QUALITATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH

CONTEMPORARY METHODS FOR THE DIGITAL AGE

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The aims of qualitative research

CONTENTS

You saw in the last chapter that there are a range of approaches to research, with no one approach clearly superior. Values and beliefs underpin all research and we can identify and label systems of values and beliefs as positivist/post-positivist, criticalist and constructivist. As was suggested in the last chapter, the purpose of the research, and hence how its quality is judged, differs across each research paradigm or system of values and beliefs. Before examining these differences, we will look more closely at the general aim that is common to all qualitative research, that of finding out what is going on.

WHAT'S GOING ON – SELECTION AND INTERPRETATION

Qualitative research can be about understanding any aspect of what is going on in the social world. However, as you will see, there is never only one correct answer to what is happening in any social situation. As mentioned in the last chapter, all descriptions and observations involve both selection and interpretation.

Say I am researching how people use the physical space of a library. I observe that a young man is sitting in a public library reading – a simple description of what is going on, but notice that even this simple description involves interpretation. I have interpreted the sex of the person as male, his age as young, and his activity as reading. Is that an adequate interpretation of what is going on? Perhaps this 'young man' is there because he doesn't want to go home. Perhaps he has no home. Perhaps he is trying to keep warm and the library is warm. Perhaps he is trying to impress the librarian. Perhaps he is filling in time before his bus leaves. Perhaps he just enjoys being there. Perhaps he is reading the same page over and over, barely taking in a word as he tries to process the devastating news he has just received. Perhaps he is a detective pretending to be reading while he observes the activities of various patrons. Did I mention that he has a large suitcase with him and that his right hand is wrapped in a blood-soaked handkerchief? All qualitative research involves selection and interpretation – selection of what to observe and interpretation of the observation.

WHAT THE RESEARCH TRIES TO ACHIEVE

Generating theory from the data

Interpretation of the observations may lead to the generation of theory, that is, a way of explaining what's going on at a more general level than a particular case. This type of theory is induced from the data rather than logically deducted. An example should help to illustrate this.

When Waller studied the early days of home access to the Internet, an existing theory circulating at the time was that men used the Internet for functional purposes and women used it to communicate. However, rather than starting with this theory and then looking for data to support it, Waller started with the data. She observed how a diverse group of males and females used the Internet and how they talked about their use or non-use. For example, she observed that male research participants who exhibited a 'blokey' masculinity, and associated technical mastery with masculinity, were at pains to describe themselves as being skilled at using the Internet, even when it seemed obvious to Waller that they were not. She also observed that some research participants told her that chat rooms were frequented by strange and unsavoury characters, and that these same research participants also expressed distaste at the idea of visiting chat rooms. She interpreted this as research participants using their non-use of chat rooms as

a way of presenting themselves as 'normal'. From a wide range of individual examples observed in the rich and complex data gathered, Waller induced the theory that people invest particular meanings in their use or non-use of the Internet as a way of performing their self (Waller, 2012).

When applied to gender, Waller's theory is the reverse of the theory that men use the Internet for functional purposes and women use it to communicate. Rather than understanding the meanings that people gave to the Internet as patterned or predictable by gender, Waller theorized that people actually perform gender through the meanings they give to aspects of their use or non-use of the Internet. This allowed for explanation of those cases that didn't fit the existing theory.

Theory generated from qualitative data is a way of conceptualizing or thinking about what is going on which describes and explains much of what is observed. Was Waller's theory the correct one? This question may be misguided. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), the criteria for judging theory that is induced from data are that it needs to fit the data, be understandable to a lay person, be general enough to apply to other situations, and allow the user partial control over the situation under study.

While the aims of understanding and explanation are common to all qualitative research, the extent to which qualitative research tries to generate theory varies. So what else does qualitative research try to achieve?

Useful and ethical research

Most researchers hope that their research is useful and ethical, yet ideas about what constitutes useful and ethical research differ across the research paradigms. The aim of positivist research is to try to find out the truth of what is going on while post-positivist research attempts to get as close to the truth as possible. As described in the last chapter, this is like trying to have a 'gods-eye' view of what is going on and it is less common for qualitative research to be undertaken from within this paradigm.

