Chapter Objectives

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

- Recognize that there is no simple distinction between ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ research.
- Understand the uses and limitations of both forms of research.
- Work out whether qualitative methods are appropriate to your research topic.

Introduction

This chapter offers practical help in answering four very concrete questions that you should consider before you think of beginning a qualitative research study. These are:

- Why do students start to use qualitative methods?
- Are qualitative methods always the best?
- Is qualitative research appropriate to the topic in which you are interested?
- If so, how should it influence the way you define your research problem?

In a way, this book as a whole is dedicated to answer these kinds of questions. However, some initial answers will help to give you a good sense of the issues involved. As in the rest of the book, I will set out my argument through examples of actual student research.
Why Do Students Use Qualitative Methods?

2.2 Chance factors related to your biography can sometimes count for more than logically defined choices. We see this in Michelle Day-Miller’s story about realizing that the subjects had all but disappeared in the survey research she conducted prior to her PhD.

STUDENT EXAMPLES

Finding Your ‘Home’

Like many students, I began my graduate training being socialized within a positivist paradigm. I was learning my statistics and how to conduct surveys and develop quasi-experimental designs. But one day I experienced a transforming moment in graduate school. Donna, one of the participants in a survey-based study I conducted, was reading a manuscript I had written reporting the findings of this study when she exclaimed, ‘Where is the depth? Where is the feeling? Where am I in all of these words?’

‘Well,’ I responded, ‘right there on page 17!’

‘I know that I’m the subject,’ Donna went on, ‘and I know that you are the researcher. But … uhm mm … I really don’t get a sense of either one of us in the paper.’

She was absolutely right! Donna, along with the other participants, provided a unique voice during the collection of the data, yet that voice was ultimately muted by the deadening ‘thud’ of an aggregate statistic. In my research report she was nowhere to be found.

This experience occurred only a few months before I took my first qualitative research methods course. In that course I found my home. While my education to that point was focused on teaching me to collect information and understand social behaviour, I wasn’t getting at the understanding human experience part of my aspiration. I realized that to truly capture experience I needed to embrace the subjective and, along with it, the humanity of social science. [Michelle Day-Miller, USA]

Michelle’s emphasis on ‘voice’ and ‘subjectivity’ shows how an interest in subjectivity and the authenticity of human experience is a strong feature of qualitative research. As I show shortly, this kind of emotionalist model is one of the dominant paradigms within qualitative research.

In my own case, the places I studied and the people who supervised me had a key influence on how I did my graduate research. My undergraduate work was at the London School of Economics (LSE) where my only experience of research methods was an excellent introductory course in survey methods taught by Claus Moser. Although not particularly numerate, I was enticed by Moser’s use of risqué examples drawn from topics like dating behaviour, guaranteed to fascinate a young man of 18!

After completing an MA in the USA, I returned to LSE to do my PhD. I then discovered that one of my undergraduate teachers (Robert McKenzie, a political
sociologist) expected that I would be supervised by him on a topic close to McKenzie’s own interests (e.g. voting behaviour). However, by this time, my interests had shifted away from political sociology and towards social class and status. Influenced by my survey course and by sociologists of the 1960s (like C. Wright Mills and David Lockwood), I planned to conduct an interview study of white collar workers at four different kinds of workplace, focusing on their lifestyles and aspirations. Not wishing to upset my undergraduate tutor (McKenzie), I chose him as supervisor together with an industrial relations specialist, Ben Roberts.

Without any real research training, I began my research interviews and, after two years, published a short note on my initial findings in the *British Journal of Sociology* (Silverman, 1967). As I shall argue in Chapter 13, this shows the value of beginning data analysis at an early stage rather than allowing the data to accumulate.

Early data analysis has a further advantage: it allows you to reconsider the direction in which your research is heading. In my case, such reconsideration had quite a drastic result:

- I started to worry about the reliability of data gathered from semi-structured interviews. How far did my respondents’ answers to my prepared questions actually reflect their own experiences? Moreover, didn’t my own assumptions come into play when I interpreted their answers to some open-ended questions?
- I now had a junior post at Goldsmiths College where I unexpectedly found myself teaching a course on the sociology of organizations. As a result, I published a paper on organization theory in *Sociology* (Silverman, 1968). Was this a better topic for my PhD?

My joint supervisor, Ben Roberts, settled the matter. Having read my published paper, he suggested that it might make sense to develop it in the form of a library-based, theoretical PhD. Seeing how quickly such a dissertation could be written, given my reading for his teaching work, I switched topics. This example shows what you can gain by discussing the direction of your research with your supervisor.

