

# Qualitative Researching



# Qualitative Researching

Second Edition

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

When I wrote the original *Qualitative Researching* I was convinced that new and would-be qualitative researchers needed a handbook that bridged the gap between ‘cookbook’ texts and abstract theoretical discussions of methodology. I wanted to produce a book that would encourage readers to engage actively with the doing of qualitative research, rather than simply to follow ‘recipes’. I wanted to help people to *use* theory in a grounded way in their research practice, and to recognize how they do so, rather than to set out for them my assessment of the full range of theoretical debates informing qualitative research. I wanted to write a book that was usable in the practice of research, rather than one that concentrated on telling stories about research. For that reason, I did not produce a book laden with rich descriptions of qualitative research experience. Although such descriptions are interesting and important for other purposes, I felt they were not the best way to stimulate and support *the active engagement of the researcher around their own set of research questions*, that I think is so vital to the conduct of good quality qualitative research. Instead, I focused the book on ‘difficult questions’ that qualitative researchers need to ask themselves, and to resolve, in the process and practice of doing their research.

My aims for this second, fully revised and updated version, are essentially the same. Although research methods literature is a burgeoning field, there remains a real need for books that support a theoretically engaged, grounded approach to qualitative researching, and that take issues of quality and rigour very seriously. In the light of contemporary theoretical debates about the state of qualitative research, which are at the same time fascinating but often abstract and inaccessible, I would like this second edition of *Qualitative Researching* to be useful to those who want to get on with the job of doing qualitative research in a theoretically cognizant way.

Qualitative research faces new opportunities in a social world that is increasingly thought to be complex and multi-dimensional, and where the particularly qualitative strengths of understanding context, diversity, nuance and process might potentially be very highly valued. It continues to represent a broad and pervasive set of challenges to more fixed ways of perceiving and understanding that world. It faces challenges too, however, to assemble and maintain its reputation and to compete for resources in multiple new environments where the idea of ‘evidence’ about the social world is very definitely flavour of the month. Qualitative researchers have to decide where they stand in all of this, and such decisions may

not be easy. However, I think it is important that they do not take too long about it, and risk getting left standing nowhere in particular. For these reasons, I want the second edition of *Qualitative Researching* to be highly usable and useful in helping to create qualitative researchers who will engage in high quality research, and who will be keen to champion the qualitative cause with confidence and energy.

The second edition thus retains the style and approach of the original, and in particular its use of 'difficult questions' to stimulate the reader's active engagement. However, it is fully revised and updated throughout, and includes extra chapters and extended discussions of visual methods, observation, and some of the main qualitative theoretical approaches. The original eight chapters have been replaced by nine chapters plus an Introduction, and there is now an Appendix drawing together all of the 'difficult questions' raised in the book into one easy-reference resource at the end.

A number of people have helped me in the production of the second edition. Thanks to Karen Phillips at Sage for her advice and support during the production of both editions of the book, and for encouraging me to write the second edition. Lynne Slocombe, the Development Editor, made some very helpful suggestions for which I am grateful. Thank you also to all of those people who found time to contact me personally to tell me how useful they had found the first edition, and for making me think that a second edition would be worthwhile. Thanks to students on my modules of the MA in Social Research at Leeds University, and to Helen Willmot, all of whom have continued to demonstrate to me how much it is possible to learn through teaching enthusiastic and committed people. Thanks to all of the following people for useful discussions about qualitative methods in recent years, and for keeping me on my toes: Bren Neale, Simon Duncan, Carol Smart, Louise Ackers, Janet Finch, Jennifer Flowerdew, Amanda Wade. Most of all, thanks to Andrew Jones, and to Rosa and Joseph.



## Introduction: The Challenge of Qualitative Research

Qualitative researching is exciting and important. It is a highly rewarding activity because it engages us with things that matter, in ways that matter. Through qualitative research we can explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world, including the texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences and imaginings of our research participants, the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings that they generate. We can do all of this qualitatively by using methodologies that celebrate richness, depth, nuance, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity rather than being embarrassed or inconvenienced by them. Instead of editing these elements out in search of the general picture or the average, qualitative research factors them directly into its analyses and explanations. This means that it has an unrivalled capacity to constitute compelling arguments about *how things work in particular contexts*. More than that though, while not all qualitative researchers are on a mission to produce ‘the general picture’ of how things work, the qualitative habit of intimately connecting context with explanation means that qualitative research is capable of producing very well-founded *cross-contextual generalities*, rather than aspiring to more flimsy de-contextual versions.

This extraordinary set of strengths is sometimes forgotten in the face of criticisms that qualitative research is ‘merely’ anecdotal or at best illustrative, and that it is practised in casual and unsystematic ways. While any piece of research – qualitative or quantitative – may be criticized for its shortcomings, the idea that qualitative research necessarily has these inherent weaknesses is based on a misunderstanding of the logic of qualitative enquiry. It fails to see the strategic significance of context, and of the particular, in the development of our understandings and explanations of the social world.

Qualitative research therefore has massive potential, and its practitioners face some major challenges. It deserves to be done well so that it can make fully justified claims for its own significance, effectiveness and meaning. Furthermore, it still has arguments to win and a reputation to build and maintain in the social sciences. Yet it cannot be done by rote or by recipe. It requires a highly active engagement from its practitioners, and a great deal of effort – intellectual, practical, physical and emotional.

My aim in writing this book is to encourage the reader to get actively

involved and engaged in the doing of good quality qualitative research, and to kindle your enthusiasm by showing how much more exciting this is than passively or unimaginatively following textbook recipes, or mountains of technical advice. Although I think it is important not to underestimate the challenges, my aim is to show that this vision of qualitative research is possible to achieve, and to offer sets of tools, and modes of critical thinking, to help practitioners to do it. I think this requires readers to be able to think themselves into the research process, using their own examples, because most of the key decisions about research are made by researchers contextually.

This introductory chapter explains the logic of my approach to these issues, as well as focusing upon some of the challenges that qualitative research faces. It concludes with an outline of the structure and organization of the book. To begin with, however, I want to explore what I mean by qualitative research.

### **WHAT IS 'QUALITATIVE' ABOUT QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?**

There have been many attempts to define qualitative research in the social sciences, and to determine whether or not it can or should be differentiated from something called quantitative research (see especially Bryman, 1988 and 2001; Hammersley, 1992; Silverman, 2001). However, there is no consensus on these questions, and we should not be surprised by this, because qualitative research – whatever it might be – certainly is not a unified set of techniques or philosophies, and indeed has grown out of a wide range of intellectual and disciplinary traditions.

For example, qualitative research is perhaps most commonly associated with certain schools which fall broadly within what is known as the interpretivist sociological tradition, particularly phenomenology (see, for example, Schutz, 1976), ethnomethodology (see, for example, Cicourel, 1964; Garfinkel, 1967) and symbolic interactionism (see, for example, Blumer, 1969). More recently, postmodernists have begun to show some interest in empirical research and qualitative methods although their take on these is in many respects distinct from the more long-standing humanist tradition (Denzin et al., 1994; Lather, 1991, 2001; Plummer, 2001; Scheurich, 1997; Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001). Anthropologists have of course for many years been practising qualitative research in the form of ethnography (Atkinson et al., 2001), and there is more recent interest in the form of discourse analysis from within the discipline of linguistics, which is grounded in the tradition of semiotics (Fairclough, 1992). Psychology, although long associated with quantitative and 'scientific' research methods, has recently developed a more critical school which favours qualitative and sometimes postmodern approaches to research, particularly those rooted in discourse and content analysis, but also psychoanalysis (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001). Other disciplines, such as human geography and education, have conventionally used case study methods, and historians have developed a particular approach to the use of qualitative methods in the writing of oral and life histories (Chamberlain and Thompson, 1997; Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Delamont and Atkinson, 1995; Gordon,

Holland and Lahelma, 2001). The ‘younger’ disciplines of media and cultural studies rely quite heavily on qualitative ways of knowing, as do areas with a strong interdisciplinary bias such as health studies and women’s studies (Bloor, 2001). Feminism has indeed had an enormous impact in its challenge to conventional scientific discourse, and in establishing the agenda for a whole range of issues which are now seen as central to qualitative research (Skeggs, 1995, 2001; Rose, 1994; Smith, 1988; Stanley and Wise, 1993).

This is not intended to be a comprehensive list of the influences which have produced the diverse set of approaches which we know as qualitative research, but instead it is meant to convey a sense of the *range* of philosophical underpinnings, as well as methodological techniques and practices, which are likely to be encompassed by the term. These different traditions, schools and disciplines operate with distinctive views about what makes the social world go round, what is important in it, what it looks like if indeed it is an ‘it’, and so on. Consequently they have different ideas about the extent to which empirical research can tell us anything meaningful, and of course about how it might do this. This means that the range of traditions which have some kind of interest in qualitative research does not dovetail neatly into one uniform philosophy or set of methodological principles.

In my view, it is a great strength of qualitative research that it cannot be neatly pigeon-holed and reduced to a simple and prescriptive set of principles, and I think it is exciting that so many researchers from so many different traditions and disciplines are interested in doing research which is, in some way or another, qualitative in nature. In the chapters which follow, I pose questions which encourage the researcher to identify their own philosophies of research, and to work out how they might in practice conduct research which is consistent with these. I have tried to avoid insisting that there is only one legitimate way of doing qualitative research based on only one philosophical position.

Although I am keen to emphasize the rich variety of qualitative research strategies and techniques, I think it is useful nevertheless to look for some common elements, so that we can develop a sense of what is *qualitative* about qualitative research. However, I wish to go no further than identifying a loose, working definition which says that qualitative research is the following:

- 1 Grounded in a philosophical position which is broadly ‘interpretivist’ in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced or constituted. While different versions of qualitative research might understand or approach these elements in different ways (for example, focusing on social meanings, or interpretations, or practices, or discourses, or processes, or constructions), all will see at least some of these as meaningful elements in a complex – possibly multi-layered and textured – social world.
- 2 Based on methods of data generation which are both flexible and sensitive to the social context in which data are produced (rather than rigidly standardized or structured, or entirely abstracted from ‘real-life’ contexts).
- 3 Based on methods of analysis, explanation and argument building which involve understandings of complexity, detail and context. Qualitative research aims to produce rounded and contextual understandings on the basis of rich, nuanced and detailed data. There is more emphasis on ‘holistic’ forms of analysis and

## 4 INTRODUCTION

explanation in this sense, than on charting surface patterns, trends and correlations. Qualitative research often does use some form of quantification, but statistical forms of analysis are not seen as central.

I do not feel comfortable with specifying any further ‘common’ features of qualitative research, and the reader will gather in the chapters which follow that there are many different ‘qualitative’ answers to central questions of methodology. Some of the answers may apply to what is known as ‘quantitative’ research as well, and I do not think research practice has to involve stark either/or choices between qualitative and quantitative methodology. Partly, this is because neither ‘quantitative’ nor ‘qualitative’ methodologies are the unified bodies of philosophy, method and technique which they are sometimes seen to be. This means that any researcher should always think carefully about integrating different methods, whether or not they think they are integrating quantitative with qualitative methods, or qualitative with qualitative, or quantitative with quantitative. The latter two options cannot be assumed to be unproblematic, in my view, any more than the first option should be seen as technically impossible. The key to integrating methods of any description, as I shall argue throughout the book, is to establish what you are trying to achieve in so doing, and to understand the implications of combining approaches which may have different underpinning logics, and which may suggest different forms of analysis and different ways of constructing social explanations and arguments.

### **DIFFICULT QUESTIONS AND ACTIVE REFLEXIVITY**

I have suggested that qualitative research requires a highly active engagement from its practitioners. Indeed, any researcher has to identify and resolve a whole range of issues in the research process, most of which are specific in some way to their particular research project, and many of which cannot be anticipated in advance. They therefore need to develop active skills which include identifying the key issues, working out how they might be resolved, and understanding the intellectual, practical, moral and political implications of different ways of resolving them. It follows that the passive following of methodology recipes is not a skill I wish to encourage in would-be researchers who need to learn actively to recognize, confront and make decisions about key research issues for themselves. I have instead tried to write a book which will encourage qualitative researchers to develop critical yet productive and creative ways of thinking and doing.

My main device for inspiring this active engagement is to pose *difficult questions* about qualitative research throughout the book. My use of the term ‘difficult’ is not intended to be offputting, but instead to suggest that there is something there to be engaged with, deliberated about, and that answers are unlikely to be straightforward. Needless to say, I do not provide the ‘correct’ answer in each case, since such a thing does not exist, but I do offer a range of possibilities, and illustrate something of the consequences of different decisions.

Each chapter contains its own set of difficult questions, which are focused

on the kinds of issues which need to be identified and resolved in relation to the elements of the research process under discussion. The questions are not designed to probe qualitative research in the abstract, or to spell out lists of its advantages and disadvantages, and nor are they simply convenient devices for organizing my text. Instead, they are intended literally as a set of questions which qualitative researchers should address to themselves, and answer appropriately, as an active part of the research process. The idea of posing difficult questions is therefore both that they represent a good way to learn about and develop the active ‘thinking and doing’ skills required for qualitative research, and also that they are an essential component in actually conducting a real piece of research.

This means not only that qualitative researchers should ask themselves these kinds of questions in preparation for, or as a training for, research, but also that a major element of their effort during the research process should involve this self-questioning activity. In that sense, these are *reflexive acts*, and constitute a way of *doing* qualitative research, rather than simply nuggets of advice about it, or media for reflecting on it afterwards. Reflexivity in this sense means thinking critically about what you are doing and why, confronting and often challenging your own assumptions, and recognizing the extent to which your thoughts, actions and decisions shape how you research and what you see. This of course can be a very difficult process, not least if it involves recognizing and dealing with elements in your own assumptions which you would rather not face, but it is also a highly creative and sometimes exhilarating one.

It is important, however, that you focus your reflexive efforts meaningfully and strategically on the research itself, and that you resist the temptation to use your research to showcase ego-centric or confessional tales about yourself, which may do little to illuminate your research practice or problem, or to help you to make sound research decisions. We should not need reminding, but sometimes we do, that ‘the people [we] are talking to are more interesting than the people asking the questions’ (Spencer, 2001: 450). When I speak of the asking of difficult questions and acts of reflexivity, I am emphatically not advocating unbounded introspection or self-fascination.

I have focused the questions on some of the most compelling elements of qualitative research, but of course it is not possible to anticipate every possible question which any qualitative researcher will need to identify and resolve, and indeed many of these will arise from the precise contexts in which the research is done. In that sense the questions included in each chapter should not be taken as a definitive checklist. I point out throughout the book that all researchers do, in practice, make decisions in relation to these kinds of questions, and that these decisions have intellectual, practical, moral and political consequences. It is vital, therefore, that researchers are fully conscious of the decisions they are making, and that these are informed and strategic rather than *ad hoc* or straightforwardly reactive. A full list of these ‘difficult questions’ is included in the Appendix at the end of the book for ease of reference.

## CHALLENGES FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research is both exciting and challenging. In recent years it has become the focus of some fascinating debates including the ability of research to discover truths or to represent the realities of others. Although these issues have long been of concern to qualitative researchers, the debates have received a particular kind of impetus from critiques raised by postmodernism. For Denzin and Lincoln, the current state of qualitative research can be read as follows: 'The field of qualitative research is defined by a series of tensions, contradictions, and hesitations. This tension works back and forth between the broad, doubting postmodern sensibility and the more certain, more traditional positivist, postpositivist, and naturalistic conceptions' (1998: 31). Others are more critical of the idea that postmodernism is 'broad and doubting' (or indeed that postpositivism is always so certain). They suggest instead that some expressions of postmodernism are ironically rather dogmatic in their assertions, for example, that the social is constituted of 'discourses of the subject' and 'decentred identities' rather than 'living and breathing, embodied and feeling *human beings*' (Plummer, 2001: x, emphasis in original). The effect can be to sweep away one form of 'lofty generalization' (modernist claims to generalize about whole cultures, for example), with another (postmodernist claims about the ubiquity of discourse and the impossibility of anything 'non-discursive' for example) (see also Spencer, 2001).

These ideas can be very influential for the practice of research, because they give us versions of what exists, and therefore how we can go about seeing it. They also affect our understandings of what is good research and what is bad. Postmodernist critiques have been partly responsible for forcing a recognition that conventional 'scientific' mechanisms for judging the quality of research are not entirely adequate, but at the same time there is a danger that research driven by postmodernist principles positions itself beyond judgement (Seale, 1999). For me, this sets the alarm bells ringing, and I find myself agreeing with those who argue that it is better to learn what we can from debates about these key issues than to assume that one argument, be it postmodernist, modernist, realist or humanist for example, has the capacity to demolish the other or to assert its ultimate authority (see, for example, Seale, 1999; Plummer, 2001).

These debates are fascinating and important, and are certainly worth having, but we should not let the practice of qualitative research become unfairly paralyzed by them. It is not difficult to imagine a scenario where qualitative researchers are busy shooting themselves in the foot over questions about truth, representation, and their own arrogance in supposing ever to understand or interpret the experiences of others (and indeed themselves). In the meantime, researchers operating from different orientations and to whom such challenges might more usefully be directed may carry on regardless, seeing these as the irrelevant wrangles of a self-obsessed band of qualitative researchers.

I think a major challenge for qualitative research is to learn how to proceed, to build and maintain its own reputation, in a manner which is sensitive to these important issues, without getting mired within an ultimately self-defeating debate. The kind of active reflexivity which I have advocated, in contrast to

unquestioning or evangelical adherence to any one doctrine (even a supposed anti-doctrine like postmodernism), is the best way I can think of to take up that challenge while getting on with the task in hand – undertaking good quality qualitative research.

I have said that I do not wish to impose one version of qualitative research upon the reader, but instead to encourage the kind of active engagement with key issues that will help the reader to make their own research decisions. Of course, it would be fair to say that this in itself constitutes an approach to the doing of qualitative research, and I cannot – and would not wish to – claim that I am neutral on questions to do with perspective and approach in qualitative methodology. On the contrary, I do of course have views on what qualitative research should be, and on what it should do. Indeed, the impetus for writing the book was a concern to encourage skilled researchers to do qualitative research well, because I think such research is highly valuable and important, while too often being undervalued. My ideas about what qualitative research should be are expressed most fully in the kinds of difficult questions I pose in the chapters which follow, and the possibilities which I spell out for answering them. However, I want to preface those chapters with a few key points about what qualitative research can, and in my view should, be.

- 1 Qualitative research should be *systematically and rigorously conducted*. I do not think there are any excuses for a casual or *ad hoc* approach to qualitative research. The difficult questions posed throughout the book are intended to make researchers think, plan and act in systematic and rigorous ways in the research process. This should, however, be distinguished from a rigid or structured approach, which is usually not appropriate for qualitative research.
- 2 Qualitative research should be *accountable* for its quality and its claims, or to use Clive Seale's terminology it should be 'fallibilistic' (1999: 6). In other words, it should not attempt to position itself beyond judgement, and should provide its audience with material upon which they can judge it.
- 3 Qualitative research should be *strategically conducted, yet flexible and contextual*. Essentially, this means that qualitative researchers should make decisions on the basis not only of a sound research strategy, but also of a sensitivity to the changing contexts and situations in which the research takes place.
- 4 Qualitative research should involve critical self-scrutiny by the researcher, or *active reflexivity*. This means that researchers should constantly take stock of their actions and their role in the research process, and subject these to the same critical scrutiny as the rest of their 'data'. This is based on the belief that a researcher cannot be neutral, or objective, or detached, from the knowledge and evidence they are generating. Instead, they should seek to understand their role in that process. Indeed, the very act of asking oneself difficult questions in the research process is part of the activity of reflexivity.
- 5 Qualitative research should produce *explanations or arguments*, rather than claiming to offer mere descriptions. Later on I shall argue that all qualitative research should be formulated around an intellectual puzzle – that is, something which the researcher wishes to explain. I do not think it is sufficient for a researcher to say that they wish simply to describe something, or explore what is happening. Descriptions and explorations involve selective viewing and interpretation; they

cannot be neutral, objective or total. The elements which a researcher chooses to see as relevant for a description or exploration will be based, implicitly or explicitly, on a way of seeing the social world, and on a particular form of explanatory logic. What I am advocating is that qualitative researchers recognize that they are producing arguments, and are explicit about the logic on which these are based.

- 6 Qualitative research should produce explanations or arguments which are *generalizable* in some way, or have some demonstrable wider resonance. I do not think qualitative researchers should be satisfied with producing explanations which are idiosyncratic or particular only to the limited empirical parameters of their study, not least because this is to underplay the great capacity of qualitative methods to facilitate cross-contextual generalities mentioned earlier. Similarly, I do not think that presenting data but leaving questions about its generality or wider applicability for the audience to decide is a very honest or satisfactory strategy. It implies that the researcher has no authorial presence, and that data are raw commodities, neither of which claim bears much close scrutiny. I do not underestimate the challenges posed by generalizing from qualitative – or indeed any – research, however. These are discussed later in the book.
- 7 Qualitative research should not be seen as a unified body of philosophy and practice, whose methods can simply be combined unproblematically. Similarly, qualitative research should not be seen as necessarily in opposition to, or antithetical to, quantitative research. *The distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods is not entirely clear-cut*, and all researchers should think very carefully about how and why they might combine any methods, whether qualitative, quantitative, or both.
- 8 Qualitative research should be conducted as *a moral practice*, and with regard to its political context. Many of the specific moral and political dilemmas raised by qualitative research are discussed throughout the book.

## STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The chapters in this book are organized around elements of the research process on which decisions need to be made, although I should emphasize that these are not intended to represent sequential stages. Indeed, qualitative research requires the moving back and forth between different elements in the research process, and the researcher should not assume that they can deal with only one element at a time or see this as something to which they should aspire. It is, however, a convenient way to organize chapters in a book.

The book is organized into three parts. Part I deals with strategic questions about planning and designing research. Chapter 1 examines how researchers might find their focus and define their ‘intellectual puzzle’. The concepts of ‘ontology’ and ‘epistemology’ are introduced in this chapter. These concepts represent different ways of asking what your research is really about. Although ontology and epistemology are often considered to be difficult concepts to grasp, I argue that it is nevertheless very important that researchers do think about their own projects in these terms. Chapter 2 argues that questions of strategy and design are ongoing concerns rather than once-and-for-all issues dealt with at the beginning. The chapter focuses on the centrality of the research question to the research



process, and of linking research questions to one's philosophical or methodological position on the one hand, and to appropriate data generation methods on the other. Some of the difficult issues involved in integrating different methods in relation to the same intellectual puzzle are addressed, and finally there is an exploration of some of the moral and political implications of research design. Overall, the chapter is intended to encourage the reader to develop the necessary skills to produce a qualitative research design. However, given that research design requires knowledge about and planning of all elements in the research process, it cannot really be done properly without a full consideration of the difficult questions raised about these elements in the other chapters.

Part II deals with the generation of qualitative data. Chapter 3 discusses the role of different approaches to generating data, and Chapters 4, 5 and 6 focus on three sets of loosely distinct methods for doing so, namely, interviewing, observation, visual and documentary methods. The chapters engage with ontological, epistemological, practical and ethical issues associated with the different data generation methods. Chapter 7 discusses the difficult business of sampling and selecting in qualitative research. It argues that we should not see these activities as associated simply or even primarily with quantitative or statistical modes of sampling. This chapter discusses alternative logics which might underpin qualitative sampling and selection, and emphasizes the link between strategic sampling and consequent analytical and explanatory possibilities.

Part III explores the process of analysing qualitative data, beginning in Chapter 8 with a discussion of a range of techniques for sorting, organizing and indexing qualitative material, and moving on in Chapter 9 to questions about how to construct analytical explanations or arguments on the basis of qualitative data. It is proposed that we should regard the making and expression of arguments as an active, self-critical and relational process, through which qualitative explanations can be constructed, communicated and substantiated.



# Part I

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## **QUESTIONS OF STRATEGY**



# 1

## Finding a Focus and Knowing Where you Stand

Most social researchers have little difficulty in selecting a broad topic or area for research. They may, for example, identify a gap in our knowledge of some aspect of the social world, or a set of issues whose exploration seems particularly timely, or a particular substantive interest relating to their own experiences, or they may be commissioned by an organization to research a particular set of events, to evaluate a social programme, or to produce ‘evidence for policy’. However, while identifying a general interest or topic in this way is fairly straightforward, it is much more of a challenge to design an effective project with a clear, relevant and intellectually worthwhile focus to explore your topic. In this chapter we will address the issues involved – and the difficult questions to ask along the way – in moving from a broad or general research interest to a set of research questions which can form the basis for an effective research design. I shall argue that researchers should be clear about what is the *essence* of their enquiry, and should express this as an ‘intellectual puzzle’ with a clearly formulated set of research questions.

### **DECIDING WHAT YOUR RESEARCH IS ABOUT: FIVE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS**

It is well known that researchers who are in the early stages of their work often find it very difficult to explain to others briefly but specifically what their research is about. Many can come up with a short but over-general version, such as ‘the experience of disability’ or ‘gender in the classroom’ or ‘post-apartheid South Africa’. Alternatively, most researchers can produce a long and detailed version of their research focus. But the middle course between these two is often very elusive and the struggle for any researcher, in my view, is to be able to articulate what the ‘essence’ of their enquiry is. I think it is a struggle because, in order to get to this essence, researchers have to ask themselves some difficult questions, and at the outset of research it can feel much easier to avoid these. I think there are five of these difficult questions, and indeed any researcher, whether of a qualitative or quantitative orientation, should address these. Similarly, they apply whether or not the researcher feels they have sole control over the direction and focus of the research. Indeed, where research is commissioned, and in a sense the topic already chosen for the researcher, these questions

are too often overlooked entirely when, arguably, they are even more important to confront.

Each of the questions is produced below in a form which is designed to encourage you as a researcher to interrogate your own assumptions, to systematize them, and possibly to transform them. While any researcher is unlikely to produce a research design which provides a clearly formulated set of answers to each of these five questions, they nevertheless need to *know* what the answers are if they are going to produce a good, and useful, research design. All five questions involve asking what your research is about, in different ways.

### ***The Social 'Reality': Your Ontological Perspective***

What is the nature of the phenomena, or entities, or social 'reality', that I wish to investigate?

This question requires you to ask yourself what your research is about in a fundamental way, and probably involves a great deal more intellectual effort than simply identifying a research topic. Because it is so fundamental, it takes place earlier in the thinking process than the identification of a topic. It involves asking what you see as the very nature and essence of things in the social world, or, in other words, what is your *ontological* position or perspective. Ontology can seem like a difficult concept precisely because the nature and essence of social things seem so fundamental and obvious that it can be hard to see what there is to conceptualize. In particular, it can be quite difficult to grasp the idea that it is possible to have an ontological position or perspective (rather than simply to be familiar with the ontological components of the social world), since this suggests that there may be different versions of the nature and essence of social things.

Yet it is only once it is recognized that alternative ontological perspectives might tell different stories, that a researcher can begin to see their own ontological view of the social world as a position which should be established and understood, rather than an obvious and universal truth which can be taken for granted. The best way to grasp that you have an ontological position, and to work out what it is and what are its implications for your research, is therefore to recognize what the alternatives are. Let us consider some examples. From different ontological perspectives social reality might be made up of any of the following, as shown in Table 1.1.

**Table 1.1**  
*Different ontological properties*

people, social actors, humans bodies, subjects, objects minds, psyches rationality, emotion, thought feeling, memory, senses consciousness, subconsciousness, instincts understandings, interpretations motivations, ideas, perceptions attitudes, beliefs, views identities, essence, being selves, individuals, subject positions others, collectivities representations, cultural or social constructions	experiences, accounts stories, narratives, biographies evolution, development, progress texts, discourses words, codes, communications languages actions, reactions, behaviours events interactions, situations, social relations social or cultural practices social processes rules, morality, belief systems material cultures, objects, things time	institutions, structures, the 'material', markets cultures, societies, groups producers, consumers nature, genes, humans, animals empirical patterns, regularities, order, organization, connectedness empirical haphazardness spontaneity, disorder, disorganization, chaos and disconnectedness underlying mechanisms one objective reality, multiple realities or versions.
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This is not intended to be a complete list of ontological elements, but it should help to illustrate the range of possibilities encompassed by the social sciences. You will note that these suggest different versions of the essential or component properties of social reality/ies, and different ideas about where these are located (for example, in people, bodies, practices, discourses, in social, legal or administrative structures). There are of course also different versions of whether and how these things relate or connect in social life. You will recognize some of these ways of conceptualizing social entities, and may be able to connect them with different philosophies of social science. This should alert you to the possibility that different versions of ontology may be logically competing rather than complementary, so that you cannot simply pick and choose bits of one and bits of another in an eclectic or *ad hoc* way, although nor do you have to take a doctrinaire approach. What is required is active engagement. Some of the properties in Table 1.1, and the distinctions between them, are actively disputed and contested by opposing perspectives in the social sciences. So, for example, whether or not it is possible or meaningful to distinguish between: subject and object; mind and body; rationality, emotion, thought and feeling; nature and culture; action and interpretation, has been the subject of long-running disputes between positivists, interpretivists, feminists, realists, ethnomethodologists, postmodernists, and so on.

Some of the properties listed may appear more well matched to qualitative research methodology than others, for example, social processes, interpretations, social relations, social practices, experiences, understandings, seem particularly so. Some gain more credence in the conventions of some social science disciplines than others (Blaikie, 1993 and 2000; Denzin, 1997; Silverman, 2000; Stanley and Wise, 1993). You therefore need to understand the implications of adopting a particular version or set of versions of ontology.

Some researchers may feel unable to answer these ontological questions

fully at the beginning of their research. Possibly this will be because they wish the research to address these very issues rather than simply to start from them, or even to attempt to adjudicate between some of the disputed distinctions. However, if that is so, then it must be an explicit aim, formulated through research questions, since more often a reluctance to address these issues stems from vagueness, imprecision, or a failure to understand that there is more than one ontological perspective.

### **Knowledge and Evidence: Your Epistemological Position**

What might represent knowledge or evidence of the entities or social ‘reality’ that I wish to investigate?

Questions about what we regard as knowledge or evidence of things in the social world are *epistemological* questions and, overall, this second question is designed to help you to explore what kind of epistemological position your research expresses or implements. It is important to distinguish questions about the nature of evidence and knowledge – epistemological questions – from what are apparently more straightforward questions about how to collect, or what I shall call ‘generate’, data (see Part II). Your epistemology is, literally, your theory of knowledge, and should therefore concern the principles and rules by which you decide whether and how social phenomena can be known, and how knowledge can be demonstrated. Different epistemologies have different things to say about these issues, and about what the status of knowledge can be. For some, the concept of evidence itself is too categorical, implying as it does that research can provide self-evidential proof of universally perceived objective realities, instead of the more epistemologically modest concepts of perspective and argument.

Epistemological questions should therefore direct you to a consideration of philosophical issues involved in working out exactly what you would count as evidence or knowledge of social things. You should be able to connect the answers to these questions with your answers to the ontological questions, and the two sets of answers should be consistent so that, for example, your epistemology helps you to generate knowledge and explanations about the ontological components of the social world, be they social processes, social actions, discourses, meanings, or whatever, which you have identified as central (see Chapter 9 for a discussion of the construction of explanations and arguments. See also Blaikie (2000), for a set of suggested paradigms for doing this.) There may be lots of possibilities and, again therefore, the researcher must recognize not only that there is more than one epistemology, but also that they will not all be complementary or equally consistent with their own ontological position. Again, some epistemologies may appear to be more consistent with a qualitative methodology than others, or have greater credibility within certain social science disciplines than in others.



## **Your Broad Research Area**

What topic, or broad substantive area, is the research concerned with?

Although this appears to be the all-encompassing question about your broad research interest or topic, and is certainly the one which preoccupies most researchers in the early stages of their work, I want to suggest that the answer must follow from your answers to the ontological and epistemological questions above. Usually a research topic will express something of the researcher's ontological or epistemological position.

For example, let us take the topic of racism. Using the concept of racism itself suggests that the social world is in some way or other organized around whatever racism is defined to be, and that this is knowable, or can be made knowable, through social research. If we move a little closer to a more clearly defined research topic, the ontological and epistemological dimensions become clearer. So, for example, a study of racist attitudes among school children would at the very least suggest an ontological position which says that individual people (children) hold attitudes, and that those attitudes are meaningful components of the social world. We might contrast that with a study which focuses on institutional racism within schools, or racist actions within classrooms, or racist discourse. The first of these might suggest an ontological position which sees institutions, collectivities or structures, rather than (or as well as) individuals, as meaningful components of the social world. The second might suggest a position which sees actions, but not necessarily attitudes, as meaningful. The third might suggest a position which sees neither individuals, nor institutions, as meaningful, but instead sees cultural texts or 'scripts' as core components of the social world. In terms of epistemology, each of these different research topics is suggesting that distinctive dimensions of the social world (for example, attitudes, actions, discourses) are knowable – that it is possible to generate knowledge about and evidence for them. The topics themselves tell us little more about what form each of these epistemologies might take, but at the very least we would know that a study designed to explore racist attitudes, which goes on to encompass an epistemology stating that only texts and discourses are knowable, has some major and possibly irreconcilable inconsistencies.

## **Your Intellectual Puzzle and Your Research Questions**

What is the intellectual puzzle?

What do I wish to explain or explore?

What type of puzzle is it?

Again, the answer to these questions must connect with the other three, and it should address the intellectual and theoretical contributions of your work. Not all

researchers will see their projects as ‘theoretical’ but, as I suggested in the Introduction, in my view, all qualitative research should be constructed around an intellectual puzzle of some kind, and should attempt to produce some kind of explanation of that puzzle, or an argument.

Intellectual puzzles can and do take a variety of forms connected to the ontological and epistemological positions encapsulated in the research, and grounded within the specific context of their research problem. It is also the case that different theoretical and intellectual traditions in the social sciences are pre-occupied with different kinds of intellectual puzzle, and consequently different kinds of social explanation. There is a fuller discussion of these issues in Chapter 9 where we explore the construction of arguments using qualitative data, but for now some examples of three common yet distinctive types of puzzle will help to make the point.

*Developmental puzzles* First, you might, for example, pose a developmental puzzle – how and why did  $x$  or  $y$  develop? The  $x$  or  $y$  might be anything, ontologically speaking, for example, racist attitudes, cultural imperialism, the American system of government, a mental illness, and so on.

*Mechanical puzzles* Alternatively, your puzzle might be about how something works or is constituted. How does  $x$  or  $y$  work? Why does it work in this way? Again,  $x$  or  $y$  might be anything – intimate personal relationships, a legal system, a penal institution, the human psyche, and so on.

*Comparative puzzles* Your puzzle might be about what we can learn from comparing  $x$  and  $y$ , and how we can explain differences and similarities between them. This could involve comparing legal or social institutions internationally, different cultural objects or artefacts, or groups of people with different sets of experiences, for example.

*Causal/predictive puzzles* You might be interested in causality, and pose a puzzle about what influence  $x$  has on  $y$ , or what causes  $x$  or  $y$ ? You might extend that into a predictive puzzle - what is the likely outcome of  $x$  or  $y$ , where  $x$  or  $y$  might be a social intervention or programme for example.

Whether or not your puzzle is a version of one of these, a combination of them or a variation on them, you will notice the significance of the words ‘what, why and how’ in formulating the questions. Indeed, Blaikie (2000) has suggested that all research questions can be distilled down into these three categories of interrogation.

Intellectual puzzles, then, will contain different sets of ontological and epistemological assumptions and prescriptions, and will suggest distinctive types of social explanation. In formulating your own intellectual puzzle, you must ensure that you have thought through what these are, and be confident that they are consistent – that is, that your puzzle is ontologically meaningful, and epistemologically explainable or workable.

## Your Research Questions

What are my research questions?

Supplementary questions might include:

Do they express or problematize my intellectual puzzle?

Are they consistent with each other, and linked to each other? Do they add up to a sensible whole?

Are they coherent and transparent? Would anyone but me understand them?

Do they make possible, and probable, intellectually interesting answers or arguments?

Are they open enough to allow for the degree of exploratory enquiry I require? Will they allow me to generate further questions at a later stage, in the light of my developing data analysis, should I wish?

Are they original and worth asking, as well as grounded in an understanding of the relevant background?

Am I asking an appropriate number of research questions at this stage?

One of the main virtues of expressing whatever it is you want to research and explain as a puzzle is that it focuses your mind on *research questions*. Once you are thinking in terms of puzzles and explanations, it will be a relatively easy task to formulate a set of research questions, and these will form the backbone of your research design. I use the term ‘research question’ in preference to, for example, ‘hypothesis’ or ‘proposition’, partly because qualitative approaches usually entail formulating questions to be explored and developed in the research process, rather than hypotheses to be tested by or against empirical research. But also, the concept of research question fits more generally with a wider range of ontological and epistemological positions than do these other terms. A research question is one which the research is designed to address (rather than, for example, a question which an interviewer might ask an interviewee) and, taken together, your research questions should express the essence of your enquiry. Therefore, you need to have done a great deal of thinking about the essence of your enquiry in the sense of its ontology, its epistemology, and most importantly its intellectual puzzle, in order to be able to formulate research questions sensibly and coherently. They should be clearly formulated (whether or not you intend to modify them or add to them later), intellectually worthwhile, and researchable (both in terms of your epistemological position, and in practical terms), because it is through them that you will be connecting what it is that you wish to research with how you are going to

go about researching it. They are vehicles that you will rely upon to move you from your broad research interest to your specific research focus and project, and therefore their importance cannot be over-stated. Research questions, then, are those questions to which you as researcher really want to know the answers, and in that sense they are the formal expression of your intellectual puzzle.

The question format will help you to design a study which is focused rather than vague, but which can nevertheless be exploratory and fluid. As a qualitative researcher you are unlikely to regard fixed solutions to your puzzles to be existing 'out there' ready for collection, and you will view your questions more as devices for guiding and focusing your enquiry, and in relation to which you will ultimately construct an argument (see Chapter 9). You should be sure that your questions are formulated in such a way that intellectually interesting answers and arguments are possible and probable. So, for example, you will want to avoid questions which would be interesting if answered in the affirmative, but uninteresting if in the negative, or those which hinge your whole project on only one potential answer. With both of these, if you get the 'wrong' answer, your research is in serious trouble.

You should also use your questions to develop, use and problematize links between your own and other research and theoretical scholarship in your broad research area, and this is of course one way of ensuring that you are posing intellectually interesting and relevant questions, and not duplicating effort which has already been made elsewhere. Often, qualitative researchers will use existing literature, research and theory as a background or springboard for launching their own research in ways which connect it with current debates.

Finally, you are likely to want to produce questions of varying types, orders and levels. For example, some may express links between your own and existing work very directly, others indirectly; some may be over-arching questions (possibly *the* research question), others smaller sub-questions; and so on. Here are some examples of research questions used in one of my own research projects which help to illustrate these points.<sup>1</sup> The broad research topic was 'Inheritance, Property and Family Relationships'.

- 1 How is inheritance handled in 'ordinary families' in contemporary Britain?
- 2 What kinds of ideas, norms and beliefs operate in contemporary families concerning the distribution of assets?
- 3 How are matters related to inheritance negotiated, and how do these negotiations link with other family responsibilities and relationships?
- 4 What is the interface between families and the law on matters related to inheritance?
- 5 In relation to all of the above, is there an underlying tension between family responsibilities and the legal principle of testamentary freedom?

As well as illustrating different levels of research question (for example, the first question is very general whereas the subsequent questions are a little more focused and specific), you will note that the way in which the questions are phrased gives away certain ontological and epistemological clues. For example, concepts such as 'ideas', 'norms', 'beliefs', 'negotiations', 'interface between families and the law' give some indications as to the researchers' views at that time about what are

meaningful and knowable components of the social world, as well as about how that world can be explained.

In the early stages it can be helpful to generate a lot of research questions, but you will quickly need to focus to ensure that you are designing a manageable project. It is very tempting to be over-ambitious, but usually better to address a small number of questions well, than a larger number superficially or badly.

### ***Your Aims and Purpose***

What is the purpose of my research? What am I doing it for?

In the simplest terms, the question is ‘What is my research for?’, and I think all researchers should be fully aware of their particular range of answers to it. In thinking about answering this question you should consider not only familiar academic arguments about increasing or challenging intellectual and theoretical understanding, plugging gaps in knowledge, extending debate and so on, but also issues about the socio-political context of your research practice. There is likely to be more than one purpose to any research project, and the different parties involved may have divergent interests in the research. Some research is intended to be ‘emancipatory’ or ‘participatory’ in nature, meaning often that the ‘users’ of the research and the subjects themselves are involved in planning, designing and controlling it (Barnes and Mercer, 1997; Stone and Priestley, 1996).

Answers to this question about the purpose of research may therefore come in different versions, will frequently be complex and multi-faceted, and are likely to change over time. In answering the question, researchers should not overlook what are sometimes unstated purposes like the achievement of social and political change or a contribution to some wider political effort, or personal advancement (for example, through access to a higher degree, through the acquisition of research funds). In addition, researchers need to ask questions about the socio-political context of research directly, and understand debates about, for example, the usefulness or emancipatory potential of research. By advocating that you think about these issues, I am arguing that you should confront and engage with the politics of social research, rather than assume it is possible to maintain a safe distance.

### **THE FIVE QUESTIONS: KNOW WHERE YOU STAND**

Taken together, these five questions represent what I think is a rigorous way to help you to establish what your research is about. Researchers working within and across social science disciplines will come up with many different answers, and their answers may shift over time. Indeed, whether you are intending to work

within the boundaries of a specific social science discipline, or across boundaries, you will inevitably need to engage with the ways in which different disciplinary conventions would answer these questions. My purpose is not (and cannot be) to tell you what your answers should be, or which disciplinary conventions are the best, but instead to argue that working out a set of answers which are consistent with each other, and understanding the implications of those answers, is a vital part of your research strategy and practice. To put it simply, in order to be able to produce a set of research questions – which I am suggesting is essential in a good research design – you will need to know where you stand on these five key ways of establishing what your research is about.

Knowing where you stand on these and indeed other questions, is likely to be a shifting endeavour. I am not suggesting that you formulate a fixed identity or standpoint and then adhere to it in doctrinaire fashion. Instead, scrutinizing your own changing perspectives and assumptions should become almost a habit of active reflexivity, although I should emphasize, as I suggested earlier, that it is not a good idea to become self-obsessed in the process.

## CONCLUSION

While I have suggested throughout that you need to find your own answers to the questions I have posed, the framework that I offer carries its own assumptions about ontology and epistemology, as well as about good (and by implication, bad) research practice. At the most basic level, my framework rests on the assumption that it is useful and possible to frame intellectual puzzles about the social world, and that these can be answered or addressed through empirical research rather than simply through abstract theorizing. It also assumes that research can be done well (or, by implication, badly), and that researchers can learn to do better research through experience, and through an active form of critical reflexive practice around key issues. My ‘difficult questions’ are intended to express those key issues and to encourage that reflexive practice, but clearly they also establish an agenda of what I think is important in good research practice, and what I think it is possible for empirical research to do. Some would probably argue that this makes me a ‘realist’ of sorts (see, for example, Scheurich, 1997, Chapter 8), although my approach is distinct from the formal body of methodological scholarship known as ‘scientific realism’ (see, for example, Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Whether or not you think I am, or you are, a realist, it is important that you know where you stand on these significant questions about what empirical research can do, and what we can ‘know’ on the basis of it, because your answers will influence what you judge to be good research practice and what you think you can achieve (see Chapter 9 for a further discussion). My perspective on these issues will become clearer, in the form and shape of the ‘difficult questions’ I pose in this and the remaining chapters and the range of possible answers I supply. You will need to decide upon your answers, and perhaps on alternative questions, yourself.

**NOTE**

1. This research project was entitled 'Inheritance, Property and Family Relationships'. It was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant no. R00232035) and directed by Prof. Janet Finch, Dr Jennifer Mason, and Prof. Judith Masson. It was carried out at Lancaster University between 1990 and 1993.