Criticalist researchers conduct research in order to achieve social change. Denzin and Lincoln succinctly express the aims of qualitative research associated with the critical-ist paradigm: 'We want a social science committed up front to issues of social justice, equity, nonviolence, peace, and universal human rights' (2011: 11). The choice of research topic reflects this: for example, criticalist researchers might research the work-ing conditions of outworkers in the garment manufacturing industry, or indigenous people's access to the labour market. A criticalist researcher looking at the relationship between ethnicity and people's health would want the research to improve the position of those ethnic groups who are most socially and economically marginalized. As well as conducting research, the criticalist researcher is often an advocate or activist on behalf of the research participants.

Researchers operating within the constructivist tradition may be motivated to do research in order to give voice to people who are not usually heard. For example,

David Karp's (1996) study of depression doesn't look for the causes of depression or cures. Instead he is interested in how people suffering depression make sense of what is happening to them and around them, what they think about psychiatry and medications, and how they deal with family and friends. Sometimes the conduct of this research is almost an end in itself, as involving participants in telling their own stories can be an incredibly empowering experience for them. A constructivist researcher researching the relationship between ethnicity and people's health is likely to want to give voice to the experience of people from minority ethnic groups suffering little-known health problems.

JUDGING THE QUALITY OF RESEARCH

Qualitative research is often criticized for not being reliable, valid, or objective. As you will see, criticisms about not being reliable or objective often reflect confusion about what different types of research are trying to achieve. Should a piece of abstract art be judged by how realistic it is? Of course not. Note that we said we can only judge whether someone has lived a good life with respect to a particular system of values and beliefs. Similarly, the quality of research can only be judged with respect to a particular set of values and beliefs about research (i.e. a research paradigm). All qualitative research needs to be valid, and in the chapters that follow we will discuss good practice in conducting particular methods of qualitative inquiry as well as in data analysis. At a more general level, however, ideas about what makes qualitative research valid differ across the paradigms. This should be intuitively obvious. A post-positivist researcher who wants to get as close to the truth as possible is going to have a different conception of quality research from that of a constructivist researcher who wants to give voice to people's experience and understandings.

Reliability and objectivity – the elephant in the room

The criticism that qualitative research is not reliable tends to miss the point. In social research the term 'reliable' has a very specific meaning. It means that the same results would be obtained if the research was conducted by somebody else, or conducted with a new but similar group of participants. Of course, this makes sense if your aim is objective truth. You want the research to uncover the objective truth regardless of who conducts the research or which particular participants are involved. Hence positivist and post-positivist research aim to be reliable in both the collection and the interpretation of the data. With respect to the collection of data, this means that the researcher has a transparent and dispassionate approach, rather than one that depends upon the nature of the relationship established between researcher and participant. The examples given in the interviewing chapter should make this clear. With respect to the interpretation of data, reliability involves coding the data, for example, interview data, according to

transparent rules. Intercoder reliability is a quantitative measure of the extent to which the data are coded the same way irrespective of who codes it. For example, if the way that Karen codes an interview coincides exactly with how Viv codes the same interview 90% of the time, the intercoder reliability is 90%.

For research operating within the critical or constructivist tradition, reliability is not an appropriate aim as the idea that objective truth exists is a myth. In critical and constructivist research it is acknowledged that different researchers will have different partial perspectives, according to who they are, their life experiences, and so on. According to this view, if the research is replicated by someone else it is to be expected that the results will not be exactly the same. With respect to data collection, different researchers will establish a different type of relationship with the research topic and research participants. With respect to data analysis, it is acknowledged that the coding of qualitative data tends to involve some degree of subjective interpretation rather than adherence to transparent rules. This makes a quantitative measure of intercoder reliability inappropriate. Unless the data are already structured, for example as answers to questions, and each answer is being placed into one or more categories according to tightly specified rules, calculating a numerical measure of the extent of similarity within coding is incredibly difficult. Qualitative data are seldom this structured. When researchers are working together as a criticalist or constructivist team, what is required instead of reliability is negotiation of a common and consistent approach to the research, both in collecting the data and interpreting these. The consistency of coding within a team can be increased through cross-coding, team coding, and regular discussions about coding.