Two years later, I was awarded my PhD at about the same time as my dissertation was published as a book (Silverman, 1970). So, as a result of chance factors and my own research experience, my research topic was totally redefined.

Through biographical events, I moved out of quantitative research towards a purely theoretical PhD. By 1970, I had a vague curiosity about qualitative research but no real understanding of it. So, while the final chapter of my book twitters on about the importance of understanding people’s ‘meanings’, the only method it refers to is a purely quantitative method of ‘measuring’ meaning deriving from the positivist psychologist Charles Osgood.

While the context today is very different, I have no doubt that biographical factors continue to play an important part in how students plan their research. Here is a recent example from an American graduate student.
John’s story, like Michelle’s, shows how, as with myself several decades earlier, the experience of doing research can lead you to question some of the received wisdom you have been taught. It also reveals that, rather than one methodology being intrinsically superior to another, it might be wiser to think of quantitative and qualitative approaches as complementary parts of the systematic, empirical search for knowledge.

In 2003, the UK government set up a working party to report on how to judge the quality of qualitative research. For its findings go to:


Are Qualitative Methods Always the Best?

‘Qualitative research’ seems to promise that we will avoid or downplay statistical techniques as well as the mechanics of the quantitative methods used in, say, survey research or epidemiology. Indeed, the

1.7STUDENT EXAMPLES

The ‘Proper’ place for Qualitative Research

As I was going through graduate school, there was an ongoing debate over the centrality of one form of social science research over another. Specifically, some very difficult and contentious debates revolved around the ‘proper place’ for qualitative research in the social sciences as opposed to quantitative. My master’s degree was directed by an individual who was working at the margins of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The underlying idea was to take qualitative data and quantify them. I was enthralled by the concept and accepted the orientation readily. As I moved to my doctoral institution, the old debates were still lingering and it was easy to identify those oriented to qualitative research as opposed to quantitative. In fact, there were no classes offered that were positioned to an in-depth study of qualitative research. Moreover, a form of implicit pressure was brought to bear on doing quantitative research: ‘clean and easy’ was the catchphrase. Nonetheless, for my dissertation I chose to follow a mixed methods approach. My decision was based on the realization that while quantitative methods provide very interesting data about how much or how many questions, they missed some of the ‘story.’ The analogy I used was that of people in poverty. A determination can be made as to how many, where, when, and the like, but what was missing, from my perspective, was a very simple and compelling question: what is it like to be in poverty? So, when it came to my topic, employee loyalty, it was a matter not simply of determining who might have been loyal or not, but also of what underlying interpersonal dynamics were at play, how they factored into loyalty, and what conditions had to be met for loyalty to exist. [John Linn, USA]
qualitative/quantitative distinction seems to assume a fixed preference or predefined evaluation of what is ‘good’ or at least ‘appropriate’ (i.e. qualitative) and ‘bad’ or ‘inappropriate’ (i.e. quantitative) research when, as we all know, methods are only more or less appropriate to particular research questions.

It is worth repeating the truism that research methods should be chosen based on the specific task at hand. Amir Marvasti’s personal experience with a study of juvenile offenders who were charged with adult criminal offences is a good illustration of this point. In 1999, Amir was working as a graduate research assistant on a project which used quantitative methods to isolate the factors that cause legal authorities to recommend a minor for adult judicial processing. This is how he describes his intellectual journey.

**STUDENT EXAMPLES**

**Pushing Quantitative Research to the limits**

The data [I was working with] came from two official sources. One was a statewide database called Client Information System (CIS). The CIS data contained numerically coded information on thousands of offenders from around the state. This information came to the researchers in the form of magnetic cartridge tapes that had to be mounted on a mainframe computer before they could be accessed and analysed. The other source of data for the project was local court records, which contained arrest reports, indictments, sentencing reports, and a host of other documents about the cases. Summarizing and analysing the numerical data was relatively easy. Once the data tapes were mounted on the mainframe, I used statistical programs like SAS or SPSS to read the data. With amazing speed, the computer programs could peruse thousands of records and extract just what was needed for analysis. For example, if I wanted to know the average age of offenders who had committed a violent crime like robbery, I would write a few lines of computer syntax, submit the request, and have the report, or output, back in seconds.