**FURTHER READING**

Blaikie's *Designing Social Research* (2000) is very useful on the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of research design in general. On qualitative research in particular, Silverman's *Doing Qualitative Research* (2000) is good on the question of getting focused, and Marshall and Rossman's *Designing Qualitative Research* (1995) is generally useful.

# 2

## Designing Qualitative Research

In the last chapter I emphasized the importance of knowing what your research is about and knowing where you stand, ontologically and epistemologically speaking. I also pointed out that what your research is and where you stand may be shifting pictures, and I recommended that these activities therefore become part of your ongoing research practice rather than positions which you establish once and for all at the beginning. In this chapter I shall suggest ways in which you can begin to transform your research focus, and particularly your research questions, into a design. This chapter will examine the role of research design, and identify the key issues which researchers should confront in producing plans and designs for qualitative research.

### **QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STRATEGY AND DESIGN**

Do I need to design my qualitative research project?

To begin with, we should consider whether it is necessary, or possible, to *design* qualitative research at all. I shall argue that it is both, but that we need to think in *qualitative* ways about what we mean by design and strategy in research. Thinking qualitatively means rejecting the idea of a research design as a single document which is an entire advance blueprint for a piece of research. It also means rejecting the idea of *a priori* strategic and design decisions, or that such decisions can and should be made only at the beginning of the research process. This is because qualitative research is characteristically exploratory, fluid and flexible, data-driven and context-sensitive. Given that, it would be both inimical and impossible to write an entire advance blueprint.

In qualitative research, decisions about design and strategy are ongoing and are grounded in the practice, process and context of the research itself. However, although qualitative researchers should not aim to produce entire advance blueprints, in my view, they very definitely should nevertheless produce a research design at the start of the process. The main proviso is that thinking about strategy and design should not stop there.



Of course, even if they wanted to, most qualitative researchers do not have the luxury of deciding whether or not to produce a research design. They are usually required to do so, often in the form of a research proposal for the consumption of an outside audience such as their funders or ‘clients’, their supervisors, their peers, research gatekeepers, or those whom they research. The purpose of producing a research design or proposal in this context may be to gain or retain funding, support or access, to convince others of the value or intellectual credibility of the research, to demonstrate some form of external accountability, or simply to describe the scope and purpose of the research to those involved.

In the ‘real world’ of social research these are clearly good enough reasons to produce a research design. However, in my view, qualitative researchers should produce quite detailed research designs for their own use, whether or not they are required to write a research proposal for another audience. The point of such an ‘internal’ research design is to facilitate the coherent and rigorous development of the researcher’s project by making explicit their current thinking about a number of key issues, which are discussed in this chapter. Further decisions about these issues will be made contextually, as the research progresses. The initial research design should be used actively (rather than followed passively) in this ongoing process because it will help the researcher or team to track their own strategic thinking from a particular starting point through its subsequent contextual transformations, which should of course also be recorded. While such a document therefore cannot and should not be a ‘once-and-for-all’ blueprint for the research, its unique value is in encouraging from the start the process of strategic thinking and reflection which must continue throughout the whole research process.

This means that there may be a distinction between ‘external’ research designs or proposals, written for outside audiences for specific reasons such as gaining funding, and ‘internal’ research designs which are written primarily to be *used* in a dynamic fashion by the researcher or team. This chapter deals mostly with the second type of research design which is, in my view, a prerequisite of the first.

### ***Start by Thinking Creatively about Methods***

What is the fullest and most creative range of methods of data generation and data sources I can think of?

As I suggested in the previous chapter, once you have decided your various answers to the question ‘what is my research about’, and especially once you have formulated your research questions, your research is already set on certain tracks in relation to its design and strategy because you have started to position it ontologically and epistemologically. You are likely already to have begun thinking about what methods you might use to generate data to help you to answer your research questions. I think it is important, in these early stages, to

think as creatively and fully as possible about methods. You can and will limit your choices later for strategic and practical reasons, but at this stage it is best to think broadly so that you can be sure that you have thought about all possible approaches to your research questions, and that you have not limited your scope arbitrarily or inappropriately.

For example, most researchers begin their projects with a better knowledge of and expertise in some data generation techniques and data sources than others, or with implicit or explicit preferences. While these preferences may be appropriate to the research being designed, they may equally be less to do with this than with idiosyncratic factors in the biography of the researcher (for example, that you happen to have been trained in some techniques and not others). While practical issues to do with training and skill are of course relevant in your choice of method (these are discussed later in the chapter), they should not govern your choices at this stage.

There will ultimately be other practical, and strategic, constraints, which is why I think it is useful to begin by consciously trying to broaden your horizons through thinking as widely and creatively as you can about possible relevant sources of data, and methods of selecting and generating them. Could you use interviews, observation, photographs, diaries, newspapers, the Internet, secondary sources, archives? If you are planning a study with interviewees or data subjects, have you thought as creatively as possible about who they could be? You should not, of course, limit your thinking to methods which you perceive to be ‘qualitative’, and I discuss issues in the integration of different methods and data later in the chapter.

Your thinking will be informed by your responses to the five key questions discussed in the previous chapter so that, for example, what you see as a potential data source, or what you see as a method of generating relevant data, will both depend upon and express your ontological and epistemological positions. At this stage, however, it is better to see these positions as enabling rather than constraining, since the object of the exercise initially at least is to think as creatively as you can about data sources and method and, quite possibly, to generate a fairly long list of possible options, which you will go on to modify. Indeed, the activity of generating and modifying such a list can, in itself, help you to firm up on precisely what it is you see as the essence of your enquiry in ontological and epistemological terms. This is because the process of deciding that certain methods are ontologically and epistemologically inappropriate can help you to see more clearly what *is* appropriate.

Literally making a list or a chart of possible research method and data source options – including those which you are going to reject – can actually be quite a good way of starting to discipline yourself systematically to consider all possible options as thoroughly as you can. Talking your list or chart through with colleagues, advisers or research participants can be an even better way of broadening your horizons and helping you to see other possibilities, as well as helping you to make choices in a considered way.

## **Focus Your Thinking by Charting Links between Methods and Research Questions**

Which of my research questions does each method or data source help me to address?

How should I focus?

Of course this creative thinking about methods will not go on unabated, and you will start to make strategic choices about which methods and sources are the most appropriate for answering your research questions. It is useful to engage directly with questions about how and why particular methods and sources might yield data which will help you to answer your questions, rather than assuming for example that a series of unstructured interviews, or some documentary analysis, will obviously and unproblematically tell you what you want to know. In linking your research questions, and your methodology, with a specific set of research methods and techniques, you will need to work out in some detail what might constitute knowledge or evidence relevant to your intellectual puzzle and research questions. You will also need to begin to engage with the question of how you might go about generating and assembling such knowledge and evidence.

Whether or not you have begun a list or chart of potential methods and sources, you should ask yourself a number of questions at this stage. If you are making a chart, you can incorporate these into it by using each question as a heading, and working out the relevant answers for each of the methods and sources you consider. To begin with, your chart might include the following questions:

- 1 What data sources and methods of data generation are potentially available or appropriate?
- 2 What can these methods and sources feasibly tell me? Which phenomena and components or properties of social 'reality' might these data sources and methods potentially help me to address (ontologically)?
- 3 How or on what basis do I think they could do this (epistemologically)?
- 4 Which of my research questions could they help me to address?
- 5 Which elements of the background (literature, theory, research) do they relate to?

Figure 2.1 provides a worked example of a chart which incorporates features identified in these questions. It is based on the research questions used in the research project on 'Inheritance, Property and Family Relationships' which I outlined earlier in the chapter.

Constructing a chart such as this, or asking questions such as these, will help you to begin the process of making choices of method and data source. It will help you to spot and eradicate inconsistencies between, for example, what you think a particular method can yield and what kinds of data you think you need to generate to address your research questions. You can also add corresponding columns to your chart on 'practicalities' (for example, resources, skills required, whether or

**Figure 2.1** Chart for linking research questions and methods

Research questions	Data sources and methods	Justification
<p>1 How is inheritance handled in 'ordinary families' in contemporary Britain?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family members: interviews</li> </ul> <p>Also possibly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Probated wills: documentary analysis</li> <li>• Solicitors and other professionals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviews will provide family members' accounts of how they and their relatives have handled inheritance, i.e. based on their own experiences</li> <li>• Analysis of probated wills will reveal how testators' wishes get formally and legally expressed and transacted</li> <li>• Interviews with professionals who handle inheritance will provide their accounts of how family members handle inheritance, i.e. based on their own experiences of dealing with clients</li> </ul>
<p>2 What kinds of ideas, norms and beliefs operate in contemporary families concerning the distribution of assets?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family members: interviews</li> </ul> <p>Also possibly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solicitors and other professionals: interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviews providing family members' accounts and reported experiences, and their judgements about those experiences, will reveal something of the kinds of ideas, norms and beliefs they and their relatives operate with in relation to inheritance. From this we should be able to discern whether people have ideas about appropriate behaviour</li> <li>• Interviews with solicitors may provide data on these issues, because they will have experiences of dealing with clients who may or may not express such ideas, norms and beliefs</li> </ul>
<p>3 How are matters related to inheritance negotiated, and how do these negotiations link with other family responsibilities and relationships?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family members: interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The accounts and experiences reported by family members will reveal something of how they came to negotiate their own inheritance experiences. Interviews with more than one member of each family will provide data on different individuals' versions of, and positions within, this negotiating process</li> </ul>

	<p>Also possibly</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solicitors and other professionals: interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviews with professionals may provide data on negotiations between family members (these may be reported to professionals, or actually take place during consultations with professionals)</li> </ul>
<p>4 What is the interface between families and the law on matters related to inheritance?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Probated wills: documentary analysis</li> <li>• Solicitors and other professionals: Interviews</li> <li>• Family members: Interviews</li> <li>• Legal documents, statutes and precedent: documentary analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will provide data on the formal expression of testators' wishes, but also tell us something about the influence of the law on those wishes</li> <li>• Interviews with professionals reveal something of the negotiations taking place between what testators want to do, and what the law will allow them to do. The experience and accounts of professionals should also yield data on their own mediating or negotiating role in this process</li> <li>• Interviews with family members will tell us something about their knowledge of and experience of the law, professional advice on will making, and so on</li> <li>• Documentary analysis of the law and precedent will yield data on the formal and administrative regulation of inheritance, interpretation of testators' wishes, adjudication in family disputes about inheritance, and so on.</li> </ul>
<p>5 Is there an underlying tension between family responsibilities and the legal principle of testamentary freedom?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All methods used in the study</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A comparison of similarities and differences between the data yielded from the different sources will help us to build up a picture of whether or not there is a 'fit' between the law and operation of family responsibilities</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> Based on the research project 'Inheritance, Property and Family Relationships' (see note 1 to chapter).

not you can gain access to the data sources), and ‘ethical issues’, both of which factors will influence your choice of method. These are discussed shortly. Figure 2.2 shows how they might be incorporated into your chart, to ensure that you are linking your thinking on practicalities and ethics directly with your choice of methods.

**Figure 2.2**  
Chart layout for linking research questions, methods, practicalities and ethics

Research questions	Data sources and methods	Justification	Practicalities (eg resources, access, skills)	Ethical issues

Charts such as these provide a fairly simple check on the consistency of your thinking at an early stage in the research process, and will help you to make certain fundamental choices. There are, however, a number of important issues which are not incorporated into the chart, but over which you will have to deliberate, including decisions about sampling, and how many interviews to conduct or documents to analyse, or whatever (sampling is discussed fully in Chapter 7). You will also need to engage with questions concerning how well these methods and sources address your research questions, what kinds of claims they will potentially enable you to make, and how you might substantiate these claims. These are issues to which we shall return shortly. Most importantly, however, you will need to decide what kind of methodological strategy lies behind the research design you are beginning to assemble.

### **Think Strategically, Now and Later**

What is my guiding methodological strategy?

The concept of methodological strategy should be distinguished from that of method, even though your choice of method will form part of your strategy. So, for example, the interview method might be a component in a range of different methodological strategies – it is not a strategy in itself. Crucially, and put most simply, your methodological strategy is *the logic by which you go about answering your research questions*. That means it is the logic which underpins the way you design your research project as a potential answer to your research questions, as well as your day-to-day decisions about most if not all aspects of the research. It is the logic that informs – although does not dictate – your decisions about what to do and how much it matters when things ‘go wrong’ as the research progresses.

It is *strategic*, therefore, in relation to the goal of addressing your research questions, and you will develop a strategic methodological practice in the extent to which you routinely tie your day-to-day and design decisions into the primary job of answering those questions.

According to my argument, just about all decisions of significance which you will make in the design and process of the research should be strategic, although certainly some will feel more strategic and some more *ad hoc*. I have begun to show how that might work both in terms of how you formulate research questions, and how you approach the task of selecting methods and sources to address them, and the rest of the book continues this process. But it is important not to overlook the overall shape of your methodological strategy in a practice which carefully positions the trees while failing to chart the wood. Thinking strategically *now*, at the preliminary design stage, must involve formulating a methodological approach to the answering of the research questions, recognizing that other approaches might have been possible, and knowing why you have rejected them.

In order to do this you need to revisit the question of what kind of intellectual puzzle your research questions express (see Chapter 1). So, for example, if your puzzle is a developmental one (how did a social phenomenon develop?), then your methodological strategy must be built around assembling data, evidence or argument which can be used to form a developmental explanation. Your strategy will express or operationalize a view or theory of what social change or development is and looks like, and how it can be observed, known or even measured. You should be aware that there will be alternative theories, and you should think through not only how *your* theory might be best turned into a strategy, but also what others might involve before you decide that yours is the best.

Different methodological strategies for answering developmental puzzles might involve, for example, attempting to gain some kind of ‘before and after’ picture in an historical sense using a range of types of historical and documentary evidence or ‘indicators’. They might involve drawing a comparison between contexts where a phenomenon has developed and others where it has not, or more likely where developments have taken different shapes and forms. In the first example, the ‘how’ is dealt with by tracing roots and origins (although questions will remain about the basis on which you give them the rather ‘causal’ status of roots and origins), and in the second it is dealt with by drawing comparisons between contexts where the ‘how’ can be seen to have worked differently, with the aim of gaining a clear and contextual explanation of how a development has occurred (although questions will remain about the basis on which you can and cannot compare different contexts, and also about the potentially causal logic according to which you assign differences of context to differences in the way phenomena develop). But there are other possibilities. For example, you might design a longitudinal study with the aim of observing or interpreting developments as they occur, on the basis that change can best be understood contemporaneously rather than retrospectively (when it becomes the interpretation of the past through the lens of the present perhaps). Or you might even

create an artificial setting in which the development or change is manipulated and observed (for example, an experiment or quasi-experiment), and in this case the ‘how’ is dealt with through direct, although unfortunately decontextualized, observation. Alternatively, you might try to answer your developmental puzzle through the perspectives of people involved, here seeing change less as something which is ‘measurable’ in before and after indicators or an experiment, and more in terms of its existence in the perspectives and experiences of narrators. Here too though, you will have to deal with questions about what status you give such narrations in the ‘measurement’ or conceptualization of change and development – are narrators witnesses who can embellish other forms of knowledge of a set of events, or do their narrations represent in themselves the changes you seek to understand?

Whatever kind of intellectual puzzle your research questions represent, you will need to engage in this kind of reasoning, and the methodological strategy that you ultimately formulate will hinge upon what can constitute a meaningful argument in relation to your puzzle, be it developmental, causal, mechanical, and so on. It will provide the logic whereby you will know whether it would be productive in the cause of constructing that argument for you to have interviewed 80-year-old women in four different countries, or to have studied legislative documents or diaries from the 1930s, or to have lived in a particular community or setting for five years, or to have collected people’s personal photographs from particular eras, or to have conducted a series of observations and interviews over a 10-year period, or to have gathered together a group of people in a ‘laboratory’ and subjected them to an unexpected stimulus, and so on. In each case, you will need to ask not only whether these will yield relevant and meaningful data, but whether and in what ways they are of the appropriate status, epistemologically speaking, to contribute to your argument.

As I have suggested, qualitative strategic thinking is a dynamic, active and reflexive process, and I do not therefore advocate selecting a methodological strategy ‘off the peg’ and then following it to the letter, albeit some very useful strategic models are becoming available (see especially Blaikie, 2000). More important, in my view, is to foster in yourself the process of strategic thinking, and in the early stages this will be around the focus of your research and your research questions (Chapter 1), and in your initial decisions about your overall methodological strategy, as discussed here. You will begin to align yourself and your research with particular versions of the philosophy of the social sciences, and as a qualitative researcher those may well be associated with interpretivism, or with interpretive readings of other schools like postmodernism or feminism, for example. But I do not think that the process of identifying a methodological strategy should necessarily be about finding a philosophical label for your approach, so much as finding a coherent and consistent approach to answering your research questions (we return to this issue in Chapter 3).



## ***Using and Integrating Different Methods and Sources***

### **What am I trying to achieve in integrating data and method?**

Once you start to weave together your thinking about which methods and sources you might choose, and how you think these might enable you to answer your research questions, you will need to address issues involved in using and integrating different methods and data sources. Possibly, your research will only use one method or draw on one data source, but often there are good reasons for using multiple methods and sources. For example, it may be that your research questions can be approached from a variety of angles or conceptualized in a variety of ways, suggesting a number of possibilities of method and source, as with the example of the research on inheritance which I gave earlier. Or each of your research questions, or components of the explanation you are going to want to construct, may suggest its own distinctive method and source. Or it may be because you want to use different methods or sources to corroborate each other so that you are using some form of methodological ‘triangulation’, a question to which I shall return shortly (Denzin, 1989; see also Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 9 for discussions of the use of multiple methods, and of triangulation). Whatever the reason, you will need to think through the implications of using data from different sources, and integrating different methods, for your overall research design and for the strength of the argument you will wish to construct.

The integration of different methods, while often highly productive, is not straightforward. Here are some examples of reasons why you might wish to try it:

- 1 To explore different parts of a process or phenomenon. If you are doing this, you are going to have to work out how the parts are linked at the levels of knowledge and explanation. Is this an empirical question which you can answer through data analysis?
- 2 To answer different research questions with different methods and sources (or address different levels ontologically). Again, if you are doing this, you will need to work out how to link the different levels at the level of explanation.
- 3 To answer the same research questions but in different ways or from different angles. Again, you will need to work out how to integrate the different angles in your explanation.
- 4 To analyse something in greater and lesser depth or breadth, using different methods accordingly.
- 5 To seek to corroborate one source and method with another, or enhance the quality of the data through some form of ‘triangulation’ of method (see below for a further discussion). If you are doing this, however, you will need to think about on what basis one set of data, or one method, can corroborate another. This will involve asking whether the two sets of data tell you about the same phenomena, or whether the two methods yield comparable data. Often they do not, and you cannot therefore expect straightforward corroboration (see Mason, 1994; see also Fielding and Fielding, 1986, for a useful discussion).

- 6 To test different analyses, explanations or theories against each other. This might involve building a study which is designed to test out the value of different ontological perspectives, for example. That might mean that you conceptualize the social entities under scrutiny in more than one way, and link these up with different sets of data generation methods. If this is your aim, you will need to ensure that you have included the appropriate range of methods and data sources to conduct such a test.

Although these questions are difficult to answer at the research design stage, it is vital that they are considered fully (see Bryman, 1988 and 2001 for a useful review of some of the issues). If they are not, the researcher risks assembling an untidy bag of methods with little logic, and with little hope of sensibly integrating the products into a coherent analysis or explanation. As well as needing to know why you wish to integrate data and method, you will need to think about the basis on which you intend to do this.

### ***Deciding How to Integrate Methods***

How – according to what logic – do I expect to be able to add the products together, or to integrate them?

It is important to devise a logic of or strategy for integration, and to schedule in enough time to do the work involved, because the process is unlikely to be quick, easy or straightforward. Integration will need to be achieved on a number of levels, as follows.

*Technical integration* You will need to begin by asking whether data generated via different sources or methods take a similar or complementary form in a technical or organizational sense, so that they can be straightforwardly aggregated, or grouped together, or made comparable in some way.

One way of doing this is to ask whether your different forms of data will use the same, or complementary, ‘units of analysis’. For example, if you have conducted qualitative interviews with a sample of people, your unit of analysis might be the individual (although, as we discuss in Chapter 7, your analytical units do not have to mirror exactly the units you use for sampling purposes). This will mean not only that you use the data you generate to tell you something about individuals, but also that aggregations and comparisons which you might make are likely to be aggregations of individuals, and comparisons between individuals. However, you might also have conducted observational studies of particular social settings and your unit of analysis in these cases might be the settings themselves or some visual or spatial elements within them. You cannot, therefore, simply add these different data sets together because their substance and form are fundamentally different, and this means that you will need to work out how to combine or integrate data which are organized around different analytical units, in this case individuals, on the one hand, and social settings, on the other.

Sometimes, of course, the analytical unit may be the same in different data sets, but the data may nevertheless take a different form. So, for example, you might wish to integrate data from a structured interview survey with data from loosely structured qualitative interviews. The structured data will probably take a standardized form, and may well be coded or categorized numerically. The semi-structured data may be coded thematically. Both sets of codes may use the individual as the analytical unit, but you may be unable or unwilling to use the same indexing codes in each data set. Other technical possibilities for linking data sets might include using computer software to build 'hyperlinks' between different forms and types of data, including all forms of textual data, photographs and so on, enabling 'the reader to follow, and indeed to create, diverse pathways through a collection of textual materials' (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 182; see also Dicks and Mason, 1998).

Whether or not you see much scope for integrating different forms of data in this technical sense, the key task is to weave the argument and analysis derived from the different data sets together intellectually, both ontologically and epistemologically, at the level of explanation.

*Ontological integration* Ontological integration, or at least complementarity, matters much more. You will need to ask whether your data are ontologically consistent. In other words, are they based on similar, complementary or comparable assumptions about the nature of social entities and phenomena?

For example, data concerning social discourses or the discursive construction of social life (perhaps a study of the construction of social categories in legal or administrative texts) might be ontologically inconsistent with data concerning individual psyches or personalities. The former may be based on an ontological position which sees social life as a collection of social discourses, and indeed may see the very idea of an individual psyche or personality as a discursive construction rather than empirical reality. Conversely, the latter may be based on a position which sees individual personalities as empirical realities, and social life as a collection of these, or as an arena in which they are played out. From this perspective, social discourses may not be recognized as empirical realities. Seen in this way, these two different perspectives are competing rather than complementary, and data generated in relation to each are unlikely to be easily made compatible. To make them compatible, the researcher needs to work out how – if at all – personalities and discourses might be related in their view of how the social world operates. Their answer might indeed be that personalities are simply discursive constructions, or that discourses are the products of individuals who have motives, personalities and psyches. The point about both of these answers is that they suggest a theory (a different one in each case) of a relationship between discourse and personality, and it is this theory which should underpin the integration of method and data in such a study.

*Integration at the level of knowledge and evidence* This involves asking whether the different methods or forms of data emanate from the same epistemology, or at least from complementary epistemologies. In other words, are they based on

similar, complementary or comparable assumptions about what can legitimately constitute knowledge or evidence? For example, in our study of discourse and personality, can the same rules of evidence and knowledge be applied to each element? A study of personality and psyche might, for example, use individual testimonies or observations of behaviour on the basis that these are the best available ways of trying to find out what is going on inside people's heads. A study of discourse might take issue with this literal interpretation of the concept of an interior self, instead seeing 'the self' as a discursive construction or as an invention. This approach might favour using documentary and textual data, for example, the analysis of legal regulation or of professional discourses such as that of the 'psy' disciplines, on the basis that this is the best available way to observe how the idea that humans have interior selves or personalities has been formed and expressed (Rose, 1996; Scheurich, 1997). Therefore, the one approach may see individual testimonies, and the other may see the scrutiny of documentary data, as inherently unreliable or partial forms of method and evidence.

*Integration at the level of explanation* This also involves asking epistemological questions, but in this case the focus is upon the construction of social explanations, and the making of generalizations. Can your different data sources and methods usefully contribute to some kind of coherent and convincing argument in relation to your intellectual puzzle? They may suggest and support different forms of general claim (for example, some may be based on the notion of empirical generalization to a wider population, some on wider theoretical resonance), or they may feed into different ideas about how you can construct an argument. Can these be brought together meaningfully in a unified explanation? Do they need to be? (A fuller discussion of different ways of constructing arguments using qualitative data is contained in Chapter 9.)

These are very difficult questions to answer, but it is important to tackle them and the discussions contained in subsequent chapters should help you to do so. For example, technical questions about integrating data relate to issues of sampling discussed in Chapter 7, the organization and indexing of data are discussed in Chapter 8, and issues of writing, representation and presentation are discussed in Chapter 9. Epistemological and ontological questions about what the social world is made up of, what counts as data and evidence, and how arguments can be constructed, involve understanding different qualitative approaches (Chapter 3) and a range of methods of data generation (Chapters 4, 5 and 6), as well as the construction and presentation of convincing arguments (Chapter 9). Although the bulk of these discussions cannot be pre-empted, it is essential at this stage to realize that the questions outlined above do form part of the decision-making process which goes into designing and planning a research project, so that they cannot entirely be shelved until a later stage in the research process. At the very least, in terms of the integration of different methods and data, you will need to be asking yourself from the beginning what steps you need to take in designing your research to ensure that the kind of integration you seek is both possible and meaningful (see Mason, 1994).

## ***Anticipating the Processes of Data Analysis and Sampling***

What kind of analytical strategies should I adopt?

What scale of study do I wish to undertake?

It is probably clear by now that decisions about which methods to use, whether and how to integrate them, and what broad methodological strategy to adopt, all involve anticipating the process of data analysis, at least in general terms. So, for example, in thinking about what kind of evidence a particular method is capable of producing, you will be making assumptions about analytical processes through which data might be turned into 'evidence'. In deciding whether a set of methodological strategies is appropriate to answer your research questions, you will be making assumptions about analytical processes through which data can be used to assemble arguments and explanations. In opting for a multi-method approach, you will be making assumptions about how it is possible to integrate data analytically, on all of the levels outlined above.

A full discussion of analysis, explanation and argument in qualitative research is contained in Chapters 8 and 9, but I want to emphasize here the importance of anticipating the process of data analysis at the initial research design stage, because of its centrality to these strategic issues. You will need to acquaint yourself with a range of strategies for analysing data, and to think creatively about these just as you have done with your choice of method. You will need to think about whether these strategies are consistent with the ontological and epistemological positions and perspectives which are embedded in your methodological strategy. You should consider what form and shape data need to take in order for these strategies to be used. For example, if you plan a form of discourse or conversation analysis, you may need detailed verbatim transcripts of interviews or dialogue, transcribed according to certain conventions. If you plan a case study analysis, you will need to ensure that you have generated the appropriate range of data to permit a full and meaningful analysis of the case in question. If you plan to use computer software to undertake a cross-sectional analysis of textual material (see Chapter 8), you may need to present or organize that material in specific ways. You should also bear in mind that you may need to acquire specialist training, equipment or software to enable you to conduct the kind of analysis you plan, and that all of this can take time to organize.

Therefore, there are several technical and practical as well as epistemological reasons why you should engage as thoroughly as you can while you are planning your research with questions about how you intend to analyse your data, and you should include the initial outcomes of these deliberations in your research design. Although some of the issues are apparently simply technical concerns about how data should be formatted, underlying these are epistemological questions about what counts as data or evidence according to particular analytical protocols.

Thinking about these will focus your mind on issues of sampling also,

because you will be concerned about *how many* (respondents, cases, photographs, documents, and so on) you will require, and *what comparisons* you will need to draw, if you are going to construct what you see as a satisfactory argument in relation to your intellectual puzzle. This line of thinking draws together issues in data analysis and sampling (discussed fully in Chapters 7, 8 and 9), which have to be addressed – at least in preliminary terms – if you are to make initial decisions about the size and scale of your project. In this, as in other areas, you will of course be influenced by practical concerns about what is possible, as well as what your financial and other resources will permit. However, decisions nevertheless need to be taken strategically so that you understand the strategic values and losses as well as resource implications of, for example, interviewing 10 more or 20 fewer respondents, or of including 3 or 6 comparison groups, and so on.

As I argued above, you will judge whether or not something has strategic value by the extent to which it helps you to address your research questions, and how well you think it enables you to do so. This leads us to questions about evidence and substantiation in qualitative research which, again, need to form part of your thinking in the planning of your research.

### **Evidence, Quality and Substantiation**

How will I turn my data into ‘evidence’ which can be used to address my research questions?

How will I be able to demonstrate that my evidence is meaningful, my arguments are convincing, and my research is of good quality?

Questions about whether qualitative data can constitute ‘evidence’, and about how the quality of qualitative research can be judged, are particularly fraught ones. This is partly because some of the philosophical approaches informing qualitative research are explicitly anti-positivist, anti-realist or anti-modernist, and yet it is from these methodological traditions that criteria for evaluating research and evidence have been conventionally derived. As a consequence, the established measures of *validity*, *generalizability* and *reliability* for assessing the quality, rigour and wider potential of research, and indeed the very idea of such ‘scientific criteriology’, are sometimes seen as irrelevant or anathema to the qualitative research endeavour (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998; see Seale, 1999, for a good discussion). From this perspective, the concept of evidence itself is problematic, suggesting as it does a neutral body of data which speaks the objective truth.

However, I do not think that the broad ideas which lie behind some of the key principles of scientific criteriology are necessarily problematic in themselves. The difficulties come if we try to apply the technical procedures which have been derived from the broad ideas and principles directly to qualitative research. So, for

example, the concept of *validity* is a useful one. If your research is valid, it means that you are observing, identifying or ‘measuring’ what you say you are. In my example of research into inheritance, we would need to be able to show that our data on and analysis of, for example, ideas, norms and negotiations about inheritance really did relate to these concepts. Validity is often associated with the ‘operationalization’ of concepts, a term more commonly associated with quantitative and experimental forms of research, but nevertheless one which encapsulates the idea that you need to be able to demonstrate that your concepts can be identified, observed or ‘measured’ in the way you say they can. You therefore need to work out how well a particular method and data source might illuminate your concepts, whatever they are.

Similarly, the broad concepts of generalizability and reliability are useful. *Generalizability* involves the extent to which you can make some form of wider claim on the basis of your research and analysis, rather than simply stating that your analysis is entirely idiosyncratic and particular. There is a variety of ways in which generalizations can be made in qualitative research, using different sets of principles and logic, and these are discussed in Chapter 9. In the early stages of planning your research you will need to ensure that you are thinking about the basis on which you can make general claims, as well as what kinds of general claims your research questions might imply. For example, do you wish to make claims which can be applied to whole populations, empirically? While this is not commonly an aim of qualitative research, you may well wish to derive cross-contextual generalities from strategically focused local/contextual studies. You may wish to make claims that have a wider theoretical resonance. These may or may not be based on how representative, in empirical terms, your sample is. Overall, you will need to engage fully and actively with these questions about generalization.

*Reliability* involves the accuracy of your research methods and techniques. How reliably and accurately do they produce data? How can you maximize their reliability? Research in the quantitative tradition often relies upon standardization of research ‘instruments’ or ‘tools’, and upon cross-checking the data yielded by such standardized instruments – and by different sets of instruments which are designed to ‘measure’ the same thing – in order to check reliability. Qualitative researchers, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, are highly sceptical of the value or feasibility of such standardization, and indeed of the very concept of research instruments (implying as it does that such instruments can be neutrally applied), but do nevertheless have to think carefully about the accuracy of their methods in what may be distinctively qualitative terms.

**Quality as a Critical Practice**

Are my concepts meaningful?

Are my methods appropriate?

Have I designed and carried out the research carefully, accurately, well?

Have I analysed my data carefully, accurately, and well?

Are my conclusions supported by my data analysis?

Are they more widely applicable?

Although we might wish to reject some of the technical procedures which have been designed to measure the quality of quantitative research, I do not advocate abandoning the ideas which lie behind concepts of validity, generalizability and reliability. In my view they have a usefulness which is expressed in the broad message that qualitative researchers should be accountable, and their research should be rigorous and of high quality. I agree with Clive Seale that ‘quality matters’, and that we do not have to subscribe to anti-qualitative sets of methodological rules or positivist notions about what constitutes a *measure* of quality, rigour or wider potential, to nevertheless think that these issues are important, and that good quality research should be cognizant of them (Seale, 1999). For Seale, quality must involve a self-critical and ‘fallibilistic’ approach to research and the emphasis here, in common with my approach, is on critical and reflexive *practice* rather than the de-contextual application of so-called universal methodological rules, for example, in relation to measuring validity, generalizability or reliability. Crucially, and as I suggest in Chapter 9, qualitative researchers need to engage with the question of how they can make a convincing case for their arguments and explanations, and in my view this should involve much more than either a nod in the direction of positivistic criteriology on the one hand, or a kind of ‘take-it-or-leave-it’ relativism, where the researcher offers their interpretation but makes no (explicit) claims about its wider resonance or significance. As Seale argues:

A fallibilistic approach . . . is not well served by presenting a personal interpretation and then simply saying that people are free to disagree if they so wish. It requires a much more active and labour-intensive approach towards genuinely self-critical research, so that something of originality and value is created, with which, of course, people are then always free to disagree, but may be less inclined to do so because of the strength of the author’s case. (1999: 6)

I think Seale is absolutely right that this is ‘active and labour-intensive’, and this means that anyone planning and designing a qualitative research project needs to structure the appropriate activities into their plans, and think about these key issues from the beginning, by asking themselves the kinds of questions outlined



above. Although there are of course different ways of answering these questions, based on different standpoints and theoretical/methodological positions or strategies, none escapes the need to *demonstrate the logic* underpinning the answer. So, a supplementary question to each of the above is:

### How can I demonstrate this?

I discuss possible answers to this and related questions more fully in Chapter 9, but for now it is sufficient to say that you will need to produce a convincing argument for the appropriateness of your methods, the meaningful nature of your concepts, the degree to which your conclusions are supported by your analysis, and so on. Seale argues for a form of ‘reflexive methodological accounting’ to achieve and demonstrate quality and rigour in qualitative research in this kind of way (Seale, 1999, especially Chapter 11). At the very least, this involves ensuring that you have the capability to show, if necessary, the methodological, theoretical and practical/pragmatic steps which led you to conclude that you could answer ‘Yes’, with confidence, to the questions listed above.

## ETHICS, MORALITY AND POLITICS IN RESEARCH STRATEGY AND DESIGN

Up until now I have focused on the intellectual, and sometimes practical, issues in planning and designing research. However, qualitative researchers should be as concerned to produce a moral or ethical research design as we are to produce an intellectually coherent and compelling one. This means attempting not only to carry out our data generation and analysis morally (which is discussed more fully in later chapters), but also to plan our research and frame our questions in an ethical manner too. Of course this is easier said than done, because however the research questions are framed, any research project is likely to involve a range of interests, some of which may be competing. Therefore the idea that there is one ethical or moral route which is equally fair to all concerned may sound good in theory, but be elusive in practice.

### ***Practical Ethics and Moral Research Practice***

What is the purpose or are the purposes of the research?

Which parties, bodies, practices, or whatever, are potentially interested or involved in or affected by this research?

What are the implications for these parties, bodies, practices, and so on, of framing these particular research questions?

I think it is because of the complexities of research ethics, and because there is unlikely ever to be one clear ethical solution, that a practical approach to ethics which involves asking yourself difficult questions – and pushing yourself hard to answer them – is particularly appropriate.

First, that means asking about the purpose of your research, but this time with ethics, morality and politics at the forefront of your mind. You may need to push yourself quite hard to be honest about the purpose of your research. It is likely to include not just the advancement of knowledge and understanding, but also factors to do with personal gain such as the achievement of a higher degree, of a promotion, of some standing in your discipline (among colleagues, friends, rivals, relatives, and so on), or perhaps of some research funding. It is part of the politics of research that you should engage with this wider context in which your research is being done. Your research may have explicitly moral or political purposes. For example, you may wish to advance the interests of a particular group through it. This does not necessarily make the ethics of your research more straightforward, however, not least because ‘the interests of a particular group’ may be diverse or contested (see, for example, Stone and Priestley, 1996, on disability research). The notion of one moral route may therefore still be elusive.

Your answers to the first question should lead you to the conclusion that there is a fairly wide range of interests involved in the research. For example, these might include yourself as researcher, your supervisor, your institution, your commissioning body, the people or bodies you research, people who are connected with your data sources in some way, people not directly researched but about whom conclusions may be reached, or generalizations made. For those undertaking participatory research, there may be a close involvement with certain parties, not just in the conduct or use of the research, but also in its design.

You will need to consider what the implications for these parties and interests of framing these particular research questions are. Your answers to these questions will not tell you, of course, whether your research questions are ethical or not, but they will guide you towards identifying the potentially complex range of interests touched upon by your research. If you are explicit about these interests, you can begin to work out which courses of action seem the most reasonable and moral, and which do not – an activity which you will engage in throughout the research process, either as an individual or with others, as you face new situations, contexts and choices. You may, of course, not have autonomy and control here. For example, you may be required to defend your research questions and design before an ethical committee which will form its own view of the ethical implications of your research. You should reflexively examine your own criteria for judging what is moral or ethical, and recognize that these are likely to derive from a range of sources and are unlikely to be neutral and apolitical. You might, for example, be drawing upon:

- 1 Your own experiences, values and politics, and those of others involved in the research.
- 2 A particular political position on ethics, for example, feminist ethics, socialist ethics

- 3 Your professional culture, and the norms of acceptability which appear to operate in your professional setting
- 4 Codes of ethical practice, which may have been developed by a professional body, or within a professional culture
- 5 A legal framework, for example, concerning rights to privacy and information, data protection, and so on.

It is easy, in the face of a moral research dilemma, to select the least stringent set of ethical criteria and to argue that, because one's research questions do not infringe these criteria, they are ethical. Some commentators are unenthusiastic about professional moral codes of conduct precisely because they can be used in this way even though they have usually been written simply to establish a basic minimum in ethical practice (see Homan, 1991), or because they are too abstract and separate from the 'real-life' research contexts in which ethical judgements are made (Murphy and Dingwall, 2001; Plummer, 2001). Worse still, they may encourage you to concentrate your attention on protecting your own interests in a litigious fashion, by 'covering your back' in relation to data protection and privacy legislation, and direct your gaze away from the interests of your research participants (Murphy and Dingwall, 2001). One of the problems with using codes of ethical practice as anything other than a baseline is that they can have the effect of forestalling rather than initiating the researcher's active and continuing engagement with the issues. I think it is important, therefore, to ask the following questions in relation to the criteria you think you are using to make your ethical decisions, and the complex range of interests you have identified in relation to your research:

- Whose interests are served by these criteria?
- How and why were they developed (either formally or informally)?
- Do the different sources offer criteria of equal stringency?
- Are they good enough in relation to the complex interests I have identified? Am I satisfied with them?

The morality, ethics and politics of research are at the same time complicated and important, and we shall return to them at many points in subsequent chapters.

## **PRACTICAL MATTERS**

What is possible, given my resources?

What is the most sensible use of my resources in relation to my research questions?

So far I have encouraged the reader to pay a great deal of attention to intellectual and ethical issues in producing a research design, but I have said little about practical matters. This is not because I think practicalities are unimportant – far from

it – but because it is essential that one's research design is not guided entirely by them. Instead, I think it is better to adopt the rule of dealing with practical issues in ways that are intellectually sound, even if practical considerations mean that you cannot do what you would ideally like to do in intellectual terms. The alternative is that you risk becoming overwhelmed by practical concerns and neglect some of the important intellectual ones dealt with above. You will need to ensure that you can respond as strategically as possible to practical problems which emerge during the course of the research.

You must plan carefully what can be achieved given your resources, for example, time, money, equipment, transport, available data sources, your own abilities, skills and need for training, the likelihood of gaining access to key data sources. It is important to be realistic rather than optimistic in your plans, because resources have a tendency to go less far than you anticipate. You may be required to produce costings or a budget for your project and, whether or not you are compelled to do this, it can be a good way of focusing your mind on what resources really will be involved. It is important to remember that your own time is neither economically free, nor freely available, and it is a very good idea to undertake some time management training.

You should produce a timetable of what you see as the key phases of the research, and you may wish to present this in the form of a diagram or perhaps a GANTT chart or critical path analysis, which shows not only the sequencing and duration of activities, but also where certain elements are dependent on the completion of others as, for example, sampling and fieldwork will be dependent on having negotiated access. You will probably wish to include a pilot study in your research design, and in the scheduling of this you should allow enough time not only to design and execute it, but to analyse and review your findings and to make forward decisions about your study on the basis of this.

It is with these kinds of practicalities in mind that you should begin to reassess your research questions and your research design, considering the broad questions listed above. For example, if your resources will allow you to answer only one of your questions, or answer several but partially, which is the best strategy in terms of the intellectual puzzle you have identified? Whatever else, you will need to modify your research questions, and select from them, bearing in mind both the intellectual issues, and the practical ones. And it is this blend of intellectual and practical concerns which your research design should encapsulate. The most useful form of research design is one which is essentially a plan of what you are going to do, which you can make practical use of (earlier I referred to this as an 'internal' research design). You can set this out in a variety of ways, and I do not think that there is any one rigid format which you should follow, although of course if you are using your research design to apply for funding, you may be required to follow a specified format.

However, most research designs will need to address the core areas set out in Figure 2.3. Different research designs may give stronger emphasis to different elements, or present the topics in a different sequence, or contain additional sections specific to the enquiry.

- The research problem, or question(s), or hypothesis. A clear statement of the questions to be addressed by the research is always needed.
- The background to the research, e.g. intellectual (theoretical orientations, relationship to other research, to social change); political; purpose of the research in some broader context, e.g. why is this project intellectually/socially/politically important? Why is it worth doing?
- The broad methodological approach and research strategy. What is the relationship between social theory and your research? What is the theoretical and philosophical underpinning? How are you translating that into a research strategy (that is, into the way you are going to go about your research)?
- Proposed methods/techniques of data generation. These usually need to be elaborated in some detail, and you need to justify your choices of method (e.g. by reference to other possible methods) to show that you have weighed up different possibilities and made an informed choice.
- Sampling, access (including questions of scale and of strategy in sampling, and practical issues including how you might gain your sample, and gain access). For example, how many people will you interview? How many institutions will you visit? How many locations will you study? And why? What is your logic in choosing 30, 50, or 2? Why this particular 30, 50, 2? Why these specific comparisons? How will your sample be stratified?
- How the data will be handled and analysed, e.g. what kinds of records are you proposing to develop and keep? Are you intending to transcribe any 'field' data? What kinds of analytical principles will you adopt? How do these relate to your sampling strategy, and to your choice of method?
- Plans for a pilot study, including its aims, rationale, design, and details of how it will be reviewed or analysed so that its products feed into the project as a whole.
- Ethical, moral and political issues. What ethical, moral or political issues are raised by this research, or might you encounter while doing the research? How do these issues inform your research, e.g. choice of topic, research strategy and practice, methods, sampling, analysis, dissemination?
- How long the project will take? A timetable of core activities and phases, or a GANTT chart, is useful.
- What resources will be required (including labour, time, money, equipment, commodities and consumables, training, skills and expertise)?
- Who will do the research, what skills are needed? What will be the division of labour, if appropriate?
- Dissemination plans, proposed uses of the research.