With its dependence on notions of an objective truth, you can see that reliability is closely related to objectivity. Another common objection to qualitative research is that it is not objective. It is only positivist/post-positivist researchers, however, who believe that we can know something objectively. Those operating within a constructivist paradigm believe that how we know something depends on where we are looking from and who we are.

You may have heard the Indian story of the six blind men describing an elephant through touch (www.jainworld.com/literature/story25.htm). Each one had a different description of what the elephant was like, because each of them had touched a different part of the elephant's body. Their descriptions of the elephant varied from a pillar, a rope, a thick branch, a big hand-fan, and a huge wall, to a solid pipe. It was the blind man who could only reach the trunk of the elephant who described the elephant as like the thick branch of a tree. It was the blind man who could only touch the tail of the elephant who described the elephant as like a rope. It was the blind man who could only reach the belly of the elephant who described the elephant as like a solid wall.

The story finishes with the arrival of a wise man who can see all these different aspects of the elephant and explains that each perspective is true because each of the blind men has only a partial perspective on the elephant. Does such a wise man with an all-seeing, objective view exist? It is only those operating within a positivist or post-positivist tradition who believe so. Those operating within a constructivist tradition aim for

'embodied objectivity' (Haraway, 1991: 188). This is an understanding of objectivity and validity that acknowledges there may be many valid and objective versions of the research. What gives them legitimacy is that they are 'a view from somewhere' (Haraway, 1991: 196). In the case of the story, none of the competing descriptions of what an elephant is like is more true than the others. Each is true given the location of each blind man. In other words, each account demonstrates 'embodied objectivity'.

Now imagine that when the blind man touched the trunk of the elephant it leaned down and picked up the man in its trunk. The blind man would no longer describe the elephant as like a thick branch of a tree. He might instead describe it as like a python. As discussed earlier, constructivist research is both a dialogue and an intervention – the researcher's perceptions are contingent not only upon how they collect the data (in this case, through touching the trunk) but also on the interaction between the researcher and the subject of study.

Trustworthiness is more appropriate than reliability as an aim of qualitative research. In order for your research to be considered trustworthy, you will need to be able to demonstrate that you have been rigorous in applying the standards of the research paradigm in which you are operating. For example, trustworthiness of coding in post-positivist research involves intercoder reliability, whereas trustworthiness of coding in criticalist or constructivist research involves consistency of approach.

The aim of validity

As mentioned, qualitative research is often criticized for not being valid. Now all qualitative research does aim to be valid, but there are different understandings of what this means. In *quantitative* research the simplest definition of validity is that it actually measures what it intends to measure. This idea becomes less straightforward in *qualitative* research. Following Mason (2002), we can distinguish between the validity of the way the data are generated and the validity of the interpretation.

Validity in how data are generated

With regard to the validity of the way the data are generated, the methods used to generate the data, such as observation or interviews, need to make sense given the specific aims of the research and the beliefs and values underpinning it. Using the example of research on the relationship between ethnicity and health, and in particular obesity, we will look briefly at what this means for each research paradigm before returning to the issue of the validity of the interpretation. (We will discuss in more detail how to choose a valid sample for your research in Chapter 5.)

With rare exceptions, post-positivist research explicitly builds on existing knowledge, which involves using established categories of knowledge. Post-positivist researchers investigating the relationship between ethnicity and obesity would select their research

participants using established categories of ethnicity and established categories of obesity. Each category would involve a set of rules or procedures for determining the ethnicity or obesity status of any research participant. For example, ethnicity may be determined from characteristics such as country of birth, country of parents' birth, first language learnt, or participation in particular cultural practices. Validity would require that the characteristics of the research participants assigned a particular ethnicity matched established ideas about that category of ethnicity. Whether or not the assigned ethnicity matched with the participant's own ethnic identification would not affect the validity. Similarly, obesity status would be determined through reference to established criteria, perhaps by asking the respondent to fill in a questionnaire or undergo a physical assessment. Having determined the ethnicity and the obesity status of the research participants, the research could then focus on aspects of the relationship between obesity and ethnicity.

