

Doing Qualitative Research

A Practical Handbook

David Silverman



SAGE Publications
London · Thousand Oaks · New Delhi

1

What is Qualitative Research?

In the Sociology Department where I work, we offer a graduate degree in Qualitative Research. This title was chosen to give a flavour of a course largely taught by ethnographers who themselves mainly use qualitative methods. However, I feel that such a title may attract students more in terms of what it promises to avoid rather than by reason of what it offers.

'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. In fact, this is indeed the case – although we expect students to take a course in survey methods and to be aware of how the issues of validity and reliability so often posed by quantitative researchers are relevant to any kind of research (albeit in varying ways).

The danger in the title, however, is that it seems to assume a fixed preference or pre-defined 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 1.1, which is drawn from the terms used by speakers at a conference on research methods.

Table 1.1 shows how imprecise, evaluative considerations come into play when researchers describe qualitative and quantitative methods. Depending on your point of view, Table 1.1 might suggest that quantitative research is superior because, for example, it is value-free. The implication here is that

TABLE 1.1 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

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, 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. Their 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!).

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 polling studies in the 1948 Truman–Dewey presidential race) made the public a little sceptical about such statistics – even though the companies

involved insisted on their intentions and methods.

But such concerns about the dominance of quantitative research themselves to a certain suspicion, where the qualitative approach is concerned.

However, so far as the apparently relationship between the two approaches is concerned. In the next two chapters we shall mean by quantitative research.

VARIETIES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Bryman (1988) has argued that social science research is a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods.

To flesh out this argument, he takes the quantitative approach taken from the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago.

Procter shows that there is a difference between two types of 'social mobility' research. One is within one life cycle, and the other is to calculate the life cycle of a population.

In Table 1.3, we see that the quantitative approach to occupations is based on the fact that it is a 'dependent' variable.

Method

Social survey

Experiment

Official statistics

'Structured' observation

Content analysis

Source: adapted from Bryman (1988)

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. In the next two sections, I address in rather more detail what social scientists mean by quantitative and qualitative research.

VARIETIES OF QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

Bryman (1988) has discussed the five main methods of quantitative social science research and these are set out in Table 1.2.

To flesh out the bare bones of Table 1.2, 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 1.3 shows.

In Table 1.3, we are shown the relationship between father's and son's occupations. 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 1.2 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 pre-determined 'schedule'	Reliability of observations
Content analysis	Pre-determined categories used to count content of mass media products	Reliability of measures

Source: adapted from Bryman, 1988: 11–12

TABLE 1.3 Respondent's occupation by father's occupation

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

Source: adapted from Procter, 1993: 246

Table 1.3 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 per cent were themselves in non-manual jobs. However, among sons with fathers in manual occupations, only 27.4 per cent 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'.

While looking at Tables 1.2 and 1.3, 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 a critics who label

Unfortunately, is it difficult to would accept i researchers wou (like physics) bu based on the crit

As I argue, at tative and qualit researchers rema limited version compare the tw different *emphas* differences.

CRITICISMS O

Qualitative rese tive methods m ables' which q (1986) argue, 'a people's heads analytical assur

The survey res is wrong if he meaningful to questions. (198

According to it of *ad hoc* proced Cicourel, 1964; researchers hav about defining researchers un claim scientific

Let me try to than twenty y Schoenherr, co interesting for of qualitative r had used qual – like how emj perceptions ra

'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 aim simply 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 Phillips, 1973). It follows that, when we compare the two kinds of research, the most we should be looking for are different *emphases* between 'schools' who themselves contain many internal differences.

CRITICISMS OF QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative researchers often assume that 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). On the basis of this critique, qualitative researchers have preferred to describe how, in everyday life, we actually go about defining, counting and analysing. The implication is that quantitative researchers unknowingly use the methods of everyday life, even as they claim scientific objectivity (Cicourel, 1964; Garfinkel, 1967).

Let me try to concretize this critique by means of a single example. More than twenty 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.

Let us see 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. 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 kind of criticisms that are often directed at purely quantitative research by more qualitative 'types'. Because space is short, Table 1.4 attempts to summarize these criticisms.

It should be noted that Table 1.4 contains simply some complaints made about *some* quantitative research. Moreover, because quantitative researchers

- 1 Quantitative research is the 'field'
- 2 Statistical correlations are interaction, are
- 3 After-the-fact social processes of re
- 4 The pursuit of intelligence by simply taking 'intelligence'
- 5 While it is important to hypothesize a hypothesis, Strauss, 1967

are rarely 'done' them. So, for disease, and what gets recorded (1973). Equally, lems involve variables involved. In the light of an insistence on quantitative logic relating to work, homes, offices, shows, a balance, of qu

VARIETIES

Qualitative research is used in qualitative findings from practices where qualitative research can be the random valid or ger

Critics of a number of (1979; Ham that experiential appropriate to social observation

TABLE 1.4 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) |

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 only too aware 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.

VARIETIES 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 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 with studies of how hospital staff (Sudnow, 1968a), pathologists and statistical clerks (Prior, 1987) attend to deaths (see Chapter 6). 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. Instead, there are many 'isms' that appear to lie behind qualitative methods – for example interactionism, feminism, postmodernism and ethno-methodology (see Chapter 6).