**Figure 2.3** Core areas for qualitative research design

Having said this, I should also emphasize that qualitative research designs invariably need to allow for flexibility, and for decision-making to take place as the research process proceeds. Especially if you are working with an ontological and epistemological model where theory is generated from empirical data, and data generation and sampling decisions are made in the light of the evolving theoretical analysis, then you cannot – and will not want to – specify in advance all the details of your research design, numbers and types of cases you will draw on, and so on. If you are using an organic strategy like this, it is helpful to indicate in your initial research design that there will be points or times when further research decisions will need to be made, and to anticipate that you will produce several research designs sequentially, as your research strategy and practice

evolve – each one giving you the opportunity to ask yourself similar sets of difficult questions, and to reflect on what you have achieved so far. These may of course be linked to a pilot study conducted early on in your research, whose purpose may be to try out sampling strategies, data generation and analytical techniques, to firm up on your intellectual puzzle and your research questions, or to allow you to gain experience of some aspects of the research process. However, postponing certain decisions until such time as you have the necessary materials or conditions to deal with them is emphatically not the same as failing to design and plan your research. The big questions about research strategy, and the logic and principle of your methodology, really do need to be addressed right from the beginning, so that you are equipped to make further strategic decisions when the right time comes.

## CONCLUSION

My aim in this chapter has been to guide the reader through the kind of thinking and self-interrogation which I believe is needed in order to be able to produce a good qualitative research design. Although I have suggested some core areas which such a design should cover, I have not provided a template, partly because I do not think such a thing exists, but also because I see research design as a skilled activity requiring critical and creative thinking, rather than as a product which can be displayed and copied. In a sense, to display a standard product is likely to reduce rather than enhance the potential for creative thinking.

I have emphasized throughout the value of engaging with difficult questions, and should add that it is crucial to keep a good account of your answers to these, and the reasoning process through which you arrive at your answers. This can become part of a research diary, or notes which you record on particular topics and issues, but whatever form it takes needs to be accessible to you both now and later, when you may wish to reconstruct, justify and defend the logic of your own personal research strategy. At many points in this chapter I have referred the reader to subsequent discussions in the book. This is because you will need to have thought your way through the whole research process in order to be able to make useful planning decisions.

There is perhaps little in this chapter which is distinctively about qualitative research. The flexibility and sequential nature of research designs are more characteristic of projects which are primarily qualitative in nature, but most of the other issues and questions in my view should apply to any research design in the social sciences, and of course many do incorporate both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

## FURTHER READING

Useful texts on research design generally, and on the specific concerns and issues raised by qualitative research, include: Blaikie's *Designing Social Research* (2000), Silverman's *Doing*

*Qualitative Research* (2000), Marshall and Rossman's *Designing Qualitative Research* (1999), and Denzin and Lincoln's edited collection *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry* (1998). On the question of integrating methods, Fielding and Fielding's *Linking Data* (1986) still remains one of the most useful approaches, but Bryman's *Quantity and Quality in Social Research* (1988) and, *Social Research Methods* (2001) are also very useful. Seale's *The Quality of Qualitative Research* (1999) is an excellent and thorough discussion of issues of quality, and helpful discussions of ethics in research design can be found in Homan's *The Ethics of Social Research* (1991) and Ken Plummer's *Documents of Life 2* (2001).





# Part II

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## **GENERATING QUALITATIVE DATA**



# 3

## Data Sources, Methods and Approaches

This chapter is, in a sense, a prelude to the three that follow. It discusses how qualitative researchers might approach questions about which data sources to use, how they might think about what these represent, how they can begin to make decisions about which data generation methods might be most appropriate for their purposes. In doing this, the chapter considers how some of the most well-known qualitative approaches tackle these essentially ontological and epistemological questions, not with the aim of providing a set of blueprints, but to aid the reader in their active construction of a research strategy. The scene is thus set for Chapters 4, 5 and 6, each of which focus on specific methods for generating qualitative data, and Chapter 7, which addresses questions about sampling and selection that are relevant, whatever methods are chosen.

### **DATA SOURCES**

It is important to begin with a few words about data sources. Initially, I want to make a distinction between data sources, on the one hand, and methods for generating data from those sources, on the other, although I am going to suggest that this is a distinction which ultimately is likely to become blurred. An example will help to illustrate why such a distinction is nevertheless useful at the outset. You may, for example, see ‘people’ as data sources in the sense that they are repositories of knowledge, experiences, feelings or whatever, which are relevant to your research. However, there may be a much wider range of methods through which you might contemplate generating data from people, for example, you might observe them, you might talk to them, or video record them, you might collect products they had generated such as letters, or ask them to create something for you such as a time diary, or a set of photographs. In this sense, your data sources are those places or phenomena from or through which you believe data can be generated (ask yourself, potentially, could I generate data from this source?); your data generation methods are the techniques and strategies which you use to do this.

If you start thinking in terms of this distinction between data sources and methods it does not mean that you are seeing data ‘out there’ as an already existing stock of knowledge, ready to be collected and independent of our interpretations as researchers. Many qualitative researchers would, of course,

balk at that view, and my use of the term data ‘generation’ rather than ‘collection’ is intended to encapsulate the much wider range of relationships between researcher, social world, and data which qualitative research spans. I think it is more accurate to speak of *generating* data than *collecting* data, precisely because most qualitative perspectives would reject the idea that a researcher can be a completely neutral collector of information about the social world. Instead, the researcher is seen as actively constructing knowledge about that world according to certain principles and using certain methods derived from, or which express, their epistemological position. Therefore, as a researcher you do not simply work out where to find data which already exist in a collectable state. Instead you work out how best you can generate data from your chosen data sources. For this reason, the term *method* in qualitative research generally is meant to imply more than a practical technique or procedure for gaining data. It also implies a data generation process involving activities that are intellectual, analytical and interpretive.

You may find, therefore, that the distinction between source of data and method of data generation begins to blur as your thinking and your research progress, but it is a useful starting point because it will help you to stretch your mind as far as possible in your search for knowledge and data relevant to your research questions. In the previous chapter I suggested that, initially at least, it is a good idea to allow yourself to think widely and creatively about possible data sources and methods, even though you will sharpen and focus these initial thoughts in the light of the intellectual and practical considerations of your research design. To begin with, then, I want to reflect upon the wide range of possible data sources available to qualitative researchers.

### **Identifying Potential Data Sources**

From which sources might I generate data?

Rather than produce a long and detailed list of potential data sources, I think it is useful to provide a more generic set of categories which represent ways of thinking about data sources. What follows is such a set of categories, which encompass the most commonly used data sources in qualitative research.

- People (as individuals, groups or collectivities)
- Organizations, institutions and entities
- Texts (published and unpublished sources including virtual ones)
- Settings and environments (material, visual/sensory and virtual)
- Objects, artefacts, media products (material, visual/sensory and virtual)
- Events and happenings (material, visual/sensory and virtual).

Each of these categories can contain many specific data sources or ways of thinking about what it is that constitutes a source, or data, within it. The categories can also overlap. For example, if we think about what researchers using ‘people’ as a

data source might be hoping to access or explore, this could include: language, expression, appearance, experiences, accounts, interpretations, memories, thoughts, ideas, opinions, understandings, emotions, feelings, perceptions, morals, behaviour, practices, actions, activities, conversations, interactions, humour, faith, creations, secrets, relationships, inner self, sub/unconscious, psyche, and so on.

It is possible to generate such elaborations for all of the categories, so for example, those using texts might be interested in the people or institutions which have produced them, or might alternatively be exploring discourse, discursive practices and the constitution of subject positions (rather than people), semantics, ideas, rules, laws and regulations, accounts of events, and so on. These different variations within each category of course map differently onto alternative ontologies, as discussed in Chapter 2.

The value of categorizing data sources in this way is not as a theoretical or conceptual exercise, however, but to encourage you to think creatively about which sources you might use, and also to become engaged with what you think they can represent, what it is that you want from them, and whether and how you think you might get it.

### ***Evaluating and Using Data Sources***

What am I interested in?

Where is it 'located' and therefore from which potential sources can I generate knowledge of it?

What do I expect these sources to be able to 'tell' me?

How well does the use of these data sources match my ontological perspective on what constitutes the social world, and my epistemological perspective on how knowledge about that world can be produced?

What are the practicalities of using these data sources?

What are the ethics of using these data sources?

In addressing the practical questions, you will need to investigate what data sources exist as well as where you might find them. For example, are there people with the appropriate range of experiences? Have relevant photographs or texts been produced in a form which is appropriate (or can they be produced)? You will need to think also about the ethics of using certain sources. For example, is it consistent with your ethical position to access private diaries or letters, or to search out people with the experiences in which you are interested? Are there ethical difficulties in using these sources, irrespective of the methods of data generation you might choose? Ethical issues in relation to specific methods are discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Questions about what the sources might be able to tell you will lead you to engage with the question of method, that is, *how* you can generate data from your sources, and what limitations might be imposed by the nature of the data source or the method. You may find that it is possible to think of a wide range of methods for generating data from your data sources, or you may feel that there is very little choice. In the next three chapters we are going to discuss four methods: interviews, observation, the generation and use of documents and visual methods. We will see that these broad headings in practice can actually encompass a wide variety of methods and techniques, and also that what you see as a legitimate and appropriate method will depend, in large part, on what your perspective is prepared to count as data and as evidence. In thinking about what it is that you want from your data sources you may find it useful to consider how different social science approaches engage with questions of data source and method.

## QUALITATIVE APPROACHES

In my discussion of qualitative research strategy in the previous chapter I avoided giving labels to a range of different strategies. This is because I see research strategy as an active process rather than a passive alignment with a position or doctrine. Strategy involves making decisions about every aspect of the research, in a very grounded way in relation to your research questions and the changing context. Alignment with a ‘big’ position or philosophy is a different form of activity which is rarely helpful in planning research or in the research process. Of course, any alignment you have with a position will influence your strategy, but it is not a blueprint for it, nor is it detailed or fluid enough to be translated readily into an everyday working strategy.

Having said that, I think it is nevertheless helpful to engage with ways in which some of the most influential qualitative approaches deal with questions about data sources and method, since this can stimulate and inform your own active reflexive thinking about these issues.

### ***Assessing How Different Qualitative Approaches Use Sources and Methods***

How do qualitative approaches conceptualize and use sources and methods?

How useful are these approaches for my project?

What do I want to use from them?

Below I sketch out in a rather unsubtle way what some of the key approaches to qualitative research have to say about data sources and method. My purpose is to illustrate some of the key differences between approaches, in order to show some

of the different sets of assumptions which underlie questions of source and method, but also to give a flavour of the wide range of ways in which sources can be used and methods deployed. I cannot emphasize strongly enough, however, that researchers should engage actively and critically with ideas which these approaches suggest, rather than assuming that they are required to adhere to a fixed position and then simply abide by its rules and conventions.

*Ethnographic approaches* Ethnographic approaches encompass such a range of perspectives and activities that the idea of adhering to *an* ethnographic position, as though there were only one, is faintly ridiculous. They have been enormously influential in the development of qualitative research and many qualitative researchers call themselves ethnographers. Despite much diversity in practice and orientation, ethnographic approaches do share common features, as Atkinson et al. have commented:

They are grounded in a commitment to the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting on the basis of (though not exclusively by) participant observation. Observation and participation (according to circumstance and the analytic purpose at hand) remain the characteristic features of the ethnographic approach. In many cases, of course, fieldwork entails the use of other research methods too. Participant observation alone would normally result in strange and unnatural behaviour were the observer not to talk with her or his hosts, so turning them into informants or 'co-researchers'. Hence, conversations and interviews are often indistinguishable from other forms of interaction and dialogue in field research settings. In literate societies the ethnographer may well draw on textual materials as sources of information and insight into how actors and institutions represent themselves and others. In principle, indeed, the ethnographer may find herself or himself drawing on a very diverse repertoire of research techniques – analysing spoken discourse and narratives, collecting and interpreting visual materials (including photography, film and video), collecting oral history and life history material and so on. (2001: 4–5)

Despite diversities within it, and its use of a wide range of methods, ethnography is an approach (some say a strategy) which is grounded in a particular ontology. It is generally about the study of culture (or similar concepts), and is based on an epistemology which says that culture can be known through cultural and social settings. Ethnographers, as Atkinson et al. suggest, lay great emphasis on a researcher's 'first-hand experience' of a setting, and on observational methods. The metaphor of 'immersion' in a setting is very frequently used, and says much about ethnography's ontological and epistemological orientations. It emphasizes the use of cultural settings as data sources (sometimes seen as natural settings), and argues that the best – although not the only – way of generating knowledge of these is for a researcher to get right inside them.

Ethnographers have led the field in the use of observational methods, but they use other methods too, and some researchers who would not class their approach as ethnographic nevertheless make extensive use of observation. It is important to realize, therefore, that ethnography is not defined by observational

methods, and my discussion of these methods in Chapter 5 should not be seen as only of interest to ethnographers.

*Interpretivist approaches* It is, of course, possible and common for researchers to conduct interpretive ethnographies. What is distinctive about interpretive approaches, however, is that they see people, and their interpretations, perceptions, meanings and understandings, as the primary data sources. Interpretivism does not have to rely on ‘total immersion in a setting’ therefore, and can happily support a study which uses interview methods for example, where the aim is to explore people’s individual and collective understandings, reasoning processes, social norms, and so on. As Blaikie puts it:

Interpretivists are concerned with understanding the social world people have produced and which they reproduce through their continuing activities. This everyday reality consists of the meanings and interpretations given by the social actors to their actions, other people’s actions, social situations, and natural and humanly created objects. In short, in order to negotiate their way around their world and make sense of it, social actors have to interpret their activities together, and it is these meanings, embedded in language, that constitute their social reality. (2000: 115)

An interpretive approach therefore not only sees people as a primary data source, but seeks their perceptions or what Blaikie calls the ‘insider view’, rather than imposing an ‘outsider view’ (ibid.). Other data sources are possible according to this approach, for example, texts or objects, but what an interpretivist would want to get out of these would be what they say about or how they are constituted in people’s individual or collective meanings.

*Biographical, life history and humanist approaches* This broad heading encompasses a fairly wide range of approaches, but what they have in common is concern with people as social actors, or active social agents, and a sense that the narrative of a life, a biography or auto/biography, conveys the essence of this in meaningful ways. People, therefore, and their life stories – which can be told verbally, or in documentary or visual ways – are the data sources. Usually, therefore, these approaches are highly interpretive. Some use the telling of individual lives as a way of reading social, cultural and economic history.

Plummer has developed a distinctive form of critical humanism, which brings together many of these characteristics in five central criteria. He explains it thus:

First, it must pay tribute to *human subjectivity and creativity* – showing how individuals respond to social constraints and actively assemble social worlds. It must deal with concrete human experiences – talk, feelings, actions – through their *social and economic organization* (and not just their inner, psychic or biological structuring). It must show a naturalistic ‘*intimate familiarity*’ with such experiences – abstractions untempered by close involvement are ruled out. There must be a self-awareness by the sociologist of their ultimate *moral and political role* in moving towards a social structure in which there is less



exploitation, oppression and injustice and more creativity, diversity and equality . . . And finally, in all of this it espouses an epistemology of *radical, pragmatic empiricism* which take seriously the idea that knowing – always limited and partial – should be grounded in experience. (2001: 14)

As Plummer points out, the moral and political role which he sees for critical humanism is not an essential element of all life history or biographical approaches to research. However, the emphasis on human beings and their essential and pivotal existence, manifest in their concrete, grounded, biographical experience, is a core theme. Again, the metaphors are illuminating – the common use of the term ‘concrete’ experience, to convey a sense of solidity in the capacity of people to create and recount their experiences, for those experiences to constitute history, and to be knowable through an equally solid empiricism – is highly significant. For many, this stance constitutes an active rejection of postmodernist anti-empiricist, anti-humanist and anti-agentic tendencies, which, it is argued, have produced a discursive relativism and a denial of the human or the person as a meaningful entity in favour of the discursive construct of subject positions including the idea of the ‘self’.

*Conversation analysis and discourse analysis* These stand in marked contrast to biographical/humanist approaches, and to interpretivism. Although they do not represent a neatly unified approach, they do share certain key characteristics, particularly in their emphasis on talk and text as data sources. The humanist idea of the whole human actor or agent is not a theme here, and neither is the sense of motivations and meanings which characterizes interpretivism. Conversation analysis is grounded within an ethnomethodological perspective, and aims to study people’s ‘methods’ for ‘producing orderly social interaction’ (Silverman, 2001: 167), especially through naturally occurring talk. The idea is that these methods can be observed in the detail of naturally occurring conversations, and that it is misleading and missing the point to seek interpretive understandings or motives to try to explain what is going on. In this sense, the approach is highly empiricist, relying on close and minute scrutiny of sequences of dialogue according to certain conventions. Other data sources, which interpretivists or ethnographers, for example, might feel added useful context, are ruled out.

Discourse analysis can mean a range of things, and some forms have been associated with postmodernism and what has been called the ‘discursive turn’ because of their emphasis on text and talk as data sources. Again, here there is rarely a sense of the whole human actor or agent – the idea of the self being viewed as a discursive construction. Rather, there is an analysis of the ways in which discourses – which can be read in texts and talk – constitute the social world. Human action does not figure in this approach, but rather discursive practices and subject positions. This approach can, therefore, use interview transcripts for data analysis, but also a much wider range of documentary sources and discursive expressions. For some, especially in the Foucauldian tradition, there is an interest in discursive practices which blend together text, talk and practice, and this suggests a wider use of methods is possible. However, these are not used to try to

explore the context of human action, as for example, an interpretivist might do, but rather to gain a nuanced understanding of the historical operation of discourses or discursive practices.

*Psychoanalytic approaches* Psychoanalytic approaches again stand in stark contrast to the others discussed here. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) offer a particular version of this approach, which seeks to use loosely structured interviews to tap into a ‘psycho-social subject’, which is not a fully conscious entity but instead a kind of inner although socio-relational subject. This subject cannot be articulated by a person telling their life story, for example, because that imposes too constraining a structure and also assumes that the person is fully familiar with, and can articulate, rationally, their psycho-social subject. A psychoanalytic approach has to find a way to tap those elements of a subject’s experience which they do not consciously know or cannot explain. Hollway and Jefferson argue that:

By asking the patient to say whatever comes to mind, the psychoanalyst is eliciting the kind of narrative that is not structured according to conscious logic, but according to unconscious logic; that is, the associations follow pathways defined by emotional motivations, rather than rational intentions. According to psychoanalysis, unconscious dynamics are a product of attempts to avoid or master anxiety. This suggests that anxieties and attempts to defend against them, including the identity investments these give rise to, provide the key to a person’s Gestalt. By eliciting a narrative structured according to the principles of free association, therefore, we secure access to a person’s concerns which would probably not be visible using a more traditional method. While a common concern of both approaches is to elicit detail, narrative analysis has a preoccupation with coherence which we do not share. Free associations defy narrative conventions and enable the analyst to pick up on incoherences (for example, contradictions, elisions, avoidances) and accord them due significance. (2000: 37)

In this approach, then, unlike conversation and discourse analysis, there is a whole person – a Gestalt – but it is not the active agentic person which we see in biographical and humanist approaches. People are, therefore, data sources, but the methods used – be they interviews or otherwise – have to provide access to the inner or unconscious subject.

I have chosen this particular range of approaches because they say distinctive things about data sources and methods, and because versions of them are widely used in qualitative research. I have not engaged in a critical discussion of them, however, because a comparative evaluation of whole paradigms or approaches is not my purpose. Many qualitative researchers do not identify with one particular position or approach in this way, although most should be able to chart their own assumptions about sources and methods in relation to them. The most useful question you can ask yourself in relation to them, and other approaches which you might identify as relevant, is *how useful are these approaches for my project?* and, perhaps more importantly, *what do I want to take and use from them?*

## DECIDING ON METHODS

### *Generating Qualitative Knowledge*

How do I generate qualitative knowledge from my chosen data sources?  
What is my logic?

It should be clear by now that how we think the social world is constituted, or what we think it is (our ontology), shapes how we think we can know about it, but conversely how we look (the epistemology and methods we use) shapes what we can see. When it is expressed like this, it all sounds rather self-fulfilling and circular, and of course in a sense it is. But if we are at least aware of the logic of our approach, and of the ontological and epistemological assumptions we are making, then we can ensure that these are available for scrutiny by ourselves and others, and that they are therefore open to debate, modification and improvement. This is how methodological advancement and development occur.

You will need to combine your thinking about these epistemological and ontological issues with grounded, strategic and practical concerns about which methods to choose and use. I suggested in Chapter 2 that those choices always need to be made in the context of your research questions. Although the following three chapters separate out interviewing, observation and the use of documents and visual methods for discussion, you may of course want to use a combination of methods, or indeed to take some of the insights and practices from one to use in another.

### *Using Multiple Methods*

What can different methods yield in relation to my research questions?  
Which parts of the puzzle do they help me to address and in what ways?  
How do the different methods feed into each other?  
How do they integrate logistically as well as intellectually?  
Can I feasibly do everything I want to do?

My discussion of methods in the next three chapters does not cover the whole range, nor do I say everything there is to say about each method. Instead, I focus on some of the key issues – and the types of thinking – with which you will need to engage when using each of the methods. It should be noted that the boundaries between the different methods can become quite blurred so that, for example,

observation might involve the generation of visual data or the conducting of interviews. Furthermore, the difficult questions which you should ask yourself – although not always exactly the same for each method – have significant similarities and overlaps. There are good reasons for subjecting yourself to the discipline of asking a core of questions about every method which you use (or might use), and for this reason each method is discussed using a similar framework.

As I have suggested, as well as using methods in ways which blur the edges between them, many researchers also wish explicitly to use multiple methods to address their research questions, and I would encourage such creative and lateral thinking about methodological choices and strategies. However, as suggested in Chapter 2, a researcher must think strategically about the integration of multiple methods, rather than piecing them together in an *ad hoc* and eclectic way. This means that, as well as asking all of the difficult questions about *each* method outlined in the three chapters that follow, you should also ask those questions about the *combination* of methods which you propose to employ. The questions listed above should focus your concerns on these issues and serve as a reminder that you should have these ideas clearly at the front of your mind when you are making ongoing decisions about method, not just at the beginning when you are planning your project.

So, for example, you may decide that the effective generation of data using one method, say, interviews, is contingent upon your prior analysis of data from another method, say, documents. Or you may think – for intellectual reasons – that it is important that two of your methods of data generation are conducted simultaneously. If so, you need to work out the logistics of doing this. Is it possible? In other words you will need to think through the practical implications of the kinds of integration of data and method you have in mind.

The final question is designed to take you firmly back into the realm of practicality. You must address the question of whether you have or can develop sufficient resources – in terms of, for example, time, money, skills – to perform the whole package of data generation activities which you have in mind. This is particularly important for those using multiple methods, because you need to make sure you are taking account of the resources required to integrate those methods, as well as simply conducting the different bits. Of course, decisions about resources cannot be made until you know the range and scope of your enquiry. How many interviews do you wish to conduct? How many settings do you wish to observe? How many documents and visual images do you wish to examine? How long will it take you to select and gain access to your interviewees, settings, documents and images? These issues are at the heart of the process of sampling and selection, which are discussed in Chapter 7.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has set out some differences in approach to the generation of qualitative data, and to the question of what counts as a data source. However, a discussion like this risks making the choices appear too stark. I have emphasized

that you do not have to choose whether you are an ethnomethodologist or a psychoanalyst necessarily, but that you do have to be cognizant of the different takes on crucial matters of ontology and epistemology that different approaches imply. It is how you handle these matters that counts more than whether you can claim to be a card-carrying member of a particular doctrine. You may do this by selecting a range of methods and data sources, and approaching them in ways which you can justify as being complementary, or, if you wish, by a more doctrinaire following of the conventions of a particular approach.

Whatever you choose to do, my view is that there is a great deal to learn by investigating and thinking about a range of ways of generating data in relation to your research questions, rather than assuming too readily that one particular method is the only way. In the three chapters that follow I discuss interviewing, observation, the use of documents and visual methods, as separate and distinct, but the reality is much less clear-cut, and insights developed in relation to one method can very often be usefully applied in relation to another. I conclude this chapter by commending to you a fluid and flexible use of data sources, and methods, and suggest that you use the resources offered in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 in that spirit.

## FURTHER READING

On ethnography, and its philosophical and disciplinary underpinnings, Atkinson et al.'s *Handbook of Ethnography* (2001) is an excellent source. Blaikie's *Designing Social Research* (2000), and the earlier *Approaches to Social Enquiry* (1993), are very useful in relation to a range of approaches. Plummer's *Documents of Life 2* (2001) is the best source on humanistic methods, and Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf's *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science* (2000) is more generally useful for life history/biographical approaches. Hollway and Jefferson's *Doing Qualitative Research Differently* (2000) is a fascinating exposition of a particular form of psychoanalytic approach, and Silverman's *Interpreting Qualitative Data* 2nd edn (2001) provides an accessible introduction to conversation and discourse analysis. On the latter, Potter's *Representing Reality: Discourse, Rhetoric and Social Construction* (1996) is also useful.

# 4

## Qualitative Interviewing

In this chapter and the following two, we shift the focus onto particular methods for generating qualitative data. This chapter deals with what is probably the most commonly used method in qualitative research: interviewing. The term 'qualitative interviewing' is usually intended to refer to in-depth, semi-structured or loosely structured forms of interviewing. Sometimes, the term 'unstructured' interviewing is used, although I consider this to be a misnomer because no research interview can be completely lacking in some form of structure, as I shall discuss later. At the other end of the continuum, open-ended questions in an otherwise structured interview schedule are sometimes assumed to constitute qualitative interviewing. However, I consider this also to be a misnomer, because the logic, rationale and approach used in such interviews are derived from survey, not qualitative, methodology.

Qualitative or semi-structured interviewing has its own character, and despite some quite large variations in style and tradition, I suggest that all such interviewing has the following core features in common:

- 1 The interactional exchange of dialogue. Qualitative interviews may involve one-to-one interactions, larger group interviews or focus groups, and may take place face to face, or over the telephone or the Internet, for example.
- 2 A relatively informal style, for example, with the appearance in face-to-face interviewing of a conversation or discussion rather than a formal question and answer format. Burgess's term 'conversations with a purpose' captures this rather well (1984: 102).
- 3 A thematic, topic-centred, biographical or narrative approach, for example, where the researcher has a number of topics, themes or issues which they wish to cover, or a set of starting points for discussion, or specific 'stories' which they wish the interviewee to tell. The researcher is unlikely to have a complete and sequenced script of questions, and most qualitative interviews are designed to have a fluid and flexible structure, and to allow researcher and interviewee(s) to develop unexpected themes.
- 4 Most qualitative research operates from the perspective that knowledge is situated and contextual, and therefore the job of the interview is to ensure that the relevant contexts are brought into focus so that situated knowledge can be produced. For some that extends into the assumption that data and knowledge are constructed through dialogic (and other) interaction during the interview. Most would agree that knowledge is at the very least reconstructed, rather than facts simply being

reported, in interview settings. According to this perspective, meanings and understandings are created in an interaction, which is effectively a co-production, involving researcher and interviewees. Qualitative interviewing therefore tends to be seen as involving the construction or reconstruction of knowledge more than the excavation of it (Mason, 2002). See also Kvale (1996: 3).

## QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING: LOGIC AND RATIONALE

Why might I want to use interviews?

Why might I want to speak to or interact with people to generate data in order to answer my research questions?

Why might I want to use *qualitative* interviewing?

Why this style and approach rather than a more structured form of interviewing or questionnaire?

What are the shortcomings of qualitative interviewing for generating data which will help me to answer my research questions?

Interviews are one of the most commonly recognized forms of qualitative research method. Perhaps for this reason, it is not uncommon for a researcher to *assume* that their study will involve qualitative interviews, without spending time working out why it should, what they expect to get out of these methods, and whether any other methods might be more appropriate or provide a useful complement? In my discussion of research design in Chapter 2, I suggested that you should ask yourself questions about why you might wish to use *any* method, rather than assuming too soon in the process that you have made the right choices. For qualitative interviewing, the questions you should ask yourself are summarized above. Your answers to these questions are likely to be quite complex and of course need to be closely related to your research questions (see Chapter 2). However, let us consider some possible reasons why you might wish to use qualitative interviewing as a method.

- 1 If you choose qualitative interviewing it may be because your *ontological* position suggests that people's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions are meaningful properties of the social reality which your research questions are designed to explore. Perhaps most importantly, you will be interested in their perceptions. This might, for example, constitute a 'humanistic' approach (Plummer, 2001) or you may be interested in the constitution of language, or in discursive constructions of the social or the self (Wetherell et al., 2001).
- 2 If you have chosen to use qualitative interviewing you should have an *epistemological* position which allows that a legitimate or meaningful way to generate data

on these ontological properties is to talk interactively with people, to ask them questions, to listen to them, to gain access to their accounts and articulations, or to analyse their use of language and construction of discourse. You should, however, be fully aware of the epistemological implications of this approach, and you will have to be quite self-critical in judging how well interviews can provide all of this. For example, if you are interested in people's experiences or understandings of violence in their daily lives, these can only be *constructed or reconstructed* in interviews, and of course the interview method is heavily dependent on people's capacities to verbalize, interact, conceptualize and remember. It is important not to treat understandings generated in an interview as though they are a direct reflection of understandings 'already existing' outside of the interview interaction, as though you were simply excavating facts.

- 3 As I have suggested, most qualitative researchers view knowledge as situational, and the interview is just as much a social situation as is any other interaction. This is one reason why you might choose to conduct *qualitative* interviews, rather than a social survey. If your view is that knowledge and evidence are contextual, situational and interactional, then you will wish to ensure that the interview itself is as contextual as possible in the sense that it draws upon or 'conjures up', as fully as possible, the social experiences or processes which you are interested in exploring. So, for example, instead of asking abstract questions, or taking a 'one-size-fits-all' structured approach, you may want to give maximum opportunity for the construction of contextual knowledge by focusing on relevant specifics in each interview. This might involve asking people to talk through specific experiences in their lives rather than, for example, asking them what they 'would do', or what they have 'generally done', under certain circumstances. It might involve trying to ascertain people's reasonings or judgements in certain areas by focusing on events and situations which have taken place in their lives, rather than simply asking them their views about x, y, or z. Or it could involve providing the means for them to 'free associate' so that you can get a sense of how issues and concerns are connected in their perceptions (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). The point really is that if what you are interested in, ontologically and epistemologically speaking, is for example a social process which operates situationally, then you will need to ask situational rather than abstract questions.

You might want to take this further by stimulating interaction of particular kinds through group or focus group interviews, where you guide group discussion through a particular set of topics so that you can observe how situational interactions take place, and how issues are conceptualized, worked out and negotiated in those contexts. In any case, if you are seeking to maximize the interview's ability to produce situated knowledge about processes and experiences 'outside' or indeed 'inside' it, you will need to be flexible and sensitive to the specific dynamics of each interaction, so that you and your interviewee(s) are, effectively, tailor-making each one on the spot. You will want to take cues from the ongoing dialogue with your interviewees about what to ask them next, rather than to go into the interaction entirely pre-scripted. This will enable you to follow up their specific responses along lines which are peculiarly relevant to them and their context, and which you could not have anticipated in advance, in a highly *organic* way. You may wish to follow the narrative or sequence provided by the interviewee.



- 4 Whichever of these apply, you are likely to be making certain kinds of epistemological assumptions about the *interaction* between yourself as researcher and those you are researching, which suggest to you that semi-structured interviewing is appropriate. These assumptions will be very different to those which form the basis for structured interviews or questionnaires, which are very often designed to minimize ‘bias’ through the standardization of the questions which are asked, as well as the way they are asked, and the interviewers who ask them. The underlying assumption here is that bias can be eradicated or controlled. Once bias is ‘eradicated’, a stimulus-response model is used, so that if you standardize the stimulus, then any variations seen in responses will be a true measure, rather than a product of your methods. But if interviews are always social interactions, however structured or unstructured the researcher tries to make them, then it is inappropriate to see social interaction as ‘bias’ which can potentially be eradicated. From this point of view you cannot separate the interview from the social interaction in which it was produced (because you cannot separate ‘facts’ from contexts), and you should not try to do so. It is better to try to understand the complexities of the interaction, and to try to develop a sense of *how* context and situation work in interview interactions, than to pretend that key dimensions can be controlled for.

At the very least this means that you will probably reject the idea that standardization of questions and format ensures that interviewees will hear and interpret the questions in standardized ways, or that their articulations genuinely express standardized meanings. If this is your approach, you need nevertheless to ask yourself to what extent it is ever possible fully to understand the complexities of the interview interaction.

- 5 You may choose qualitative interviews if your view of the ways in which *social explanations and arguments* can be constructed lays emphasis on depth, nuance, complexity and roundedness in data, rather than the kind of broad surveys of surface patterns which, for example, questionnaires might provide. So, for example, you may wish to explain something about social process, social change, social organization, social meaning, and you will argue that this requires an understanding of depth and complexity in, say, people’s situated or contextual accounts and experiences, rather than a more superficial analysis of surface comparability between accounts of large numbers of people. In other words, you may wish to achieve depth and roundedness of understanding in these areas, rather than a broad understanding of surface patterns. This is likely to mean that you take a distinctive approach to comparison, to analysing data and to the construction of arguments. You may aspire to the generation of cross-contextual generalities (see Chapter 9).

So, for example, you are unlikely to rely heavily on quantifying, although you may want to count or enumerate certain elements of your data. Your approach to making analytical comparisons in your data set will certainly not depend upon having asked all interviewees the same set of questions. You will assume that in order to achieve data which are comparable in key ways, far from giving everyone standardized questions in a standardized form, you may well need to ask different questions of your different interviewees – precisely so that you can generate situated knowledge with all of your interviewees. Your point of comparison is therefore unlikely to be straightforwardly sited at the level of differences or similarities in people’s answers to the same set of questions. What and where your

points of comparison are, must depend upon your research questions, and the analytical principles you propose to use or develop, but they are likely to be conceptual rather than straightforwardly empirical, and ‘inductively’ generated through your data (see Chapter 9 for a further discussion). You are likely to want to identify interpretive themes in your data upon which to construct your analysis and your argument. Nevertheless, you will need to engage with the question of how you ensure that you are generating data which will allow appropriate comparisons to be made.

- 6 If you choose qualitative interviewing, you are highly likely to conceptualize yourself as *active and reflexive* in the process of data generation, and seek to examine this rather than aspiring to be a neutral data collector. While most qualitative researchers do have this kind of aspiration, it is important not to under-estimate the reflexive challenge posed by analysing your own role within the research process.
- 7 Rather more pragmatically, you may choose qualitative interviewing because *the data you want may not feasibly be available in any other form*, so that asking people for their accounts, talking and listening to them, and so on, is the only way to generate the kind of data you want. For example, records of existing research, documents, letters, diaries, and so on, which you might use if you could, may not exist, or perhaps direct observation of phenomena in which you are interested is simply impossible. If this is your reason for using qualitative interviews, then you need to consider how good a substitute for your preferred method is a ‘conversation with a purpose’ of this kind. Does it really get at what you are interested in?
- 8 You may indeed wish to use qualitative interviewing as just *one of several methods* to explore your research questions. Qualitative interviews may add an additional dimension, or may help you to approach your questions from a different angle, or in greater depth, and so on (see Chapter 2). You may be attempting some form of methodological triangulation, where you are using interviewing in tandem with another method to see how well they corroborate each other, although as suggested in Chapter 2, you should not expect different methods to produce the same kind of data, or to address the same research questions. For example, you may interview selected participants from a meeting for which you have a set of minutes, so that you can make comparisons between the different types of experience and account of the same event and set of interactions.
- 9 You may choose qualitative interviewing because you have a particular view of *research ethics and politics* which means that you believe interviewees should be given more freedom in and control of the interview situation than is permitted with ‘structured’ approaches. You may want to suggest that qualitative interviewing is more likely to generate a fairer and fuller representation of the interviewees’ perspectives. You may believe that you, as interviewer, should be more responsive in the interview interaction than a structured format allows, for example, answering questions the interviewee may ask, giving information, opinions, support. Or you may feel it is important to try to make sure your interviewees enjoy being interviewed, and your view may be that qualitative interviewing is the best way to achieve that. Nevertheless, you should ask yourself to

what extent qualitative interviewing achieves your ethical goals. For example, does it give interviewees more control, does it inevitably represent their perspectives more fully and fairly, is it really enjoyable? It may not necessarily be the 'best' moral choice, nor a sound intellectual one, to try to turn the interview into a 'therapeutic encounter'.

## PLANNING AND CONDUCTING QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

Good qualitative interviewing is hard, creative, active work (see Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). It is a much more complex and exhausting task to plan and carry out a qualitative interview than, for example, to develop and use a structured questionnaire for asking a set of predetermined questions. In that sense the informal and conversational style of this form of interviewing belies a much more rigorous set of activities. However, it can be exhilarating and highly enjoyable.

To begin with, qualitative interviews require a great deal of planning. For the moment I am leaving aside the question of deciding whom you want to interview and how you gain access to them, since this is dealt with in the discussion of sampling and selection in Chapter 7. What I mean by planning, therefore, is all the other work which goes into preparing for your interviews. Just because you are planning a loosely structured or semi-structured interview which is going to feel (to the interviewee) like a 'conversation with a purpose', this does not mean that you do not need to engage in some detailed and rigorous planning. In fact, in my view qualitative interviewers have to work particularly hard on the structure and flow of the interview. However, given that most qualitative researchers will find the idea of preparing this in advance in the form of a structured sequence of questions unsatisfactory (for the reasons outlined above), they must use alternative mechanisms and must develop a rather specific set of intellectual and social skills. I do not think the importance of these, and the challenge of acquiring them, can be over-estimated.

In the absence of a predesigned set and sequence of questions, the qualitative interviewer has to prepare themselves to be able to 'think on their feet' in the interview itself. They have to do this quickly, effectively, coherently and in ways which are consistent with their research questions. They need to be able to ensure that the interview interaction actually does generate relevant data, which means simultaneously orchestrating the intellectual and social dynamics of the situation. It is all too easy to orchestrate a pleasant social encounter whose content has little or no bearing on the intellectual puzzle which the research is designed to address. Alternatively, too much attention on asking 'the right' questions in 'the right' order can result in a peculiar social dynamic which may be equally unsatisfactory. A qualitative interviewer has to be ready to make on-the-spot decisions about the content and sequence of the interview as it progresses, and to keep everything running smoothly.

I think it is useful in preparing for and conducting qualitative interviews if you ask yourself a range of questions about the substance and style, scope and sequence of your interview questions.

### **Conducting Interviews which will Generate Meaningful Knowledge**

Am I collecting data (excavation)?

Am I generating data (construction)?

What should be the content of my interviews, and the substance of my questions?

How do I prepare my questions, and ensure the interviews are focused, without writing and following a script?

I have already suggested that qualitative interviewing usually operates with the model that knowledge is constructed rather than straightforwardly excavated. However, it is wise to think through the implications of your take on this issue for the interview questions which you will ask. What do you expect of them? If the interview is intended to generate situated knowledge, how can you ensure that the appropriate context is brought into play? As I suggested above, this is likely to involve asking questions which focus more on lived experiences than hypothetical scenarios or abstract concepts, although you may wish to include some such questions also. Do you need anything else to help you to understand the relevant context? Do you want your interviewees to think something through or work it out during the interview? If so, how can you provide them with the necessary materials to be able to do this?

A great deal of intellectual preparation is required for qualitative interviews, and you will also need to plan for and handle the social dynamics. As I have pointed out, you are highly unlikely to find yourself producing a structured list of questions which you can simply reel off in the interview. Instead, you need to develop a mechanism to help you to devise the intellectual skills you will need to make on-the-spot decisions about the substance and style, scope and sequence of questions outlined above, for while the decisions have to be made and acted upon quickly, they should nevertheless be strategic and considered rather than *ad hoc* and idiosyncratic. I have emphasized the need to ground your decisions in your intellectual puzzle and your research questions. Although this does not mean that you should produce a rigid interview structure in advance, or that you must try to anticipate everything in which you are likely to be interested, it does mean that you need to be clear enough about recognizing what you might be interested in to be able to judge what to pursue in the interviews.

There may be qualitative researchers who will disagree with me here, because they wish to emphasize the possibilities for exploratory and unstructured data *collection*. However, as I argued in Chapter 2, my view is that, whether or not they acknowledge it, all researchers *do* have ontological and epistemological positions which get activated or expressed in their research decisions and judgements, and I now want to add that all researchers *do* make decisions and judgements in

the conduct of their qualitative interviews. Therefore, I do not think it is possible to gather data in a wholly unstructured way through a qualitative interview, because the decisions and judgements the researcher makes give some form of structure and purpose to the data generation process.

Given this, my concern is with the kinds of procedures for asking interview questions which qualitative researchers can use to help them make sensible, intellectually compelling and systematic interpretations and judgements. Whatever technical system you develop and use to do this, you will need to make sure that it is one which has the effect of firmly entrenching your research questions and your intellectual puzzle in your interview practice, because it will usually be on the basis of fast mental reasoning, rather than slow reference to notes and reminders, that you will make important decisions. Although you are likely to take written or visual notes and aids into your interviews to supplement your thinking, you will inevitably want to make many decisions and judgements quickly, without always referring to your notes.

Figure 4.1 gives an example of a procedure which you might use to prepare and plan intellectually for qualitative interviews. It is not intended to be rigid or prescriptive, but instead to give a sense of the kind of intellectual work that needs to be done in advance of interviews, and suggestions about how this might be achieved. It uses a worked example based on a real piece of research which I introduced in Chapter 2, entitled 'Inheritance, Property and Family Relationships'. Figure 4.2 provides a simplified overview of the same procedure.

#### Step 1

List or assemble the 'big' research questions which the study is designed to explore.

##### *Example of one of the 'big' research questions in the Inheritance project*

1 *How do families handle issues of inheritance?*

#### Step 2

Break down or subdivide the big research questions into 'mini'-research questions. The links between the big questions and the subcategories of them – the mini questions – should be clearly expressed, for example, by using corresponding numbers or codes, or by laying the two sets of questions out in a chart, or by using cross-referenced index cards. It is possible to establish a perfectly workable manual system, or you can use a computer graphics package and/or database to help you.

##### *Example of mini-research questions which are subcategories of the big research question given above*

- 1 (a) *Are negotiations about inheritance treated as part of a wider set of negotiations about support in families? Or is inheritance treated as a totally separate matter?*
- (b) *Do people in any way take into account the possibility of inheritance in formulating their own life plans?*
- (c) *Is a clear distinction maintained between 'blood relatives' and 'in-laws' in the process of negotiating inheritance?*

**Figure 4.1**

*Example of planning and preparation for qualitative interviewing*

**Figure 4.1** (cont.)

Example of  
planning and  
preparation for  
qualitative  
interviewing

**Step 3**

For each mini-research question, start to develop ideas about how it might be possible to get at the relevant issues in an interview situation. This means converting your big and mini examples of 'what you really want to know' into possible interview topics, and thinking of some possible questions – in terms of their substance, and the style you might use to ask them. These will not form a rigid 'script' for you to use in the interview, but the process of developing possible topics and questions will get you thinking in ways appropriate to an interview interaction. Again, make sure that the links between this set of questions and the other two (that is the big and mini-research questions) are clearly expressed.

*Examples of interview topics and questions related to mini-research questions*

- 1 (a) *Family inheritance history, and history of other family support – what happened in practice in relation to specific events and instances? How did people decide what was the most appropriate course of action?*
- (b) *Knowledge of the inheritance plans, content of wills, etc., of other family members. Have people thought about inheritance at all? Have they made wills? Do people have life plans, for example, do people have a sense of what they will be doing, where living, and so on, in 5 or 10 or 20 years' time? How were these plans arrived at?*
- (c) *Ascertain composition of family and kin group, and what kinds of relationships exist with specific others. Explore whom people count as 'blood kin', whom as 'in-laws' or 'step-relatives' – establish this so that family inheritance history, and specific events and instances, can be contextualized in the sense that we will know the 'kin status' (as conceptualized by the interviewee) of relevant parties. Explore the detail of distributions of assets, and negotiations about them, in relation to kin of different status. Who has legitimate interests? How do people decide whom to include and exclude? Possibly ask directly whether people think about their blood relatives and their in-laws in different ways in relation to inheritance, and other matters.*

**Step 4**

Cross-reference all the levels, if you have not done so already, so that you know that each big research question has a set of corresponding mini-research questions, and each of these has a set of ideas about interview topics and questions. Make sure the cross-referencing works in reverse, so that your interview topics and questions really are going to help you to answer your big research questions.

