaning. Instead, I want to try to demonstrate some uses of quantification in research which is qualitative and interpretive in design.

I shall try to show that simple counting techniques can offer a means to survey the whole corpus of data ordinarily lost in intensive, qualitative research. Instead of taking the researcher's word for it, the reader has a chance to gain a sense of the flavour of the data as a whole. In turn, researchers are able to test and to revise their generalizations, removing nagging doubts about the accuracy of their impressions about the data.

As Cicourel (1964) noted many years ago, in a bureaucratic-technological society, numbers talk. Today, with qualitative social science on trial, we cannot afford to live like hermits, blinded by global, theoretical critiques to the possible analytical and practical uses of quantification. In the new millennium, I believe this case holds just as strongly. The case study here shows the uses of simple counting techniques in a qualitative study.

CASE STUDY
Cancer clinics

In an observational study of British cancer clinics (Silverman, 1984), I formed an impression of some differences in doctor–patient relations when the treatment was 'private' (i.e. fee for service) as opposed to 'public' (i.e. provided through the British National Health Service).

A major aim of this study was to compare what, following Strong (1979a), I called the 'ceremonial order' observed in two NHS clinics with that in a clinic in the private sector. My method of analysis was largely qualitative and, like Strong, I used extracts of what patients and doctors had said as well as offering a brief **ethnography** of the setting and of certain behavioural data. In addition, however, I constructed a coding form which enabled me to collate a number of crude measures of doctor–patient interactions.

(Continued)

This coding form allowed me to generate some simple quantitative measures. The aim was to demonstrate that the qualitative analysis was reasonably representative of the data as a whole. Occasionally, however, the figures revealed that the reality was not in line with my overall impressions. Consequently, the analysis was tightened and the characterizations of clinic behaviour were specified more carefully.

My impression was that the private clinic encouraged a more 'personalized' service and allowed patients to orchestrate their care, control the agenda, and obtain some 'territorial' control of the setting. In my discussion of the data, like Strong, I cite extracts from consultations to support these points, while referring to deviant cases and to the continuum of forms found in the NHS clinics.

The crude quantitative data I had recorded did not allow any real test of the major thrust of this argument. Nonetheless, it did offer a summary measure of the characteristics of the total sample which allowed closer specification of features of private and NHS clinics. In order to illustrate this, I shall briefly look at the data on consultation length, patient participation and widening of the scope of the consultation.

My overall impression was that private consultations lasted considerably longer than those held in the NHS clinics. When examined, the data indeed did show that the former were almost twice as long as the latter (20 minutes as against 11 minutes) and that the difference was statistically highly significant. However, I recalled that, for special reasons, one of the NHS clinics had abnormally short consultations. I felt a fairer comparison of consultations in the two sectors should exclude this clinic and should only compare consultations taken by a single doctor in both sectors.

This subsample of cases revealed that the difference in length between NHS and private consultations was now reduced to an average of under 3 minutes. This was still statistically significant, although the significance was reduced. Finally, however, if I compared only *new* patients seen by the same doctor, NHS patients got 4 minutes more on average – 34 minutes as against 30 minutes in the private clinic. This last finding was not suspected and had interesting implications for the overall assessment of the individual's costs and benefits in 'going private'. It is possible, for instance, that the tighter scheduling of appointments at the private clinic may limit the amount of time that can be given to new patients.

As a further aid to comparative analysis, I measured patient participation in the form of questions and unelicited statements. Once again, a highly significant difference was found: on this measure, private patients participated much more in the consultation.

However, once more taking only patients seen by the same doctor, the difference between the clinics became very small and was *not* significant. Finally, no significant difference was found in the degree to which non-medical matters (e.g. patient's work or home circumstances) were discussed in the clinics.

(Continued)

(Continued)

These quantitative data were a useful check on over-enthusiastic claims about the degree of difference between the NHS and private clinics. However, it must be remembered that my major concern was with the 'ceremonial order' of the three clinics. I had amassed a considerable number of exchanges in which doctors and patients appeared to behave in the private clinic in a manner deviant from what we know about NHS hospital consultations. The question was: would the quantitative data offer any support to my observations?