The next aspect of validity for the post-positivist researcher would be that the method of data collection (for example, observation, interviews or focus group) generated an accurate picture of what was actually going on. It would be important that the data collection strategy allowed participants to speak honestly and freely. In the case of focus groups, for example, it would be important that all the research participants felt equally able to participate. It would probably not be a good idea to combine teenage girls and boys in the one focus group to talk about obesity, as given the pressures on teenage girls and boys to look a particular way it would be likely that some participants would feel uncomfortable, or would withhold certain relevant information in order to present themselves in a particular way.

In contrast to the approach of post-positivist researchers, where validity is increased through correctly matching participants to established categories of ethnicity and obesity, the approach of the criticalist researcher is not to take the appropriateness of these categories for granted. Rather, validity in the approach of the criticalist researcher is increased by interrogation of these categories. So the criticalist researcher may examine how the research participants understand and experience ethnicity, and how this intersects with the understandings, perceptions and lived experiences around obesity. For example, teenage girls strongly identifying with cultures where larger bodies are the desired norm may have a different understanding of what constitutes obesity from that of a teenage girl who immerses herself in North American celebrity culture. The criticalist researcher may even deliberately combine teenage girls and boys in the one focus group to talk about obesity. Rather than considering that this may distort the data generated, a criticalist researcher may consider that how the two sexes interact around the issue of obesity is as telling as what individuals say or don't say about obesity.

Validity in the generation of data for constructivist research is increased by actively involving participants in the research process, including in deciding what is considered to be data. The generation of data for constructivist research should be an empowering experience for the research participants. For example, it would be important not to inadvertently label participants in ways that may reduce their self-confidence.

Across the paradigms, it can increase the validity of the data generated to ask respondents to confirm its accuracy. This works best with interview data where transcripts can be provided back to the respondents to check that they have been heard correctly and that they are happy with what they said. This is not always possible, however, as respondents may not be interested or able to do this.

Validity of the interpretation of data

In general, the validity of the interpretation of the data relates to the rigour of the process in which you have engaged and your capacity to make this intelligible to others. As Mason says, ' … you should be able to, and be prepared to, trace the route by which you came to your interpretation' (Mason, 2002: 191). If you are generating theory, ' … you should not be satisfied until your generalization is able to apply to every single gobbet of relevant data you have collected' (Silverman, 2011: 379). You need to be satisfied that you have canvassed all possible alternative explanations and can justify what makes yours stronger.

Some scholars advocate the idea of face validity (Babbie, 2007) or apparent validity (Kirk and Miller, 1986). This is basically the idea that the interpretation of the research should seem, at a glance, to be plausible. However, although this may seem to be common sense, relying on face validity can blind researchers to unexpected interpretations. Regardless of whether the interpretation of the data has face validity or indeed goes against conventional wisdom about the topic, a researcher needs to be able to demonstrate how they arrived at their interpretation of the data.

In addition to Mason and Silverman's advice about being rigorous in arriving at and being able to justify your interpretation of the data, there are some aspects of the validity of interpretation that are relevant only to research within a particular paradigm. In order for the interpretation of data in post-positivist research to be considered valid, the evidence must be available for scrutiny by people other than the researcher.