However, the work was much more challenging where the local court files were concerned. To transform these documents into data suitable for statistical analysis, the researchers put together a lengthy data collection instrument. After making an appointment at the appropriate courthouse, which could be hundreds of miles away, I myself or one of my colleagues would drive to the location and peruse the dossiers in search of information that corresponded to the hundreds of variables on the data collection instrument. For example, if the minor offender had used a firearm during an offence, that would be coded as 1; a blunt weapon, such as a baseball bat, would be coded as 2; etc.

As the project proceeded, the principal investigators and I had to add more variables to capture the nuances of each case. For example, I came across a few cases that started in one jurisdiction and were transferred to another. This required the inclusion of new variables to the data collection instrument. All of us soon realized that no matter how many variables were added, many details of the case simply did not fit a precoded, standardized format. Additionally, we were faced with the problem of overlapping categories. For instance, I had difficulty recording a case in which the offender began beating his victim with a baseball as a 1 or 2.

(Continued)
As you can see from this example, methods should be our servants, not our rulers. Methods are properly used as tools when they are needed. So it would have been silly for Amir and his colleagues to turn away from the case study method because it seemed 'too qualitative'. It would have been equally unreasonable to exclude the statewide (CIS) data from the research because they were 'too quantitative'.

Any good researcher knows that your choice of method should not be predetermined. Rather you should choose a method that is appropriate to what you are trying to find out (see K. Punch, 1998: 244). For instance, if you want to discover how people intend to vote, then a quantitative method, like a social survey, may be 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. 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. This suggests a purely pragmatic argument ('horses for courses'), according to which our research problem defines the most appropriate method.

Never assume that qualitative methods are intrinsically superior. Indeed, a quantitative approach may sometimes be more appropriate to the research problem in which you are interested. So, in choosing a method, everything depends upon what you are trying to find out. No method of research, quantitative or qualitative, is intrinsically better than any other.
As we shall see later, research problems are not neutral. How we frame a research problem will, as we saw in Michelle’s story, inevitably reflect a commitment (explicit or implicit) to a particular model of how the world works. And, in qualitative research, there are multiple, competing models (see Chapter 7).

**Attempt Exercise 2.1**

What does all this mean in practice? In the final substantive section of this chapter, using some more student accounts, I look at the sort of questions you should ask yourself before embarking on a qualitative research project.

**Should You Use Qualitative Methods?**

An obvious question for this book would be: why do some students choose qualitative research? In the United States, quantitative research tends to be more prevalent. In most sociology departments, the majority of the faculty use quantitative methods in their research, and most journals publish a disproportionate number of quantitative papers. The so-called ‘norm’, at least for now, is quantitative. What then attracts some to qualitative research? Here are some answers directly from the researchers.

While there is a general sense among some researchers that qualitative data are inherently more ‘interesting’ than numbers, there are less aesthetically oriented and more analytically astute reasons for choosing qualitative methods. In the example below, Karyn McKinney suggests that qualitative research was a better fit for the type of questions she was asking.

**STUDENT EXAMPLES**

‘How?’ or ‘How Many?’

I’ve always found qualitative data more interesting than quantitative data. Beyond that I believe that qualitative data are often more suited to provide me with the answers to questions I’m interested in. I find that my interests usually lie in ‘how’ questions rather than in ‘how many’ questions. In my dissertation, I was interested in how whiteness is created and sustained in everyday life. The question of how many whites live in the United States or how much money whites make compared to other groups could have easily been answered using census data. [Karyn McKinney, USA]

Similarly, Sara Crawley states that in her research on lesbian identities, quantitative measures seemed inadequate.
Sara’s reference to ‘the good stuff’ is telling. As she notes, she does not wish to deny the possibility of measurement. Rather, sometimes qualitative research is just a good fit for the question. As Darin Weinberg states, there is nothing inherently superior about qualitative research and its practitioners. Selecting qualitative methodology could be mostly a practical matter of deciding what works best.

When Should ‘Identities’ Be Counted?

My substantive interests were related to identity and sexuality. The notion that anyone could describe such intimate matters with a 6 or some quantitative measure seemed atheoretical and, frankly, ludicrous. I am not suggesting that nothing is measurable or that attempts to measure are less useful for some topics. But with a topic that is so intimate and constantly forming as sexuality and identity, it seemed extremely important to highlight individual narrators’ ideas and concepts with some detail. As it turns out, I became very interested in talk and how people narrate their identities and realities. The good stuff was in their descriptions and ideas. It fascinated me every day. [Sara Crawley, USA]

These stories show the diversity of qualitative research. The features that attract researchers to this methodology are many and so are the ways this methodology is practised. Table 2.1 summarizes many of these issues.