The answer was, to some extent, positive. Two quantitative measures were helpful in relation to the ceremonial order. One dealt with the extent to which the doctor fixed treatment or attendance at the patient's convenience. The second measured whether patients or doctor engaged in polite small-talk with one another about their personal or professional lives (I called this 'social elicitation'). As Table 2.7 shows, both these measures revealed significant differences, in the expected direction, according to the mode of payment.

TABLE 2.7 Private and NHS clinics: ceremonial orders

	Private clinic ($n = 42$)	NHS clinics ($n = 104$)
Treatment or attendance fixed at patient's convenience	15 (36%)	10 (10%)
Social elicitation	25 (60%)	31 (30%)

Now, of course, the data shown in Table 2.7 could not offer proof of my claims about the different interactional forms. However, coupled with the qualitative data, they provided strong evidence of the direction of difference, as well as giving me a simple measure of the sample as a whole which contexted the few extracts of talk I was able to use.

Two limits to the methodology used in the case study should be noted:

- My tabulations were dependent on observational fieldnotes. Without access to tape-recordings of these doctor–patient encounters, my database was dependent upon the inferences I had made at the time. Therefore, it lacked some **reliability** because it could not claim to use **low-inference descriptors**.
- This study also lacked some theoretical credibility. I was using a **constructionist** model concerned with describing the actors' own methods of ordering the world. Yet the categories I had counted (e.g. 'social elicitation') were my own and had an unknown relation to the categories actually used at the time by the people I was studying.

It is, of course, mistaken to count simply for the sake of counting. Without a theoretical rationale behind the tabulated categories, counting only gives a spurious

validity to research. For instance, in his observation of classroom behaviour, Mehan suggests that many kinds of quantification have only limited value:

> the quantitative approach to classroom observation is useful for certain purposes, namely, for providing the frequency of teacher talk by comparison with student talk … However, this approach minimizes the contribution of students, neglects the interrelationship of verbal to non-verbal behavior, obscures the contingent nature of interaction, and ignores the (often multiple) functions of language. (1979: 14)

To some extent, when I counted patients' questions in a study of cancer clinics, I fell foul of Mehan's criticisms. Although my comparison of clinics was theoretically informed (deriving from Strong's, 1979, discussion of 'ceremonial orders'), the tabulation was based upon dubious, commonsensical categories. For instance, it is very problematic to count participants' questions when your only data are fieldnotes. Without being able to reinspect a tape-recording, my category of 'question' has an unknown relation to the participants' orientations.

TIP

When you think you have identified a pattern in some data, try to tabulate instances of this pattern in all your data. If you find deviant cases, try to use these to revise your understanding of this pattern. This is sometimes known as **analytic induction**. If your data allow, try to count participants' own categories as used in **naturally occurring** places.

The cancer clinics study shows that there is no reason why qualitative researchers should not, where appropriate, use quantitative measures. Simple counting techniques, theoretically derived and ideally based on participants' own categories, can offer a means to survey the whole corpus of data ordinarily lost in intensive, qualitative research. Instead of taking the researcher's word for it, the reader has a chance to gain a sense of the flavour of the data as a whole. In turn, researchers are able to test and to revise their generalizations, removing nagging doubts about the accuracy of their impressions about the data.

I conclude this section, therefore, with a statement which shows the absurdity of pushing too far the qualitative/quantitative distinction:

> 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. Furthermore, our decisions about what level of precision is appropriate in relation to any particular claim 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)

TABLE 2.8 The preferences of qualitative researchers

1 A preference for qualitative data – understood simply as the analysis of words and images rather than numbers.
2 A preference for naturally occurring data – observation rather than experiment, unstructured versus structured interviews.
3 A preference for meanings rather than behaviour – attempting 'to document the world from the point of view of the people studied' (Hammersley, 1992: 165).
4 A rejection of natural science as a model.
5 A preference for inductive, hypothesis-generating research rather than hypothesis testing (cf. Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Source: adapted from Hammersley, 1992: 160–72

Attempt Exercise 2.4 about now

2.7 VARIETIES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The methods used by qualitative researchers exemplify a common belief that they can provide a 'deeper' understanding of social phenomena than would be obtained from a purely quantitative **methodology**. However, just as quantitative researchers would resist the charge that they are all 'positivists' (Marsh, 1982), there is no agreed doctrine underlying all qualitative social research.

Nonetheless, writers of textbooks on qualitative methods usually feel obligated to define their topic and to risk suggesting what qualitative researchers may have in common. Martyn Hammersley has taken a cautious path by arguing that, at best, we share a set of preferences. These are set out in Table 2.8.