Some post-positivist researchers will triangulate in order to demonstrate validity. The term 'triangulation' originally referred to a technique that made use of the mathematical properties of triangles to pinpoint a precise location. In social research, within the positivist paradigm, triangulation of methods means the use of a variety of methods to pinpoint the precise answer to a research question. In other words, if the variety of methods yield the same findings, this is then taken as increasing the validity of the findings. However, the reverse is not true. A variety of findings do not negate the validity of the research. Rather than being a problem, contradictions or conflicting data indicate the need for further investigation of how contradictions are experienced and lived. As Pierre Bourdieu has said:

> … to be able to see and describe the world as it is, you have to be ready to be always dealing with things that are complicated, confused, impure, uncertain, all of which runs counter to the usual idea of intellectual rigour. (Bourdieu et al., 1991: 259)

Hence, in triangulating, post-positivists use multiple methods to get closer to the truth. In contrast, while research conducted from a constructivist or criticalist perspective may also use multiple methods, the intention is to gain a variety of perspectives. This use of multiple methods is not triangulation, as there is no intention to triangulate, namely to use the variety of perspectives to get closer to the one true perspective, the 'gods-eye view'.

Interpretations of data in criticalist research need to explicitly take into account the social structures in which the activities of research participants are situated. Returning to our example, the interpretation of the criticalist researcher would be unlikely to be considered valid unless it had taken into account the cultural, political, and economic factors around obesity.

Validity for the constructivist researcher also means that the interpretation of the research needs to align with participants' own interpretation of what is going on, and that this interpretation should empower the participants and improve understanding. So, for example, in interpreting what is going on, the researcher should pay attention to the cultural meanings that participants give to different body types. A typical strategy that the researcher could use to ensure the validity of her interpretation would be to ask the subjects of study to write stories, or draw pictures, about what is important to them in relation to the research topic. Another example relates to reporting on a study of men's sexual practices. Using the term 'homosexual' when reporting on male research participants who have sex with men would be invalid if those research participants understood themselves as heterosexual men who had sex with men.

Researchers operating from within the constructivist paradigm may also ask the research participants to confirm the validity of the researcher's interpretation of the data. This practice is known as respondent validation. Usually this is done through providing each research participant with what the researcher has written about them to see if they agree with the interpretation.

However, as Silverman (2011) outlines, it may not make sense to undertake respondent validation in criticalist or post-positivist research. Participants may not understand the sociological framing, they may not be interested, and what the researcher has written may not fit with the participant's image of themselves. This last point can present a dilemma for the criticalist researcher who has an agenda of reducing the disadvantage suffered by certain groups in society and explicitly takes power structures into account in their analysis. This means that a criticalist researcher may have an unflattering interpretation of behaviour that is valorized within a certain group. In other words, the group for whom the criticalist researcher is intending to expose and reduce structural disadvantage may themselves reject the research and feel disempowered by it.

Reflexivity in constructivist research

An integral aspect of validity for those operating within both the constructivist and criticalist tradition is for the researcher to be reflexive about their involvement in any

particular research. This means they need to pay attention to how their experiences, values and expectations shape and affect their research. As with the story of the six blind men describing the elephant, this does not imply that such research is less true. Rather it is a recognition that all research presents a view from somewhere – the disembodied 'objective' view does not exist. Reflexivity involves being aware of who you are as a researcher as well as the power relations between you, the researcher, and the researched, and how these may affect the conduct of the research, the type and quality of data generated, and your interpretations.

An example from Waller's research on household use of the Internet illustrates how who you are as a researcher can affect what data are generated. Waller, then a young female researcher, did not feel comfortable pursuing the issue of pornography on the Internet, particularly with male interviewees, some of whom were using the Internet in private for several hours each night. As a result, the only data that Waller collected on use of the Internet to access pornography were in terms of parental concern about children's use of the Internet.

Another example relates to the obvious difficulties associated with an adult researcher trying to enter into a child's world. In particular, there is an unequal power relationship between adult researcher and child in the research situation. One consequence of this unequal power relationship is that children may try to give the adult researcher the answers that they think that person wants. Of course, this can occur when researching adults as well.

An example from Schatzman and Strauss's (1991) study of a community that had just experienced a tornado illustrates how who we are can affect our interpretation of the data. Assigning class on the basis of education and income, Schatzman and Strauss found that middle-class people were more able than working-class people to use a variety of perspectives to describe what had happened. However, they also admitted that, as middle-class researchers themselves, they may have not understood some of the cultural codes embedded in working-class ways of talking.