In spite of this diversity, qualitative researchers are seen by Hammersley (1992) to share a set of preferences which are set out in Table 1.5.

Unfortunately, as Hammersley himself recognizes, such a simple list is a huge over-generalization. For instance, to take just item 5 in Table 1.5, qualitative research would look a little odd, after a history of over 100 years, if it had no hypotheses to test!

Nonetheless, if we take the list in Table 1.5 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.

Of course, many scientists themselves reject the wilder dreams of positivism, for instance the search for laws based on laboratory experiment as the 'gold standard' of good science. Nonetheless, we are still left with this

TABLE 1.5 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 rather than 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

troubling questions? How can they explain their explanations?

CRITICISMS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

In many, quantitative research is seen as more 'scientific' than qualitative research. In such, it is suggested that qualitative research is 'exploratory' and that research can be seen as a series of sampling and case studies.

This view is based on the assumption that the data are the starting point for the research.

The inspection of data is periodically followed by analysis. Frequent analysis is seen as a clue to an understanding of this implication of further the development of his conclusions.

Despite these criticisms, it is assumed that 'qualitative' research is to be found, and that it is a valid method of research.

Field research is a set of events and actions, et al., 1988:

Note the emphasis on the focused research of qualitative research and their approach to the little about the world.

These researches are, by definition, tables. The categorizing of research is seen as a way of organizing it, reliability.

This is seen as a way of organizing it, reliability.

refers to the category of research (1992: 67)

troubling question: why should we *believe* what qualitative researchers tell us? How can they demonstrate that their descriptions are accurate and that their explanations hold water? It is to these questions which I now turn.

CRITICISMS 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 begins.

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. (Selltitz 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 tape-recorded and transcribed, the reliability of the interpretation of transcripts may be gravely weakened by a failure to record apparently trivial, but often crucial, pauses and overlaps. 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, 1989).

This problem is expressed very clearly by Bryman:

There is a tendency to draw conclusions or explanations from unstructured content. There is a generality of these

This complaint of the reliability of research. 'Validity' doubts the validity of no attempt to deal with the 'field', so typ about the validity of organization. Or so shorter articles sim 'telling' examples of natural sciences wh select 'perfect' slid

Despite these co of qualitative rese its value. However has been more tha many qualitative

CONCLUSION

The fact that simp tative research sho open to question. most such dichoto best, they are pe difficult field: the not thinking, wh unwilling to learn

Ultimately, obj Kirk and Miller,

the process of in retreat into para 182)

This means that, research, we wil tematic attempt qualitative (see

Although Tab qualitative resea

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 13). 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 demand by journal editors for shorter and shorter articles simply means 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).

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

CONCLUSION

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, as I stated in the Preface, 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.

Ultimately, objectivity 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)

This means that, if we wish to establish criteria for distinguishing qualitative research, we will need to understand the similar issues faced by any systematic attempt at description and explanation, whether quantitative or qualitative (see Table 1.6).

Although Table 1.6 was prepared as a set of criteria for the evaluation of *qualitative* research papers, I believe that the criteria I have selected are

TABLE 1.6 Criteria for the evaluation of research

- 1 Are the methods of research appropriate to the nature of the question being asked?
- 2 Is the connection to an existing body of knowledge or theory clear?
- 3 Are there clear accounts of the criteria used for the selection of cases for study, and of the data collection and analysis?
- 4 Does the sensitivity of the methods match the needs of the research question?
- 5 Was the data collection and record-keeping systematic?
- 6 Is reference made to accepted procedures for analysis?
- 7 How systematic is the analysis?
- 8 Is there adequate discussion of how themes, concepts and categories were derived from the data?
- 9 Is there adequate discussion of the evidence for and against the researcher's arguments?
- 10 Is a clear distinction made between the data and their interpretation?

Source: adapted from criteria agreed and adopted by the British Sociological Association Medical Sociology Group, September 1996

equally appropriate for quantitative studies. This shows that, in principle, there is no reason to prefer any form of data.

I conclude, 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)

SUMMARY

In this chapter, I have made four basic points. First, 'qualitative' research involves a variety of quite different approaches. Second, although some 'quantitative' research can be properly criticized or found insufficient, the same may be said about some 'qualitative' research. Third, in these circumstances it is sensible to make pragmatic choices between research methodologies according to your research problem. Finally, 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'.

The most useful book in *Social Research: Principles in Practice* by Silverman (1993) and *Handbook of Qualitative Research* by Hinde (1999)

In addition to themselves (1979) and

Exercise

Review a following

- 1 To what combinations of questions?
- 2 How to qualify quality?
- 3 How to set out?
- 4 In your own words and

Further reading

The most useful introductory texts are Alan Bryman's *Quantity and Quality in Social Research* (Unwin Hyman, 1988), Nigel Gilbert's (ed.), *Researching Social Life* (Sage, 1993) and Clive Seale's (ed.), *Researching Society and Culture* (Sage, 1998). More advanced qualitative analysis is offered by Silverman's *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction* (Sage, 1993), Miles and Huberman's *Qualitative Data Analysis* (Sage, 1984), Hammersley and Atkinson's *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (Tavistock, 1983) and Denzin and Lincoln's (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Sage, 1994). 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 1.1

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 How fully does this study satisfy the criteria for the evaluation of research set out in Table 1.6?
- 4 In your view, how could this study have been improved methodologically and conceptually?