Unfortunately, as Hammersley himself recognizes, even such a cautious list as that in Table 2.8 is a huge over-generalization. For instance, to take just item 5, qualitative research would look a little odd, after a history of over 100 years, if it had no **hypotheses** to test!

Moreover, if we take the list as a reasonable approximation of the main features of qualitative research, we can start to see why it can be criticized. As already noted, in a world where numbers talk and people use the term 'hard science', a failure to test hypotheses, coupled with a rejection of natural science methods, certainly leaves qualitative researchers open to criticism.

So unless we use the negative criterion of being 'non-quantitative', there is no agreed doctrine underlying all qualitative social research. Instead, there are many 'isms' that appear to lie behind qualitative methods. We have already seen how critics of quantitative research accuse it of positivism. And many readers of this book will have already come across other 'isms' such as feminism and postmodernism.

The most useful attempt to depict these different approaches within qualitative research is in Gubrium and Holstein (1997). They use the term 'idiom' to

Table 2.9 Four qualitative idioms

Idiom	Concepts	Preferred method
Naturalism	Actors Meanings	Observation Interviews
Ethnomethodology	Members' methods for assembling phenomena	Audio/video recordings
Emotionalism	Subjectivity Emotion	Interviews Life histories
Postmodernism	Representation Pastiche	Anything goes

Source: adapted from Gubrium and Holstein, 1997

encompass both the analytical preferences indicated by my term **model** (see Table 1.1) and the use of particular vocabularies, investigatory styles and ways of writing. They distinguish (and criticize) four different 'idioms':

- *Naturalism* A reluctance to impose meaning and a preference to 'get out and observe the field'.
- *Ethnomethodology* Shares naturalism's attention to detail but locates it in the study of talk-in-interaction.
- *Emotionalism* Desires 'intimate' contact with research subjects, favours the open-ended interview, and attempts to understand the impact of the biography of both researchers and subjects.
- *Postmodernism* Seeks to challenge the concepts of 'subject' and the 'field' and favours pastiche rather than science.

Some development of these ideas is found in Table 2.9.

According to Gubrium and Holstein, qualitative researchers inhabit the 'lived border between reality and representation' (1997: 102). On this border, in their view, each idiom veers too far to one side as follows:

- *Naturalism* Its pursuit of the content of everyday lives offers deep insights into the 'what' of reality at the price of the 'how' of reality's representation (by both participants and researchers).
- *Ethnomethodology* Its focus on common-sense practices gives rewarding answers to 'how' questions but underplays the 'what' of contextual givens.
- *Emotionalism* Helps us understand people's experiences but at the cost of privileging a common-sense category ('emotion').
- *Postmodernism* Reveals practices of representation but can lead to a nihilistic denial of content.

As a way out of this purely critical position, Gubrium and Holstein offer three valuable practical ploys for the qualitative researcher. First, seeking a middle ground to 'manage the tensions between reality and representation' (1997: 114), they show how we can give voice to each idiom's silenced other. The figure of the insider, so dear to naturalism, can be treated as 'a represented reality' which arises within subjects' own accounts (1997: 103). The same applies to emotionalism's description of people whose 'feelings' are crucial. Equally, conversation analysis's account of institutionality (see Chapter 6) and Sacks's **membership categorization analysis** (see Chapter 5) show how ethnomethodology can put meat on the bare bones of representation. Last, while we must respect what postmodernism tells us about representation, this can be treated as an incentive for empirically based description, not as its epitaph.

Attempt Exercise 2.5 about now

If 'qualitative research' involves many different, potentially conflicting, models or idioms, this shows that the whole 'qualitative/quantitative' dichotomy is open to question.

In the context of this book, I view most such dichotomies or polarities in social science as highly dangerous. At best, they are pedagogic devices for students to obtain a first grip on a difficult field; they help us to 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.

The implication I draw is that doing 'qualitative' research should offer no protection from the rigorous, critical standards that should be applied to any enterprise concerned to sort 'fact' from 'fancy'. Ultimately, soundly based knowledge should be the common aim of all social science (see Kirk and Miller, 1986: 10–11). As Hammersley argues:

> the process of inquiry in science is the same whatever method is used, and the retreat into paradigms effectively stultifies debate and hampers progress. (1992: 182)

KEY POINTS

- When we compare quantitative and qualitative research, we generally find, at best, different emphases between 'schools' which themselves contain many internal differences.
- Qualitative researchers should celebrate rather than criticize quantitative researchers' aim to assemble and sift their data critically.

