

Exercise 1.2

Discuss how you might study people who take the law into their own hands ('vigilantes'). Is there any difference between your proposed study and a good television documentary on the same subject (i.e. differences in the questions you would

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QUALITATIVE DATA:

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Exercise

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namely:

- observation
- analysing
- interviews
- recording and transcribing.

Now consider (a) what are the relative merits of each method in addressing this topic and (b) what, if anything, could be gained by combining the two chosen methods (you might like to refer forward to my discussion of 'triangulation' in Section 8.3.2).

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2

What Is 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 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.

However, other, less practical questions arise when you choose between 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' methods. The researcher has to bear in mind that these methods are often evaluated differently. This is shown in Table 2.1, which is drawn from the terms used by speakers at a conference on research methods.

Table 2.1 shows how imprecise, evaluative considerations come into play when researchers describe qualitative and quantitative methods. Depending on your point of view, the table 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, this flexibility encourages qualitative researchers to be innovative. For others,

TABLE 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: Halpin, 1979, p. 200

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 for 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 1990s, in many Western countries, the assumed reliability of quantitative research was beginning to be under significant threat. In Britain, for instance, the ways in which inflation and unemployment were calculated during the Thatcher era were regularly changed. This suggested to some that such indexes might be being 'fixed' in order to cast a favourable light upon these matters. Similarly, 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.

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 it is trying to find out, we need now to sketch out the uses and abuses of both quantitative *and* qualitative methods.

2.1 THE SENSE OF QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

Bryman (1988) has discussed the five main methods of quantitative social science research and these are set out in Table 2.2.

TABLE 2.2 Methods of quantitative research

Method	Features	Advantages
Social survey	Random samples Measured variables	Representative Tests hypotheses
Experiment	Experimental stimulus 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

To flesh out the bare bones of Table 2.2, 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).

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 2.3 shows.

In Table 2.3 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).

Table 2.3 appears to show a strong association (or 'correlation') between father's and son's occupations. For instance, of the group with non-manual

TABLE 2.3 Respondent's occupation by father's occupation

Son's occupation	Father's occupation	Father's occupation	
		Non-manual	Manual
Non-manual		63.4%	27.4%
Manual		36.6%	72.6%

Source: adapted from Procter, 1993: 246

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 occupation 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 2.1 about now

While looking at Tables 2.2 and 2.3, 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 world 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 aim 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 2.6). 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).

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 with 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)

This is 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 analyse 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 analysing.

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 common-sense understandings by scientific explanations based on apparently

reliable, 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 brief (non-random!) example should allow you to understand the kinds of criticism that are often directed at purely quantitative research by more qualitative 'types'. Because space is short, Table 2.4 attempts to summarize these criticisms.

TABLE 2.4 *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 'delinquency' or 'intelligence'.
- 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 3.4.1).

It should be noted that Table 2.4 contains simply some 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, 'cause of death' or a 'criminal offence' (see Hindess, 1973). 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 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, 1983; 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 both 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, 1968a), pathologists and statistical clerks (Prior, 1987) attend to deaths (see Section 5.3.2). 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 methods used by qualitative researchers exemplify a common belief that they can provide a 'deeper' understanding of social phenomena than would be obtained from purely quantitative data. 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 (see Section 2.6).

2.4 THE NONSENSE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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 recent 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 analyse 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 2.2 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.

2.5 COMBINING QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE 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)

Since the 1960s, a story has got about that no good sociologists should dirty their hands with numbers. Sometimes this story 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 ethnography, 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, 1979; 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 recent 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 *per se*. 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.

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 inter-relationship 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 (Silverman, 1984), 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, common-sensical 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. So quantification can neatly tie in with the logic of qualitative research when, instead of conducting surveys or experiments, we count participants' own categories as used in naturally occurring places.

Let me give you an example of this. In the early 1980s (see Silverman, 1987: chs 1-6) I was directing a group of researchers studying a paediatric cardiology (child heart) unit. Many of our data derived from tape-recordings of an outpatient clinic that was held every Wednesday.