Table 2.1 shows that qualitative research is not always appropriate to every research problem. You need to think through exactly what you are trying to achieve rather than be guided by some fashion or trivial preference (perhaps you are not comfortable doing statistical calculations). So, following item 2 of Table 2.1,
if you are mainly interested in making systematic comparisons in order to account for the variance in some phenomenon (e.g. crime or suicide rates), then quantitative research is indicated. Equally, as a rule of thumb, if it turns out that published research on your topic is largely quantitative (item 3), does it pay to swim against the tide? As I stress several times in this book, if you can align your work with a previous, classic study, this makes a lot of sense. The last thing you want to do is to try to reinvent the wheel!

Of course, we should not overplay the opposition between qualitative and quantitative methods. If resources allow, many research questions can be thoroughly addressed by combining different methods, using qualitative research to document the detail of, say, how people interact in one situation and using quantitative methods to identify variance (see Chapter 8). The fact that simple quantitative measures are a feature of some good qualitative research shows that the whole ‘qualitative/quantitative’ dichotomy is open to question. In the context of this book, I view many 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 researchers into ‘armed camps’, unwilling to learn from one another.

Of course, as Table 2.1 (item 6) suggests, such armchair debates are of less relevance than the simple test used by Darin Weinberg in his earlier story: ‘what works for me’. Howard Becker comments about his use of qualitative data: ‘It’s the kind of research I’ve done, but that represents a practical rather than an ideological choice. It’s what I knew how to do, and found personal enjoyment in, so I kept on doing it’ (1998: 6).

However, Becker adds that his ‘choice’ has not blinded him to the value of quantitative approaches:

**TABLE 2.1 Should I use qualitative research?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>What exactly am I trying to find out? Different questions require different methods to answer them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>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?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>How have other researchers dealt with this topic? To what extent do I wish to align my project with this literature?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>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?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Will I learn more about this topic using quantitative or qualitative methods? What will be the knowledge payoff of each method?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>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?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from K. Punch, 1998: 244–5
I've always been alive to the possibilities of other methods (so long as they weren't pressed on me as matters of religious conviction) and have found it particularly useful to think about what I did in terms that come from such other ways of working as survey research or mathematical modeling. (1998: 6)

Not only does it sometimes pay to think of qualitative research, as Becker suggests, in terms of quantitative frameworks, it can also be helpful occasionally to combine qualitative and quantitative methods. As I show in Chapter 15, simple tabulations can be a useful tool for identifying deviant cases.

In this section, I have used students’ accounts to show the importance of thinking through one’s research problem before committing yourself to a choice of method. But, as I have already hinted, the situation is rather more complicated than this. In Chapter 7, we will see how theoretically defined models enter into your research strategy.

Attempt Exercise 2.2

Concluding Remarks

2.5 There is considerable overlap between the themes discussed in this chapter. For example, as we noted, data collection, analysis and writing are virtually inseparable in qualitative research. Thus these categories are not intended to be treated as mutually exclusive; their main purpose is to show you the diversity of research experiences. If, in selecting your topic, you are pushed and pulled by different forces, you are not unique. Doing qualitative research is in many respects no different than doing everyday life: it is complex and sometimes downright chaotic. The point of this book and other advice and mentorship you receive is to help you manage this chaos and direct it into a coherent research project.

Ultimately, everything depends on the research problem you are seeking to analyse. I conclude this chapter, 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)
KEY POINTS

- ‘Qualitative’ research involves a variety of quite different approaches.
- Although some ‘quantitative’ research can be properly criticized or found insufficient, the same may be said about some ‘qualitative’ research.
- In these circumstances it is sensible to make pragmatic choices between research methodologies according to your research problem and model.
- 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’.

Further Reading

In my recent book A Very Short, Fairly Interesting, Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research (Sage, 2007: 11–36), I outline the sort of topics that I believe qualitative research is best placed to answer. Other short introductions are ‘Inside qualitative research’, the introduction to Seale, Gobo, Gubrium and Silverman’s edited book Qualitative Research Practice (Sage, 2004: 1–11); and my book Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction (third edition, Sage, 2006), especially Chapter 2.


Exercise 2.1

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

- 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?
- How far does its use of these methods meet the criticisms of both qualitative and quantitative research discussed in this chapter?
- In your view, how could this study have been improved methodologically and conceptually?
Exercise 2.2

In relation to your own possible research topics:

- Explain why you think a qualitative approach is appropriate.
- Would quantitative methods be more appropriate? If not, why not?
- Would it make sense to combine qualitative and quantitative methods? Explain your answer.