- Reliability and validity are key ways of evaluating research.
- Certain kinds of quantitative measures may sometimes be appropriate in qualitative research.
- However, a dependence on purely quantitative methods may neglect the social and cultural construction of the 'variables' which quantitative research seeks to correlate.

RECOMMENDED READING

Two good chapter-length treatments of the relation between qualitative and quantitative methods are Julia Brannen's 'Working qualitatively and quantitatively' (2004) and Neil Spicer's 'Combining qualitative and quantitative methods' (2004). The most useful introductory texts are Alan Bryman's *Quantity and Quality in Social Research* (1988), Nigel Gilbert's *Researching Social Life* (1993) and Clive Seale's *Researching Society and Culture* (2004b). Sensible statements about the quantitative position are to be found in Marsh (1982) (on survey research) and Hindess (1973) (on official statistics).

In addition to these general texts, readers are urged to familiarize themselves with examples of qualitative and quantitative research. Strong (1979a) and Lipset et al. (1962) are classic examples which show respect for both qualitative and quantitative data.

EXERCISE 2.1

Should I use qualitative research?

When planning your research project, try to answer the following six questions suggested by Maurice Punch (1998: 244–5):

1 What exactly am I trying to find out? Different questions require different methods to answer them.
2 What kind of focus on my topic do I want to achieve? Do I want to study this phenomenon or situation in detail? Or am I mainly interested in making standardized and systematic comparisons and in accounting for variance?
3 How have other researchers dealt with this topic? To what extent do I wish to align my project with this literature?
4 What practical considerations should sway my choice? For instance, how long might my study take and do I have the resources to study it this way? Can I get access to the single case I want to study in depth? Are quantitative samples and data readily available?

5 Will we learn more about this topic using quantitative or qualitative methods? What will be the knowledge payoff of each method?
6 What seems to work best for me? Am I committed to a particular research model which implies a particular methodology? Do I have a gut feeling about what a good piece of research looks like?

EXERCISE 2.2

This exercise gives you an opportunity to test your understanding of Procter's (1993) arguments about statistical correlations. Table 2.10 relates voting in printers' union elections to having friends who are also printers. Examine it carefully and then answer the questions beneath it. Note that each statistic refers to a separate situation and so the columns do not add up to 100%. For instance, of those with high political interest and with printer friends, 61% voted in union elections.

Table 2.10 Club membership and voting in union elections: percentage participating in elections

		Political interest		
		High	Medium	Low
Printer friends	Yes	61%	42%	26%
	No	48%	22%	23%

Source: adapted from Lipset et al., 1962

1 Does Table 2.10 show that there is an association between having a printing friend and participating in union elections? Explain carefully, referring to the table.
2 Can we be confident that the degree of political interest of a printer does not make any correlation between friendships and participation into a spurious one?

EXERCISE 2.3

Review any research study with which you are familiar. Then answer the following questions:

1 To what extent are its methods of research (qualitative, quantitative or a combination of both) appropriate to the nature of the research question(s) being asked?
2 How far does its use of these methods meet the criticisms of both qualitative and quantitative research discussed in this chapter?
3 In your view, how could this study have been improved methodologically and conceptually?

EXERCISE 2.4

This exercise requires a group of at least six students, divided into two discussion groups ('buzzgroups').

Imagine that you are submitting a proposal to research drug abuse among school pupils. Each buzzgroup should now form two 'teams': team I is 'Quantitative', team II is 'Qualitative'.

1 Team I should formulate a quantitative study to research this topic.
2 Team II should suggests limits/problems in this study (team I to defend).
3 Team II should formulate a qualitative study to research this topic.
4 Team I should suggests limits/problems in this study (team II to defend).
5 Both teams should now come to some conclusions.

EXERCISE 2.5

This exercise will also focus upon drug abuse among school pupils. It can be done in buzzgroups or by individuals.

Following Gubrium and Holstein's (1997) account of four 'idioms' of qualitative research (Table 2.9), suggest how each idiom might:

1 define a delimited research problem on this topic
2 suggest a particular methodology.