We soon became interested in how decisions (or 'disposals') were organized and announced. It seemed likely that the doctor's way of announcing decisions was systematically related not only to clinical factors (like the child's heart condition) but to social factors (such as what parents would be told at various stages of treatment). For instance, at a first outpatients' consultation, doctors would not normally announce to parents the discovery of a major heart abnormality and the necessity for life-threatening surgery. Instead, they would suggest the need for more tests and only hint that major surgery might be needed. They would also collaborate with parents who produced examples of their child's apparent 'wellness'.

This step-by-step method of information-giving was avoided in only two cases. First, if a child was diagnosed as 'healthy' by the cardiologist, the doctor would give all the information in one go and would engage in what we called a 'search and destroy' operation, based on eliciting any remaining worries of the parent(s) and proving that they were mistaken.

Second, in the case of a group of children with Down's syndrome in addition to suspected cardiac disease, the doctor would present all the clinical

information at one sitting, avoiding a step-by-step method. Moreover, atypically, the doctor would allow parents to make the choice about further treatment, while encouraging them to dwell on non-clinical matters like their child's 'enjoyment of life' or friendly personality.

This medical focus on the child's *social* characteristics was seen right at the outset of each consultation. I was able to construct a table, based on a comparison of Down's and non-Down's consultations, showing the different forms of the doctor's questions to parents and the parents' answers. This tabulation showed a strong tendency with Down's children for both the doctor and the parents to avoid using the word 'well' about the child, and this absence of reference to 'wellness' proved to be crucial to understanding the subsequent shape of the clinical consultation.

Moreover, the categories in the table were not my own. I simply tabulated the different questions and answers as actually given. For instance, the most common question that the doctor asked parents was:

A well child?

However, parents of Down's syndrome children were rarely asked this question. Instead, the most common question was:

How is he (she)?

This avoidance of the term 'well' proved to be crucial to understanding the direction which the consultations with Down's syndrome families subsequently took.

This example 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, 1992a: 163)

Attempt Exercise 2.3 about now

2.6 VARIETIES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Writers of textbooks on qualitative method, including myself (Silverman, 1993), usually feel obligated to define their phenomenon and to risk suggesting what qualitative researchers may have in common. Martyn Hammersley (1992) has taken a cautious path by arguing that, at best, we share a set of preferences. These are set out in Table 2.5.

TABLE 2.5 *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

Unfortunately, as Hammersley himself recognizes, even such a cautious list as that in Table 2.5 is a huge over-generalization. For instance, to take just item 5 in the table, 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 leave 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 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 talk-in-interaction.
- *Emotionalism* Desires ‘intimate’ contact with research subjects and favours the personal biography.

- *Postmodernism* Seeks to deconstruct the concepts of the ‘subject’ and the ‘field’.

Some development of these ideas is found in Table 2.6.

TABLE 2.6 *Four qualitative idioms*

Idiom	Concepts	Preferred data
Naturalism	Actors Meanings	Observation Interviews
Ethnomethodology	Members’ methods for assembling phenomena	Audio/ video recordings
Emotionalism	Subjectivity Emotion	Interviews
Postmodernism	Representation Reflexivity	Anything goes

Source: adapted from Gubrium and Holstein, 1997

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’ (1997: 103), as can emotionalism’s ‘feeling’ subject. 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 2.4 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 researchers 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' who 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

The most useful introductory texts are Alan Bryman (1988), Nigel Gilbert (1993) and Clive Seale (1998). 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 (1979) and Lipset et al. (1962) are good examples of each.

Exercise 2.1

This exercise gives you an opportunity to test your understanding of Procter's (1993) arguments about statistical correlations. Table 2.7 relates voting in printers' union elections to having friends who are also printers. Examine it carefully and then answer the questions beneath it.

TABLE 2.7 *Club membership and voting in union elections*
(% participating in elections)

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

Source: adapted from Lipset et al., 1962

- 1 Does Table 2.7 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 by controlling for the degree of political interest of a printer, we prevent any correlation between friendships and participation being spurious.

Exercise 2.2

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 2.3

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 suggest 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 suggest limits/problems in this study (team II to defend).
- 5 Both teams should now come to some conclusions.

Exercise 2.4

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 2.6), suggest how each idiom might:

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