**Step 5**

Start to develop some ideas about a loose structure, or format, for interviews. You will want this to be highly flexible and variable, but you should be able to produce some kind of guide to the key issues and types of questions you will want to discuss.

*Example of loose interview structure/format developed for the 'inheritance' project*

*In this project we developed a loose interview format, based on key topics and types of questions we were likely to want to ask. With each interviewee we anticipated following up lines of enquiry specific to their circumstances, which we would not be able to anticipate in advance. We therefore wanted maximum flexibility, but also some kind of guide or prompt for the interviewer about the key issues and questions with which the study was concerned. We did not produce a script of questions, but rather a set of index cards to take into each interview. One card contained a flow chart of a possible interview structure, which could be readily modified on the spot. The other cards contained shorthand notes about specific topics and issues for the interviewer's use at relevant points in the interview. These notes were nonsequential, so that they could be drawn upon at any time, in relation to the specific context of the interview in progress. Here are examples of each type of card:*

**'Loose structure/format of interview' card**

**Possible main structure**

Specific topics and issues – to be asked in relation to any of the main structure sections (there are cards for each of these sets of questions)

Introductory explanation



Brief social/personal characteristics



Composition of kin group and spouse's kin

Inheritance history, other responsibilities and relationships, inheritance family and kin group



Family inheritance history



Specific questions (if not covered elsewhere)

Formal and external factors, including the law



Questions about the law check

Principles and processes of inheritance and family responsibility



Personal characteristics check

Social and personal characteristics (current and overtime)

**Example of 'specific topics and issues' card**

**Inheritance history, other responsibilities and relationships, inheritance family and kin group**

**Experience of inheritance:** personal/others – as testator, beneficiary, executor; patterns characteristic of own family; how many generations; experience of legal procedures and services; expected and unexpected; experience of will making; when, why; professional advice; intestacy laws; lifetime transfers.

**Inheritance and other aspects of kin relationships/wider patterns of responsibility:** family relationships affected by inheritance? conscious of possible inheritance in relationships with relatives?; conflicts – how resolved; life plans and inheritance e.g. housing, geography, timing; death and how it is dealt with; making formal statements about relationships?; part of ongoing reciprocity and exchange – explicit/implicit?; idea of final settlement?

**The inheritance family or kin group:** who has legitimate interests?; in-laws/exclusions and principles of exclusion/inclusion; inheriting via someone else.

**Figure 4.1** (cont.)

Example of  
planning and  
preparation for  
qualitative  
interviewing

**Step 6**

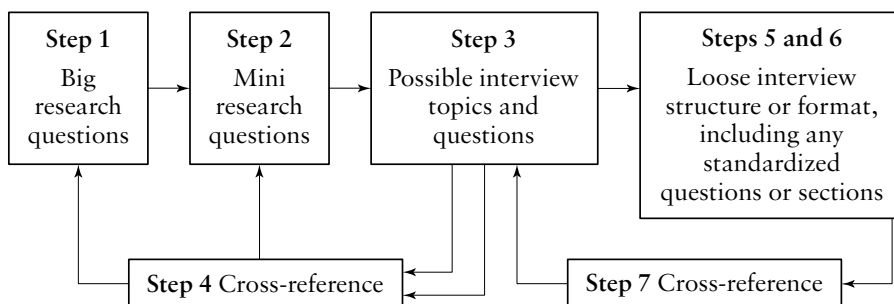
Work out whether you want to include any standardized questions or sections in your interviews. There may be certain questions which you want to ensure that you ask everybody. In the example above the introductory explanation was fairly standardized, as were some of the questions about personal and social characteristics (for example, age, marital status). You might also want to think of some standardized comments and assurances which you will make about confidentiality of data to your interviewees.

**Step 7**

Cross-check that your format, and any standardized questions or sections, do cover adequately and appropriately your possible topics and questions.

**Figure 4.2**

Overview of the  
planning and  
preparation  
procedure for  
qualitative  
interviews



### **Scope and Sequence in Interview Questions**

How much depth or breadth do I want to achieve on these issues?

What should be the *scope* of my questions?

Shall I follow up, or move on?

What should I ask next? What should be the *sequence*?

Just as working out what to ask, and in what sequence to ask it, depends upon on the spot assessments of the relevance of each part of the interview interaction to your intellectual puzzle and research questions, so does deciding how deeply you want to engage with any one particular issue, or how broadly you want to cover a range of issues. You may find yourself having to make decisions about the



implications of sacrificing some breadth of coverage for depth on a particular issue in a particular case. You may find you are having difficulty achieving either breadth or depth, because your interviewees are garrulous in ways which are not entirely relevant, so you may have to make an on-the-spot decision about how to get the best – in terms of breadth or depth – out of that particular interaction.

Probably the easiest part is deciding where to begin the interview, and you may well wish to begin all your interviews with a similar opening or ‘warm-up’ question or topic. But as each interview progresses you need constantly to make decisions about what to ask next in the context of that particular interview. This means working out whether you want to ask a question which relates to what you and your interviewee(s) have just been talking about, or whether you want to change the subject and move the interview onto new terrain. Whichever of these you decide to do, the social task is to orchestrate an interaction which moves easily and painlessly between topics and questions. The intellectual task is to try to assess, on the spot, the relevance of each part of the interaction to your research questions, or to what you really want to know. Although you are likely to have some form of *aide-mémoire* to remind you about the topics and issues you are interested in, you nevertheless need to be able to make connections between relevant issues quickly, and to spot and follow up issues which may be relevant, but which you had not anticipated.

### ***Style and Demeanour***

How should I ask my questions?

What kind of demeanour should I adopt?

How should I act?

Working out how to ask questions means both how to phrase them, or what words to use, and also what kind of manner, demeanour and approach you are going to adopt. You will not have a standard script of questions, and will instead need to think on the spot how best to ask about whatever it is that you ‘really want to know’, and how to generate meaningful contextual and situated discussion. This means that you will need to be able to formulate appropriate questions there and then, rather than asking your interviewee to wait while you fumble in your notes for a preformulated question which you discover, as you ask it, is not suitable in this particular case. This process involves more than thinking of the right words. Your decisions will be likely to depend upon the research questions which guide your study, the specific social and situational dynamics of each interview, and what repertoire of demeanours and sets of social skills you personally are able to draw upon.

Of course the question of how we should ‘be’ is not always one that is easily resolved by making a decision and executing it. Apart from the fact that

researchers are rarely able to exercise such high degrees of instrumentality, performance and self-control, we must also remember that interviews are interactions, and how you can 'be' depends to a great extent on the situation and the other participants. So, while it is important to reflect upon these issues, you should not over-estimate your ability to act a part, nor its benefits. In Chapter 5 we discuss these issues more fully in relation to a researcher's 'ethnographic self' (Coffey, 1999).

These questions all imply the need to make quick, but considered and strategic, decisions while you are interviewing. In each case, these decisions and their consequences will need to achieve a number of things. They will need to do the following:

- Make sense to, or be meaningful to, the interviewees
- Be related to your interviewee's' circumstances, experiences and so on, based on what you already know about them
- Be sensitive to the interviewees, to their needs and rights, in accordance with your ethical position and moral practice
- Help the flow of the interview interaction – the 'conversation with a purpose' – rather than impede it
- Ensure an appropriate focus on issues and topics relevant to your research questions.

### ***Developing Your Skills***

Clearly, interviewing is a formidable – although highly enjoyable – task for which a high degree of intellectual and social skill is required. At any one time you may be: listening to what the interviewee is currently saying and trying to interpret what they mean; trying to work out whether what they are saying has any bearing on 'what you really want to know'; trying to think in new and creative ways about 'what you really want to know'; trying to pick up on any changes in your interviewees' demeanour and interpret these, for example, you may notice they are becoming reticent for reasons which you do not understand, or if there is more than one interviewee there may be some tension developing between them; reflecting on something they said 20 minutes ago; formulating an appropriate response to what they are currently saying; formulating the next question which might involve shifting the interview onto new terrain; keeping an eye on your watch and making decisions about depth and breadth given your time limits. At the same time you will be observing what is going on around the interview; you may be making notes or, if you are audio or video tape-recording the interview, keeping half an eye on your equipment to ensure that it is working; and you may be dealing with 'distractions' like a wasp which you think is about to sting you or your interviewee, a pet dog which is scratching itself loudly directly in front of your tape recorder microphone, a telephone which keeps ringing, a child crying, the fact that your feet are aching, you are tired and too hot, and so on.

How might qualitative interviewers prepare for such a challenging set of tasks? First, it is vital that researchers work on developing the skills they need to

handle the social, intellectual and indeed practical elements of these kinds of interactions, and on preparing for their interviews, rather than assuming that these are attributes which they either do or do not have already. It is possible, for example, to practise the following:

- 1 Listening – *really* listening – to what people are saying. Most people need a great deal of practice in this. You need to be able to do this whether or not you are tape-recording your interviews.
- 2 Remembering what people have said to you, and indeed what you have already asked them. It is only too easy, in the context of the multiple activities you are engaging in, to forget what you have been told, or what you yourself have already said. If you are conducting more than one interview per day, you may become unclear about what occurred in one and what in another.
- 3 Achieving a good balance between talking and listening. The appropriate balance is likely to vary in different situations, and there is no general rule about what you should do. However, it is important to be aware of what you are doing, and of the implications of it. So, for example, are you interrupting your interviewees frequently? For what reasons? What are you trying to achieve by interrupting? Do you achieve it? Is interrupting in this way helpful, or unhelpful?
- 4 Observing, picking up verbal and non-verbal cues about the social situation, its visual and spatial dynamics, and the mood of your interviewee(s). This means making sure you are tuned in to body language and to demeanour so that you can recognize when people become bored, tired, angry, upset, embarrassed. Sometimes, you may recognize a change in your interviewees' demeanour, but be unable to interpret it. This should include understanding, anticipating and interpreting the social dynamics of interviewing, for example, showing appropriate respect and courtesy to your participants
- 5 Becoming accomplished in the practicalities of interviewing, for example, in note-taking, in using your tape recorder, in recording visual and other non-verbal elements (see section below on generating data for a discussion of some of these aspects).

All of these skills involve handling the social interaction of the interview appropriately. You can practise them in everyday social situations, or with your peers, colleagues, or advisers, or better still in a pilot study which you can reflect upon later. You can audio or video tape-record some pilot interviews, and scrutinize the recording later on for these aspects as well as taking the opportunity to train yourself in the use of the equipment. Or you can ask a colleague to sit in on some pilot interviews and give you their views about how you are handling the situation. Or you might want to ask your pilot interviewees what they think? In general, you need to find some mechanism for ensuring that you are identifying which skills you need to work on, and that you are developing and improving these.

## **TURNING QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS INTO DATA**

So far we have focused on the planning and doing of qualitative interviews, but have said little about processes through which what we call data are produced. I

am referring here to the mechanisms through which you transform your interview interaction into what you consider to be data. This throws the spotlight back onto epistemological issues and, in particular, onto what your perspective suggests count as data and as evidence. You will need to consider the following types of questions:

### ***Deciding What Counts as Data***

What procedures give my interview interactions the status of data?

Do different procedures yield data of differing status or quality?

Which elements count as data? What shape or form do they need to take?

Should I focus only on the utterances?

Do other non-verbal aspects of the interaction and its context count?

Does my own written or tape-recorded account, and do my written or tape-recorded field notes, which are based on my interpretations of what went on, count as data?

Do my own memories and unwritten interpretations of the interview interaction count as data?

Does the interview or interaction become data only when it becomes text as, for example, in a transcription of a tape-recorded interview?

Does a visual or audio record of the interview count as data in itself?

Can diagrams, pictures, drawings, charts and photographs produced during the interview, or before or after it, count as data?

What counts as data should not be regarded as self-evident. As I suggested in Chapter 3, different qualitative approaches may take widely differing views on this question. It is therefore very important indeed to ask yourself these questions, and to work through their implications for your research practice from the beginning, since many of the consequent decisions need to be made early on. In answering these questions you need to ask yourself what it is that turns your interviews into data, rather than just chats or conversations. Do the procedures, or the data, have to be verifiable in some way in order to have the status of good or reliable data? What principles of verification might be appropriate? What form or shape do the data need to be in to make this possible?

A major challenge for interpretivist approaches centres on the question of how you can be sure that you are not simply inventing data, or misrepresenting your research participants' perspectives. Qualitative researchers over many years have been locked in debates about this question (see Chapters 1 and 9), and

different qualitative approaches offer different solutions. For an ethnomethodologist, this is precisely the problem with reading 'beyond' data, and researchers from this perspective should concentrate on utterances and recorded (although usually naturally occurring) interactions.

Ethnographers, on the other hand, have long sought to draw reflexively on their own experiences and perceptions, and to see these as part of their data. The main challenge with this approach is to ensure that you are doing it in meaningful and sensitive ways, rather than imposing your own interpretation inappropriately or without justification. It is very important in this context to record as fully and explicitly as you can, the route by which you came to the interpretations you are making. This will involve questioning your own assumptions. You need to remember that, however 'objective' you try to be in your records, you are continually making judgements about what to write down or record, what you have observed, heard and experienced, what you think it means. Your records need to provide the fullest possible justification for your own decisions. In dealing with these issues you will inevitably face questions about memory and verifiability. How can you be sure that your memories are accurate or that your perceptions are valid? You need to try to be as systematic as you can about these matters.

In answering these questions it is also important not to over-estimate the representational or reflective qualities of interview transcripts, audio and visual recordings. A transcription is always partial partly because it is an inadequate record of non-verbal aspects of the interaction (even if you try to insert these in the form of fieldnotes into the transcription afterwards), and also because judgements are made (usually by the person doing the transcription) about which verbal utterances to turn into text, and how to do it. For some verbal utterances, there are simply no written translations! Therefore, do not assume that transcription provides an 'objective record' of your interviews, or that you do not need to make a record of your own observations, interpretations and experiences of the interview.

The same applies to audio and video recordings, which have to be regarded as partial reconstructions of interviews rather than full records of them (see Chapter 6 for a fuller discussion of these issues). Ask yourself which aspects of the interaction you do not gain access to via a video tape. For example, you will not have a record of what went on behind the camera. You may have a record from only one visual perspective. And, as with tape recording and transcribing, this does not give you much access to the interviewer's observations, interpretations, experiences and judgements. Make sure that the knowledge that you have a tape recorder switched on does not tempt you to stop listening or watching or doing all the other work outlined above. Not only do you need to continue with these activities in order to conduct the interview well, but you may discover subsequently that your equipment had failed. If you were not paying full attention to the interaction, there will be little you can retrieve from it.

The production of visual materials, or encouraging your interviewees to produce something of this kind, can be a very creative way of accessing aspects of your interviewees' lives or experiences which are non-verbalized, or difficult for them to verbalize. Do not assume, however, that everyone finds it easy to express themselves through the production of these kinds of materials.

Nevertheless, these can be particularly useful if what you really want to know about in ontological terms is not readily or appropriately expressed verbally. You can use visual materials as prompts in an interview, or you can produce charts or diagrams jointly with your interviewees, or you can ask them to produce their own ‘cognitive maps’ as drawings, diagrams (see Miles and Huberman, 1994, for lots of examples) or pictures. The latter technique is fairly widely used in interviews with children. Again, in thinking about how these constitute data, you must be aware of their limitations, and what they do not, as much as what they do, address.

### ***Reading Interviews Literally, Interpretively and Reflexively***

Do I wish to derive data from interviews in a literal, interpretive or reflexive manner?

When thinking about all of these difficult questions, you may find it helpful to draw a distinction between literal, interpretive and reflexive ‘readings’ of interviews. If, for example, you wished to derive data in a *literal* manner, then you would probably be interested in aspects of the interaction such as the literal dialogue, including its form and sequence, or the literal substance. If you wished to derive data in an *interpretive* manner, then you would be wanting to ‘read’ the interviews for what you think they mean, or possibly for what you think you can infer about something outside of the interview interaction itself. And if you wished to derive data in a *reflexive* manner, then you would want to ‘read’ something about your role, and your interface with the interaction. Your answers to these questions will of course be related to your stance on whether knowledge is constructed or excavated through interviews. The different decisions about what count as data, which you can potentially make, will imply different answers to these questions, and place differential emphasis on literal, interpretive or reflexive data. In practice, you may wish to derive data in all three ways, but it will nevertheless help you in doing so to think carefully about what kind of balance between them you are hoping to achieve.

In general, you should try to be as clear as you can about your answers to all of these questions as early as you can in your research process, since they will help you to choose your methods for generating (or recording) data from your interviews. You will need to think carefully about which methods are best for you – in both practical and intellectual terms. It is important to remember that tape-recording or video-recording, and transcribing in full, usually represent a very large commitment of time and resources. You should therefore be clear that you have good reasons for doing this, for example, that you are interested in the ways in which people articulate their ideas, not just in the substance of what they say. These reasons should be closely linked to your research questions. You will also need to have some idea of how you are going to go about analysing your data, so

that you make sure that what you generate takes an appropriate form for this type of analysis (see Chapters 8 and 9 for a further discussion of data analysis).

I think this demonstrates that it is possible to generate a fairly wide range of types of data, and more creatively than is sometimes thought, through qualitative interviews. It also suggests that conducting interviews can help a researcher to develop experience in a fairly wide range of methods.

## **ETHICAL ISSUES IN QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING**

I emphasized the importance of ethical issues in research design in Chapter 2, and more generally the need to be clear about operating a moral research practice at every stage in the research process. I also suggested that this is by no means straightforward. The use of qualitative interviews as a data generation method raises a number of general ethical issues, and there will also be specific ethical concerns connected to any one particular project. Some of these can be anticipated in advance, but just as you will find yourself making intellectual and practical decisions on the spot, so too you will from time to time need to make hasty moral judgements. You must prepare yourself to do this, by thinking through the kinds of ethical issues which might arise, and your possible responses to them. While you cannot anticipate all of them, this will nevertheless help you to ensure that you are thinking and acting in an ethically principled way even in the face of the unexpected. Here are some examples of difficult questions about ethics and qualitative interviews which you can ask yourself as a form of preparation.

### ***Conducting Qualitative Interviews in an Ethical Way***

How far is my own interview practice and style ethical?

On what basis am I judging what is ethical and what is not?

What justifications can I offer for the ethics of my interview practice and style?

On what basis, and to whom, are these acceptable?

Answering these questions might involve thinking about the following:

- 1 What you ask. Are you asking questions about personal or private matters, or matters which your interviewees do not wish to discuss? Are you asking about traumas, tragedies, mistakes, illegal activities? Are you asking questions which may distress, worry, or annoy your interviewees? In examples such as these, you will need to think about your ethical justifications.
- 2 How you ask it. For example, are you using trick questions to catch your interviewees out, to confuse them? Are you doggedly pursuing a particular issue? Are

- you asking questions in a blunt way, to see how your interviewees react? Is your style of questioning making your interviewees uncomfortable?
- 3 What you 'let' your interviewees tell you. Are your interviewees revealing more than you think they should? Even if you do not ask them directly, they may feel relaxed and open up to you about issues which you suspect they consider to be private. What are the ethical implications of the process of gaining your interviewees' trust, and the process of making your interview feel enjoyable, like a conversation, or like a therapeutic encounter?
  - 4 Whether and how you can guarantee the confidentiality and anonymity of your interviewees, if this is what you have said you will do. You must think carefully about how you will fulfil such promises, and this can be quite difficult given the full, rich and personal nature of the data generated from qualitative interviews. Such data can usually be recognized by the interviewee whether or not you attach the interviewee's name to them, and also they may be recognizable to other people.
  - 5 The power relations of the interview interaction. It is usually assumed that the interviewer exercises power over the interviewee in and after the interview, for example, in setting the agenda and in controlling the data. In this context you clearly have certain responsibilities to those interviewees. But power relations can be more complex and multidirectional than this, and sometimes they may simply be reversed – you may, for example, be interviewing very powerful people, and you may feel that they are controlling the agenda. You may feel your personal safety is at issue. In these cases, you must nevertheless think through the ethical implications, rather than assuming that ethics do not count because you as researcher are not wielding all the power.

### ***Gaining Informed Consent***

Have I gained the 'informed consent' of my interviewees for their participation?

Whose consent should I seek?

How can I be sure that the consent is genuinely informed?

Many of the ethical guidelines published by professional academic associations emphasize the importance of gaining the informed consent of all participants in research. On the face of it, this seems fairly straightforward where qualitative interviews are being used, since the participants are clearly identifiable, and can be asked whether or not they give their consent before the interview begins. However, I want to suggest that getting informed consent is actually quite a complex and difficult business even in this context.

First, you will need to consider whose consent to ask. You should certainly gain the consent of the people you propose to interview. However, you should be careful about how readily you accept that consent has been gained. In particular, you should acknowledge the persuasive influences which operate on people when you ask them to consent to take part in your research, for example, powerful



committee members, teachers, parents, carers, employers, colleagues, yourself, all may influence a potential interviewee into saying yes. How much choice do interviewees really have about participating? Is it ever appropriate for a third party to give consent on someone else's behalf, for example a parent on behalf of a child, a relative or carer on behalf of someone with a mental illness, a husband on behalf of his wife, an employer on behalf of their employees? Is it ever desirable to gain the consent of someone other than the interviewee, for example, a parent *as well as* the child you wish to interview? You need to recognize that it is not uncommon for an interviewee to reveal what seems like private information concerning third parties whose consent you have not gained. These issues are not straightforward, and you will need to think them through in some detail in the light of the precise issues raised by your project.

You will also want to consider how you can be sure that the consent you have gained is actually *informed* consent. This is very difficult, and relates crucially to what it is that you think you are asking people to give their consent to, and what rights you think they are giving to you in giving that consent. For example, are you asking them to consent to the following?:

- 1 Participating in the interview? Does this mean they are consenting to answer whatever questions you might ask? Are you giving them opportunities to withdraw their consent at any stage? You may wish to renegotiate consent at several points during the interaction, as the interviewee becomes more fully informed about what consenting to the interview actually means.
- 2 Giving you the right to use the data generated through the interview in ways which you see fit? Do you think they understand and share your perspective on what counts as data, for example, where you are drawing on not only their words, but also their intonation, body language, pauses, general demeanour, what they say 'off the record' when the tape recorder is switched off, other aspects of the interaction? How about where data include information about others?
- 3 Giving you the right to interpret and analyse the data, making comparisons with data generated through other interactions? Most interviewees will be unfamiliar with the principles and techniques of analysis which you use, and with the ontological and epistemological principles upon which your research is based.
- 4 Giving you the right to publish or reproduce the data, and the analysis?
- 5 Passing those rights on to others, for example, by archiving your data for other researchers to use?

In my view, there are limits to how adequately you can inform all interviewees about all these aspects. You need to think carefully about what to tell your interviewees when you are informing them. How much can and should you tell them, at what level of detail, complexity and sophistication, and at what points during the interaction? Many interviewees may not be very interested in the detail, and may not be familiar with the disciplinary and academic skills and conventions which are needed to understand issues about what counts as data, what principles of analysis will be used, and so on. You may not be sure yourself, at this stage, about exactly how you will constitute and use your data, and about how you will use them to explain your intellectual puzzle. If you take the decision to offer your

data to an archive, you will be even less sure about what use other researchers may make of them.

However, these limits mean that researchers need to take the issue of informed consent more rather than less seriously, in ensuring that they adopt a stringent moral practice. There are no easy answers or prescriptions about what that practice should be. But in my view, it is not sufficient simply to assert that you have gained informed consent because people have agreed to be interviewed, or because in our increasingly litigious world they have signed a consent form, and you can therefore do what you want with the data and the analysis, if there are in fact some ambiguities in relation to the difficult questions outlined above. As Murphy and Dingwall have argued:

The rights of research subjects in ethnographic work will not be respected simply because consent forms have been signed: indeed, as in much biomedical research, these forms may offer more protection to the researcher than to the subject in the event of litigation . . . Signed consent forms may actually jeopardize the confidentiality of participants by making them identifiable. There are genuine difficulties about the means of respecting rights to autonomy and self-determination. The answers depend more on the moral sense of the researcher and their ability to make reasoned decisions in the field than upon regulative codes of practice or review procedures. (2001: 342)

It may be impossible to receive a consent which is fully informed, and the responsible researcher should be prepared to recognize this, and think through its implications, in their research practice. Recognizing that fully informed consent may be impossible always to achieve puts researchers in a powerful and highly responsible position, and means that they have a greater, not a lesser, duty to engage in a reflexive and sensitive moral research practice.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined some of the difficult questions which are raised by the use of qualitative interviewing. Perhaps the most important message is that this kind of interviewing is not an easy option, contrary to the view that such interviews are little more than everyday conversations which ‘anyone could do’. Although interviewing can be rewarding and fascinating, I have also wanted to make it clear that qualitative interviewing is difficult intellectually, practically, socially and ethically, and that all researchers should be aware of the kind of challenge they are taking on in choosing to use this method. Furthermore, this kind of interviewing is greedy of resources: it is heavily consuming of skills, time and effort, both in the planning and conducting of the interviews themselves, and in the analysis of the products (which is discussed in Chapters 8 and 9).

All this means that the decision to use qualitative interviewing should not be made lightly. It is, in fact, one of the most – possibly *the* most – widely used methods in qualitative research, and for some very good reasons. It is considered by many to be an appropriate and practicable way to get at some of what qualitative

researchers see as the central ontological components of social reality. Indeed, qualitative interviewing has become such a commonplace that it is often taken to be the 'gold standard of qualitative research' (Silverman, 2000: 291–292). The decision to use qualitative interviewing, or indeed any other method should be based on sound ontological and epistemological principles, and tied into specific research questions. These principles should guide the practice of interviewing, and the process of analysis.

However, it is important to remember that qualitative interviewing has limitations, especially in its reliance on talk and text, generated through the rather specific and refined context of an interview. Qualitative interviewing tends to direct our research gaze away from visual, spatial and observational social worlds, although it is also the case that many qualitative interviewers feel that they are engaging in ethnographic research practices. This means that the discussion of observation and visual methods which follows in Chapters 5 and 6 is relevant to the practice of qualitative interviewing and, as I suggested in Chapter 3, the divisions between these methods are blurred. It is to a discussion of observation that we now turn.

## FURTHER READING

There are a number of excellent treatments of qualitative interviewing in the literature, including Kvale's *InterViews* (1996), Holstein and Gubrium's *The Active Interview* (1995), and Hollway and Jefferson's *Doing Qualitative Research Differently* (2000). There are also very useful discussions in Plummer's *Documents of Life 2* (2001), and Silverman's *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, 2nd edn (2001), as well as a selection of useful chapters in May's edited collection, *Qualitative Research in Action* (2002).

# 5

## Observing and Participating

In this chapter we shall examine observational and participatory methods of generating qualitative data. The terms ‘observation’, and in particular ‘participant observation’, usually refer to methods of generating data which entail the researcher immersing herself or himself in a research ‘setting’ so that they can experience and observe at first hand a range of dimensions in and of that setting. These might include: social actions, behaviour, interactions, relationships, events, as well as spatial, locational and temporal dimensions. Experiential, emotional and bodily dimensions may also be part of the frame (Coffey, 1999).

As I suggested in Chapter 3, in practice, the method of participant observation is often one element in a broader ‘ethnographic’ approach, involving the use of a range of other research methods. Conversely, researchers may use observational methods without considering themselves to be conducting ethnography. For the purposes of this chapter, we shall treat observing and participating as data generation methods in their own right, without assuming them to be necessarily connected to any particular overall approach. Decisions about whether and how they may be so connected in any particular project need to be *made* rather than assumed, as part of the strategic processes of research design and practice.

Instead, the chapter is structured around a series of questions which researchers might usefully ask themselves to help them come to decisions about whether observing and participating are appropriate methods in particular circumstances, to anticipate what these methods might involve, and to consider what might be some of the implications and consequences of using them.

### **OBSERVATIONAL METHODS: LOGIC AND RATIONALE**

Why might I want to use observational methods?

Why might I want to enter or participate in a research setting in order to generate data for my research questions?

What are the shortcomings of using observational methods for my purposes?

As with the example of qualitative interviewing discussed in the previous chapter, I do not think you should expect your answers to these questions to be easy or simple. However, as well as needing to think through the intellectual logic behind the use of observation, it is also crucial to recognize that conducting observational research can be very time-consuming and resource-consuming. You need to be sure of your reasons for doing it before making a major commitment. Here are some possible reasons why you might want to use observation as a method of data generation.

- 1 You have an ontological perspective which sees interactions, actions and behaviours and the way people interpret these, act on them, and so on, as central. You may be interested in interactions involving large numbers of people (for example a mass rally, a rock concert, a religious ceremony). You may be interested in a range of dimensions of the social world (for example, not just written responses to a questionnaire, or verbal responses to an interview, or written texts), including daily routines, conversations, language and rhetoric used, styles of behaviour (including non-verbal behaviour), the active construction of documents and texts in certain settings, and so on. You will probably be interested in the ways in which these social phenomena occur or are performed in the context of a 'setting', and you may wish to associate yourself with the tradition which conceptualizes these as 'naturally occurring' phenomena, because they are observed in a setting rather than contrived in an experiment or reported or constructed in an interview, for example. You may indeed be very interested in the setting itself, including its physical, spatial, temporal as well as social organization, for example, a pub or café, a town or 'community', a stock exchange, a music festival, a conference or meeting, a shopping centre, a classroom, a court of law, a hospital or clinic. If your ontological perspective encapsulates these kinds of ideas, you nevertheless do need to engage with criticisms of the idea that a researcher can 'capture' naturally occurring phenomena by entering a setting in this way. We discuss this further below.
- 2 If you decide to use observational methods you will have an *epistemological* position which suggests that knowledge or evidence of the social world can be generated by observing, or participating in, or experiencing 'natural' or 'real-life' settings, interactive situations and so on. Or, to put it another way, you may have a position which suggests that meaningful knowledge cannot be generated without observation, because not all knowledge is for example articulable, recountable or constructable in an interview. Such a position is based on the premise that these kinds of settings, situations and interactions 'reveal data' in multidimensional ways, and also that it is possible for a researcher to be an interpreter or 'knower' of such data as well as an experienter, observer, or a participant observer. Indeed, many devotees of observation would argue that the researcher can be a 'knower' in these circumstances precisely because of shared experience, participation or by developing empathy with the researched. In other words, they know what the experience of that social setting feels like, although of course not necessarily from the perspective of all participants and actors involved, and in that sense they are epistemologically privileged.

Whether or not you accept this notion of epistemological privilege, at the very least, you will probably hold the view that observation allows the generation of multidimensional data on social interaction in specific contexts as it occurs,

rather than relying on people's retrospective accounts, and on their ability to verbalize and reconstruct a version of interactions or settings. You may regard such situationally generated data as superior, or as simply different from a *post hoc* reconstruction.

You must, nevertheless, take on board criticisms of the simplistic 'standpoint' position – that is, that you are a 'knower' because you share relevant experiences, or because you have 'been there' – especially in so far as you cannot assume that your experience of a setting, and your social location and so on, match those of all others involved. After all, your analysis and explanation of what is going on in the setting will itself be a *post hoc* reconstruction. This raises questions about representation and voice in interpretation and presentation of data, which are discussed more fully in Chapter 9.

- 3 Choosing to use observational methods usually coincides with the view that *social explanations and arguments* require depth, complexity, roundedness and multidimensionality in data, rather than surface analysis of broad patterns, or direct comparisons of 'like with like' (such as the comparison of interviewee responses to a standardized set of questions). Again, as with qualitative interviewing, you are likely to build explanations through some form of grounded and interpretive data analysis, and you may place little emphasis on enumeration. In more of a contrast with interview methods, this approach is likely to lay some considerable emphasis on the claim that the data were 'naturally' or situationally occurring, or at least generated through a contextual setting, rather than clearly artificially manufactured or reconstructed.
- 4 If you have chosen observational methods you are highly likely to conceptualize *yourself as active and reflexive* in the research process, not least because of the premium placed on the experiential nature of this form of data generation. Most users of observational methods write themselves into their fieldnotes and into their analysis. Of course you must not under-estimate the challenge of analysing your own role in this way, nor should you over-estimate your capacity to empathise with or 'know' the other, simply because you have participated in a shared setting as part of your research practice.
- 5 In a rather more pragmatic sense, you may decide to observe and participate because the kind of *data you require are not available in other forms* or ways. For example, this may be because your view is that retrospective accounts of interactions are inadequate or impossible to achieve, or because the situational dynamics of settings are never fully reportable by people who have participated in them because they will only have a partial knowledge or understanding of them. If this is your argument, however, you must be reflexive and self-critical about your own ability to transcend the partiality of any perspective of a setting.
- 6 You may consider observation to be a useful technique to answer some of your research questions, or to approach them from a particular angle, as part of a *multi-method strategy*. If this is the case, you will need to think carefully about the implications of and possibilities for integration of methods (see discussion in Chapter 2). As I have suggested, where observation is part of an ethnographic approach, it is likely to involve other methods as part of the process. So, for example, it is common for an observer to conduct interviews with participants in a

setting – sometimes spontaneously, sometimes in a planned way – or to use or generate documents or visual data.

- 7 You may feel it is more *ethical* to enter into and become involved in the social world of those you research, than to attempt to ‘stand outside’ by using other methods. You must, however, be conversant with debates about the ethics of covert and overt observation, and about the possibilities for and merits of adopting different roles on the participant–observer continuum, and be prepared to take some difficult decisions and sometimes make compromises in relation to these issues (see Coffey, 1999). Observation is rarely viewed or experienced by researchers as an ethically straightforward or easy method.

## PLANNING AND CARRYING OUT OBSERVATION

If you are intending to enter a setting or situation to carry out some form of observation, then you will need to prepare yourself not just for the process and technique of observance, but also for social interaction. You will be variously involved in observing, participating, interrogating, listening, communicating, as well as a range of other forms of being, doing and thinking. This set of activities, performed in a research setting, is often referred to as fieldwork. Doing fieldwork means observing all of the points made in the previous chapter about managing and orchestrating social interactions, albeit the nature of the interaction may be different. You are likely to find the process more challenging and exhausting than conducting interviews because settings, situations and interaction can be notoriously messy and complicated, with lots of things happening at once; your own role may be less clear-cut and will probably be subject to more frequent negotiation and renegotiation than if you are an ‘interviewer’; and you may involve yourself in your setting for lengthy periods of time. Observation in a fieldwork setting can feel a more intensely personal and intimate endeavour than conducting interviews, and you may invest a great deal of yourself in it. As Coffey points out in her introduction to *The Ethnographic Self: ‘Fieldwork is personal, emotional and identity work’* (1999: 1). Significantly, she goes on to argue that it is also physical work, and embodied experience:

all fieldwork can be conceptualized in terms of the body. Not only is fieldwork concerned with the spatial location of bodies (the fieldworker and other social actors). It is also concerned with the interaction, regulation, management and use of the body in everyday social life. Fieldwork includes the observance and analysis of the body as an embodiment of culture. At the same time our engagement with the field is both intellectual and physical. We cannot divorce our scholarly endeavours from the bodily reality of being in the field. (1999: 68)

If the social, emotional and bodily dynamics present a major challenge, so too do the intellectual issues involved in generating data from settings, situations and interactions. You must, therefore, ask yourself some very difficult questions about observation to ensure that you not only prepare yourself as fully as possible in

advance, but also continue to take informed and strategic decisions throughout the whole process of data generation. Here are some examples of key questions – at the very least you need to work out your answers to these, and for most of them you will need to do this before, during and after the process of data generation.

### ***Generating Knowledge and the Significance of Observational ‘Settings’***

Am I collecting data (excavation)?

Am I generating data (construction)?

What does my ‘research setting’ represent?

What is it telling me about? What type of data can it yield?

What else do I need to know?

On the face of it, the association of observation with ‘naturally occurring data’ fits better with the idea that a researcher’s job is to collect or excavate knowledge, than to participate in generating or constructing it (see Chapters 3 and 4). However, many researchers who use observational methods do not view settings as seams of naturally occurring data ready to be mined in any simple sense, and especially not once a participant observer enters them, simultaneously becoming part of and transforming the dynamics within them. Some of the most significant developments in our thinking about reflexivity in research and the constructed nature of knowledge have come from the reflections of ethnographers and participant observers (see especially Coffey, 1999; Atkinson et al., 2001). There is therefore a decision to be made here, as indeed there is with all other methods, about whether you see observation as enabling you to excavate or construct knowledge and data. This will influence the way in which you observe as well as how you chronicle your observations, how you weave them into an analysis and an argument, and how you implicate yourself within this process.

The language used to describe the process of data generation in observational work suggests that it is located, physically in specific sites called ‘settings’ or ‘the field’, which the researcher enters, inhabits and exits. While the experience of doing observation usually does involve going, being and leaving somewhere, it is useful nevertheless to engage in some critical self-questioning about exactly how you are assuming your setting produces data and about whether all your data come from the setting. The way in which a researcher conceptualizes what a setting is, and in particular what its data generating capabilities might be, has important ramifications for the nature of the knowledge they can argue to have produced.

A useful way to approach this might be to consider how far the setting, as a physical and social place or space, encapsulates everything you are interested in.



What of interactions which occur ‘outside’ it, which may shape what takes place ‘within’ it? What of orientations or motivations, cultural rules, norms or discourses which emanate from ‘elsewhere’? Will these be fully expressed or visible in the setting and in the elements you are observing within it? Are there other ‘hidden’ contextual factors? In other words, is everything that you require to enable you to address your research questions available from within your chosen setting, and can the setting itself be understood solely from ‘the inside’?

The different possible answers to these questions will not only shape your methodological strategy and determine whether or not you will use other methods alongside observation, but will express something of your theoretical orientation. So, for example, in a rough continuum from interpretivist ethnography to ethnomethodology, here is a range of possible answers. You may be seeking to understand the setting itself, and to understand how it is organized or operates. You may see the setting as a specific or local operation of something wider (aspects of culture, for example) which is discernible, perhaps, in the behaviours, practices, perceptions and assumptions of people within it, in the interactional rules and taken-for-grantedness which seem to be operating, in elements of spatial or physical organization. Or you may argue that the setting exhibits the micro-social order solely through the accomplishments of speech and face-to-face interaction within it. If the latter, you are unlikely to seek to supplement your documentation of the setting with methods aimed at exploring a wider context, but the other potential answers do not preclude that possibility.

Knowledge generated through high quality observation is usually rich, rounded, local and specific. All of the potential answers above suggest that it is contextual and situated, although they say different things about what the context might be and how we might connect with it.

### ***Directing your Gaze***

How do I generate or collect data?

Where do the data come from? What do they look like?

What am I looking for in the setting? What shall I observe?

Although the purpose of observation is to witness or experience what is going on in a setting, it is difficult sometimes to work out what to observe and what to be interested in. Doing observation can feel very unfocused and vague. You will probably be interested in talk, behaviour, interactions, layouts and spatial elements, appearances, physicality/embodiment, procedures and so on. But which ones?

If you reject the view – as I do – that it is possible to produce a full and neutral account of a setting or set of interactions based on observation, then you must work out how to tackle the questions of selectivity and perspective in observation, since any observation is inevitably going to be selective, and to be based upon a

particular observational perspective. The key to this is to try to understand *how* you are using selectivity and perspective, rather than to assume – or to hope – that you are not. This means that you must have at least some sense of what you are looking for in the setting, and some critical awareness of how that has informed what you have observed, and what you have found interesting and relevant.

You should, therefore, prepare yourself quite carefully in both an intellectual and practical sense before you begin your observation, and you can use procedures like those detailed in the previous chapter for preparing for interviews. As discussed there, you will need a procedure for linking your research questions to questions you might ask, or observations you might be able to make, in the ‘field’. While your procedure for doing this is likely to be more fluid, and more ongoing, than that for qualitative interviews, you must nevertheless have some kind of procedure to help you to make situated yet strategic decisions – for example, about what to look for next, whom to speak with next, how to respond or behave in a certain situation, what to record in some way and follow up – once you are observing in your setting.

Do not over-estimate your ability simply to ‘hang around’ in a setting or location and to ‘soak up’ relevant data. As well as the intellectual issues involved in working out what you are interested in, and how to handle selectivity and perspective, this raises more practical and methodological issues about how to ensure that relevant data are generated during your time in the field. Simply ‘hanging around’ in an unfocused way can be notoriously time-consuming, unproductive, exhausting and sometimes embarrassing or risky. You will need to consider how you will generate data, or how you will ensure that you are in the right place at the right time to collect data and make meaningful observations. You may wish to use other data generation methods alongside observation. For example, you may conduct some interviews, or a focus group, or invite some of those involved in the setting to reflect on their understandings and experiences. You may collect or generate some documentary or visual data, for example, you might take or use photographs, draw maps and diagrams of spatial locations and events, collect newspaper reports about your setting, and so on.

While you will certainly wish to take decisions about these kinds of issues in an ongoing way as your research progresses, you must also ensure that you do think quite extensively about them in advance of entering your observational setting so that you are maximizing your intellectual and practical resources.

### ***Finding your Observational ‘Setting’***

What is the most appropriate setting to choose?

Where are the phenomena in which I am interested located – in time, space and place?

How does immersion in a particular setting shape what I see, and what I do not see?

Locating a context or setting in or from which you will be able to generate data relevant to your research questions can be quite challenging intellectually as well as practically. It requires you to think carefully about what your intellectual puzzle is, and what phenomena you are attempting to investigate. Then you need to think about where these might be located in time, space and place. So, for example, if you are interested in the concept of community, you must think about where communities are located according to these dimensions. If you focus on ‘public’ settings such as shops, cafés, post offices, parks, and so on, at certain times of day or year, are you overlooking a central aspect of community which might be located in more ‘private’ places, such as people’s households, or less tangible ‘places’ such as telephone conversations, or which might be activated at different times? As suggested above, your choice of setting will say much about how you perceive the social phenomena in which you are interested to be organized or made manifest, and it will also shape what you are able to see. As Atkinson et al. remind us: ‘Ethnographic fieldwork, and the disciplinary commitments that inform it, construct the objects of research as well as providing ways of exploring them’ (2001: 6). In other words, how, where and in what ways we look will shape what we see. We shall return to these issues in Chapter 7 as part of our discussion of sampling, but the point to grasp for now is that the choice of setting is not simply a practical matter, but a highly intellectual one which expresses core elements of your ontology and epistemology. Choice of setting is a practical matter too, however, especially in relation to whether your setting is feasibly and physically accessible, and this leads us into the next section.

### **Getting ‘In’ and Getting By**

**Can I gain access to the setting? What does access really mean?**

**Do I intend to be a participant, an observer, or a participant-observer?**

You may wish to gain access to a setting which is ‘public’ or semi-public, such as a café, a railway station, a music festival, a village. Even in these cases, access may not be unproblematic. You will need to think about how far you can gain access to all the dimensions in which you are interested, because even apparently public settings are likely to contain regions or interactions which are out of bounds to the general public. You may also need to negotiate access as a researcher – rather than as a passenger, customer, audience member or resident – to these types of settings, and to work out in practice what that means. Where settings are obviously ‘private’ in some way, you will need to negotiate access with the relevant gatekeepers but again, as with public settings, you should not assume that access is either granted or denied universally to your setting. You must continue to use your critical judgement to assess what kind of access you have – for example, it might be full, partial, conditional, intermittent – and to which regions or interactions. In

negotiating access, and in trying to work out just what kind of access you have been granted, you will be focusing upon forming and managing relationships with others in the setting, an issue to which we shall return. You will also be thinking about what it is you are going to do when you get there.