Being reflexive means paying attention to how aspects of ourselves affect the data collection and analysis, even though it is never possible to fully know what effect we, as researchers, have had.

CONCLUSION

While only some research aims to generate theory, all qualitative research should aim to be useful, ethical, trustworthy and valid. In this chapter we have shown how understandings of what it means to conduct trustworthy and valid research differ across the research paradigms.

Table 2.1 summarizes the fundamental philosophical differences between the research paradigms, indicating how the broad aim of the research varies according to these basic beliefs and values.

Table 2.1 Underlying philosophical differences in research

RESEARCH PARADIGM	Positivist	Post-positivist	Criticalist	Constructivist
View of social reality	Social structures have an independent existence	Social structures have an independent existence	Social structures are a product of human consciousness, values and biases, and unequal power	Social reality (may include 'objects') is local and specific, actively constituted through representations and discourse and practices
Relationship between researcher and findings	Objective	Aim for objectivity	Researcher has progressive political agenda (justice, equity etc.) in topics, aims, design, execution and use of research	Who the researcher is affects what they find out
How to find things out	Measuring and deduction Objective and reliable methods Expertise of researcher Collect social facts	Measuring and deduction Objective and reliable methods Expertise of researcher Collect social facts	Reflexive Interrogate existing structures	Reflexive Expertise and voice of participants Researcher and researched co-construct findings Societal facts
Aim	Capture objective, measurable truth	Get as close to objective truth as we can	Create positive change Articulate possibilities for alternatives	Give voice to participants Empower participants

Table 2.2 shows how these underlying philosophical differences translate into everyday decisions about how to conduct the research. Note that positivism is missing from this table as it is incompatible with qualitative research.

Table 2.2 Defining aspects of the paradigms for everyday decisions in qualitative research

RESEARCH PARADIGM	Post-positivist	Criticalist	Constructivist
Power of researcher *vis-à-vis* participants	Researcher in charge	*No defining aspect*	Equal – and empower participants
Level of voice of participants	Researcher interprets what's going on	*No defining aspect*	Participant voice paramount
Use of categories	Assign people to established categories	Critique established categories Investigate people's lived experience	Investigate people's lived experience – categories perhaps not relevant Societal facts
Relationship between researcher and participants	Dispassionate	Advocate	Equal

(Continued)

Table 2.2 (Continued)

RESEARCH PARADIGM	Post-positivist	Criticalist	Constructivist
What counts as data	Researcher decides	May be researcher or participants	Participants help decide
Validity in interpretation	Correct matching of participants to categories	Interrogation of categories Take power into account	Matches participants' interpretation Researcher reflexive about their role
Validity in data generation	Researcher doesn't affect outcomes	Participants empowered	Participants empowered View from somewhere

Going further

Charmaz, K. (2004) 'Premises, principles, and practices in qualitative research: revisiting the foundations', *Qualitative Health Research*, 14 (7): 976–93.

In this transcript of a keynote address Charmaz offers insights about the purpose and conduct of qualitative research, drawing from Goffman and her own work as a qualitative researcher operating within a social constructionist paradigm.

Denzin, N. (2013) 'The death of data?', *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 13 (4): 353–6.

In this short but provocative piece, Denzin challenges post-positivist assumptions about data.

Patton, M. (1999) 'Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis', *Health Services Research*, 4 (5), Part II: 1189–1208.

This article is written from the perspective of a programme evaluator and contains much practical advice.

Shenton, A. (2004) 'Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects', *Education for Information*, 22: 63–75.

This article offers clear practice and advice on improving the trustworthiness of qualitative research, contrasting positivist approaches to reliability and validity with what might be appropriate in qualitative research.

Skeggs, B. (1994) 'Situating the production of feminist ethnography', in M. Maynard and J. Purvis (eds), *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*. London: Taylor and Francis. pp. 72–92.

This chapter demonstrates reflexivity as the author situates herself with respect to an ethnographic study of working-class women doing a further education course.