At its simplest, the answer to this question requires you to select a role on the continuum between complete participant and complete observer, and to understand the implications of your selection for the research process and its products. However, this is not a simple selection to make – especially not in the abstract – and what is more you may find that you do not take a ‘once and for all’ decision about this, but in fact that you move between a variety of roles in any one research project for both intellectual and practical reasons. To begin with, you should ask yourself how far it is possible to be a complete observer, in the sense that you have no influence on the setting, or that your observations remain ‘untainted’ by experiencing or feeling what the setting is like. For many enthusiasts of the method, this notion of researcher distance or neutrality is not only impossible, but completely defeats the epistemological purpose of immersing yourself in a setting. In other words, you are – according to this view – supposed to know what it feels like rather than simply act as a detached witness.

However, you should of course also ask yourself how far it is possible to be a participant. There are likely to be various answers to this depending, in part, on what you understand by the term ‘participation’. One view is that you cannot fail to participate in some form, and the problem is that you cannot control how your participation is perceived by others. For example, if you try to be nonparticipative, or neutral in your expressed views and actions, this may be interpreted in a whole range of ways by those involved – the point being that it will be *interpreted* and *responded to* in some way. Your attempts at lack of involvement in whatever is going on in the setting will have some effects and cannot be judged to be the same as if you were simply absent from the setting altogether.

So, if you cannot be a ‘fly on the wall’, can you participate in such a way that you effectively understand the setting *because* you are part of it? In other words, can you gain epistemological privilege by participating in and experiencing what is going on? There are problems here too, and you must ask yourself to what extent you are really in the same position, or have the same perspective, as others in the setting: are there some divisions, or differences of perspective or interest, between you and ‘them’, and between ‘them’? The answer is almost certainly yes, and your job will be to try to understand the basis of those divisions. You may find it difficult to limit your participation, and feel you are getting too involved or risking ‘going native’. These difficulties do not mean that you should remain undecided about your participant or observer status, but they do suggest that you are unlikely to be able to make a ‘once and for all’ decision about it at the beginning. Instead, they mean that you should keep it constantly in focus, and continue to consider how it might shape your data.

Coffey suggests a different and productive way of thinking about these issues. Instead of trying to locate oneself on a participant–observer continuum, she argues that we should be actively reflexive about the ethnographic selves that we create and live during and following observation:

The choices between involvement and immersion, rapport and over-rapport, familiarity and loss of self are often too starkly drawn to accurately reflect the full range of chosen and imposed identities, assumed during and beyond the field. The issue is not necessarily one of conversion, immersion or not, but a recognition that the ethnographic self is the outcome of complex negotiations. Moreover the definition and location of the self is implicitly a part of, rather than tangential to, the ethnographic research endeavour. One of the strengths of ethnographic enquiry is the real involvement of the fieldworker in the setting under study. A weakness is not the possibility of total immersion, but a failure to acknowledge and critically (though not necessarily negatively) engage with the range of possibilities of position, place and identity. (1999: 36)

### **Identity Work**

What kind of identity, status or role shall I try to adopt?

What impression should I try to create?

How should I act?

These questions all concern the ‘ethnographic self’ which Coffey identifies and, as with the participant–observer question, you will not be able to decide them once and for all in advance. They also carry similar difficulties, in the sense that you may be unable to control the ways in which your identity, status or role are perceived, and you may find yourself constantly trying to negotiate and renegotiate them. You will need to decide whether you admit your status as a researcher, for example. While most ethical codes would suggest that you should not conduct research in a covert or deceitful manner, and there have been extensive debates about the merits of covert or overt observation in the social sciences, you may find that an overt role is not always easy or possible to maintain. For example, if your setting is a busy café, or a railway station, how can you feasibly inform everyone of your status? Even in small groups, it is not always possible to preface every interaction or meeting with a few well chosen words about your role as a researcher.

You may, of course, take on other roles in your setting: you might join a factory as an assembly line worker, a school as a teacher, a club as a member, and so on. You will need to think about the implications of your role(s) for data generation and for your ability to move around in the setting. So, for example, a teacher clearly gets a rather specific perspective on classroom interaction. You will also need to think about the practicalities of adopting such a role: are you trained, can you perform the role adequately, will other characteristics – for example your age, your gender, your ethnicity, your religion, your known views or allegiances – influence your ability to take on the role or to be accepted in it?

There are of course other less formal aspects of your identity, status or role which you should think about. For example, what kind of demeanour are you going to adopt in your setting, and in different situations? How are you going to

behave? Are you going to be enquiring, accommodating, aggressive, reticent, garrulous, opinionated? What impression are you going to try to create? I am not suggesting that you can or should plan all of this in advance, and then simply act out a script. Even if you wanted to be that instrumental, the intellectual, social, emotional and bodily vigours and relationships of fieldwork will certainly inhibit your efforts, and of course you will not be the only person in the setting who is engaged in 'identity work' and in working out what you and others are about. You will make on-the-spot decisions about these issues, and sometimes you will act and react without make conscious decisions at all. But at the very least you should think about these issues both in advance and reflect about them as you go along, trying continually to be aware of your ethnographic self and to understand its relevance in the interactions, situations and settings you are studying, and for the knowledge and data you are generating.

### **Relationship Work**

**How should I go about developing relationships in the setting?**

**How can I gain acceptance?**

**How will I know whether I have been accepted?**

**What kinds of limits should I create?**

**How and when will I negotiate my departure from the setting?**

Developing relationships in your setting can be very difficult, and the way you do this is likely to have significant implications for the kind of access you actually achieve. The development of relationships in your setting will, at least in part, be governed by a range of social norms. So, for example, if you are observing in a café or a railway station, certain kinds of sociability and relationship building may seem more appropriate to some participants than others. You may risk being seen as over-friendly, or intrusive, or suspicious, or threatening, if you approach strangers for a chat in these settings. You may be at risk yourself. Aspects of your demeanour, and characteristics such as your gender, will have a bearing here also.

Whatever the setting, it is inevitable that the researcher will get on better with some participants than others, and may actually be 'adopted' by a 'key informant' who might then introduce them to other people or regions in the setting. The advantages and disadvantages of using key informants are well documented in the literature on participant observation (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Chiefly, you will need to think about the implications of using any one key informant. So, for example, in an organizational setting, would it matter if your key informant was an unpopular manager, a trades union representative, a woman who had made a formal complaint about being sexually harassed by a colleague? Would your relationship with this person affect your

standing and credibility (and therefore access to certain interactions and regions) with other members of the organization? Whether or not you identify a key informant, or a key informant identifies you (for we cannot always make choices about this), it is unrealistic to assume that you can maintain a completely neutral stance in the development of relationships in your setting, and so you must think through the implications of forming specific alliances. You must ask yourself whether you have gained ‘acceptance’ from all of those involved, and what exactly that acceptance might mean. Your answers to such questions will of course be tentative, since you simply will not always – or ever – be in a position to know how others see you, but you should ensure that you continue to analyse yourself, and your interactions with others, so that you can make judgements about these issues.

Relationships in research settings are likely to develop and change over time, in some cases becoming very close, and sometimes becoming difficult or fractured. Researchers may develop friendships, or spend large amounts of time in the company of people they dislike, observing or participating in activities which they do not care for. Negotiations and decisions about relationships involving trust, respect, mutual disclosure and obligation are part of the process as well as shaping the process and, of course, the data. All of this needs to be ‘handled’ somehow, and the immersion which characterizes observation, often over long periods of time, can make it all feel very intense. The researcher has to live through and manage these relationships and situations in a process which is simultaneously personal, emotional, physical and intellectual.

As part of that, the researcher has to organize their departure from the setting, and from the relationships they have built. It is worth thinking through how this might be ideally handled early on in the process because temporal factors are likely to be key elements in the development and negotiation of relationships. For example, do you expect to terminate relationships once your fieldwork is over? Do you anticipate any enduring contact, and if so what shape and form might this take? You are unlikely to be able simply to execute a predetermined plan in this respect, because relationships develop in dynamic more than instrumental ways, and because you will not be the sole author and controller of them. So, for example, you may not want to terminate your contact with people in your research setting when your fieldwork is over, or they may pursue continued contact with you. You might feel a moral responsibility to maintain contact and perhaps to provide feedback or support, rather than ‘cutting and running’ with your data. On the other hand, people in your setting may feel they have given you enough, and that any overtures towards further contact which you might make would be ultimately exploitative.

However, although decisions about these matters will be situational and contingent, it is not helpful to begin your research without any clear ideas about them. You need to have a sense of what you will expect of yourself and others over time, so that this forms part of the understanding on which your relationships develop, and so that people in the setting can make judgements about what their involvement might entail.

### ***Developing your Skills***

Observation clearly requires a complex set of intellectual and social skills, and you will need to think about how you can develop these. Recognizing what they might need to be, on the basis of the discussion above, is an important start. You can certainly follow the advice about interviewing set out in the previous chapter, and in particular develop your skills in listening, remembering, balancing talking and listening, observing, recording data and making fieldnotes. Getting by in a setting may require you to develop specific skills for use in that setting, and will certainly mean you need to be able to interact easily and effectively with a whole range of people.

As with any research method, it is important to practise – perhaps through a pilot study – and to critically scrutinize your early attempts, so that you can develop and improve.

## **TURNING OBSERVATIONS INTO DATA**

It is quite a task to turn, for example, your experiences of living and interacting in a setting for a year or so into ‘data’. There is the problem of the sheer bulk of material, information, impressions, which you will generate, and how to select from it. However, also you will have to engage with the question of how such diverse, experiential and sensuous material, can become social scientific data of a kind which you can use to construct a convincing or meaningful argument. This is a problem for other qualitative methods too, but it is more often in relation to observational and participatory methods that researchers feel most strongly the sheer inadequacy of text and language.

### ***Deciding what Counts as Data***

How should I record my observations?

What should I record?

When should I do it, and how often?

In the previous chapter we examined some of the processes qualitative researchers should go through in order to transform interview interactions into what they consider to be data. These questions, about what count as data, how you produce and recognize data, and construct them in a form which you can analyse or systematize in some way, apply with equal resonance to observational methods. In fact, the issues often appear more complex in relation to observation, because the researcher may be forming impressions and developing interpretations on the basis of a more variable and sometimes less tangible range of interfaces with the



social world – it can all feel much more vague, fluid and arbitrary. Therefore, all the questions asked about what counts as data in relation to interviews (outlined in Chapter 4) apply here also.

Researchers who use observational methods, as discussed, are usually interested in non-verbal elements of their research settings as well as verbal interactions, accounts and discourse. They may also be more explicitly concerned with developing a reflexive analysis of their ‘selves’ and seeing this as part of their data more than is expected in interview methods, where immersion in a setting is not a defining characteristic.

The ‘how’ questions about recording observations are similar to those for qualitative interviewing, in the sense that you will need to make decisions about whether to make notes while you are observing or to write up ‘fieldnotes’ at some point following your observations. You might want to consider making audio or video recordings, taking photographs or creating diagrams. These decisions must be taken in the context of grounded critical judgements about what each can offer in relation to your research and its context, and what the limitations are, and you should retain a healthy scepticism, as discussed in Chapter 4, about the ‘objectivity’ and totality of some apparently literal methods like audio- and video-recording. You will need to think about the form of the data produced by the different recording methods, and about what kinds of subsequent analyses will therefore be possible. Your decisions will also be influenced by practical matters such as what recording methods are possible in the setting (for example, audio-recording may not work very well in very noisy settings, or may be forbidden), and what your role allows you to do (for example, an assembly line worker may have little opportunity to make notes or a video while observing). If you have taken the contentious decision to perform covert observation, then some of the more obtrusive methods of simultaneous recording will not be available to you. And of course your chosen method(s) will have an influence on your setting and the interactions within it, just as your own presence does. So, for example, your presence and role may be interpreted variously depending upon whether you view everything through your camcorder, whether you keep breaking off conversations to make jottings in your notebook, whether you are taking photographs, and so on.

Your chosen method of recording will of course influence what you are able to record. So, for example, a video-recording will give you visual images and possibly a soundtrack, but will not say anything about your own interpretations of the setting, your feelings about what was happening, and so on. Of course many observers use more than one method of recording, and most make fieldnotes or a field diary of some kind, which records their observations and interpretations in a more or less reflexive manner. Given the premium placed on the experiential nature of observation, it is vital to ensure that whatever data recording methods you are using, they do help you to observe, record and analyse your own role in and experience of the setting and its interactions. In my view, fieldnotes are essential for this purpose, whether or not you use other methods as well. Remember that if you are behind a camcorder making a video-recording, you will not also be in the picture. Although this seems obvious, the point is that the use of a cam-

order may construct a rather artificial separation between you and your setting (we discuss these issues more fully in Chapter 6).

Substantive issues about what you record, in the sense of what themes you choose to write about in your fieldnotes, or where you choose to point your camera or your microphone, must be tied in with your research questions, or your intellectual puzzle, which means you must have a self-conscious sense of ‘what it is you really want to know about’, while you are observing and recording. Your preparation in answer to the earlier question ‘what am I looking for in the setting?’ will help you here and, as with qualitative interviewing, it needs to be a form of preparation which allows you to be innovative and flexible in your vision when you are in the field, rather than blinkering you by imposing a very rigid set of pre-conceptions. It is worth reiterating, however, that you will be being naïve if you think you can produce a complete or literal description of your setting and that therefore you do not have to prepare to ‘look for’ anything at all. You will inevitably be making a record of your observations which is structured around certain themes, issues, interests and ways of seeing. This means that you will be selective both in terms of omitting what you consider to be irrelevant, but also in how you choose to frame what you do observe and record. It is therefore imperative that you are clear about what your interests are, what your framework is, as well as how and why you are recording observations around them.

While observational researchers may use a range of methods to record or construct ‘data’ from their observations, including audio- or video-recordings, photographs, maps and diagrams, many would argue that their most significant activity is the writing of fieldnotes, so it is worth discussing this here.

### **Making Fieldnotes**

How should I make my fieldnotes?

What am I producing? What is the status of fieldnotes?

Emerson et al. argue that fieldnotes are:

writings produced in or in close proximity to ‘the field’. Proximity means that fieldnotes are written more or less *contemporaneously* with the events, experiences and interactions they describe and recount . . . Fieldnotes are a form of *representation*, that is, a way of reducing just-observed events, persons and places to written accounts. And in reducing the welter and confusion of the social world to written words, fieldnotes (re)constitute that world in preserved forms that can be reviewed, studied and thought about time and time again. (2001: 353)

However, they point out that there are differences between ethnographers in their view of what fieldnotes represent, and how they should be constituted. This means that there are choices to be made. There is not simply one way to produce fieldnotes, and the choices which a researcher makes about them will partly reflect,

partly constitute, their methodological and theoretical orientation. So, for example, you may regard fieldnotes as ‘raw data’ which is gradually built up into a data set which you can then analyse, perhaps drawing excerpts from it for inclusion in your polished, written account. Alternatively, you may regard fieldnotes as more developmental devices for formulating your understanding of your setting, for documenting your ‘hunches’, and for developing and testing out your analytical ideas. You may incorporate your own perceptions, everyday interpretations, experiences and so on into your fieldnotes, or alternatively you might feel that you should keep these separate from your observations of others. Your decisions about these kinds of issues will be guided by whether you view your task as one of data excavation or construction (see Chapters 3 and 4) – whether or not ‘the field’ exists ‘out there’ ready to be observed, or it is constructed through your own observational presence, practices and products (Emerson et al., 2001; Atkinson, 1992).

How you write your fieldnotes therefore clearly depends on what you consider those fieldnotes to represent. You will need to decide whether you wish to include detailed descriptions of what has happened, discussion of your own feelings and impressions, your own analytical ideas, and so on. If you want to create a detailed catalogue of events, or your own role in the research process, then you will need to write fieldnotes at frequent intervals. Decisions you make at this stage will determine whether and how well you can ‘read’ (in an analytical sense) your fieldnotes now and later, and in particular whether you can engage in *literal*, *interpretive* or *reflexive* readings, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Whatever you decide, you will need to work out the best format for your notes, including practical questions like whether you jot them into a note book, onto scraps of paper, record them electronically, whether you ‘paste-in’ other materials, and so on. You will need to ensure that they are appropriately indexed and annotated so that you can retrieve, locate and contextualize them in ways which are consistent with your understanding of what they represent.

## **ETHICAL ISSUES IN OBSERVATION**

Many of the debates about the ethics of qualitative research have taken place around the issue of observation and, in particular, the question of whether covert observation can in any circumstances be regarded as ethically acceptable (Bulmer, 1982; Homan, 1991). While choices about covert or overt observation are very important, these should not overshadow the overt observer’s engagement with the more ‘routine’ range of ethical matters discussed in relation to research design and qualitative interviewing (see Chapters 2 and 4). So, for example, questions about the ethics of your overall research practice and where you derive your ethical position from, or questions about the way in which you build and maintain relationships in the field, the power dynamics which operate and your role in them, the issue of informed consent and your rights over the data and analysis, are all central in the practice of observation. Some are raised in particularly sharp form such as, for example, the gaining of informed consent which can be

very difficult to achieve – even for the overt observer – in a complex and multi-faceted social setting.

In observational research, then, all of the questions about ethics raised in Chapters 2 and 4 apply. There are, however, some additional and more specific issues which you should consider if you are planning to use observational methods.

### ***Ethical Fieldwork Practice***

How far is my fieldwork practice ethical?

What does ethical fieldwork look like?

How do I judge what is ethical fieldwork?

You will need to work out your answers to these questions in the same way as suggested in Chapter 4 in relation to interviewing, and some of the answers will probably be the same especially around how you ask questions and elicit talk from people you observe. As Murphy and Dingwall point out, ‘research participants may experience anxiety, stress, guilt and damage to self-esteem during data collection’ (2001: 340). Whilst this applies to interviewees also, the difference is that in observational studies people may be ‘on view’ for much longer periods of time and in a wider range of activities, and therefore the researcher’s capacity to do harm in the process of data generation is greatly increased. Of course the greater time investment might allow the researcher to make better judgements about how to reduce harm, as well as giving them more opportunities in which to do this. Either way, you will need to be making very many on-the-spot ethical and moral decisions, possibly over very long periods of time.

The fact that observational studies often involve the development of close relationships in the field also raises some specific issues. Some of these relate to questions about reciprocity, mutuality and (in)equality in relationships. It may be inappropriate to assume that reciprocal relationships can or should be developed. The people you observe may simply not want that level of involvement with you and your research, and if they do, you need to consider carefully whether you can or wish to offer this, especially in the light of your ‘ethnographic self’ and your stance on exiting from your setting, discussed above. Murphy and Dingwall remind us that: ‘participants may form close relationships with the observer and experience loss when the study is completed and the observer withdraws’ (2001: 340). On the other hand: ‘participants are not always particularly interested in follow-up and researchers must be wary of further burdening them with expectations of intense involvement, arising more from their own need for affirmation than from any need or desire among the participants themselves’ (2001: 344).

Questions about how close your field relationships should be, and what

form they should take, may very well arise, and your answers to these will depend not only on what you think is good for the data set you are generating, and for your ‘ethnographic self’, but also on the source and nature of your ethical judgements which, as I argued in the previous chapter, you should subject to critical and contextual scrutiny (see Coffey, 1999; Murphy and Dingwall, 2001). In essence, you will need to develop a self-conscious and situated moral practice, rather than expect simply to be able to follow a code of ethnographic ethical conduct.

### ***Gaining Informed Consent***

Have I gained informed consent from all participants?

I began to outline some of the challenges posed by the concept of informed consent in the previous chapter, and in this chapter I have already pointed to some of the difficulties of negotiating access with every participant in a setting. While I would not advocate covert observation, it is important to note that apparently overt observational studies may involve covert elements. For example, consent may not have been gained from everyone, for practical reasons, and therefore not all participants may be aware that they are being observed. But also the observer may observe ‘private’ events and interactions, either surreptitiously or unintentionally, in an otherwise overt observational study. Just as interviewees may reveal more than they intend, to a sympathetic and empathetic researcher (see Chapter 4), so participants in an observational study may say or reveal more than they are comfortable with on reflection. You may have to make difficult moral choices about what you can count as data. You will need to be active in your assessments of this kind of situation, rather than assuming that advance consent, or consent from some participants, covers all eventualities.

Similarly, questions about confidentiality will need to be given careful and active thought. For example, your research setting is unlikely to be an entirely public place, where all goings on are entirely transparent and available to all participants. Instead, you will gain insights and knowledge which are not shared by everyone, and you will have to decide what to do with these in everyday situations, as well as in your data analysis (ethical issues in data analysis and presentation are discussed in Chapter 9). In some cases you will have to decide whether to proceed in an interaction as though you do not have a piece of knowledge that you do have, or risk breaching its confidentiality because you do not know whether it is known to all others. Proceeding as though you do not know something that you do may make you feel foolish, or affect your credibility with other participants. These kinds of decisions are not easy, and are always contextual. They demand an active moral practice.

## CONCLUSION

Some of the most useful and challenging debates about qualitative methods have been on ethnography and observation and the issues they raise, and there is a wealth of experience, reflection and craft knowledge which can be drawn upon and learned from in this respect (see especially Atkinson et al., 2001).

In this chapter we have considered some of the key 'difficult' questions which are raised by observational methods. As with interviewing, it is not a method upon which a researcher should embark lightly as it raises a number of challenges. However, it can be hugely productive, rewarding and involving. In my view, it needs careful planning and preparation, even though it is a highly situational method, and most of your key decisions will be made in context and in action.

## FURTHER READING

There is a great many useful accounts of 'life in the field', but the most useful general texts in my view are: Atkinson et al.'s *Handbook of Ethnography* (2001); Hammersley and Atkinson's *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (1995), which is a highly accessible and practical guide; Lofland and Lofland's *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis* (1984); Silverman's *Interpreting Qualitative Data* (2001); and Coffey's *The Ethnographic Self* (1999).

# 6

## Using Visual Methods and Documents

In this chapter we shall examine the use of documents and visual methods. In fact, these are two distinct approaches, although they have connections particularly in the use of photography which produces at the same moment a document – the photograph – and a visual image. I think there is great scope for extending the use of documentary and particularly visual methods in social research, and for considering visual, sensory and documentary dimensions in formulating our research questions.

The analysis of documentary sources is a major method of social research, and one which many qualitative researchers see as meaningful and appropriate in the context of their research strategy. The idea of documentary research used to conjure up a mental image of a researcher digging around in a dusty archive among historical documents, but in fact there are many different ways of generating data through documents, including using the Internet, and there are many different types of documents. Some documents exist already, prior to the act of research upon them. Others can be generated for or through the research process. Some examples of the first type are: Acts of Parliament; Congressional papers; insurance policies; bank statements; accounts and balance sheets; company reports; wills; minutes of meetings; books, manuals and other publications; diaries; letters; shopping lists; computer files and documents; newspapers and magazines; rough notes and scribbles; menus; advertisements, websites and other materials available on the Internet and World Wide Web. Some examples of documents which can be generated for or through the research process are: diaries; time diaries; written accounts and stories; biographies; pictures and drawings; charts; tables and lists. Such documents can be generated by you as the researcher, or you can ask people or bodies you are researching to generate them for or with you.

Most of these examples are text-based documents, although many of them will also contain non-text-based elements which may be of interest to the researcher (for example, the graphics and layout of newspapers and magazines). Documents are usually considered to be text-based, but they are not necessarily so, and some commentators will include non-text-based documents – especially photographs – in their discussions of documentary methods (see for example Scott, 1990).

Other non-text-based forms of visual data sit less comfortably under the heading of ‘documents’, and there are even less clearly established conventions for using them in social science research. Examples of these are film, video and television, dis-

plays, graphic representations, sculpture, drawings and pictures, visual art and artefacts, objects, bodies, style, spatial organization, diagrams, ‘cognitive maps’ (that is, diagrams which attempt to map out such things as thought processes, or sets of social interactions), and so on. These kinds of visual resources have been underexploited in social science research, and photographs have tended to be seen as the primary form of visual data (see Emmison and Smith, 2000, for a critique of the dominance of photographs in visual methodology).

There has also been some confusion about whether, when we talk about using visual data, we are referring to visual data sources (phenomena which occur or are located in the visual and spatial, rather than in words and text), or visual research methods (visual ways of researching), or visual data products (visual ways of recording or presenting data). These are ontological and epistemological distinctions, concerning what we see as meaningful or elemental components of the social world (ontology), and how we think we can know them (epistemology). Of course these are tied together, as they are with any methodology, because what we think exists influences how we see it, and conversely how and where we look influences what we can see.

Confusion and debate about these issues have arisen in part because the development of visual methodologies has occurred in a different and more technique-led way than with, for example, interviewing and observation. Visual methods have sometimes been more tightly harnessed to changing technological capabilities than to epistemological debate. As Loizos has warned: ‘It is easy to get carried away by the idea of “making a video”, and to end up letting the technology, or the excitement, dominate the research’ (2000: 106). The danger is that debate occurs around what it is that technology can do, with less focus on what it is about the visual that we are interested in, and how we are doing the visualizing. Emmison and Smith argue that ‘the inability to see beyond the use of photography . . . has been the major impediment to the development of a vibrant tradition in visual research . . . Visual data should be thought of not in terms of what the camera can record but of what the eye can see’ (2000: 2–4).

The focus on ‘what the eye can see’ is partly a movement against what some might see as the extraordinary dominance of talk and text in our research imaginations and methods, extraordinary because of the one-dimensional nature of this foray into, or construction of, what most would agree is a multi-dimensional, multi-sensory ‘reality’. The idea that everything we are interested in exists in language or text, or is expressible in those ways, and that we can explore it using words or reading text, can be argued to be a rather limited and uncreative one. There has been a welcome increase in the amount of interest in visual data and method, and there is a good and developing range of sources on which would-be visual researchers can draw (for example, Ball and Smith, 1992 and 2001; Prosser, 1998; Emmison and Smith, 2000; Bauer and Gaskell, 2001; Pink, 2001; Plummer, 2001). However, interest in the visual and in visual methods is still not widespread, as Ball and Smith comment ‘the visual dimension is beginning to occupy an established *corner* in ethnographic work. Visual ethnography is emerging as a distinct but diverse specialism’ (2001: 309, emphasis added).

However, there are dimensions of the visual that are not encapsulated in the



idea of ‘what the eye can see’. Recent developments in ‘visual ethnography’ take the debate further than this (see especially Jenks, 1995; Pink, 2001). Pink, for example, argues that:

Material objects are unavoidably visual, but visual images are not, by definition, material. Nevertheless, the intangibility of an image that exists as verbal description or is imagined makes it no less ‘real’ . . . The rupture between visibility and reality is significant for an ethnographic approach to the visual because it implies that reality cannot necessarily be observed visually’. (2001: 23)

Memories, dreams, thoughts, plans, may thus be visual but not visible. This directs our attention to how the visual is embedded in the social, how it works, how we work with it, and so on. It suggests a need for methodological creativity, because taking a photograph or shooting a film will not capture what we seek. This represents an ontological interest in the visual, and we can of course extend this into a fuller sensory agenda, for example, how things feel, smell, taste, sound, and so on. Although there is interest in these areas, it is not widespread among qualitative researchers and is instead concentrated in specific disciplinary domains, including those as diverse as cognitive psychology, sociology of ‘the body’ and processes of embodiment (Scott and Morgan, 1993; Stoller, 1997; Coffey, 1999), and aspects of the study of ‘material culture’ or the anthropology of the senses (Howes, 1991; Classen, 1993; Tilley, 1999, 2001).

These ontological concerns with the visual and the sensory raise methodological challenges that are not resolved with an epistemology based on what the eye can see (or nose can smell for that matter). If you wish to conduct research in these areas, you will need to think creatively about the issues raised. You should consider how you might use any of the methods discussed in this book (and elsewhere) – not just visual ones – to explore these interests.

In this chapter I focus for the most part on the use of visual methods, as well as the use of documents. These methods can usefully inform qualitative projects where interviews or observation are chosen as the primary methods. In other words, a visual or sensory ‘gaze’ should not necessarily be confined to the generation and use of wholly visual data. We may need to use other methods – for example, interviews – to understand some elements of the visual. We may also wish to generate visual or sensory data via those methods, for, as Pink points out, the visual and the conversational are closely intertwined: ‘Conversation is filled with verbal references to images and icons. People use verbal description to visualize particular moralities, activities and versions of social order (or disorder). Sometimes informants refer to absent images (including photographs) or they might introduce material images or objects into a conversation (2001: 71).

Interview methods might well involve systematic visual observation of aspects of the interviewee’s dress, demeanour and non-verbal behaviour, use of space, spatial context and so on. Observation in a busy hospital ward might include the predominance of a smell of disinfectant or the sounds of people, bodies and equipment, as well as aspects of spatial and temporal organization such

as where beds, patients and visitors are located, what kinds of movements occur, in what sequences and at what times.

Therefore, documentary, visual and other methods of data generation may overlap in a range of ways. For example, in interviewing and observation, a researcher may very well produce documents such as fieldnotes and transcripts, or visual data such as video and film, for analysis as part of these methods. We have seen that the idea that observations and interviews become *data* when they are transformed into text is a very influential one in the social sciences. This probably has the effect of over-emphasizing the inherent credibility of documentary and particularly textual data, and under-playing that of visual and other non-text-based forms of data. The implication is that text has a superior or concrete and indisputable quality, but you should not uncritically accept such a claim about *any* document, including transcripts of interviews or observational fieldnotes – whether or not you yourself produced it. Instead, you should ensure that you subject all documents, including those you have produced, to exactly the same degree of critical scrutiny. And of course you should do the same with non-documentary visual data.

## DOCUMENTS AND VISUAL METHODS: LOGIC AND RATIONALE

Why might I want to use or generate documents?

Why might I want to use visual methods?

As I have hinted above, you should resist using visual methods if the appeal is simply to do with the technology, or because you fancy making a film. Before you cost into your budget some enormously expensive photographic equipment consider that, as with any method, you must consider the logic and rationale of the approach you intend to take on ontological and epistemological grounds. Remember Loizos's warning about getting carried away with technology, and note also that Emmison and Smith argue that: 'photographs may be helpful sometimes in recording the seen dimensions of social life. Usually they are not necessary' (2000: 4). Using documents does not normally inspire such unbridled enthusiasm, but the same kinds of questions need to be asked. Here are some possible answers.

First, if you choose to use documents or visual methods, you may have an *ontological* position which suggests that written words, texts, documents, records, objects, visual or spatial phenomena or aspects of social organization, shape, form, and so on, are meaningful constituents of the social world in themselves (you may see them as more meaningful than, for example, verbal utterances), or you may be interested in the processes by which they are produced or consumed, or you may believe that they act as some form of expression or representation of relevant elements of the social world, or that we can trace or 'read' aspects of the social world through them.

A range of interests is incorporated here. For example, you may be interested in objects and things as forms of 'material culture' involving the expression of something which is not based in language nor necessarily reducible to it. Tilley explains this as follows:

We know that things are not texts or words and that to attempt to communicate even the simplest sentence such as 'it is raining' with things would be a completely redundant exercise. Things communicate in a different way, such that if I could say it, why would I dance it, or paint it, or sculpt it? etc. Things often 'say' and communicate precisely that which cannot be communicated in words . . . Objects relate to far wider perceptual functions than words, they have multidimensional qualities relating to sight, sound, smell, taste and touch, enabling remarkably subtle distinctions to be made . . . Such distinctions are rarely unidimensional, but relate to a thickly textured phenomenological experience of the thing with which we may engage with the full range of our senses: a synaesthetic interaction and knowledge. Things perform work in the world in a way that words cannot. (2001: 259–260)

This implies an interest in things in and of themselves, not simply as adjuncts to people or social interaction. Alternatively, you may view things, and visual phenomena, and documents as what Plummer calls 'accessories to a life story' – that is, visual and sensory elements or 'biographical objects' which help to convey personal or cultural biographies (Plummer, 2001: 48 and 49–58; Hoskins, 1998). You may have an interest in a broad range of visual or spatial phenomena. Emmison and Smith (2000) suggest four broad forms: images, signs and representations; objects and material culture; built environment; people and bodies in mutual interaction. Or you may be interested in how the visual is embedded in the social, both tangibly and intangibly.

Second, related to your ontological position, if you are using visual or documentary methods, you will have an *epistemological* position which suggests that texts, documents, written records, visual documents, visual records, objects, artefacts and phenomena, or visualization (as a process more than a thing) can provide or count as evidence of these ontological properties. For some, this will extend to the view that words and text cannot express all of the elements of the visual in which we are interested, and that research must involve processes of visualization. For others, a textual or verbal 'depiction' or 'construction' of visual observations will be satisfactory and may indeed be necessary for exploring intangible visual images and practices. You might take the view that you can 'read' these phenomena in a literal sense, for example, they *are* the evidence. That might be done through, for example, an ethnomethodological approach in which a video-taped sequence of 'courses of action in time and space' might be scrutinized 'locally' or 'internally'. As Ball and Smith suggest: 'videotaped data permits close analysis of the local intelligibility of objects in an environment in which the visual intertwines with the spoken' (2001: 310).

Literal 'readings' of visual data and documents should not extend to treating them as though they are direct representations or reflections of 'reality' or

straightforward ‘factual records’. Documents and visual images are always constructed, and visualization is an accomplishment involving perspective and directional gaze, so none of these is directly and straightforwardly ‘evidential’ or ‘representational’, even though photographs and film for example may exude a particularly tenacious grasp on our enthusiasm for realist notions of representation. As many commentators have pointed out, the idea that ‘the camera cannot lie’ is unconvincing, and the advent of digital technology in particular, with all its capabilities for construction and manipulation of photographic images, has perhaps finally discredited this notion (see Emmison and Smith, 2000; Loizos, 2000; Ball and Smith, 2001; Plummer, 2001).

In a more interpretive sense, you may feel that documents, visual images, objects, visualization, and so on need to be ‘read’ and interpreted in the context of, for example, how they are produced, used, what meanings they have, what they are seen to be or to represent culturally speaking. It is tempting, as suggested above, to see documents as providing ‘hard’ or especially legitimate evidence, but your epistemology should be more critical than this, and you should exercise a high degree of sophistication and scepticism in the reading and interpretation of documents and visual data.

Your epistemological position may extend to a reflexive reading of visual data and documents, so that you actively use an understanding of your own role and experience in generating or operating with them to explore how they work or what they mean (see Pink, 2001).

Third, data on the phenomena you are interested in may simply *not be available in other forms* and you may therefore choose to use documents or visualization/visual methods. For example, you may be interested in historical events to which there are no living witnesses, but which are documented in some form, or related to which, visual images exist. Alternatively, you may be unable to find anyone appropriate to interview, or unable to locate a ‘field’ or ‘setting’ to enter. Documents or visual data may provide a way of gaining access to, for example, a set of events or processes, which you cannot observe (for example, because they have already occurred, because they take place in private) without recourse to verbal descriptions and reconstructions. If you see texts or visual and spatial images as ontologically meaningful in themselves, then your corresponding epistemological position may be that these simply cannot be ‘known’ in their entirety or captured in other media, such as verbal descriptions.

Fourth, as I have already suggested, you may wish to use documents or visual data *alongside several other methods* of data generation. Sometimes, documents are used to verify or contextualize or clarify personal recollections and other forms of data derived from, for example, interviewing and observation. You might construct visual images and accounts, or examine visual data and artefacts, as well as conducting interviews and observations (including, of course, observations of visual and spatial phenomena and processes). You may actively use documents or visual data in interviews and observations. For example, you might ask people their responses to a set of photographs, or images, or film, or ask them to show you their own photographs. Or you might give them a camera and

ask them to take photographs to discuss with you later, or take pictures of them which will form the basis for a future interview (Plummer, 2001). Alternatively you might ask them to read and comment on a document, or ask them to produce a document such as a drawing or diagram, cognitive map or whatever. Documents and visual data may provide an alternative angle on, or add another dimension to, your research questions. Remember, however, that the integration of different methods is not an entirely straightforward matter, and you will need to revisit the questions posed in Chapter 2 about how you might integrate them, and what you are expecting to achieve in so doing.

Finally, you might choose to use certain documents or visual images because you know them to exist or be available. This is a pragmatic answer to the question, implying as it does that you might use documents or visual data *because they are there*, but in some forms of research – particularly historical research – part of the process does involve rooting around to find whatever is there. If you discover that relevant documents or visual images exist, or that you can gain easy access to them, this may drive your decision to use them. Certainly, research based on the use of already existing documents and visual data needs to work itself, and its intellectual puzzle, around what is there and what is possible and sometimes the discovery of documents and images will allow the researcher to tackle supplementary research questions. However, although in these cases the process of linking questions to methods may occur in a different sequence, there is no less need to ensure that the decisions taken about data sources and method are systematic and strategic. At the very least, you would not wish to use documents or visual data – whether or not they exist and are easy to access – if your ontological position suggests they represent nothing meaningful about the social world, or your epistemological position says that they do not count as evidence. You might also not wish to use them if they are only tangentially relevant, and you should be aware that scrutinizing large numbers of documents, or a wide range of types of visual data, can be very time-consuming and labour-intensive, as well as intellectually challenging.

## **COLLECTING AND GENERATING DOCUMENTS AND VISUAL DATA**

The generation and use of documents and visual data does not inherently involve the researcher in social interactions as do interviewing and observation, although of course equally it may. If in that sense the preparation for using these methods seems simpler, there are nevertheless some distinctive issues raised by them, and we shall consider some of the most important ones. Chiefly, these involve asking yourself critical questions about the nature of the sources you are using or generating, as well as questions about what it is you want from them, or expect to be able to get from them.

## ***Generating Knowledge from Documents and Visualization***

Am I collecting data (excavation)?

Am I generating data (construction)?

What do I expect documents and visualizations to be?

These questions are familiar by now, having been rehearsed in the previous two chapters. On the face of it, they may seem less relevant here, especially where the researcher is involved in ‘unearthing’ documents whether textual or visual, because this activity feels a lot like excavation and nothing much like construction. However, it is not that simple, not least because the excavation metaphor implies the retrieval of solid factual information which is (or was) naturally occurring. But all of these concepts may be problematic. It is unlikely that you will be expecting your documents to be full, factual descriptions or depictions, for a number of reasons including the following.

Documents, whether visual or textual, are constructed in particular contexts, by particular people, with particular purposes, and with consequences – intended and unintended. You may wish to investigate why they were prepared, made or displayed, by whom, for whom, under what conditions, according to what rules and conventions. You may wish to know what they have been used for, where they have been kept and so on. It is unlikely that you can ‘read’ all of this from the document alone, because it does not display ‘the facts’ about itself in this way. Furthermore, documents may be more or less detailed and comprehensive, they may or may not be authentic and genuine (what they purport to be), reliable, accurate, and so on. They may or may not be readily identifiable and available. For example, the relevant documents or visual images may well exist, but they may be so numerous, or so badly filed, or so disparate, as to make systematic retrieval and analysis of them very difficult to achieve without unlimited financial and temporal resources. You may want to gain access to only a small number of documents, but be unable to find what you want among an amorphous and messy bulk.

All these factors make the process of documentary analysis look less and less like ‘excavation’. The process of reading, understanding, translating and interpreting documents, selecting them, comparing them, and so on adds a further dimension of construction as well as reflexivity here, as Scott points out:

Textual analysis involves mediation between the frames of reference of the researcher and those who produced the text. The aim of this dialogue is to move within the ‘hermeneutic circle’ in which we comprehend a text by understanding that frame of reference from which it was produced, and appreciate that frame of reference by understanding the text. The researcher’s own frame of reference becomes the springboard from which the circle is entered, and so the circle reaches back to encompass the dialogue between the researcher and the text. (1990: 32)

All of these points apply equally to visual and textual documents. Maps and photographs, for example, are just as contextual, constructed and interpreted, as are diaries, letters, Acts of Parliament, and so on.

Visualization, where a researcher uses visual means to research visual phenomena, is more obviously about construction than is the collection of documents, involving as it does the active creation of some form of visual ‘record’ or representation. Notwithstanding this, journalistic and ‘fly on the wall’ forms of visualization sometimes aspire to provide factual records, but we should not uncritically accept claims of journalistic realism. As Loizos suggests when considering film as data:

First, it is likely to be of low visual fidelity; secondly, the sound quality may vary between the clearly audible and the scarcely comprehensible; thirdly, camera angles may not always be optimum to show the most significant details of an action sequence; and lastly, because of the general reduction of subtlety in such a record, it might be open to real misinterpretation about readings of mood and intention, in addition to whatever problems of interpretation the actual three-dimensional human behaviour (as opposed to the low-fidelity record) might have led to. Add to these difficulties the likelihood that the camera observes from a fixed position, and we have a recipe for courtroom drama. (2000: 104)

Therefore, it is probably more useful to think of documents and visual data as constructions rather than excavations. Indeed, you might see them as embedded in or constitutive of social or cultural relations, rather than revealing facts about them. The key question in this case will be, what do you need to help you to understand this embeddedness, or to help you to make the appropriate inferences? This raises a question which you will need to resolve about whether the documents or visualization are enough, or whether you need other data, for example verbal or textual data, to help you to understand how documents or things are used, or constitute social relations, or whatever.

### ***Working out How to Visualize***

What does visualization involve?

How should I visualize?

How should I record my visualizations?

What does the camera fail to ‘see’?

Thinking about how to use visualization as a technique involves many of the same issues as arise with observational methods (see Chapter 5). For example, you may wish to select a ‘setting’ in which to conduct your visual observations, and you will thus need to think through questions about what that setting represents

and what type of data it can yield. You will need to think about what types of visual phenomena you are interested in, and about how they might best be observed and recorded. Will you need to observe movements, colours, layouts, spatiality? Will you need to take measurements, perhaps spatial or temporal? Will you want to observe from a fixed position, or move around? You will need to bear in mind the limitations of observing from a fixed position for some purposes, and be aware that the use of cameras, camcorders and so on will structure and frame both what you see and what gets recorded, in particular ways. They are unlikely to be adequate, in themselves, for recording your visual observations. Do you also need to observe and record sounds, smells, bodily factors, talk, and so on? Will you need to know what is going on just outside the camera's or your own field of vision? Do you need to observe a wider context than can be 'captured' through a lens including the social relations in which the visual is embedded? If your answer to these questions is yes, then you will need to think about how to make visual fieldnotes, sketches or drawings, as well as about what supplementary data and methods you might employ.

In a sense, then, the task is twofold. First, a researcher must learn *how to visualize*, and this is not just a matter of technique, albeit skill is an important dimension here, but relates to ontological questions about what the visual is or represents, and epistemological ones about how it can be known. As I have suggested above, there are different possible positions here, so learning how to visualize means recognizing what your position is, that is, what you think can be seen, what seeing something means, and how seeing can be done. Only then can you or should you deal with the second question, which is *how best to record your visualizations*, or to construct visual materials. Visual technology will not teach you how to visualize, and will not do the visualizing for you. Instead, it may help you to record or construct visual materials, but never in a directly representational, or 'objective', or complete way.

### ***The Need for Focus in Documentary and Visual Research***

How do I handle selectivity and perspective?

Just as a qualitative interviewer or observer needs to be forearmed with a good sense of what they are looking for, so too does the researcher using documents or visual images. Anyone who has fulfilled the stereotype of spending lengthy periods in a dusty archive, or indeed on the Internet, will confirm this. It is little use spending six months reading documents, and then deciding at the end of that period what it is you were looking for. And as Loizos points out: 'Thousands of video recordings are made in community research settings, but many of them are probably never watched seriously, and may have the status of research and action "fashion accessories" and have been a waste of time and money' (2000: 106).

As I have emphasized, you will need to begin by asking yourself what you



expect documents or visual data to be able to tell you about, in an ontological and epistemological sense, and in particular to consider which parts of your intellectual puzzle they might potentially help you to address.

You must work out the answer to this question, so that you can develop a clear set of principles for dealing with selectivity and perspective in your handling of documents, visual materials, and processes of visualization. As I suggested in relation to both observation, and interviewing, you will inevitably be operating in a way which is both selective and uses a particular perspective, and you need to be clear and consistent about how you do this. Just as with those other methods, you should develop a technique or mechanism for ensuring that you are doing this, and to help you to be systematic in recording what you have scrutinized.

### ***Relationship and Identity Work in Visualization***

How should I go about developing relationships?

How can I gain acceptance?

How should I act?

How shall I handle the relational (and practical) aspects of using visual equipment?

What is the significance of the social relations through which the data are generated?

Undertaking visual observation, and using or developing visual materials in interactive research processes like interviewing, involves the researcher in relationships as with any observational or interview based study (see Chapters 4 and 5). Aside from the usual issues about negotiating your role and status – your ‘ethnographic self’ (Coffey, 1999), consent and co-operation from participants, the use of cameras or camcorders may raise particular issues. These include negotiating people’s acceptance of and handling their reactions to visual technologies, and managing your own competence and use of the equipment while trying to interact with participants.

The visual equipment used is rarely itself seen in the visual products which emerge, yet its presence and operation are clearly part of the generative dynamics of the consequent data. Similarly, visual technologies can make it appear that the researcher is not really a part of the data, because they rarely appear in the film or photographs which emerge. This can make it more of a challenge to write yourself into your analysis, and understand your own role in the data. Yet it is possible to learn a great deal about the meaning of the visual through reflexive analysis of social relations in the field. The following extract from Pink’s discussion of her visual ethnography of women bullfighters illustrates these benefits very well.

As an unaccompanied woman at bullfighting receptions and public occasions and, at the time, still learning the language and unable to engage in any detailed conversation, I was grateful to have a role as ‘photographer’. My photography was endorsed by the organizers and was not problematic for participants since at any such public event a number of press photographers were expected to be present. Once my photographs of the receptions were printed, I showed them to the organizers and other participants with whom I was in contact. We discussed the event and the people who were present, and my informants often asked me for copies of particular images, usually of themselves with particular people, so that they could pass them on to their friends, colleagues or contacts within the bullfighting world. In this way I was able not only to gain feedback about the events that I had participated in as a photographer, but also to get a sense of the way that social relationships and alliances were mapped out and constructed within the bullfighting world. I did this by studying who wanted to be photographed with who during the events, and by tracking the collection and distribution of the copies of the images that my informants asked for. (2001: 66)

As with other methods, you will need to scrutinize these relational aspects of your data generation.

### ***Developing your Skills***

The range of methods covered in this chapter suggests the need for the development of a fairly extensive skills portfolio. For example, researchers using visual methods need to learn how to visualize, in all its complexity, just as interviewers and observers need to learn how to listen, remember, interact, observe, and so on. But visual researchers need those skills too. Visualization is very often done during interviews and observations, or as an adjunct to them, suggesting the need to use a number of complex skills at once. Practice is, of course, a very good idea. For those who wish to use visual technologies in generating visual data, there may be the need to acquire certain technical skills as well as skills in assessing both the capabilities and limitations of the technologies (and the user). Once again, practice is fundamental here.

Researchers using texts or non-text-based documents may also need to know how to visualize, as well as how to ‘read’ documents. They may also need to seek out and find documents in some cases, which may require certain ‘detective’ skills, and to select what is relevant from a mass of what is not, or what is authentic and so on. They may need to be able to recognize certain textual forms or genres, to be able to translate, and to judge or interpret physical aspects of documents including texture, age, and so on.

### ***Working out What is Possible***

Do appropriate documents or visual data exist, and can I gain access to them?

Can I generate appropriate documentary or visual data?

Many documentary researchers begin with these types of questions, since their intellectual puzzles sometimes have to be shaped around the availability of documentary evidence. But of course any researcher contemplating using documents or visual data should engage with such questions, and should set to work on the logistics of gaining access to the relevant materials. It is important to bear in mind the full range of practicalities here. You will need to work out the feasibility of doing what you want, and the value of what the documents or visual data can provide for your project in that context. We will return to these issues in our discussion of sampling in Chapter 7.

## TURNING DOCUMENTS AND THE VISUAL INTO DATA

When you first begin to engage with the question of how you turn your documents or your visual images into data, it may seem as though the task is simplest in relation to text-based documents. After all, there is a strong tendency among qualitative researchers to think of data as text, and the fact that text-based documents *already* take a textual form makes them look more like data than, for example, your own attempts at visualization in a research setting. However, such an assumption is based solely on the idea of a literal ‘reading’ of text-based documents; when you begin to ask yourself the difficult questions about what count as data which were explored in Chapter 4 in relation to qualitative interviewing, and Chapter 5 in relation to observation, a wider range of ways of deriving data from text-based documents becomes possible.

### ***Deciding What Counts as Data in Text-based Documents***

What counts as data in documents?

Do I wish to ‘read’ my documents in a literal, interpretive or reflexive manner?

There are a number of possible answers to these questions.

- 1 You may wish to view the text of a text-based document, in a *literal* sense, as data.
- 2 You may wish to include *other literal elements* of text-based documents apart from the text – for example, visual, layout and design elements – in your understanding of what counts as data.
- 3 You may wish to include *interpretive* elements of text-based documents – for example, factors relevant to or speaking of their context, production and consumption – in your understanding of what count as data.
- 4 Not all of the text-based elements contained in the documents will necessarily be meaningful to you as data.
- 5 You may wish to see other aspects of your interface with the documents – in a *reflexive* sense – as data.

Your answers to these questions will clearly influence what you treat as data, and how widely ‘outside’ the documents you will collect or generate data.

### ***Deciding What Counts as Data in Visual Documents, and Visualization***

What counts as data in visual documents?

What counts as data in visualization?

Do I wish to ‘read’ in a literal, interpretive or reflexive manner?

In answering these questions, the same issues involving literal, interpretive and reflexive readings apply. Visual documents can appear to be highly literal and representational, especially where they involve photographic images, although as I suggested above, the idea that ‘the camera cannot lie’ is now wholly discredited. However, if we want to engage in an interpretive reading of photographs, we can ask a range of questions about photographic images that move beyond what is contained in the image itself. For example, who or what is not in the photograph? Which phenomena or events are photographed, and which ones are not? We can ask questions about the circumstances under which the photograph was taken, whether and how it was ‘composed’, by whom, and so on. We can ask who owns or displays it, where and in what way. We can ask what meanings it has and for whom. There are many possibilities here, and the implication is that context and material which are outside the image are counted as data.

This same logic can be applied to visualization and, as suggested above, an interpretive approach might want to include quite a range of contextual factors as data. Furthermore, a reflexive reading of visual documents or visualization, as we have seen, will involve some scrutiny of your own perspective and involvement – the way you are reading your data, your positioning in your data, and so on.

Whatever your approach, you will need to ensure that you do indeed gather or generate the appropriate data including, in many cases, contextual and reflexive material.

### ***Deciding on the Form and Shape of your Data***

What form should my data take?

Once you have moved past the point where you view documents or visual images as simply data in themselves, you will begin to think about what it is that you want to take from them in the process of deriving data. This may mean taking, or copying, whole documents or images for subsequent analysis, but it may also

mean that you will select elements of them, record specific things about them (for example, this might be literal quotations from a document, or it might be written or visual notes about form, style and structure in visual images). You will clearly need to think carefully about what you expect from the literal, interpretive and reflexive dimensions, so that you can make certain that you collect and record in relevant ways. For example, if you are interested in literal wording, form and sequence in a text-based document, then you will need to devise a literal method of recording these. If you are interested in the location of a painting in an art gallery, and in the ways in which viewers respond to it, then you will need to record something other than the literal form and style of the painting. You might make maps and diagrams, count numbers of viewers, take photographs, make written fieldnotes. These strategies in their turn will produce forms of text- and non-text-based data for further analysis.

Make sure you consider the practicalities of your choices of recording strategy. For example, is it possible or desirable to make photocopies of all the documents you wish to analyse? Can you afford to do this, in terms of time and money? Will you be permitted to do this by the owners or keepers of the documents, by copyright legislation, and so on?

The dominance in the social sciences of textual forms of data analysis and presentation does pose some problems or challenges for those using visual methods. Tilley puts this very well in relation to the study of ‘material culture’:

The great paradox, or *aporia*, of all material culture studies is that to write about things is to transform, domesticate and strip away the fundamental non-verbal qualities of the things we are investigating through this very process . . . We cannot adequately capture or express the powers of things in texts. All we may conceivably hope to do is to evoke. This is why experimentation with other ways of telling, in particular with exploiting media that can more adequately convey the synaesthetic qualities of things, in particular the use of imagery and film, must become of increasing importance to the study of material forms in the future. (2001: 268)

This highlights very nicely the one or two-dimensionality of our ways of analysing and ‘telling’ in the social sciences, and if you have used visual methods, you may wish to think quite creatively about non-textual presentations, or more creative forms of textual presentation, which have a greater capacity to evoke the senses and to generate knowledge and understanding on those different levels (see Stoller, 1997). We shall return to these issues in our discussion of arguing and writing, in Chapter 9.

## **ETHICAL ISSUES IN THE USE OF DOCUMENTS AND VISUAL DATA**

Given the variety of ways in which visual methods and documents may be used, it is reasonable to suggest that all the points about ethics raised in relation to observation and interviewing apply here also, but there are distinctive issues too.

## ***Informed Consent and Permission to Use Visual Methods***

Have I gained the appropriate consent from all relevant parties?

Documents and visual data can take a very private or confidential form, and it can be difficult to establish informed consent for their use because they may refer to or implicate people other than their owners or keepers. You may feel that the person or body who is able to give you permission to use a set of documents does not actually have the moral authority to grant such use. Therefore, all the questions about ethical practice and informed consent apply equally to the use of documents and visual data. Permission to take photographs or to film may not equate to a rigorously construed informed consent, and it may be difficult to gain consent from all parties who end up in the photographs or film, or are affected by them.

## ***The Impact of Visual Media***

What impact might using these media have on participants?

Cameras and other forms of recording equipment can make people feel self-conscious, sometimes frightened or intimidated, or as though they are under surveillance. Equally they can prompt people to want to capture the limelight and 'be a star', without always fully appreciating the consequences.

Visual images can produce quite profound responses and reactions. Those who use visual methods as a way of eliciting talk, for example, in the discussion of 'family photographs' in interviews, will need to consider the range of responses, including sometimes highly emotional ones, that a trawl through a personal set of photographs can evoke. Part of the point of using photographs in this way may be precisely that they encourage multi-dimensional, highly detailed and sensitive recollections in interviewees, and thus produce very rich data. Sometimes, photographs might cause an interviewee to recall something previously forgotten, or something they might not normally wish to discuss in an interview.

The idea discussed above, that you might engage in more creative and visual ways of presenting your analysis, raises particular issues, because it may be very difficult to anonymize text-based documents, and impossible to conceal the identities of people in photographs and film. If you are generating your own documents or visual images, you will therefore need to scrutinize the ethics of this kind of production, especially, in relation to whether you have gained or can gain the informed consent of everyone involved. The fact that you are researching, and possibly presenting your analysis, via a wide range of senses means that questions of morality and ethics need to be thought through on all of those dimensions. The richer, more multidimensional data and analysis which you produce may

potentially be more intrusive, more damaging, more invasive of privacy, than other qualitative methods. (Ethical issues in the analysis of qualitative data are discussed more fully in Chapter 9.)

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has concluded our discussion of methods of generating qualitative data. It has focused on some of the distinctive issues raised by the use of documents, and visual methods, whilst drawing out some common threads with the previous discussions of interviewing and observation.

Social science interest in the visual, and in visualization, has been slow to develop in some areas, although of course anthropologists and ethnographers have a long-standing concern with these elements of culture. However, it offers immense possibilities which are firstly ontological and epistemological, that is about ways of comprehending, perceiving and knowing what the social world is about, and only secondly technical. Many experienced visual researchers warn against allowing visual methods to be technologically driven, or allowing our enthusiasm for visual media to overtake our strategic and methodological understandings.

We have spent some time discussing those ontological and epistemological dimensions, and in considering just what it is that we expect the visual, or documents, to represent in our research endeavours. That discussion of course leads us to consider questions about how we might sample or select our documents, visual images, or choose our setting for visualization, and so on. In the following chapter, we move the discussion on to these broader questions of sampling and selection which are fundamental to the use of any qualitative method.

## FURTHER READING

In recent years some important texts on visual methods have emerged. Pink's fascinating and thought-provoking *Doing Visual Ethnography* (2001) is particularly useful. Also useful are: Prosser's *Image-Based Research: A Sourcebook for Qualitative Researchers* (1998), Bauer and Gaskell's *Qualitative Researching with Text, Image and Sound* (2001), and Emmison and Smith's *Researching the Visual* (2000). There are also good discussions in Plummer's *Documents of Life 2* (2001), which is also helpful on documentary methods, and Denzin and Lincoln's *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2000). Scott's *A Matter of Record* (1990) continues to be a highly useful source on documentary research.

# 7

## Sampling and Selection in Qualitative Research

So far we have explored questions about research design, and examined three of the main methods used for generating qualitative data, but have said very little about how you decide whom you should interview, for example, or how many interviews you should conduct, or which or how many documents you should collect, or which and how many settings you should observe, or how you should select visual phenomena. Now we are going to move on to discuss these issues of sampling and selection.

In the broadest definition, sampling and selection are principles and procedures used to identify, choose, and gain access to relevant data sources (see Chapter 3) from which you will generate data using your chosen methods. These sources will belong to or relate to a relevant wider population or universe, and your sampling strategy will need to link the sources you choose meaningfully with that wider context. The principles and procedures used can be governed by alternative underlying logics, although the term ‘sampling’ is very often associated solely with a logic derived from general laws of statistics and probability, and used for quantitative surveys. This is unfortunate because in qualitative research the logic of probability is rarely employed, yet its strong association with the term ‘sampling’ means that alternative logics are less visibly practised and perhaps less well understood. Certainly, they are less well documented so that, with some notable exceptions, discussions of sampling are relatively absent from qualitative methods texts (examples of exceptions are Patton, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Silverman, 2000). However, qualitative research frequently does demand an alternative logic of sampling and selection, and in this chapter we will focus on difficult questions which researchers should ask themselves in order to establish what that logic should be and, as a consequence, by what principles and procedures their sampling and selection should be governed.

One of the central aims of the chapter is to dispel any notion that somehow rigorous or systematic sampling strategies are not really important in or relevant to qualitative research simply because it is often small-scale or not amenable to the logic of mathematical probability. On the contrary, I want to suggest that sampling and selection – appropriately conceived and executed – are vitally important strategic elements of qualitative research which have direct implications for whether and how generalization is consequently possible.



## THE LOGIC OF QUALITATIVE SAMPLING AND SELECTION

Qualitative research usually involves some form of sampling or selection, for two sets of reasons. The first are practical and resource-based issues. For example, if you are doing a study of family photographs, or of women's experience of politics, you are unlikely to be able to access all photographs ever taken of all members of one family, and you are equally unlikely to gain insights into the political experiences of all women even in one local or national state. You could of course focus right down, onto one branch of one family, or the membership of a political party in one region, and then it might be feasible to conduct a 'census' rather than select a sample, but of course you have already sampled by that stage, in selecting your family, branch, political party, region, and so on. The second set of reasons for sampling are to do with the important question of focus. Actually, you are probably not interested in the 'census' view, or trying to conduct a broad sweep of everything, so much as focusing in on specific issues, processes, phenomena, and so on. Remember that qualitative research is very often about depth, nuance and complexity, and understanding how these work. Therefore, the act of focusing through sampling is likely to be as strategic as it is practical.

### *The Purpose of Sampling in Qualitative Enquiry*

What work do I want my sample to do?

What is the wider universe or population from which I wish to sample?

What is the nature of my interest in this universe or population?

Essentially, the work you are asking of your sample is to help provide you with the data which you will need to address your research questions. There are two related elements here. First, through tapping into appropriate data sources, your sample should provide useful and meaningful empirical contexts, illustrations or scenarios. However, this is not just an empirical matter, since as we saw in Chapter 3, data sources mean different things in the context of different theoretical and epistemological approaches. Therefore, what is useful and meaningful needs to be seen in the context of how well it will allow you to generate data and ideas which advance your understandings, and these are always theoretically informed. If we take these two elements together, then you will want your sample to give you access to data that will allow you to develop an empirically and theoretically grounded argument about something in particular. Of course, that 'something in particular' will be your intellectual puzzle, and the focus of your research questions.

The combined theoretical and empirical considerations that come into play in sampling decisions, hinge upon the question of what you see as the nature and significance of the wider universe or population from which your sample is drawn.

The concept of *sampling* from a wider universe implies that selections other than the ones you have made would have been possible, and this means you need to have and to demonstrate a clear sense of the rationale for your choices.

This requires in the first instance that you work out in what way, and on what basis, data generated from your sample signify the wider population or universe in which you are interested. Much of the intellectual work involved in sampling and selecting concerns establishing an appropriate relationship between the sample or selection on the one hand, and the wider universe to which you see it as related on the other.

There are both empirical and theoretical elements to this issue. Empirically, your wider universe will involve, for example, the people, groups, countries, organizations, policies, discourses, social practices or activities in which you are interested. You may have more than one empirical focus. So, for example, in a project concerning social welfare in contemporary Europe you might be interested in: the total adult population of Europe; the governments of all European Union member states; all European social security legislation since 1945; and all social security recipients in specified countries. These will suggest a range of data sources, depending upon your methods and approach.

These kinds of empirical answers to questions about your wider population or universe are, of course, already grounded within your broad ontological perspective. So, for example, the fact that you see the social world as meaningfully made up of people, political and geographical entities and boundaries, legal and administrative frameworks or whatever, is a statement of ontology, as we discussed in Chapters 1 and 3.

These answers, then, are not somehow solely or neutrally empirical, and this should prompt you to reflect upon a second type of answer to the population or universe question: namely, answers which are directly and explicitly to do with social theory or social explanation and argument. Here you need to think about the wider universe of social explanation in relation to which you have constructed your research questions. About which bodies of social explanation, or theoretical debate – for example, theories of the ‘underclass’, theories of welfare regimes, theories of gender relations, postmodernist understandings of power, theories of development, conceptions of the self – will you want to have something to say on the basis of your project? Your decisions about the nature of your interest in a wider universe or population will make some sampling choices more sensible and meaningful than others.

For example, if your project concerns gender and, in particular, your concern is with theories of gender relations (rather than say the status of women, or women’s experiences), then you will presumably be interested either in a literal population or universe of gender relations, or in a population which will enable you to speak of gender relations in a more interpretive sense. You are probably very unlikely to perceive the social world in terms of a large set of gender relations from which you can simply draw a smaller representative sample of gender relations. Similarly, you are unlikely to see gender relations as straightforwardly embodied in, or personified by, women and men, in a way which would make it meaningful simply to draw a representative sample of people by gender. However,

you will have some sense of how a universe of gender relations might be constituted more theoretically, or interpretively (for example as *relations or interactions between*, say, women and men; as *discourses which construct subjects* of gender relations; as *structures of power* within which women and men are differentially located; as gendered *genetic messages and codes*; as distinctive male and female *aptitudes, attributes or psyches*; and so on).

Whichever applies, it must feed directly into your sampling strategy. It is these features which you will want to represent or encapsulate somehow in your sample. Or, more interpretively, you will want to be able to say something theoretically about these features on the basis of data analyses derived from your sample. In other words, there is no point in drawing for interview a representative sample of all women and all men in Britain, if those total populations do not relate meaningfully to the universe – empirical or theoretical – in which you are interested.

Therefore, you will need to work out your answer to the question of what you want your sample to do in the context of the particular project that you have in mind, and its theoretical and empirical referents. However, there are some further issues of strategy that it is helpful to consider.

### **Strategic Sampling**

**What relationship do I want to establish, or do I assume exists, between the sample or selection I am making, and a wider population or universe?**

**How can my sampling strategy help me to develop a theoretically and empirically grounded argument about ‘something in particular’?**

This question takes us right to the heart of the logic of your sampling strategy, and it is very important that qualitative researchers grapple – and grapple successfully – with it because, as I suggested at the beginning of the chapter, they may wish to depart from ‘conventional’ sampling logic. The first point to grasp in relation to this question is that there are a number of possible answers. In other words, it is possible to conceive of different types of relationship between your sample and a wider population or universe. It is important to establish this, because the prevalence of a representational logic in more quantitative forms of sampling sometimes leads to the assumption that sampling is inherently about empirical representation of a wider universe. However, this is not the predominant logic in qualitative sampling. I am going to discuss three broad ways in which your sampling strategy can help you to develop theoretically and empirically grounded arguments that are focused on your research questions, each of which says something different about the relationship of the sample to the wider universe.

*Sampling Strategically* A strategic relationship between sample and wider universe can take a variety of forms. The aim is to produce, through sampling,

a relevant range of contexts or phenomena, which will enable you to make strategic and possibly cross-contextual comparisons, and hence build a well-founded argument. In this version, then, the sample is designed to encapsulate a *relevant range* in relation to the wider universe, but not to represent it directly. This might mean a range of experiences, characteristics, processes, types, categories, cases or examples, and so on.

You should have a strategic purpose in selecting your specified relevant range which means that the relationship between your sample and the wider universe is not *ad hoc*, accidental, purely opportunistic or indeed representational (see below). Again, though, you will need to be clear about exactly what kind of relationship you are establishing. This will depend upon the type of intellectual puzzle that your research questions are designed to address, for example, whether it is a developmental, mechanical, comparative or causal/predictive one (see Chapter 1). If you want to explain how something has developed, for example, you need to include a meaningful range of developmental ‘threads’ in your sampling strategy. If you want to explain how a social process works, you need to include a meaningful range of mechanical components or constituents, and so forth.

It is vital that you challenge your own assumptions and theories here, however, in relation to what constitutes a ‘meaningful range’. You must therefore engage with other possible versions of what might constitute developmental threads, mechanical workings, comparative criteria and causal associations, so that your sample does not include simply those elements of the wider universe that will substantiate your argument, while ‘strategically’ excluding those elements that might inconveniently counter it. We shall discuss this issue again shortly.

The range of contexts and phenomena that you select is ultimately guided by a combined empirical and theoretical logic, therefore, and one of the key sampling strategies that comes under my heading of ‘strategic sampling’ is that of *theoretical sampling*, initially introduced by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s, and subsequently modified by Strauss, and Strauss and Corbin (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Many qualitative researchers use a version of theoretical (or purposive) sampling without necessarily following the precise techniques and strategies advocated by Strauss. In its more general form, theoretical sampling means selecting groups or categories to study on the basis of their relevance to your research questions, your theoretical position and analytical framework, your analytical practice, and most importantly the argument or explanation that you are developing. Theoretical sampling is concerned with constructing a sample (sometimes called a study group) which is meaningful theoretically and empirically, because it builds in certain characteristics or criteria which help to develop and test your theory or your argument.

While strategic sampling thus needs to involve a strong theoretical logic in the selection process, this need not and often should not be based on the idea of empirical representation, therefore. You may, for example, decide that certain contexts or phenomena have a special or pivotal significance in relation to your research questions and your intellectual puzzle. This *may* be because they commonly occur in the wider universe (and in that sense you are defining them as empirically significant), but it is more likely that you will be defining their signif-

ificance theoretically. This may involve selecting phenomena which occur infrequently rather than commonly in the wider universe. There are many ways of conceptualizing significance theoretically, some of which are outlined in the discussion of analysis in Chapter 9, but at a general level in relation to sampling it means that you will wish to select contexts and phenomena which *will enable you to make key comparisons and to develop and test your argument*. This links sampling very directly to the process of generating theory and explanation ‘inductively’ from or through data.

So too does the idea that whatever you sample, and however you see its relationship to a wider universe, you will want to generate a close-up, detailed or meticulous view of the particular contexts or phenomena involved. One of the driving logics of some forms of qualitative research is that whatever it is we seek to investigate, it is likely to be complex, nuanced, situated and contextual. If we sample strategically across a range of contexts, we increase our chances of being able to use that very detail not only to understand how things work in specific contexts, but also how things work differently or similarly in other relevant contexts. From there we may be able to develop cross-contextual generalities which are very well founded because they are based on the strategic comparison of sensitive and rich understandings of specific contexts, whose significance in relation to a wider universe we can demonstrate (see Introduction and Chapter 9).

This implies that, when you determine your sampling strategy, you will be thinking ahead to the kind of analysis which you are likely to conduct. It also suggests that you will be doing something more than simply aggregating data gained from your sample and noting frequencies of patterns and distributions. Furthermore, it means that qualitative researchers should ensure that there is a very direct link between their sampling strategy, their data analysis and the type of argument they intend to construct. Making such a link will influence your sampling strategy both conceptually (that is, what is its logic) and procedurally (that is, how it is executed).

*Sampling Representationally* This suggests a relationship where the sample is *representative* of a wider population or universe and, as suggested, this method is less commonly used by qualitative than by quantitative researchers. It usually involves trying to select a sample which is representative of the total empirical population which you wish to study, in the sense that the sample displays characteristics (usually identified as ‘variables’ like age, gender, ethnicity, class in a population of people) in similar proportions and patterns to the total population about which you wish to make generalizations. This requires, of course, that the parameters of the total population are known, as are some of the population’s key characteristics, and these pieces of information constitute a sampling frame from which your sample can be drawn. In this type of sampling, the aim is to achieve a representative microcosm of the population which the researcher wishes to study, so that they can claim that patterns discovered within the microcosm are likely to appear in similar shapes and proportions in that total population, whatever it may be. Statistical conventions are used to calculate the probability that patterns observed in the sample will exist in the wider population.

This is probably the most commonly understood form of sampling logic, yet it is also probably the least commonly used logic in qualitative research, for a number of reasons. Perhaps most importantly, as I have suggested, much qualitative research uses a different analytical logic, and one which is not particularly well supported by the generation of a representative sample (see also Chapter 9). This means that representative sampling may not be the most effective and efficient way either to generate data which will address the research questions of the study, or to develop analysis and theory. Furthermore, the pursuit of representativeness often requires the construction of very large samples which make the use of qualitative data generation methods very time-consuming and costly (and in many instances therefore, impossible to achieve). The patterns observed in data generated from a representative sample may therefore necessarily be rather superficial, and this approach does not readily facilitate the exploration of social processes through nuance, complexity and detail. For many qualitative researchers the consequently limited gains of having a representative sample are not offset by the substantial losses in terms of sampling and analytical sensitivity.

Finally, the parameters of a total population and its key characteristics are not always known quantities, or are not adequately 'measured' by characteristics which are known. For example, commonly defined 'variables' such as age or gender may be of limited relevance in your conceptualization of what is the total population. More likely, they will be too static or cross-sectional and not sufficiently processual or conceptually rich. In other words, you may decide that known characteristics of an empirical population do not represent meaningful, coherent or consistent categorizations because they are too flat, static, one-dimensional or simplistic.

The consequences of all of these factors are therefore that, first, you may decide that the pursuit of representativeness in a sample is not the most suitable way to make theoretical and analytical advances in relation to your research questions; second, you may find the criteria for judging or measuring the representativeness of a sample to be flawed or superficial; third, it may therefore not actually be possible to judge the representativeness of the sample against the population in question; and fourth, it may therefore be impossible to devise methods for drawing a sample which might be considered representative in the first place.

*Sampling Illustratively or Evocatively* Qualitative researchers may argue that the relationship between the contexts and phenomena they have sampled, and the wider universe that they are interested in, is an illustrative or evocative one. The argument here may go something like: 'it can be like this in the wider universe, or this is an example or an illustration, but I am not making claims about how well it represents that universe'. In a sense, this approach to sampling seeks only to provide a flavour – sometimes a very vivid or illuminating one. However, of course strategic decisions do get made even in this form of sampling, not least in working out which kinds of data sources are meaningful (see Chapter 3), what might make the 'best' illustration, and of what. These decisions certainly will express the researcher's ontological and epistemological perspectives, and are also likely to say

something about how they construe the relationship between the illustration or evocation, and the wider universe of interest. Therefore, I think it is vital that those using this approach engage just as seriously as anyone else with the strategic issues outlined above.

## **AN ORGANIC SAMPLING PRACTICE**

The discussion so far has been fairly abstract and theoretical, although grounded in specific questions you need to ask yourself, because it is very important that you establish what shape and form your sampling logic takes, and what you want to be able to achieve, analytically, on the basis of your sampling strategy. I want to turn the focus onto issues of practice now, however, and to suggest that it is useful to see qualitative sampling as an *organic* practice, in the sense that it is something which grows and develops throughout the research process, in ways that are crucially related to the emerging shape of the research project.

### ***Deciding What to Sample***

What should I sample?

You will need to relate your answer to this question to what your methods and approach say about data sources. You may find it useful here to refer back to my discussion of data sources in Chapter 3, so that you can consider the range of dimensions in and through which data sources might be constituted in your study. I shall organize the discussion in this section around the broad generic categories of data source I outlined there, while reminding you that these are only intended to be an aid to thinking about potential data sources, and also that you will need ultimately to think in much more specific ways about what your own data sources might be.

*People (as individuals, groups or collectivities)* Many researchers in the social sciences will, at some stage in their research, be sampling people, or conceptualizing people as their ‘sampling categories’. This is based on the notion that people are distinguishable, discrete and whole categories or, in other words, we know what they are and we can tell them apart. It also, of course, has to be based on the firm idea that people are meaningful data sources for the intellectual puzzle in question. In order to decide which people, however, you need to work out how to classify them or, in other words, by what means you will tell them apart.

It is conventional in social research to classify people for sampling and analytical purposes on the basis of ‘characteristics’ like age, sex, class, ethnicity, occupation, specific life experiences. Often, however, these classifications have been developed as a gauge or scale for ‘measuring’ the representativeness of the

sample of people against a wider population or universe of people (judged in terms of whether or not the sample displays these characteristics in similar proportions to the wider population). It is important to remember, therefore, that a representative sample constructed in this manner is representative only in terms of these known and specified characteristics of these known and specified sampling categories (that is, people). It is not necessarily representative in every possible sense (empirical or theoretical), but only in relation to the particular classification system used. Although this seems an obvious point, it is one which can be readily forgotten in the assumption that a 'representative' sample is representative of anything and everything in a wider population.

These kinds of classification systems are of course also used in the construction of variables for the kind of data analysis in which the relationships between variables are explored, and explanations built on that basis. The term 'variable' in this sense refers to attributes on which relevant objects or sampling categories (in this case, people) differ. It is important, however, to look behind and beyond these conventions, and to assess how relevant they are for your own particular project, and for qualitative research more generally. *This means that you need to ask what it is about people that you are interested in.*

While people and other 'common-sense' or 'real-life' categories, might be appropriate for sampling, they equally might well not. In order to make a decision about this, you will need to think again about your intellectual puzzle, and what your research is really about. For example, if your ontological perspective tells you that people's experiences are meaningful, then you might want to think about sampling experiences, rather than people or their characteristics *per se*. You may be more interested in instances of what you see as relevant ontological properties of the social world – for example, experiences, feelings, behaviours, practices – than in the 'common-sense' or 'real-life' category of 'person', or the variables by which they are commonly distinguished.

In other words, you need to work out what is the most appropriate unit of classification to use in making sampling decisions, and common sense or everyday classifications, or those invented by other researchers or in other research traditions, may or may not suffice. Of course, sometimes you may end up using common-sense classifications for pragmatic reasons, even though they are not ideal intellectually, but you must think through the implications of doing this.

If you decide, for intellectual or pragmatic reasons, to treat people as your sampling categories, you will therefore need to ask yourself whether the ways in which people (or groups or collectivities of people) are classified are relevant and useful to you in your sampling. So, for example, how useful and meaningful are conventional classifications which use 'characteristics' or 'attributes' such as age, gender, ethnicity, or social class? Your answer to this will depend first on how effectively you believe each of these classifying labels encapsulates a uniform and meaningful category of experience, or set of relevant instances; and, second, on how relevant these are to your research questions and your intellectual puzzle. In relation to the latter, you may simply decide that the conventional and available ways of classifying people are irrelevant for your purposes. In relation to the former, you may be happy to accept ethnicity, for example, as a uniform and



meaningful category, or you may view it as too static, one-dimensional or cross-sectional an indicator of what are essentially complex and differentiated life experiences.

This is not just a case of seeing ethnicity as more differentiated than the conventional divisions into well-known ethnic groups would suggest; it also means that you may be taking issue with the way in which what you may see as complex and messy experiences, or understandings and meanings, or practices or biographies (or whatever are the relevant ontological properties), are reduced to a single static measure. In other words, you may be unwilling to accept that ethnicity, or indeed age or gender, can be treated as an attribute – or indeed as a variable – in such a straightforward way. Whatever your view, you must ask yourself what it is that you think these kinds of classifications represent, or what you see them as standing for. What does gender, or age, or ethnicity, or whatever, actually mean when it is used as a label in this way? (See Burgess, 1986, for a useful discussion of key variables in social investigation.) Many of us do use these classificatory systems, but cautiously and interpretively rather than categorically, and always with an eye to their imperfections.

You may of course reject the idea of attributes or characteristics, and develop more sophisticated classifications based on, for example, the division of social existence into types, themes, experiences or instances. However, you will still need to begin to engage with the question of how far these can or should be conceptualized as variables for analytical purposes, since you may simply be creating a different set of variables rather than rejecting the notion of variable labels altogether. Although this is a question which relates more directly to your analytical than your sampling strategy, the two are in fact closely tied up together so that you cannot effectively sample without having some ideas about data analysis. As we have seen (see also Chapters 3 and 9) different sampling strategies support different approaches to analysis and explanation. Basically, if you are going to view characteristics, experiences, instances, or whatever, as variables, this implies a certain analytical logic as follows: variables are expressions of characteristics on which objects differ, and explanations are fashioned on the basis of an analysis of the connections and relationships (usually seen as causal) between variables (see Bryman and Cramer, 1990, for a discussion of the logic of variable analysis; see Blumer, 1956, for a classic critique of variable analysis; see also Pawson, 1989). This is anathema to many qualitative researchers partly because of the inadequacy of the labelling process whereby concepts are turned into variables, as already discussed, but also because of the superficial, circumstantial and one-dimensional nature of social explanation which they see it as producing.

Your answers to questions about which people to sample should therefore be driven by an interpretive logic which questions and evaluates different ways of classifying people in the light of the particular concerns of your study. Underlying all of this must be a concern to identify who it is that has, does or is the experiences, perspectives, behaviours, practices, identities, personalities, and so on, that your research questions will require you to investigate. The question is therefore not only what is the best data source from which to sample, but who or which?

*Organizations, institutions and entities* Essentially, the same issues apply here. You will need to think about what it is about organizations that you are interested in, and evaluate for your own purposes the common-sense or real-life ways in which they are classified into types. Furthermore, you will need to engage with the question of what the organization is, or what or who can represent or ‘speak’ for or of it. This might include identifying key figures such as managing directors, members of the workforce, customers, clients, competitors, and so on. If you are focusing on key people, though, you will need to think through who might represent, or be illustrative of, or have access to the appropriate contextual and situated knowledge, to count as in some way speaking for or about the organization. At each level, you will need to engage with the kind of logic you are using (strategic, representational, illustrative), and consider how appropriate or meaningful it is. Alternatively, you might draw on a range of texts or publications about the organization, or produced by it, or on measures of its performance in various markets, or relation to equal opportunities or human rights. You might want to gain access to company records, official and unofficial, or to observe specific sets of practices in certain settings. Again, the same questions about your logic will apply.

*Texts (published and unpublished sources including virtual ones)* Texts can include printed or virtual, text-based or visual, documents. Many of the issues involved in selecting and using these have been discussed in Chapter 6. Again, you will need to think about what texts represent in your ontological and epistemological ways of thinking, and what an analysis of them might be able to contribute to your intellectual puzzle, so that you can decide on what basis to sample them, and how to think about making meaningful comparisons of them. Are you interested in whole texts, as classified in real-life or common-sense ways? Or are your sampling categories based more upon themes and issues which might emerge irregularly in texts classified in these ways? Are you interested in the content of the text for the purposes of sampling, or the people or bodies that produced it, or the contexts in which it is used or has relevance? Do you wish to try to establish the ‘authenticity’ of the text and, if so, who or what can provide such authentication? How can you use registers, indexes or archives of texts interpretively, to get at what you are really interested in? How can you find out what is available? Do you want people to produce texts especially for your project, for example, diaries, pictures, photographs? If so, are your interests more in texts produced by different types of people (which involves thinking about how you classify people), or texts of different types (which involves classifying texts)?

*Settings and environments (material, visual/sensory and virtual)* Again, some of the issues involved in selecting a setting were discussed in Chapter 5. For sampling purposes, you will need to think very carefully about how a setting can provide data to help you reflect on your research questions, and what it is about that setting that does this, in what ways? You may be interested in social processes or phenomena which traverse a range of settings, and may have to decide which are the ‘core’ or most meaningful ones for understanding those processes. Some settings may be, at least in part, pre-classified, for example, a school or classroom, a

company boardroom, a firm of accountants, an Internet chat room, an out-of-town shopping mall, an inner-city housing development, a rural landscape. However, the boundaries around these definitions are likely to be very fluid, and you will need to think critically, just as with real-life classifications of people, texts or organizations, about how useful and meaningful these are, and about how you might be able to work interpretively with them. The point of selecting a setting is usually that it provides a useful context or situation for the generation of data, and almost always there will be further sampling decisions to take, for example who to talk to in the playground, which 'regions' in the setting to observe or participate in, at what times, and so on. Again, you will need to think through what logic you are using here (strategic, representational, illustrative) and beware the dangers of slipping into a representational logic – where a key informant is seen as representing a typical view, for example – where that is unjustified or inapplicable.

*Objects, artefacts, media products (material, visual/sensory and virtual)* Selecting objects, artefacts or media products involves some of the same questions that apply to the sampling of texts and documents – about what they are seen to be and what it is in them that interests you or is relevant to your research questions. Again, you will have to deal with real-life ways of classifying them – for example as precious or otherwise, as art or utility, as avant-garde, pre-Raphaelite or post-modern, and so on. You must decide how meaningful these classificatory systems are for your purposes and how you can work with them interpretively. Here, perhaps more than with other data sources, you may wish to think about categorizing in sensory and visual ways, in working out what is meaningful and what to select. As with texts, you will need to decide whether you are interested in the objects themselves, or their production, use, meaning, or even the systems used to classify them or judge their quality, and to think about what and how you might sample (strategically, representationally, illustratively) to access the full range of dimensions that is relevant to your study.

*Events and happenings (material, visual/sensory and virtual)* Events and happenings can sometimes be equated to settings, and may be studied before, after or contemporaneously. Just as with settings, you will need to decide what are the dimensions, and boundaries, which constitute the event, and how you should select them for study (strategically, representationally, illustratively). This will involve decisions about what constitutes the event – where does it begin and end, in time and space? So, for example, with an anti-war demonstration, is the event bounded in time to the demonstration itself, or does it include preparation for it by participants, police, local authorities, media, pro-war activists, and so on? Are you interested in the event as a culmination of something, in a developmental sense, or as the start of something, in a more causal sense? Your answers to these types of questions will determine how and where you should sample to gain the understanding you require.

I have posed a difficult range of questions in an illustrative rather than exhaustive way about what you might sample in relation to different (broadly conceived) data sources. Questions like these are very closely tied up with the issue of

*validity* which was introduced in Chapter 2 (and which is discussed further in Chapter 9). In its most general terms, a judgement about whether data analysis is valid is a judgement about whether or not it measures, explicates or illuminates whatever it claims to measure, explicate or illuminate. So, for example, in judging the validity of an analysis of religious belief one might ask does this study actually tell us about *religious* belief as opposed to some other kind of belief, or does it actually tell us about belief rather than religious *behaviour*, and so on? Or, can the author of an analysis of cultural change demonstrate convincingly that they are tapping into culture – however they define it – rather than, say, unconnected sets of individual behaviours? Does a study of personality development convincingly illuminate the development of personalities, rather than, say, behaviours, or even cultures? In other words, does the analysis really get at the kinds of issues and concepts it claims to get at?

A major part of the answer to this question will depend upon how effectively the researcher has thought about what they should sample, or what are the sampling categories in their study. This is because, to pursue the religious beliefs example, being able to produce a valid analysis of religious belief is dependent upon successfully accessing the conduits or vessels within which such beliefs are contained, or through which they are constructed, be these people's minds and thoughts, actions and interactions, words and religious discourses, and so on. For each sampling decision, therefore, you should ask whether this person, or these people, or this document or these documents, or this instance or these instances or experiences, can potentially tell you what you want to know. Finding a successful answer to the question of what you should sample contributes to the ultimate production of analytical validity by ensuring that you are looking in relevant 'places' when you go about the process of data generation.

Of course deciding what to sample also involves questions about *reliability* (see Chapters 2 and 9) and relevance, since you will need to be making assessments about how accurate, reliable, meaningful and authentic a set of data can be generated from those particular sources, be they people, texts, organizations, objects, events, settings or whatever.

### ***Deciding When and Where to Sample***

How do issues of time and space cross-cut my sampling categories?

Whatever you sample, you will need to think about the different dimensions along which your sampling categories might be organized, and whether and how these dimensions intersect. In particular, it is worth separating out the dimensions of time and space for specific consideration.

You should think about how your sampling categories might be bounded by time. This means asking not just what you wish to sample, but when, as I have hinted above in my discussion of settings and events. You might be interested in

experiences or practices or people at particular times (for example, at coffee breaks, on holiday, in afternoon court sessions, in the 1940s), or experiences over a period of time (for example, during a degree course, from the beginning to the end of compulsory schooling years, during membership of a particular 'subculture', during the American Civil War). You might also be interested in time itself as a focus for study, and in the different ways in which it might be constituted. Overall, is important to think about, and specify, your temporal parameters.

You should also think about how and whether your sampling categories are defined in place, space and location. You might be interested in people, experiences, practices or whatever, in particular locations, for example, at work, in class, in the pub, in Scandinavia, in the countryside. You might be interested primarily in the location itself and its layout, or movements between locations, or the ways in which space is used. Again, you will need to specify your parameters, and be clear about them.

These dimensions can of course be conceptualized in a variety of ways, and you will need to work out exactly what you think they mean or stand for, just as you would with classifications of 'common-sense' or 'real-life' categories and variables as discussed above. You will also need to think about how they intersect. So, for example, if you are planning a case study of an organization, you will need to work out not only which sampling categories are relevant – first, which organization, then perhaps practices, policies, people, documents, within the organization – but also where the organization begins and ends (for the purposes of your study) in time and space. Is the organization spatially bounded, so that you will include only practices taking place 'behind the factory gates'? Are you interested in the experiences of staff when they are not in the workplace, as when they are off duty in terms of time, and at home in terms of space? Are you interested in the influence the organization might have on the local or national economy, or on its interface with health and safety legislation? Are you interested in virtual and electronic representations and activities of the organization, or multi-media communications, and so on?

### ***Deciding How Many to Sample***

How many is enough, too few, or too many to address my research questions in an appropriately focused way?

Can I make sensible and meaningful comparisons on this basis?

How do I focus, strategically and meaningfully (*not* how do I represent)?

Have I searched for 'negative instances'?

Have I challenged my own assumptions and arguments?

If you are using a theoretical or purposive sampling strategy, then whether or not the sample is big enough to be statistically representative of a total population is not your major concern. However, you will wish to include particular categories, or a range of categories, from which you can generate data which will help you to develop your theory, and that range may end up being quite large. So, you might sample reasonably large numbers, but you will probably arrive at that result for a different reason, and by a different logic, than you would with statistical forms of sampling. Qualitative samples are usually small for practical reasons to do with the costs, especially in terms of time and money, of generating and analysing qualitative data, but in my view there is no inherent reason why a qualitative sample must be small.

The key question to ask is whether your sample provides access to enough data, and with the right focus, to enable you to address your research questions. This will usually involve making comparisons of some kind and you will need to ask whether you can make meaningful comparisons with the numbers and range that you have. When you are making comparisons, you are unlikely to be attempting to compare sampling category with sampling category, as though they are representative of all such categories. Similarly, you are unlikely to see the sampling categories as straightforwardly comparable in and of themselves because you may have selected them because they provide *access* in an interpretive sense to something that you are interested in, rather than actually *being* the thing you are interested in. Therefore, the categories that you will use to make comparisons in your analysis may not be an exact reflection of the categories you have used for sampling.

You may, for example, have sampled people, but wish to make comparisons of experiences. The people involved may have had uneven numbers and types of the kinds of experiences you wish to compare so, for some purposes, you may compare the people, and for others you may compare specific types of experience. You may wish to make comparisons of complex sets of experiences, or experiential processes, which are not readily encapsulated in the idea of a 'characteristic' of a person, which can be used as a variable to classify that person for purposes of comparison with other people and variables.

As discussed, qualitative methods are usually used when the object of study is some form of social process or meaning or experience which needs to be understood and explained in a rounded way, rather than by attempting to understand, for example, causal patterns by analysing connections between static or snapshot variables. Therefore, decisions about whether or not you have included the 'right' number depend on thinking about what it is that you need to compare, and the extent to which the sample you have generated will enable you to do that.

This means that you may not be able to make all of your sampling decisions in advance. An example of this in practice is found in the work of Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame (1981). They claim that the size of sample is dictated by the social process under scrutiny. This means that you sample until you reach theory-saturation point, that is, until you know that you have a picture of what is going on and can generate an appropriate explanation for it. This point is reached when your data begin to stop telling you anything new about the social process under

scrutiny, and you cannot therefore anticipate in advance when and how that point will be reached. This approach has been criticized for being *ad hoc* and unsystematic (it raises the question of how the researcher can demonstrate that saturation point really was reached), but the two principles that, first, your sample size should help you to understand the process (or whatever you are interested in), rather than to represent a population, and second, that it should be a dynamic and ongoing practice, are very useful ones.

Deciding how large your sample should be therefore involves asking why you wish to make comparisons, which in turn should encourage you to reflect upon the logic through which you intend to develop and test social explanations and the kinds of arguments you wish to make (see Chapters 2 and 9). The basic principle is likely to be something like: 'instead of establishing causality, for example, on the basis of connections and relationships between variables such as age and voting behaviour, I am attempting to develop explanations (whether or not these are causal) through detailed scrutiny of how processes work in particular contexts.' You cannot, however, expect a context to be representative of all contexts of that type, unless you have sampled in a way which ensures this.

This principle of understanding the process rather than representing a population must be kept clearly in mind when you are deciding how many categories or contexts of a particular type you will select in order to constitute, for example, a relevant range for purposes of comparison and explanation. Do not accidentally fall into a representational logic, if you are actually attempting to adopt a strategic or illustrative approach, as discussed earlier. Therefore, you should not assume that, because you select one category of a particular type, this can somehow represent *all* categories of this type.

For example, if you decide that a relevant range of categories might be people of different ages selected for interview, and so you select ten people, each of whose ages fall within a specified five-year period, you must not let yourself slide back into a statistical or probability logic whereby you expect the one 55-year-old in your study to be representative of all 55-year-olds. Instead, you must remember that the categories which you have chosen to constitute a range are intended to allow you to generate data to explore processes, similarities and differences, to test and develop theory and explanation to account for those similarities and differences in particular contexts, rather than to make statistical comparisons between the categories themselves within the range, and to infer causality on that basis. In other words, you are expecting the interview with your 55-year-old to provide access to qualitative data which will help you to make sense of, for example, voting behaviour and its location and development within the life experience, biography, and so on, of that person. You are emphatically not expecting your 55-year-old to be a representative of other 55-year-olds simply because they possess the 'characteristic' of being 55.

The answers to questions about how and what to compare must be driven by your research questions and your intellectual puzzle, but also are likely to be influenced by the ideas and theories you develop in the process of generating and analysing data. Thus, at the beginning of your research, you will have some ideas about key comparisons based on, for example, existing research and theory. These

will help you to decide not only how your sample should be constituted, but how large it will need to be, so that such comparisons can feasibly be made.

Taken together, all of these factors suggest that the answer to the question of how large your sample should be is that it should be large enough to make meaningful comparisons in relation to your research questions, but not so large as to become so diffuse that a detailed and nuanced focus on something in particular becomes impossible. In other words, there is not a fixed answer, because it depends upon what a meaningful set of comparisons would look like in relation to your specific research project, its research questions and intellectual puzzle, and the kind of social explanation you are striving to produce. Your guiding practice should be to be explicit about why particular comparisons might be meaningful, bearing in mind your answers to the earlier questions about what you are sampling and why. You will need, therefore, to keep asking yourself: why is this or that category or group relevant? In what ways would including it or them in my study help me in developing the overall kind of explanation I wish to develop, or in understanding the process I wish to understand? This is the logic which should drive your decisions about which categories to include, as well as how many to include.

Remember that qualitative research is particularly good at constituting arguments about how things work in particular contexts (see Introduction), rather than representing the full range of experience. Therefore, decisions about exactly what range to include must be guided by a strategic logic ('how well does this range, do these comparisons, help me to address my research questions?') rather than a representational one ('I'd better include this group, and that category, so that I've covered everything'). The key issue for qualitative sampling is therefore how to *focus*, strategically and meaningfully, rather than how to represent.

However, as I suggested earlier, you must ensure that you do not simply pick those sampling categories which will support your argument and disregard those inconvenient ones which do not. You can and should make sure that you sample in a way which will help you not only to develop your theory or explanation, but also to test it, and you need to build in a mechanism for doing this. A classic way to do this, derived from procedures of 'analytic induction' (see Denzin, 1989, Chapter 9), is to seek out negative instances or contradictory cases in relation to your developing analytical ideas. In other words, you should use your sampling strategy not simply to acquire categories from which you will generate data which support your analysis or explanation, but also to show that you have rigorously looked for cases or instances which do not fit with your ideas or which cannot be accounted for by the explanation which you are developing. If you cannot find any, and if you can show that you have looked in places where such negative cases are likely to occur, then your explanation is strengthened. If you can find some, then you will need to modify your explanation.

So, for example, if your theory suggests that a certain constellation of experiences in people's lives is likely to encourage them to be politically active, then you could search for someone who is politically active but does not have that set of experiences; or you could search for someone with that set of experiences who is not politically active. Then the analytical task is to understand the differences and



to adapt your argument accordingly. Another version involves selecting the most unlikely scenario in which a given process is ‘hypothesized’ to occur (this being established on the basis of existing research and theory, or upon the analysis you have developed of your own data so far). If the process does occur, even in that setting, then the claim you wish to make about it may be strengthened.

The search for negative instances in the analytical process is discussed more fully in Chapter 9, but the point in relation to sampling is that it can and should be driven by the analytical and explanatory logic you propose to adopt. In particular, your capacity to make generalizations on the basis of your analysis, and the way in which you will be able to do this, will be crucially influenced by the strategy you have adopted for sampling (see Platt, 1988, for a useful discussion of links between sampling and generalization).

It is worth reiterating at this point that representative sampling comes with statistical conventions which can be used to estimate or measure the relationship between sample and wider universe and, in particular, to judge how well one represents the other. However, given that theoretical and purposive sampling are not based on a notion of empirical representativeness, the issue of how one substantiates the relationship between the sample and the wider universe is not so well rehearsed, and it is, therefore, even more important for researchers to specify exactly what they see this relationship to be. Theoretical or purposive sampling can be criticized for being *ad hoc* and vague if not employed systematically. It is very important therefore to have a sampling strategy in your research, and to be able to explain its logic. If you do not do this, you run the risk that your sampling will be misunderstood, and judged by statistical criteria (that is, as though you were trying to produce a sample statistically representative of a wider population). It is therefore vital to keep a record of the sampling decisions you take, and the basis on which you take them, so that you can spell out (in your theses, publications, and so on) exactly what you did and why. You do not have to engage in statistical sampling to be able to demonstrate that you have proceeded in a logical and systematic way, and indeed a failed attempt to justify what you have done in quasi-statistical terms is likely only to reduce the strength with which you are able to make claims about the rigour of your alternative sampling procedures. But you do have to be able to construct an alternative – and convincing – logic.

### ***Ensuring that Organic Sampling Practices are Strategic***

When should I make my sampling decisions?

How shall I keep track of my organic sampling practices?

Theoretical or purposive sampling is a set of procedures where the researcher manipulates their data generation, analysis, theory, and sampling activities *interactively* during the research process, to a much greater extent than in statistical

sampling. This sampling strategy is broadly intended to facilitate a process whereby researchers generate and test theory from the analysis of their data (sometimes called inductive reasoning), rather than using data to test out or falsify a pre-existing theory (sometimes called deductive reasoning). In this latter model, sampling decisions are generally taken prior to the generation and subsequent analysis of data, which are seen as independent stages in the research process. With theoretical or purposive sampling, although you are likely to want to make some early decisions about sampling, as we have seen, you are also likely to want to review these at certain stages.

Therefore, in theoretical or purposive sampling, the processes of sampling, data generation and data analysis are viewed dynamically and interactively. This means that a qualitative researcher must work out not only when to make sampling decisions, but also when to stop sampling. You need to be able to make informed decisions about sampling – that is, decisions which are informed by analysis, theory and explanation. Looking for negative instances is one example of that. Your theoretical position at the beginning of your research will come out of your reading of existing research, other literature, and possibly some preliminary research or observation of your own. But, as you go on, your theory and developing explanation themselves will be informed by your analysis of your own data. If your sampling strategy is to be informed by theory, and in turn help to develop your theory and explanation, this implies that you do not have to decide upon it once and for all at the beginning, because at that point in your research you may not be in the best position to make such precise decisions. Instead, you may wish to make some preliminary decisions about sampling which will lead you into a position where you can make informed decisions subsequently (some form of pilot study is an initial way of doing this). Therefore, the process is one involving the setting of some initial sampling quotas and targets, and their subsequent systematic review.

If you do decide to postpone some sampling decisions, or to set tentative targets which may be revised, you must be systematic about those subsequent decisions. You should build into your research practice, mechanisms which are designed to help you to review your sampling strategy at relevant times, and make informed decisions about how to proceed. You may wish to set specific dates or points in the research process when you do this. Many qualitative researchers use a system of quotas, targets or grids, both to set out initially what their intentions are in relation to sampling categories and numbers, and subsequently to keep track of how far their sampling practice is fulfilling these intentions, and how far it needs to be modified – for example, by a search for negative instances – in the light of their developing analysis. This helps you to be systematic because your initial ideas about quotas can act as a baseline against which to measure both how well your sampling strategy is filling your quotas, and also how useful those quotas continue to be (see Finch and Mason, 1990). The consequence of this kind of ‘stocktaking’ exercise may be that you want to modify your quotas, or introduce new quotas. For example, as you begin to formulate an explanation of, say, gender relations in the rock music industry, you may discover that particular life experiences which you had not previously thought of now seem to be important

influences on the career trajectories of male and female rock musicians, or that the activities of a particular record company seem influential, or that particular types of visual image have a strategic importance. You may want to adjust your sampling quotas at this stage to include these, and if you have set clear and strategic targets, and kept good records of how well these have been met, you will quickly and easily be able to estimate the implications of making this kind of change at this particular point in your research. Similarly, you may find that you have practical difficulties in filling your quota targets satisfactorily, which necessitate some change of plan. Again, you will be able to do this in a strategic fashion if you have adopted some kind of systematic mechanism for making and recording sampling decisions.

It can be a great help to talk to your supervisor or colleagues about your sampling progress, and about any potential decisions you want to make. Getting a second opinion can help you work things through, and the discipline of having to explain your strategy to others will help you to make explicit the multitude of sometimes half-formed ideas you are operating with. Keep a record of the whole process, and the basis on which you make decisions, so that you can justify your strategy afterwards. This is not just so that you can defend your research to other people: keeping a record of what you decided, and why, is a good way to start developing your own principles for analysis of the data set as a whole.

You will need to develop a practical and systematic method for making and recording your decisions about the nature, size and shape of your sample. While determining your final sample size is a matter of intellectual judgement based on the logic of making meaningful comparisons, developing and testing your explanations, I do not recommend that you rely solely on your intellectual intuition to 'know' when you have sampled enough.

When you construct your sampling lists, tables or grids, or devise other means of recording your evolving practice, remember that a sampling category may or may not be equivalent to a 'common-sense' or 'real-life' category such as a person or a discrete document. As suggested, you may wish to sample experiences or instances, the numbers of which may not precisely correspond with the numbers of 'common-sense' or 'real-life' categories like people or documents which you ultimately include: one person may, for example, have several of the experiences you are interested in, or one document may contain more than one instance.

Your list, table or grid should specify roughly the range and number of different sampling categories you want to include, and also give some ideas about how these might cross-cut each other. So, for example, are you happy to include people who have multiple experiences of the kind you are interested in, or do you require each experience to be embodied in a different person? Does it matter what constellations of experiences people have – do you want some people to have specific combinations of experience? Would it be alright if all the people in your study who had one particularly interesting experience were also all of the same age? Or do you want particular experiences to be more widely distributed across age ranges? The same goes for settings, or visualizations. Do you wish to select settings that all combine a number of key features, or to choose some that have some

features and others with markedly different features? The answers to these questions clearly depend on how and why you are going to want to make comparisons. Figure 7.1 provides a simple example of how you might set out such a list or chart of quota targets, based on a section of the quota list for interviews devised for a real project on the topic of ‘Migration, Kinship and Household Change’.<sup>1</sup> Note that the number of total experiences targeted exceeds the total number of interviewees, suggesting that some interviewees will have more than one experience. Some desired combinations of experience are specified, others are left open for subsequent review. There is also some flexibility in the gender quotas, whereby the gender of 10 target interviewees is left unspecified.

Figure 7.1  
Example of a quota  
target list

Total sample size = 60 interviewees

To include:

- At least 30 people with experience of *divorce and/or remarriage*
- At least 20 people over the age of 65 who either already have some *personal care needs*, or can anticipate needing some help in the foreseeable future
- At least 20 people who have experience (past, present or anticipated future) of being actual or potential *carers* for elderly relatives
- At least 25 people who have made a *residential move* related in some way to divorce, remarriage or elderly care
- At least 15 people who have *not moved* house in these kinds of circumstances
- At least 25 *women*, ensuring that there are at least 3 in each of the above categories
- At least 25 *men*, ensuring that there are at least 3 in each of the above categories

### **Sampling Frames, Access and Opportunity**

How, or by what methods and techniques, can I best achieve the kind of sample I want?

Can I identify a sampling frame?

Can I negotiate access?

You will need to pick a method of sample selection which is both practicable and allows you to establish an appropriate relationship between your sample and the wider universe, incorporate appropriate numbers and types of specific sampling categories and so on. This can be quite difficult, and you may wish to try to identify a suitable ‘sampling frame’. A sampling frame is a resource from which you can select your smaller sample. It will help you in filling quota targets if the sampling frame contains some information about the sampling categories which is relevant to those quotas. Whatever frame you choose, your sampling practice

will thenceforward be influenced by the parameters and characteristics of that frame.

Let us consider an example. You may perhaps choose electoral registers as a frame for sampling people. In England, electoral registers currently contain names and addresses of household residents aged 18 and over and who are registered electors. The information is organized by household, and by residential address. You can use such information to make your selections, or to gain further information to help you to make selections. You might gain further information by, for example, contacting people or households directly, or you might make some visual assessment of the household and its location, or you might do some cross-referencing with other potential sampling frames – for example, the telephone directory. The question of how you make decisions about which sampling categories to select from your sampling frame of course depends on the logic of your sampling strategy and, in particular, the relationship you are trying to establish between your sample and your wider population. If you want a sample which is statistically representative of all registered electors, then you are likely to use a random method of selection, or a stratified random method whereby you make random selections within certain categories (for example, geographical location of household). If you wish to target men only, then you may be influenced by the names of electors in your choices, although of course sex cannot always be read straightforwardly from given names.

There are, however, at least three difficulties which are commonly encountered in relation to identifying and using sampling frames:

- 1 Although a sampling frame may be available, it might not provide enough relevant information about the potential sampling categories to enable you to make considered selections. So, for example, as well as knowing that people are registered electors, knowing their names, and where they live, you may want to know about their experience of foreign travel, or their educational qualifications, or their sexuality. While you might have a sampling frame such as the electoral register which tells you something about people, it is unlikely to give you access to the full range of factors and experiences which you are interested in. Furthermore, the frame may be partial in its coverage. The English electoral register, for example, will not give you names and addresses of all people who are potentially eligible to vote. Homeless people are excluded, as are people who are not officially registered as electors. Similarly, the register may provide inaccurate information, for example where members of a household have moved since the compilation of the register.

In these cases, either you can try to find an alternative or supplementary sampling frame, or you can try to devise a two-stage method – for example, a superficial survey of selected registered electors – for generating the information which you require, and effectively therefore for producing your own sampling frame from which to make subsequent selections. Similarly, with documentary research, you might make some kind of preliminary assessment of a listed set of documents and, on that basis, produce a sampling frame for further selections. With observation, you might make an initial assessment of a number of settings that are listed in some form, for example a register of particular types or sizes of organization. You could use a range of materials, as well as observation, to do this, and select a smaller number of settings on that basis, and so on. These kinds

- of procedures can, however, be rather consuming of resources and unwieldy, so you will need to think carefully about how feasible they are.
- 2 Alternatively, a sampling frame may be available, but the defining characteristics of the frame might be specific in ways which are not helpful to your research. So, to use one of the examples cited above, if you are interested in people's experiences of foreign travel, you might try to gain access to the database of a travel agent. However, that database may be specific in ways not helpful to your research, for example it may contain clients who live in one particular geographical area, or who are mostly of only one or two socio-economic classes, or who mostly visit only a small range of destinations or engage in particular types of travel, and so on. If you are hoping to produce a sample of travellers representative of all travellers by, for example, making random selections from your sampling frame, then the biased nature of this frame is clearly a problem. But even if this is not your intention, the shape and nature of the sampling frame will of course influence the kinds of selections you are able to make. The general message here is that you must think carefully and critically about the parameters and specificity of any sampling frame that you use.
  - 3 A sampling frame may not be available. This is a very common problem in social research. Very often there is simply not an appropriate resource from which you can sample. This means that you will have to think about whether you can generate your own sampling frame, or whether you can draw on a number of partially adequate frames to piece together your sample. You might, alternatively, use a method like 'snowball' sampling, whereby you begin with one sampling category – usually a person – and ask them to put you in touch with others of a similar or known type. In a sense, this will also produce a sampling frame for you, and you should ask yourself the same questions about how adequate it is. Does it matter that the categories – people – might know each other? Does it matter that decisions about who should be included in your sample are, at least in part, in the hands of the initial contacts whose help you seek in gaining further contacts?

### ***Practical and Ethical Issues***

Is my sampling strategy practical and feasible?

Do I have the necessary resources?

Is my sampling strategy ethical?

Your sampling practice will be influenced by all kinds of practical considerations and, while these should not drive the intellectual decisions you take, they must of course inform those decisions. Again, the importance of having a sampling strategy should be emphasized here so that, faced with practical difficulties and constraints, you are able to take strategic decisions, and to have a broader understanding of their consequences for your study.

You must ask yourself realistically whether you will be able to fill your quota targets using your chosen sampling logic and methods. There is little

point in inventing a highly sophisticated and detailed set of quotas if you have no practical method for filling these. Given the importance of strategy and quotas in qualitative sampling, however, the onus is upon you to find practical methods, rather than to abandon strategic planning. But, you must ask yourself how long this is likely to take, and what kind of commitment of other resources you are likely to have to make. If, for example, you will need to conduct a preliminary scan of 5,000 documents in order to devise a means for selecting 500, you should try to work out how long that first stage will take. You may need to think quite carefully about how many documents you will have to subject to the initial scan in order to produce a frame large enough to select the sample you require. Do you have enough time to do this? What are the other options?

Once you have identified your sampling categories, how certain are you that access to them will be forthcoming? If, for example, your categories are people, you must bear in mind that some people will be willing to participate and some will not. 'Access' is difficult to define, as we have seen. You may be given permission to do the research by, for example, a manager in an organization, but does that (or should that?) guarantee you access to the employees, to the clients or customers, to the filing system, and so on? You may need to negotiate with gatekeepers, or ethical committees, which again will drain your time and resources. You will not always know at the beginning of the research whether or not your application for access will be successful. You will therefore need contingency plans, or at least some ideas about what you will do if you cannot draw a sample, and gain access to it, in the way you propose.

You will need to consider how many interviews, observations, diaries, documents, visits to archives, visits to the cinema, study trips abroad, and so on, you can carry out, given the available resources. In answering this question you have to bear in mind the handling, organization, and analysis of the data, as well as their generation. For example, doing 20 qualitative interviews at two hours apiece may not seem to take very long in the grand scale of things, but if you are going to transcribe them, and search the transcripts for themes and categories, and develop case studies, and so on, you will begin to realize that the commitment of resources is quite large. Taking photographs or making other visual products like films can be even quicker to do, but similarly will require a great deal of analytical investment. The same even goes for making 20 trips to the cinema if you are doing this in anything more than a recreational way.

You may have very good intellectual reasons for wishing to make certain sampling selections, and they may be practicable, but you nevertheless feel that such selections would be unethical. For example, a sampling frame for a study of inheritance might be the death notices in a local newspaper. However, you might feel that it is unacceptable to approach recently bereaved people using this method. Or, you may have unofficial access to private documents which would be very useful for your study. Or, you may be able to identify people whom you would like to include in your study, but you may suspect that such inclusion would place them in a difficult or dangerous position. The point really is that decisions about sampling cannot be divorced from the wider ethics of your research practice.

## CONCLUSION

The conventions for sampling in qualitative research are less clear-cut or well established than for statistical sampling and quantitative research. I do not think it is possible, however, to provide a recipe which sets out how sampling should be done in every qualitative research project, or even a set of common principles.

I have focused on a core set of difficult questions with which you should engage in order to come to sensible, strategic and grounded sampling decisions for qualitative research. Different types of project, of research puzzle, and of data generation method will raise different sampling issues and problems, and although I have not been able to cover all of these in detail, I have tried to give a flavour of some of them in this chapter. Discussions of sampling, both quantitative and qualitative, have often tended to focus on how to sample people, and some of the conventions, particularly for statistical sampling, are applicable only to survey sampling. However, I have emphasized that decisions about which data sources you include, and what they represent, and what is their relationship to a wider universe of relevance, are equally salient – if less well rehearsed – for sampling from other data sources and for using different methods.

A recurrent theme throughout the chapter has concerned the link which can and should be established between sampling strategies, the process of data analysis, and the construction of explanations. It is to questions about how you might sort, organize, and analyse your qualitative data that we shall turn in the following two chapters.

## NOTE

1. Figure 7.1 shows a small section of a longer quota target list designed for this project. The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council between 1994 and 1996, under the direction of Dr R. Flowerdew, Prof. R. Davies (both of Lancaster University) and Dr J. Mason (Leeds University), grant no. L315253007.

## FURTHER READING

Burgess's *Key Variables in Social Investigation* (1986) is useful for questioning what conventionally conceived variables actually mean. My chapter with Janet Finch, 'Decision Taking in the Fieldwork Process: Theoretical Sampling and Collaborative Working' in Burgess's *Studies in Qualitative Methodology*, vol. 2, explains how we tried to use theoretical sampling in one of our research projects. Glaser and Strauss's original discussion of theoretical sampling in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) continues to be an important source, as does Strauss and Corbin's revised formulation in *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (1990). A good textbook discussion can be found in Silverman's *Doing Qualitative Research* (2000).



# Part III

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## **ANALYSING QUALITATIVE DATA**



# 8

## Organizing and Indexing Qualitative Data

The key question for this chapter and the next involves how to construct and present a convincing explanation or argument on the basis of qualitative data. This is of course a question which troubles many a would-be qualitative researcher who can see the merits of a qualitative approach to data generation, but is less clear about what can be done with the ‘products’. ‘Doing something with the products’ covers a potentially wide range of activities, from the routine organization and handling of data, to working out whether it is possible to make generalizations to some wider reality or universe. This chapter will deal with the former, and Chapter 9 with the latter. Both will pose difficult questions which, among other things, demonstrate that the elements within this range are interconnected and therefore that one’s approach to analysis of all kinds – including sorting data and building explanations – should be both strategic and internally consistent.

In this chapter I am going to outline three broad approaches to the task of sorting and organizing qualitative data. They are: cross-sectional and categorical indexing; non-cross-sectional data organization; and the use of diagrams and charts. These three are not, however, mutually exclusive alternatives and in practice you are likely to want to use elements of all three. They are differentiated to some extent, however, both technically and epistemologically, because they involve different techniques and activities, and also because they support different modes of social explanation. Before you can decide which approaches you wish to use, however, you will need to know how to recognize and ‘read’ your data.

### **RECOGNIZING AND ‘READING’ DATA**

The impulse to impose some form of organization and order on your data can seem overwhelming when you are faced with a mass of apparently unconnected notes and scribbles, interview tapes, transcribed conversations, documents, photographs, maps, diagrams, hunches and ideas, and so on. At the very least, you are likely to want to organize your material physically into different boxes or filing cabinets, or electronically into databases or virtual archives, according to some form of cross-sectional indexing and cataloguing system. In other words, you will want to use a system which is consistent across the whole data set (or large parts of it), or consistent within each of your data sets if you have more than one. You will want to number, name or otherwise identify the categories or the boxes as well as the

individual texts, documents, videos, artefacts, or whatever. You may wish to file fieldnotes chronologically, or thematically, or both, so that you will know how to retrieve them and be able to do so quickly and with the minimum of fuss. You will probably want to cross-reference different types of data with each other, for example, interview transcripts with fieldnotes, photographs, specific documents, and so on. Again, you will need to devise a system for doing this – for example, should the cross-referencing be chronological or thematic? What makes sense in terms of the types of connections you are wishing to make? You will need to ensure that your records are confidential and are kept carefully, securely and responsibly, and in accordance with data protection, freedom of information and privacy legislation.

At first sight, this kind of sorting and ordering of data seems an entirely practical task which can be done according to certain technical indexing and cataloguing conventions. Viewed in this way, it seems that once the data are sorted and ordered, the researcher will start to be able to make some interpretive sense of them, and to build their explanations and arguments. However, while it is true that the primary sorting and ordering of data in some way or another is a practical necessity, it is not entirely a practical or technical task, and the distinction between this and building analyses and interpretations is thus a blurred one. Cataloguing or indexing systems are not analytically neutral. In other words, in choosing or devising a particular system, you are at the very least making certain assumptions about the kinds of phenomena you are cataloguing and the kinds you are not (and indeed what count as data and what do not), as well as how and in what form you will be able to retrieve them later on. In fact, you are likely to be making a whole series of further assumptions too, the consequence of which will be to open up some analytical possibilities, and to close off others.

Although it seems obvious to say it, any researcher who intends to sort and organize their data must know what it is that constitutes data in the context of their research. Clearly, you need to have a sense of what it is that you are sorting and organizing before you start, not least because different forms of data will be more or less amenable to different organizing mechanisms.

### ***Reading Data: Literally, Interpretively or Reflexively***

What count as data or evidence in relation to my research questions? How do I wish to ‘read’ my data?

It is vital to revisit this question which you should have asked yourself many times (see especially Chapters 3–6). Since writing your research design, you may have modified or elaborated your views about what constitute data for your research, or you may have generated unanticipated forms of data. Whether or not this is the case, you will need to engage with all the familiar issues (introduced in Chapters 3 and 4) about how far you wish to ‘read’ your data *literally, interpretively or reflexively*.

*Literal readings* If you are intending to ‘read’ your data *literally*, you will be interested in their literal form, content, structure, style, layout, and so on. So, for example, if you are working with interview transcripts, you might be interested in the words and language used, the sequence of interaction, the form and structure of the dialogue, and the literal content. Similarly, if you are working with documents, video, film, visual artefacts, or whatever, a literal reading will mean that you are interested in documenting a literal version of ‘what is there’. While you may want to make such literal readings, most qualitative researchers will not want to stop there. Indeed, many would suggest that a purely literal reading is not possible, just as a purely objective description is not possible, because the social world is always already interpreted and because what we see is shaped by how we see it.

*Interpretive and reflexive readings* Whatever your view on the possibility or otherwise of literal readings, you will need to consider to what extent you will want to make an *interpretive* reading of your data. An interpretive reading will involve you in constructing or documenting a version of what you think the data mean or represent, or what you think you can infer from them. You may, for example, read a section of an interview transcript as telling you something about implicit norms or rules with which the interviewee is operating, or discourses by which they are influenced, or something about how discourses are constituted, or as indicating some kind of causal mechanism in social action. You may be mostly concerned with what you see as your interviewees’ interpretations and understandings, or their versions and accounts of how they make sense of social phenomena, or you may place more emphasis on your own interpretations. Probably, you will do both to an extent. Whatever form of interpretive reading you adopt, you will be involved in *reading through or beyond* the data in some way, be they texts, artefacts, visual images or whatever.

Finally, you will need to decide how far you want to make a *reflexive* reading of your data. A reflexive reading will locate you as part of the data you have generated, and will seek to explore your role and perspective in the process of generation and interpretation of data. You will probably see yourself as inevitably and inextricably implicated in the data generation and interpretation processes, and you will therefore seek a reading of data which captures or expresses those relationships.

Many qualitative researchers make readings of their data on all three of these levels. In Chapters 4, 5 and 6 we discussed the implications of the different forms of reading for what you actually generate and record as data. For example, if you wish to read documentary data or visual images on all three levels you will need to generate not only literal documents, but also data concerning perhaps the context of their production, consumption, interpretation and use, and data concerning your role in that. The different types of reading have different implications for what you treat as data so that, for example, fieldnotes documenting your own response to a situation, or providing an account of how you interpreted what was happening at the time, how you interpreted it later, and so on, are more likely to be viewed as data in relation to reflexive than literal readings. What this means is

that, whatever it is that will be counted as data according to your perspective and the reading you wish to make, this must take a form (or be put into a form) that can be readily sorted and organized for analytical purposes. So, if you have analytical notes and memos, you will need to decide to what extent they can and should constitute data which will be sorted, organized and indexed. If you are using your memories and unrecorded observations as data, you need to think critically and honestly about whether you can sort, organize and retrieve these in any meaningful or convincing way, or whether they must first be transformed into text, tape, or diagrams.

In general, you will also need to think about what form it is that the materials that you are working with already take. What do the data look or feel like? So, for example, text-based data such as interview transcripts, textual documents, and so on, may take very different forms. A document such as a Will, or an Act of Parliament, or an encyclopaedia, may be very formal and standardized. It may be organized into a more or less logical sequence, and already codified to an extent. A semi-structured interview transcript made from an audio-recording is likely to be much less ordered. It may be disorganized, eclectic, incoherent in places, and may or may not take the form of a sequential narrative. Visual images may be already organized into some form of sequence – indeed, you may be interested in that very sequence – such as a film, or photographs on the page of a magazine. Or they may be disorganized, indistinct, unfocused, and so on. Whatever form the materials take, you will need to think about whether or not you wish to work with or against any existing coding, sequencing or organization which has been imposed on the materials, and you will need to think more generally about what their form implies about how you can actually handle them in practice. Do you, for example, need to transform them in some way as part of the process of sorting and organizing them? Do visual images, visualizations and observations need to be turned into some form of textual description, or do you want to work with the images themselves?

These are difficult questions, and you may formulate more than one answer in respect of the same piece or set of data for different analytical purposes. Once you have decided what constitutes data in your study, and you have some ideas about what form they take and how they therefore need to be handled, you are ready to think about the range of approaches you might take to sorting and organizing them. We will begin with a discussion of what is probably the most commonly used form of data organization, especially for text-based data.

## **CROSS-SECTIONAL AND CATEGORICAL INDEXING**

Cross-sectional indexing of data involves devising a consistent system for indexing the whole of a data set according to a set of common principles and measures. This technique can also be referred to as ‘categorical indexing’ to the extent that it uses classificatory categories to establish the common index. The central idea of indexing (some writers and researchers call it categorizing, coding, assigning nodes, or ‘code and retrieve’) is that the researcher applies a uniform set of

indexing categories systematically and consistently to their data. These could simply take the form of serial indexing categories, inserted as subheadings at the relevant points in text-based data, either whilst the text is being produced, or at some stage afterwards. These are likely to function in the same way as headings and subheadings in the chapters of a book, giving a descriptive sense of what each section of text is about, and may be useful as a way of directing the reader's eye through an individual text.

However, there are three main limitations with this form of simple indexing. The first is that although it may be a useful way to signpost the reader in general terms through an individual text, it may produce indexing categories so broad or bland as to be of limited further use, especially for the purposes of making comparisons or connections between more than one text. Second, any one piece of qualitative text is likely to address more than one topic or concept at a time, and therefore serial indexing may be inappropriate or impossible to apply. And third, serial indexing is unlikely to work very well in qualitative texts which do not have a uniform layout or follow an ordered sequence, or in non-text-based data. So, for example, it may be more useful for the categorization of texts with a standardized layout such as legal or administrative documents, and less useful for interview transcripts derived from semi-structured conversations or observational field-notes.

Even if simple serial indexing is appropriate for some of your analytical purposes, you are likely to want something more sophisticated for other elements. You may want to create indexing categories which can be applied simultaneously to text, where appropriate, and you may want to create more than one type of category (or level of categorization). So, you may end up with a fairly complex set of both unrelated and interrelated categories and subcategories. As far as the logistics of applying the categories indexically is concerned, you will need to devise a system for tagging the appropriate sections of text, or elements of visual images, and so on, with the appropriate category index labels or markers, which can subsequently be used to support the kinds of retrievals you might wish to make. The purpose of this more complex form of indexing is to turn your data into a resource which can be accessed in various ways, according to various purposes. In other words, the function of the categories is to focus and organize the *retrieval* of sections of text, or elements of data, for the purpose of some form of further analysis or manipulation. It is sometimes easier to think of this process as constituting different ways of slicing your data set, for different purposes.

The job of indexing and retrieving text – or slicing your data set – can be done manually, but is much facilitated by the use of computer aided qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS). A whole industry has sprung up around CAQDAS in recent years, and some of the most commonly used packages include *QSR NVivo*, *NUD\*IST*, *Ethnograph*, *ATLAS*, and *Hypersoft*. CAQDAS both facilitates and enhances the indexing and retrieval process, by enabling you to index a large (sometimes unlimited) number of categories, more efficiently than you could by hand. Some packages can support hyperlinks between different types of data, for example text, image and sound, as well as sometimes quite complex links within data sets.

Whether or not you use the technology, there is a great deal of detailed and time-consuming work in creating and applying the indexing categories, and although CAQDAS potentially enhances and expedites the retrieval process, it can also mean that indexing takes on a more prominent role than it might in the way you organize your data because so much more seems to be possible than with manual systems. This may or may not be a good thing for your particular project, and you will need to make a careful assessment of that. Before we discuss the practice of indexing and retrieval in more detail, it is important to consider why you might wish to use cross-sectional indexing in the first place.

### ***A Rationale for Cross-sectional Indexing***

Do I wish to index my data cross-sectionally in some way?

If yes, what are my reasons for wishing to do this?

There are a number of possible answers to this question. Here are some examples of reasons why you are likely to want to engage in some kind of cross-sectional indexing procedure:

- 1 Your data are predominantly text-based. Indexing and retrieval procedures are most readily applied to text-based data, although it is certainly possible to create cross-sectional index systems for visual material like photographs, which might be indexed for example according to the broad subject matter, the camera angle, who took the photographs, their composition, or according to their use, or their positioning within a text. Digital technology facilitates the indexing of audio- and video-recordings. If you are generating and using visual data, you will need to think carefully about how much cross-sectional indexing you wish to do, and how useful it will be, given that most of the systems and techniques have been devised with text-based data in mind.
- 2 You want to get a systematic overview of your data so that you have a clear idea of their coverage and scope. Engaging in some kind of indexing process – which usually involves among other things the systematic and routine scrutiny of one's data – can help the researcher to distance themselves from the immediacy of the initially striking or memorable elements, and therefore to gain a more measured view of the whole. Sorting, organizing and indexing can thus help you to get surprises from your data which take you beyond an impressionistic view based on the limitations of your own memory and your capacity to sort and organize in your head. Of course a researcher can only gain these beneficial effects from the indexing process if they do it themselves, but even if they do not, the index that is produced should itself help them to delineate the scope and coverage of their data. Of course this scope and coverage will be expressed in terms of the indexing categories used, which means that although a researcher may well be able to argue that their overview is systematic, they will not be able to claim that it is the only possible version or way of 'slicing' the data.
- 3 You want to be able to locate and retrieve issues, topics, information, examples and



themes which do not appear in an orderly or sequential manner in the data, or in a manner that is easily and straightforwardly visible and accessible. You might want to begin to generate a resource, and a mechanism, which will enable you to select and retrieve elements of your data for the purposes of presentation and dissemination.

- 4 You are beginning the process of creating interpretive, conceptual or analytical categories and themes, and wish to index the location of these in your data. Just as I suggested earlier that the process of indexing helps the researcher to get a sense of the scope and coverage of their data, so this process also can help the researcher in their conceptual, analytical and theoretical thinking.
- 5 You want to establish whether and how well your data address your research questions and your theoretical concerns.
- 6 You think it will give you analytical ‘handles’ on your data, or ways into your data, so that you can use them (now or later) to decide how to focus your analytical activity, to decide what is relevant and what is not and to develop your explanations and arguments. For example, you may use these ‘handles’ as a basis for making comparisons or connections within your data. As we shall see shortly, cross-sectional indexing supports some kinds of analyses and explanation building better than others.
- 7 You wish to ‘take stock’ of your progress in the research process, and assess what to do next. For example, taking stock can mean taking informed decisions about further sampling and data generation (in accordance with principles of theoretical sampling where you analyse your data as they are generated so that you can make further decisions on the basis of the developing analysis and associated theoretical principles: see Chapter 5 for a further discussion of this). Or it can mean taking informed decisions about whether and where to redirect your analytical activity.

It is important to work out which, if any, of these answers apply to your own research, rather than seeing them simply as ‘advantages of cross-sectional indexing’. Your reasons for indexing in this way (or indeed for deciding not to do so) will influence the ways in which you do it, as well as what kinds of subsequent analyses you are able to perform.

### ***Indexing Categories***

What kinds of indexing categories do I wish to produce?

Categories of what? Categories for what?

If you do decide to create a cross-sectional indexing system, you will have to ask yourself what kinds of indexing categories, or codes, you want to produce. This question should direct your attention back towards ontological and epistemological matters. If you do not consider these when you devise your indexing categories, then you are effectively engaging in technique without philosophy, or procedure without strategy, and you are very likely to end up with an indexing system which is inconsistent with the epistemological and ontological core assumptions of your research design.

Ontologically, you will need to be clear about what kinds of phenomena your categories are supposed to represent or constitute instances or expressions of. So, for example, if you are creating categories in order to index sections of text, what do these represent? Are they literally only sections of text, or do they represent behaviours referred to in the text, or actions, accounts, attitudes, understandings, practices, discourses, and so on? Are they properties of individuals, institutions, structures, textual practices? Are they as much about you and your way of seeing as about ‘what is there’? Your answers to these questions do not necessarily have to mirror exactly the ontological elements of your research design, since at this stage you are only indexing your data rather than producing your final analysis, but they do of course need to be consistent with them. If you think your categories are simply different elements in an overall story, you nevertheless need to be clear about the ontological terms in which your story, and your categories, are cast because, as I argued in Chapter 1, no research or story can be ontologically neutral.

Epistemologically, you need to think carefully about how your indexing categories represent instances of these ontological phenomena. What kind of knowledge or evidence do they constitute? In particular, are your categories going to be based on literal, interpretive or reflexive readings? If you are creating indexing categories based on literal readings, these might involve the literal substance or form of the data. If you want to produce interpretive and reflexive categories, they are likely to be based on what you think you can infer from parts of the data, or what they imply. This might involve your reading not only what a text actually contains, but the implications, in your judgement, of what is not present literally in the text, including its context.

Figure 8.1 illustrates these points using an example of a short piece of an interview transcript, and suggests some literal, interpretive and reflexive indexing categories which might be derived from it.

In effect you will probably want to produce indexing categories in relation to all three levels, and the idea that a solely or neutrally literal reading is possible has been much criticized by qualitative researchers. The main message is that you must be clear about what each of your categories is intended to represent, so that you can use them consistently, appropriately and strategically. Exactly what you think they represent, and how you therefore intend to use them, must of course also be tied in with the kind of explanatory and analytical logic you intend to rely upon.

### ***Categories, Codes and Explanatory Logic***

What explanatory or analytical logic does cross-sectional or categorical indexing support?

There is no point in indexing just for the sake of it. You need to ensure that the cross-sectionally indexed chunks or slices of data are going to make some kind of

### The interview transcript

This short section is taken from part-way through a real interview conducted as part of a study of 'Inheritance, Property and Family Relationships' (see Chapter 2, where this project was introduced as an example). There were two interviewees, one male (Robert) and one female (Christine), and a female interviewer (Mary). All of these are pseudonyms. The transcript is a verbatim record of the interaction, although it does not include references to non-verbal behaviour. Short pauses in speech are indicated as (. . .). Interruptions are indicated as //. Words and phrases emphasized by the speaker are underlined. Punctuation has been added, it is hoped in a way which is faithful to the delivery of the dialogue, to make the text more readily intelligible to the reader.

**Mary:** Have you had other experiences of inheritance in your own family?

**Christine:** (. . .) Er, um, yes. Well, not my own relationships, but my sister, she had, um, some friends and, er, the husband was in the ambulance service, right. And the wife, I think she worked actually, so they both contributed towards the household. And they had two children, er, the wife died, which left the husband and the two children. I think the two would be in their late teens, would think, by then. And this left the husband on his own. Now I think he was left on his own a couple of years and then he met and remarried. And the lady that he married, think she had a son. And then he got heart trouble, right. And he died when they were away on holiday. And he must have made a will leaving everything to his new wife. So of course his new wife inherited everything that he and his wife had worked to achieve, and his own two children didn't get a ha-penny.

**Mary:** Oh dear.

**Christine:** Everything went to the new wife. And so I think it's experiences like that, knowing what happens in those sort of circumstances, that's made me feel like I do about our relationship. And I feel also for Robert's children.

**Mary:** Yes.

**Christine:** I think it's wrong that sort of thing, that your own children don't inherit anything. I mean I know it sounds sick that you should feel you've got to leave money and your children need it all, but it's wrong, if you've built a family up and then both mother and father die and the children don't inherit anything from them at all, but some other family inherits it all. It's wrong. And, um, well, that's just my view. Some people maybe think//differently but

**Robert:** //It is wrong but that's the way it works because unfortunately, when you marry, your next of kin is your wife, whatever relations she had before that. But I think a lot of things are because people don't make contracts before they get married. That's why we don't know when we're getting married because we don't really see much point and purpose at the moment, do we?

**Christine:** Not as we are at the moment, no, we're not. I mean, what would we gain from getting married?

### Suggested literal indexing categories

There are a number of ways in which a piece of transcript like this might be indexed literally. For example, you might wish to index pauses, interruptions, emphasized words, points where one speaker agrees with another, or disagrees, or seems partially to agree but uses that

**Figure 8. 1**

*Examples of literal, interpretive and reflexive indexing categories derived from a section of interview transcript*

**Figure 8.1** (cont)  
 Examples of literal,  
 interpretive and  
 reflexive indexing  
 categories derived  
 from a section of  
 interview transcript

agreement to close a topic and make a separate point (as does Robert when he says 'it is wrong but that's the way it works . . .'), the sequence in which the speakers talk (that is, (1) interviewer, (2) female interviewee, (3) interviewer, (4) female interviewee, (5) interviewer, (6) female interviewee, (7) male interviewee, (8) female interviewee). You may wish to conduct a detailed form of conversational analysis, using a precise set of conventions. You might want to index what you see as literal topics or points of substance, for example: no personal experience of inheritance; third party experience of inheritance; inheritance and remarriage; inheritance to children; marital status; pre-marital contracts.

#### Suggested interpretive indexing categories

There is probably an even greater number of ways in which this piece could be indexed interpretively, depending upon the researcher's perspective and interests. Some suggestions of categories related to what you might infer from the transcript, or what you might think it might be telling you in an interpretive sense, are: rules and norms about what is right and wrong in inheritance (especially in the context of remarriage, children, who 'counts' as family, balance – that is, receiving in relation to input); mismatch between law and what people want; inheritance strategies (for example, the strategy of 'not getting married' for these interviewees); inheritance narratives (used to convey normative understandings). You may wish to link with other elements in your data, and other forms of analysis.

#### Suggested reflexive indexing categories

On the face of it there seems little to work with reflexively in this section. We do not have any text relating to the researcher's perception of their own role in the interaction, or of their ongoing interpretations of what was going on. However, there are several instances of interviewer empathy or apparent agreement with what is being said. In general, the interviewer is presenting an encouraging response to what Christine is saying, and you might want to categorize each response accordingly for indexing purposes. You might also index other reflexive materials, such as your fieldnotes, or research diary.

analytical sense. This means that you must think very hard about what your indexed slices of data will look like once they are retrieved, and what kind of explanatory logic they might feed into. For example, if you were to create an indexing category called something like 'inheritance strategies', based on the example given in Figure 8.1, you should think about what such a slice would look like, and what you might do with it. The slice would probably take the form of a collection of all sections of data which had been indexed under the category of inheritance strategies – in that sense it is like a 'bag' of data. What might you do with such a collection? There are two main possibilities, one of which is likely to be more palatable to qualitative researchers than the other.

Let us begin with the least palatable option. You might treat your slices or bags of categorically indexed data as *variables*. So, for example, you might try to explore relationships between such 'variables' as 'inheritance strategies' and 'rules and norms about right and wrong in inheritance'. Or you might be interested in charting relationships between 'inheritance strategies' and 'gender' by treating these as variables. Usually, variable analysis would involve making inferences about causation or direction and degree of influence based on the apparent associations between variables. I cannot emphasize too strongly, however, that *you must not attempt to do this if you have rejected the logic of variable analysis* (see

Chapters 7 and 9 for further discussion of variable analysis), which most qualitative researchers will have done.

You might alternatively use your slices or bags of indexed data as retrievals which you will treat as *unfinished resources* for a variety of further uses, rather than end products (such as variables) in themselves. For example, you might simply view your slices as ways of seeing thematically across your data set. You might use them to conduct some further analysis, possibly of the content of the slices, or use the slices as a starting point to ask questions which will take you into other parts of your data set. This ‘unfinished resource’ option is likely to be more palatable to qualitative researchers, since it supports a wider range of analytical and explanatory logics than the variable analysis option.

Both of these options suggest a logic of cross-sectional comparison in the formation of explanations, but the former does this in a way which simply extends – probably inappropriately – what is often seen as a quantitative logic of variable analysis into the qualitative domain. This is likely to be inappropriate for a range of reasons, including:

- 1 The treatment of indexing categories as though they are variables suggests a high degree of uniformity between each section of data categorized by this label, yet this is unlikely to exist. While your categories should be consistent, they are unlikely to be uniform.
- 2 The idea of a variable may work better for literal readings of data than for interpretive and reflexive readings. Yet qualitative researchers usually wish to engage in one or both of the latter.
- 3 Your indexing categories may refer to complex and/or specific processes which cannot be reduced to a static or simple variable or type, but which are usefully organized under specified indexing headings for you to retrieve and do further analytical work upon.
- 4 The rest of your research design probably does not support this form of analysis. For example, if you have used theoretical sampling, and semi-structured or non-standardized data generation techniques, then these are unlikely to be compatible with this form of variable analysis (see Chapters 3–6 on data generation, and Chapter 7 on sampling). This means that, if you try to do some kind of variable analysis, you are unlikely to be able to achieve very effective results.

The kind of cross-sectional comparison supported by the ‘unfinished resources’ option is less rigid. So, for example, it acknowledges that you may wish to compare all instances of ‘inheritance strategies’ across your data set, and indeed you might want to explore the relationship between these and ‘rules and norms about the rights and wrongs of inheritance’. However, it assists this process by helping you to draw some of the relevant data together in a bag or slice of data – so that you can explore them further, rather than helping you to manipulate one slice against the other as though they were dependent and independent variables. If you are using cross-sectional indexing according to this logic, you must be very careful that you do not inadvertently find yourself sliding towards the ‘variable analysis’ way of thinking. As we shall see shortly, some of the CAQDAS packages

for analysing qualitative data can encourage you to make this mistake. The following simple rules will help you to resist

First, do not treat your categorically indexed slices of data as more concrete, uniform or static than you know they are. Do not be tempted to view them as tidy and labelled variables, when you know that they are loose and flexible groupings of unfinished resources which you developed primarily as a retrieval mechanism.

Second, do not try to index what cannot be categorized cross-sectionally. For example, it may not be possible to identify and tag complex and specific social processes through a straightforward system of cross-sectional indexing. This might be because they are simply too complex, or too particular, to be encapsulated in an indexing category, or too big to appear in a small chunk of text taken from an interview, a document, or whatever. Or, it might be because they do not appear cross-sectionally in the data set (see discussion of ‘non-cross-sectional data organization’ later in this chapter).

Take, for example, the issue of ‘reciprocity’ in family relationships. Reciprocity can potentially involve complex systems of exchange, or of give and take, in family life. So, for example, a daughter might receive a financial gift from her father and, although it is defined by both of them as a gift, she might feel a sense of duty to make some repayment for it. The sense of duty is unlikely to come solely from receipt of this particular gift, but will be embedded somehow in the history of the relationship between the daughter and her father, and possibly other relatives. The feeling of duty to repay might contribute to a general feeling of indebtedness towards her father, and the daughter may provide support and assistance to him over many years, either directly or indirectly, as a consequence of this. Alternatively, she may decide to make a direct repayment which is equivalent in financial terms to the original gift. Or, she may never repay directly, but may always be ready to provide assistance – to be ‘on call’ if you like – should it be required by her father. There are lots of possible permutations, but the point is that it is unlikely that such a process of reciprocity will be neatly bundled into small chunks of interview text ready for the researcher to categorize and index. Partly, this is because an understanding of reciprocity may come from an interpretive analysis of the ‘whole’ story, rather than from specific quotations selected from interviews with the daughter or the father. So, while a researcher might be ‘lucky’ enough to be able to identify a chunk of text which does express some form of reciprocity, for example, where the daughter talks explicitly about feeling a duty to repay, the very nature of these kinds of social processes means that more often than not they will not come ready packaged in this way. Any one small section of text taken in isolation, or even taken together with others of a similar type, may therefore not express a complex interpretive concept in any meaningful sense. You must think about how useful your indexed slices of data will be before you do the lengthy and time-consuming job of indexing and retrieving them.

The third rule is not to forget the context, or interaction, or whatever, which produced the sections of data which you are indexing. It is easy to get carried away with the enthusiasm of designing cross-sectional categorical indexing systems, and to forget that these will have the effect of lifting small sections of data out of their context, so that they can be compared with other similarly decontextualized

sections of data. It is possible to cross-sectionally categorize or code certain aspects of context (and some of the CAQDAS packages help you to do this), such as the age or gender of the interviewee, the date of the document, the point in the sequence of the whole text from which your indexed section was extracted, and so on. However, the mechanisms for doing this represent a fairly crude and static way of understanding context and are, of course, based on a logic whereby context can be reduced to certain key characteristics or variables. Indeed, if you were conducting a variable analysis you might wish to conceptualize these as independent variables. You should, therefore, not be satisfied with this as your only mechanism for understanding context, unless you have wholeheartedly and consistently adopted the logic of variable analysis in your study.

### **Creating and Applying Indexing Categories**

How do I create and apply my indexing categories?

Once you have worked out whether and why you might wish to use cross-sectional indexing, you will need to think about how to do it. Actually, your first question may be ‘where will I get my categories from?’ In part, this question is answered by your overall methodological approach and, in particular, whether your study is designed to ‘test out’ certain clearly formed ideas or hypotheses, or whether you intend to generate ideas, propositions and theories from the data. Putting it this way over-simplifies some complex philosophical and methodological issues (see Chapter 9), but the point really is that some researchers will wish to generate indexing categories in a fairly grounded way on the basis of their ongoing interpretation of their data, while others may be less concerned with this. Most researchers within the qualitative tradition fall into the former group, so we will consider what *generating indexing categories from the data* might mean.

In the first place, it means making sure that you are as familiar as you can be with your data – read them, look at them, study them, listen to them, think about them and the process of their production, sleep with them under your pillow if you think it will help. However, it also means being very familiar with what I have been calling your intellectual puzzle and with the questions you are attempting to address with your research. You need to ensure that you are categorizing in a way which will produce the right kinds of data slices or bags from your data set. Essentially, you need to create for yourself a mechanism for moving back and forth between your intellectual puzzle, your research questions, and your data, so that you develop your indexing categories through this process of interaction. Keeping to the forefront the question ‘where do the categories come from?’ – as well as the previous set of questions about what the categories constitute – should help you to ensure that this process is as interactive as you would like it to be. So, for example, if your honest answer has to be that the categories you are developing come

entirely from your data with no reference to your research questions, then you can make the appropriate adjustments to your practice.

Using this logic you can start creating indexing categories at any stage in the research process, although I suggest below that you also need to make sure you stop at some point. So, for example, you might start creating categories before you have generated any data, or when you only have a few data. Such categories clearly will be informed mostly by your research questions, and will need to be reworked in the light of the further generation of data. If you are doing a pilot study involving the generation of data, then this might be a very good time to start creating indexing categories – they will assist in the preliminary analysis of your data, and they will give you practice in category creation and indexing.

Ultimately, there is probably no better mechanism for ensuring that the creation of categories is interactive between research questions and data than the process of indexing itself, whether this be at the pilot study stage, or at any point later on. Once you have revisited your research questions, and thoroughly familiarized yourself with your data, it is a good idea to develop a few trial categories, and start a trial run. Once you begin trying to index, not only will you start to discover how sensible and workable (or not) the indexing categories you have seem to be, but also you can simultaneously begin developing new categories and start indexing these too. If you literally keep your research questions nearby while you do this, you can make sure that you are constantly cross-checking between them and your data in the process of developing and applying categories. You should develop notes and records on the construction of the categories while you are doing this, so that you devise a clear set of definitions of what each category constitutes, as well as instructions about how to apply them. These can usefully form the basis of discussions with peers and colleagues about your developing indexing system. However, you must remember that this is a trial run: if your indexing categories are to be systematic and workable they will need to be standardized, and be consistently applied. This implies that at some stage you will need to end the trial run, construct the final list of categories (and definitions, and application instructions), and begin afresh.

It is a good idea to have a trial run of making sense of your categorized data, perhaps by writing a thematic paper on the basis of part of them. Again, this can help you better to see what works and what does not, and to refine your indexing practice accordingly.

In my view, CAQDAS packages can provide invaluable assistance to any qualitative researcher with more than a few texts and documents to index, and it is therefore important to take advantage of them. This is not an unequivocal or universal endorsement though. Many of the functions which computer software packages perform very well actually support or come very close to the logic of variable analysis, and this may be inappropriate for your qualitative project. Examples of facilities which support this kind of logic are: programs which can trace relationships between indexing categories as used in the text (for example, where categories occur simultaneously, or in a particular sequence); or between 'base data' or social characteristics (for example, age, gender, social class of interview respondents) and indexing categories; and those which offer the facility of



building trees or hierarchies of indexing categories to help you to develop explanations of the relationships between the categories (this kind of facility is often referred to in the software manuals and marketing materials as ‘theory building’). While it is possible, probably, to use all these facilities without engaging in variable analysis, the programs can be quite seductive and give the researcher a false impression that they are actually dealing with neatly packaged variables. If you are considering using a CAQDAS package you should be aware that apparently technical details such as these do support specific epistemological, analytical and explanatory strategies. You should therefore examine carefully what the software manufacturers or distributors say about how the program works, and acquire a demonstration copy from the distributor if one is available. You can also seek out the views and experiences of existing users. Above all, what you must check is that your approach to epistemology and explanation is consistent with (or at least complementary to) the one underlying the software.

### **Questions of Timing in Indexing**

When should I make final decisions about what the indexing categories will be?

When should I start indexing?

When should I finish?

How many times should I index my data?

The strategies of generating indexing categories at least in part from data, on the one hand, and producing consistent cross-sectional categories on the other, can seem rather contradictory. The one suggests sensitivity to data and a high degree of flexibility – for example, to reinterpret categories, to create new categories at any stage in the process – and the other suggests a higher degree of rigidity, at least once a final set of categories has been decided upon. But as I suggested earlier, if your data slices or bags are to make sense and be useful, you will need to introduce consistency at some stage. It is therefore important to keep in mind the question ‘when do I make final decisions about what the indexing categories will be?’ The temptations to delay the final decision about indexing categories are great and this question is useful not least as a constant reminder that you do have to make such final decisions. If you do not, you may waste a lot of time and effort producing an indexing system which is so *ad hoc* as to be useless. Or, you may spend so long developing and refining your list of indexing categories, that you leave yourself far too little time for the painstaking business of actually doing the indexing, and the retrievals, and more importantly working with the products to produce your explanations and arguments.

Indexing and retrieval is a very time-consuming and labour-intensive

business, whether or not you use CAQDAS. Indeed, although such packages undoubtedly speed up and enhance the process of retrieval, they arguably do not actually decrease the amount of time you spend on this both because they make possible more ways of retrieving, and because they tend to encourage the researcher to develop a greater number of indexing categories in the first place. There is, of course, no point in having a perfectly refined list of categories if you do not have time to index your data with all of them, or if you do not have the time or resources to do all the retrievals that you want to, and to analyse further the products of these retrievals. Do not under-estimate how long indexing, retrieval and further analysis will take you. A trial run can be useful in helping you to calculate this fairly precisely (it will depend on the number and complexity of your categories, the nature and quantity of your data, and so on). Do not make plans to categorize your data more than once (unless using the facility some software packages offer for automatically subdividing or adding original categories to make new ones) unless you have very good reasons for doing so, because this may represent a very large investment of time for a procedure which is ultimately likely to constitute only one limited part of your total analytical effort.

### ***Getting the 'Right' Number of Categories***

How many indexing categories do I need to produce?

How will I know whether I have the right number?

As well as asking yourself questions about the nature of your categories, and the timing of the indexing process, you also need to think about whether you are producing a sensible number of categories for your analytical purposes. If you have too few categories, you may end up with what you feel is a sketchy and inadequate indexing system – just like a book index which has only half of the relevant items within it. Given that you will be wanting to do further work on the retrieved slices or bags of data, you will have to accept that if they are not focused sufficiently on core issues (because you have cast your categories too generally or broadly), or if there are not slices for all of the core issues (because you have missed some out), then you will have problems at that stage. The first problem is easier to deal with than the second, since it simply means that you may wish to do some sharpening or refining, and possibly some subcategorizing. Although these all represent investments of time and effort, they are possible, and may actually help you in the process of building explanations and arguments. On the other hand, if you have entirely overlooked some important categories, and you do need cross-sectional data slices for these, then you will have no choice but to do without them, or to index the whole data set again with your new categories.

However, if you have too many categories, you will also have problems. If you have simply included some categories which you subsequently decide are irrelevant, then the problem is only that you have wasted time and effort in

indexing them. But if you have produced a set of categories that are too precise and too refined at too early a stage, then they may be less useful than you had hoped. So, for example, an interview-based study of geographical migration might, in your view, require an analysis of different types of residential move. You might perhaps think that moves which involve short geographical distances are qualitatively different from those involving long distances, and be tempted to produce indexing categories such as: short distance moves; medium distance moves; long distance moves. You would then try to index your interview transcripts or notes using these categories, so that every mention of a short, medium or long distance move can be retrieved and collected together in three data bags. There are a number of problems with this, however.

First, in order to ensure consistency you would presumably need to specify, perhaps using a linear measurement like kilometres or miles, exactly what you meant by short, medium and long. Yet the precise distance of a move might not always be made clear in each section of text which nevertheless refers, broadly, to geographical distance. Alternatively, you might use your interviewees' understandings of what constitutes a short, medium or long distance move rather than a linear measurement, but you would consequently have to accept that where one interviewee might see 50 kilometres as a short distance, another might see it as a long distance. So, although you could categorize every section of text where short, medium and long distance moves (in your interviewees' terms) are mentioned, you may not be indexing like with like in terms of linear distance. You would also still have the problem that discussions about distance which do not refer specifically to short, medium or long distances would not be indexed by this system, yet presumably would be relevant to your analysis.

A second problem is that, if you were to use a linear measurement of distance, you may find that the interval you have chosen between short, medium and long is much too big, or much too small. This could result in nearly every type of move being categorized as, say, long distance, simply because they were all in excess of 50 kilometres.

The third and most important problem is that you are unlikely to get a qualitative and conceptual sense of how people perceive or construct geographical distance, or of what part it might play in their thinking about residential moves, with such a system. What people count as short, medium or long distance might vary not just between different interviewees, but also for the same interviewees in different contexts or at different times in their lives. People may think of distances in ways other than linear measurements or lengths, such as the ease with which they can travel between one point and another, the cost of the journey, and so on. If you index using categories based on short, medium and long distance criteria, you will probably miss all kinds of interesting discussions and inferences about distance, and instead you will simply end up with a bag or slice of data based on one way of conceptualizing distance. In this example, therefore, you would probably find that it is better to use the more open and flexible indexing category of 'distance', to index all instances of talk about anything to do with distance in relation to residential moves, than to fine-tune your indexing category from the beginning into short, medium and long distance. Subsequently of course,

if you wanted to, you could explore the contents of your ‘distance’ data bag in order to develop an understanding of different ways of understanding distance, including, perhaps, short, medium and long distance. This example shows why thinking ahead to what the contents of each bag or slice of categorized chunks of data will look like is really important, because it can help you to make workable initial decisions about the scope and shape of your categories. Ultimately, what you choose to do will depend again on what you expect your categories to do for you, and what kind of explanatory logic you are going to apply in your data analysis.

### ***Making Appropriate Use of Available Technology***

Have I made the best use of the available technology?

I have made various points about the use of CAQDAS throughout this section, and clearly individual researchers will need to assess for themselves how useful these packages might be for their own purposes. In writing about this I tread a fine line between inspiring some enthusiasm, but not too much, lest the seductiveness of the technology stops you from seeing the epistemological issues. On the other hand, qualitative researchers have been said to be notoriously, and not always productively, anti-technology (Seale in Silverman, 2000), and I think it is important to overcome that. I have already suggested that you should look carefully at the published information about any programs you are considering using, to check whether they are compatible with your approach to epistemology, and of course you must also check more generally that the program will help you to do what you want to do, and that you have the appropriate equipment and so on to run it. You should also seek demonstration copies and contact existing users through the various formal and informal electronic networks that exist.

Overall, it is important to ask yourself whether you are making the best use of the technology available to you though, and this applies equally to enthusiasts and to those who feel uncertain about, or resistant to, the merits of CAQDAS. For enthusiasts, you should ask yourself whether you are placing too great an emphasis on what the software can do, to the point where this is driving your analytical activity and epistemology rather than being driven by them. Many of the packages offer a range of ‘quantitative’ facilities, such as percentage calculations of text indexed by specified themes, and some of them make big claims about their ‘theory building’ capabilities. However, these are usually based on a logic of variable analysis or a mode of quantification which may be entirely inappropriate both for your overall methodological stance, and for the specific nature of the project which you have conducted (in terms of its sampling, methods of data generation, and so on). If that is so, you must ensure that your enthusiasm for the technology does not cloud your research judgement about what is useful, and what is not, in the context of your project. If, on the other hand, you are uncertain

about the value of CAQDAS, you should ask yourself whether you have made an adequate survey of what is available, and whether or not you are avoiding the use of technology unnecessarily. It is very useful for indexing and retrieval – activities which most qualitative researchers probably engage in – even for a relatively small number of documents, texts, transcripts, and so on (which can still produce a large mass of data). It also offers some exciting possibilities for creating interactive links between different types of data, for example text, image and sound, or different elements within the same data set (Coffey et al., 1996; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996).

I have devoted much of my discussion of the sorting and organization of qualitative data to these cross-sectional forms of indexing, because they are very commonly used and also because it is important, in my view, to spell out the potential dangers of using them as though they are a form of variable analysis. There are, however, at least two other ways of organizing and sorting qualitative data, and it is to a brief discussion of these that we shall now turn.

## **CONTEXTUAL, CASE STUDY AND HOLISTIC DATA ORGANIZATION**

As we have seen, the logic of cross-sectional data indexing is that you devise the same set of indexing categories for use, cross-sectionally, across the whole of your data set. In other words, you are using the same lens to explore patterns and themes which occur across your data. Non-cross-sectional, contextual or case study forms of data organization involve ways of seeing and sorting your data which do not necessarily use the same lens across the whole in this way. Essentially, these forms of data organization involve looking at discrete parts, cases or contexts within your data set, and documenting something about those parts specifically. Those might be ‘whole’ life stories, the dynamics of setting, and so on. In that sense, it is a practice guided by a search both for the *particular in context* rather than the common or consistent, and the *holistic* rather than the cross-sectional. This kind of approach is much less well supported by CAQDAS, although the use of hyperlinks can aid case study analysis and presentation (Coffey et al., 1996), and digital technologies can assist in the ‘holistic’ archiving of visual and other materials.

### ***Reasons for a Contextual, Case Study or Holistic Approach***

Do I wish to organize my data in a non-cross-sectional way?

If yes, what are my reasons for wishing to do this?

There are a number of possible answers to this question. Here are some examples:

- 1 You want to gain a sense of the distinctiveness of different parts or elements of

- your data set, which a search for common cross-sectional themes might not provide.
- 2 You wish to understand intricately interwoven parts of your data set, or social processes, or complex narratives or practices, for example, and you believe that these are too complicated or elaborate to be amenable to categorical indexing (or at least to be usefully indexed in this way).
  - 3 You wish to organize data around themes, issues or topics which do not appear cross-sectionally in your data set because, for example, they are particular, specific or idiosyncratic. You might reject the idea that everything can or should be indexed with a common set of categories.
  - 4 You place great emphasis on context, for example, how things work in particular contexts, and feel that cross-sectional 'indicators' of context are too crude and variable-like.
  - 5 You think this method of data organization will provide the most appropriate form of analytical 'handle' on your data, enabling you to make comparisons and to build explanations in a distinctive way. We shall examine, shortly, what kind of analytical logic these approaches support.
  - 6 You wish to use this method in addition to, for example, cross-sectional indexing, so that you can build explanations based on two alternative ways of 'slicing' your data set. Most qualitative researchers would be unhappy simply to adopt cross-sectional indexing, and will want also to use non-cross-sectional forms of data organization.

### ***Contextual, Case Study and Holistic Data Organization in Practice***

How should I go about contextual, case study or holistic data organization?

What constitutes 'the case', 'the context', or 'the whole'?

In order to answer this question you will need to decide what the meaningful data organizing principles are and what the data 'wholes' or contexts in the context of your research project are. You will of course also have to engage with the question of whether you are reading your data literally, interpretively or reflexively (see above). Examples of this type of approach include the compilation of case studies, life stories, narratives, biographies, and other 'holistic' sequences. These may be organized around and draw upon a range of data sources. For example, people, organizations, settings, texts, objects, events, and any combination can all be the focus for a case study.

Yin says that 'the case study allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events – such as individual life cycles, organizational and managerial processes, neighbourhood change, international relations, and the maturation of industries' (1989: 14). However, you do not have to see yourself as doing 'case study research' to be able nevertheless to identify case studies, contexts or 'wholes' within your data set for analytical purposes. While

non-cross-sectional data organization does not have to be done around 'real-life events', this is certainly one of the commonly used principles. Equally, however, you might identify 'holistic sequences' which do not map directly onto real-life events.

Just as with cross-sectional indexing, and the resultant data bags or slices, you will need to think about what kind of sense your data will make once organized non-cross-sectionally around the principles you have chosen. So, for example, does it make sense to collate and prepare data on the individual biographies of some of the interviewees in your study, or some of the participants in your setting? If so, where does 'biography', or what constitutes 'the individual', begin and end? What constitutes 'a life'? Would a case study which charts the emergence, construction and context of a particular law be meaningful? If so, how do you identify the key elements in its emergence? Would a detailed analysis of the layout and style of a particular visual image be helpful? If so, do you need more of the context, for example, of its production and use, to constitute your case or 'whole'?

Underlying all these questions is the central one which is, what constitutes the case, the context or the 'whole', and according to what principles? You should not take the answer to this question as a given or assume it is defined only commonsensically or by 'real life' categories (for example, a person's life, an organization, a film). This raises all the familiar questions discussed in Chapter 7 in relation to sampling, about identifying categories, or for present purposes 'cases', 'contexts' or 'wholes', that are meaningful in relation to the kind of puzzle your research addresses. This of course brings into play your theoretical perspective in the form of ontology (what you see the world, or the case, to be), and epistemology (how you think it can be known, and along which dimensions you feel you can assemble knowledge about it).

You also need to think about how literal, interpretive or reflexive your cases, contexts or 'wholes' are intended to be, so that you can organize the appropriate material into them. Most qualitative researchers argue that a literal version is not possible, because of the issues of selection and strategy which go into deciding what is a case or a 'whole'. But, if you are operating interpretively or reflexively, you need to ensure that you organize the appropriate materials into your case study to enable you to make the interpretive or reflexive sense required.

If you want to organize your data in these ways, you need therefore to do it according to principles that you identify, strategically. You will not feel bound to ensure that you have a common set of categories for indexing, worked out in advance, as you would with cross-sectional logic. You will probably organize at least part of your data manually, since CAQDAS is mostly designed to assist cross-sectional categorical indexing. Nevertheless, you might use a database, a graphics package, CD-ROM and hyperlinks to help you to construct and represent sequences or connections in your data. You may well wish to construct diagrams and charts (see next section for a fuller discussion). Your task will be to identify and represent what you see as the key elements of the *particular* and *holistic* part of your data which you are examining. Just as the creation of cross-sectional indexing categories should be done as a reflexive practice, where you document the steps in your thinking and in the final definitions of each category, so too with

non-cross-sectional methods you should be clear about what organizing principles you are using to identify the key elements of each particular and holistic part. Do not let the use of terms like ‘holistic’ and ‘real-life events’ allow you to forget that every narrative or representation is a version rather than an objective and neutral description. You will be using a set of principles derived from somewhere, and it is important that you are clear about what these are and where they come from.

### ***Contextual Data Organization and Explanatory Logic***

What explanatory or analytical logic does contextual, case study and holistic data organization support?

These approaches to organizing your data support an analytical logic whereby explanations are derived from analysis and comparison of ‘wholes’, cases or contexts (such as biographies, organizational histories, and so on), rather than parts, slices or themes (or indeed variables) compared cross-sectionally (such as sections of data derived from interview transcripts relating to the theme ‘inheritance strategies’). This means that the researcher begins by analysing the holistic ‘unit’, or case study, to try to produce an explanation of processes, practices, or whatever, that characterize that unit.

This might, for example, involve an analysis of someone’s biography and an explanation of how they came to be in a position where they inherited a large sum of money or certain objects from a relative, or indeed it might involve an explanation of inheritance strategies they had used throughout their life. Instead of then moving on to examine another unit (or biography) and to compare its features as though they were like for like with the first unit, the researcher compares the explanation of the first unit with the explanation of the second, both explanations having been derived from a holistic rather than cross-sectional analysis. I have used the same thematic example as that used to discuss cross-sectional indexing – that is, inheritance and inheritance strategies – to illustrate that it is possible to approach similar substantive intellectual issues from these different analytical directions. Indeed, it is common to use both approaches in tandem, especially given the limited explanatory potential of cross-sectional data organization for many of the questions about social process, and interpretive and qualitative complexity with which qualitative researchers frequently wish to grapple.

### **DIAGRAMS AND CHARTS**

Finally, I want to say a few words about the use of diagrams and charts in the process of data sorting and organization. In fact, you might use these as a tool in their own right, or as an aid to both cross-sectional and more contextual forms of organization. They might take the form of diagrammatical or graphical recordings



or representations of data, of the cross-sectional or non-cross-sectional organization of your data, or of your analysis as it develops. You can create diagrams and charts manually or electronically.

### ***Reasons for Organizing Data Diagrammatically***

Do I wish to organize my data diagrammatically?

If yes, what are my reasons for wishing to do this?

Among the possible answers to this question are:

- 1 You may use diagrams to record or represent your data, because it may be easier or quicker to 'read' them in that way. So, for example, you may create diagrams of spatial layouts, or of sequences of interaction, or you might use flow charts to represent sequences of events.
- 2 You might wish to construct diagrams or charts as an analytical tool to help you in your analytical thinking. If you do this, you may or may not actually use the diagrams in any presentation of your data to third parties. Sometimes, using diagrams in this way can help you to spot connections or relationships in your data which are difficult to 'see' when data are in, for example, a text-based format. A good example of this is in the use of charts to plot the relationship between different types of time in the study of 'life courses'. These can be used to show, simultaneously in chronological sequence, events which take place in historical time (for example, wars, droughts, changes of government), family time (for example, marriages, births, deaths), and individual time (for example, job changes, earnings, education, health). You might have gained data on these three types of time from various sources, and plotting them together on one chart can help you to spot potential connections between them which might not have been visible from the perspective of any one of the sources.
- 3 You might create diagrams or charts of your cross-sectional indexing categories, or of your more contextual forms of data organization. These might be fairly simple, or you might want to develop some kind of flow chart or matrix of relationships between the different elements. CAQDAS can help you to do this in relation to cross-sectional categories, although as I suggested earlier you should beware the logic of variable analysis which tends to underpin this kind of activity.
- 4 You may wish to use diagrams, charts and graphs as presentation or display tools. This might be because they are simply more eye-catching, or because they make complex material easier to understand, or more multi-dimensional.

Whichever of these reasons applies, you are likely to be using diagrammatical forms of data organization alongside one or both of the other types discussed earlier.

## ***Diagrammatical Data Organization in Practice***

How should I go about diagrammatical organization of data?

There are very many different ways of constructing diagrams, charts and graphs in the analysis of qualitative data (see Miles and Huberman, 1994, for an excellent discussion), and the increased availability of fairly sophisticated technology enhances the possibilities. The key guiding principle, as with other forms of data organization, is to think about what job it is that you expect diagrams to do for you, and what your data will look like when organized in this way. Therefore, you should ask yourself why you are producing diagrams, and as a consequence think about how to do it.

Diagrams, charts and graphs can be organized around a range of 'axes', dimensions or principles, just as cross-sectional indexing categories or holistic units can be, and you need to make sure that the ones you are working with are meaningful in the context of your own project, its research questions, and the methodology you have adopted. You will, of course, have to decide whether the diagrams are to be organized around literal, interpretive or reflexive readings of your data.

For example, a literal diagram might involve a map of the spatial layout of a setting in which you are conducting observation, although you should be self-critical about the extent to which a visual representation like this can ever be neutrally literal, given that it will express a perspective and a version. An interpretive diagram might take the form of a 'cognitive map' which charts what you reckon to be, perhaps, the reasoning process of one of your interviewees and a reflexive diagram might do this in relation to your own reasoning process.

In thinking about the axes, dimensions or principles which underlie your diagrams, it can be easy to muddle the literal, interpretive and reflexive dimensions. For example, one form of diagram which is extensively used in social research is the family tree. At first glance you may think that a family tree is a literal diagram, because it charts literal family relationships or kinship positions. However, family trees can be drawn differently according to the formal conventions used for understanding so-called blood and kin relationships, and some cultural ways of understanding kinship are very difficult to reproduce as a 'tree' at all. A family tree may look different depending upon which set of formal conventions you are following, and upon whether you are using what you see as your research subject or interviewee's own understandings of kinship. Both of these suggest that you will be playing with interpretive, rather than literal, readings of data, in the construction of your diagram. You should, therefore, make sure that you are clear about where your interpretive principles have come from.

## **Diagrams and Explanatory Logic**

What explanatory or analytical logic does diagrammatical data organization support?

Diagrams, charts and graphs can support a wide range of explanatory logics, including both of those we have discussed already in this chapter, and those which do not depend on the use and manipulation of text as an underpinning principle. However, different ways of composing and drawing diagrams will suggest specific explanatory logics, and you must be aware of these when making your diagrammatic choices. Flow charts, for example, suggest a linear or sequential logic of explanation, and to some extent probably depend on the use of categorical indexing, or at least the application of categorical labels to sections of data. Most diagrams which are reproduced on paper are two-dimensional (or at least can only mimic three-dimensionality), which may restrict their explanatory potential.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this chapter we have examined the three most commonly used forms of qualitative data organization. While these represent very important parts of the analytical process, I have been careful not to suggest that they constitute the whole act of data analysis in themselves. In a sense, all that these methods do is to help you to organize and ‘get a handle’ on your data. The remainder of your analytical effort will go into constructing explanations and arguments in relation to your intellectual puzzle, and in working out how to present these to others in a convincing way. You will of course draw on your data, in ways which are made possible by the way you have organized it, to do those things. It should be clear therefore that decisions about how to organize your data are not simply technical or administrative, but are ultimately part of your analytical strategy, and require you to engage fully with questions about the theoretical orientation of your study as well as the practical shape of your data.

The construction of convincing explanations and arguments, including questions about how this should be done, what should be seen as convincing, and so on, is one of the most contested areas of debate in the social sciences. It is a difficult area for qualitative researchers, who very often find themselves going against the grain of conventional modes of thought. It is therefore to these questions and issues that we shall turn in the next chapter.

## **FURTHER READING**

There are now a number of useful sources on CAQDAS, including: the chapter by Seale in Silverman’s *Doing Qualitative Research* (2000), sections of Coffey and Atkinson’s *Making*

*Sense of Qualitative Data* (1996), an appendix in Miles and Huberman's *Qualitative Data Analysis* 2nd edn (1994), Dey's *Qualitative Data Analysis: A User Friendly Guide for Social Scientists* (1993), and Bryman's *Social Research Methods* (2001). Most of the software packages have both technical and non-technical manuals and accompanying texts. There are also some useful websites, including: <http://www.scolari.co.uk>, which is the distributor of some of the major CAQDAS packages, and <http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/caqdas>, which is the website of the British CAQDAS networking project. Plummer's *Documents of Life 2* (2001) is very useful in relation to contextual/case study/holistic forms of organization, and Pink's *Doing Visual Ethnography* (2001) takes a creative and thorough look at ways of organizing visual data. Miles and Huberman's *Qualitative Data Analysis* (1994) is a good all-round resource, and is particularly useful in relation to diagrammatic forms of data organization.

# 9

## Making Convincing Arguments with Qualitative Data

In the last chapter we explored ways in which qualitative researchers might begin to sort and organize their data, and I gave some suggestions about the types of analyses or explanation building which the different methods might support. I emphasized that organizing and sorting are not conceptually neutral activities, and that you must be aware of the kinds of analytical and explanatory possibilities not only that you open up, but also that you close off, by organizing your data in certain ways.

This chapter moves the discussion on to questions about how to construct and present analytical explanations on the basis of qualitative data. In order to do this, we return to a discussion of what I see as the central role of intellectual puzzles in qualitative research. However, instead of suggesting that we should seek *solutions* to these puzzles, as though the answers are straightforwardly and objectively out there for showing and telling, I am proposing that qualitative researchers should direct their efforts towards *the making of arguments*. The concept of argument here is not meant to suggest that the task of qualitative explanation should necessarily be an adversarial one. Instead, what I mean by making an argument is the construction of a perspective, an interpretation, or a line of reasoning or analysis and, significantly, it requires this to be a *relational* process, in which the researcher is continually thinking about and engaging with those to whom the argument is being made as well as, of course, the grounds on which they think the argument stands. The idea that an argument can or should be *convincing* which I develop later in the chapter both depends upon the assumption that there are no self-evidently correct answers to intellectual puzzles, whilst also requiring that a researcher be able to demonstrate to others what led them to suppose that their argument was appropriate or persuasive. Arguments are sets of ideas which are *expressed*, and how they are constituted, in writing or in other forms, is fundamental. Making an argument therefore involves working out how to construct, communicate, support and substantiate it, and these concerns form the focus of this chapter.

### **MAKING ARGUMENTS**

I have argued earlier that I see qualitative researchers as being in the business of producing social explanations, or addressing intellectual puzzles. However, in

Chapter 1, I also suggested that there are different types of intellectual puzzle, including developmental, mechanical, comparative and causal/predictive. You will have designed a study which is likely to be able to help you to produce certain types of explanations and arguments and not others, and you need to be clear about what the possibilities are. There is a range of ways of thinking about this.

### ***Different Kinds of Argument***

What kinds of explanations or arguments can I build from my data?

What kinds are outside the scope of my analysis?

What do I want the explanation or argument to do?

In thinking about what kind of argument you can build, a first step is to recognize that there are different kinds, albeit the categorizations of these can be both ambiguous and confusing, and are certainly contested within the social sciences (see Blaikie, 1993 and 2000; Rose, 1994). It is not my aim to prescribe particular forms of social explanation or argument as being the best or most worthy *per se*, or to tell you how you should conceptualize and distinguish between them, but instead to inspire you to work this out for yourself, in the context of the ontological and epistemological frameworks you have fashioned for your own research.

When you reach the stage where you are beginning to construct an argument with your data, you will of course already have made research design and practice choices which will mean that you now do not have *carte blanche* to select just any form or style of argument you fancy. An important part of the process is therefore to look carefully at what you have done. What kinds of research question did you pose originally? To what extent have you changed your focus during the research? What kinds of data have you generated? What key decisions have you taken along the way that influence the kind of analytical argument you can make? It is vital here that you reflect upon the research you have actually conducted, rather than an ideal of what you would like to have achieved, or of what you originally planned.

You need to be fully versed in all of this in order to tackle the important question of what you want your argument to do? Here are some possible answers to that question, and you will note that these are closely tied to the range of different forms of research question that I identified in Chapter 1. As there, these different types of argument may be overlapping, and any one may draw on elements of one or more of the others. In each case, you will need to ask yourself whether you have generated data of the appropriate order, from the relevant range of sources, and with adequate coverage, to fashion the kind of argument you desire.

*Arguments about how something has developed* You will construct a developmental argument if you want to explain how social phenomena, social relationships, social processes and so on have developed or come to be. Here, the logic of explanation is centred on the idea that a meaningful process of development, or a story, or a narrative, or an ‘archaeology’, can be invoked. Qualitative research can be particularly useful here because, although it is rarely used to identify broad patterns or trends, it can provide a detailed, contextual and multilayered interpretation which is unlikely to simplify or caricature developmental processes.

*Arguments about how something works or is constituted* Qualitative research is in my view particularly good at supporting ‘mechanical’ arguments that focus on how social phenomena and processes operate or are constituted. This is because of the rich, contextual and ‘local’ nature of most qualitative investigation which is done in ‘messy’ contexts. Mechanical arguments should not be confused with causal ones because, although they usually involve an attempt to explain how and sometimes why social phenomena work, often in relation to other phenomena, they rarely are based on the idea of a cause–effect relationship between variables (see below). Nor should they be confused with the idea of simple description. As I have suggested, that concept is deeply flawed insofar as it implies that reality is objectively ‘out there’ as a set of social facts waiting to be discovered, and that perspective and selection are nothing to do with what is seen and understood.

*Arguments about how social phenomena compare* Comparative arguments aim to draw some explanatory significance from a specified set of comparisons and therefore the logic of explanation is tied up with the mechanism of comparison. Again, qualitative research can be particularly useful here, because its sensitivity to context maximizes the chances of developing fully meaningful points of comparison, where more superficial ‘measures’ may be too crude (see for example, Ackers, 1999).

*Arguments about causation and prediction* Causal arguments are usually framed in terms of the effects of variables on each other and, in this form, they are not widely used by qualitative researchers. However, developmental, mechanical and comparative arguments all imply something about why and how social phenomena or processes occur or operate, and in this sense qualitative research does deal with questions of causality, although very often it wishes to think and speak of it in a different way. In fact, many have argued that qualitative research is particularly good at understanding causality, again precisely because of its attention to detail, complexity and contextuality, and because it does not expect to find a cause and an effect in any straightforward fashion (see Miles and Huberman, 1994; also Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). That same logic applies to qualitative research’s engagement with prediction. While it is unlikely to be based on patterns of variables discerned from previous circumstances being applied to the future, its concern with how and why social phenomena or processes happen in particular circumstances and particular ways can certainly support predictive ideas about how those things might vary in different contexts.

Whether your argument is developmental, mechanical, comparative or causal, or a combination of these, it will be based upon a theory of how the argument can be constituted, that is, how causality, development, mechanics and comparison can or should be construed or envisioned. These theoretical elements are too often buried deep within our assumptions and taken-for-granted conventions for doing research. But you should be as explicit as possible about them, for example, on what dimensions do you think you can make comparisons? Why those and not others? Or how did you come to identify certain phenomena or processes, and not others, as developmental threads? Or how did you decide which elements of a process could be conceptualized as its ‘workings’, or as causes, and so on?

### ***Different Ways of Arguing***

How do I want my argument to work?

How categorical do I want my argument to be?

Questions which push us to be explicit about our theories for arguing also encourage us to focus on different ways of arguing. In part, this is a question of style, but there are more fundamental epistemological issues at stake here too, and you will discover that whichever ‘way of arguing’ you adopt, you will face different challenges when it comes to making your argument as convincing as you can. Thinking about these issues forces us to see the making of arguments as a relational process, involving a dialogue (not necessarily verbal) not only with ‘the data’, but also with those to whom our arguments are directed. Perhaps the simplest way to work out your ‘way of arguing’ therefore is to think your way into this relational scenario and consider how you would finish the sentence ‘I can make this argument because . . .’. Your answer will say something about the implicit epistemological claims of your argument. Here are some ways of approaching this:

- *Arguing evidentially* (‘I can make this argument because I can show you the relevant evidence’.) If this is your argument, you will be concerned to demonstrate that you have marshalled and assembled your evidence carefully and appropriately. You will need to be clear about the basis on which you suppose your data constitute evidence.
- *Arguing interpretively or narratively* (‘I can make this argument because I can show you that my interpretation or my narrative is meaningful or reasonable’.) If this is your argument, you will be concerned to show that your interpretation is sensitive, appropriately nuanced, and valid.
- *Arguing evocatively or illustratively* (‘I can make this argument because I can evoke understanding or empathy in you, or because I can provide a meaningful illustration.’) If this is your argument, you will aim to get your audience to feel or understand experientially or by illustration whatever it is you are seeking to convey. Evocation can take text or non-text based forms.



- *Arguing reflexively or multivocally* ('I can make this argument because I can make you aware of a meaningful range of perspectives, experiences and standpoints, including my own.') If this is your argument, you will be seeking to show a sensitivity to a range of interpretations and voices in your data, and a willingness to critique and question your own as well as those of others.

As these examples show, the differences in approach are not simply differences in style, although certainly the consequent styles of argument will be different. Each implies a different use of data, a different understanding of what constitutes data, and a different role for theory in the constitution of the argument. There are also different takes on the question of whether a single truth can be discerned (arguing evidentially), or on how we might handle the possibility of multiple truths and perspectives (arguing interpretively, or multivocally), including understanding the shaping role of our own gaze (arguing reflexively). For some, these questions are so deeply problematic that an 'evocative' approach is the only option because we simply cannot hope to represent or reflect the social world:

Ethnographers do not have an undisputed warrant to study others; this right has been lost. Self-reflection is no longer an option, nor can it be presumed that objective accounts of another's situation can be easily given. Truth is also always personal and subjective. An evocative and not a representational epistemology is sought. (Denzin, 1997: 265–266)

Denzin's depiction of an anti-realist, postmodern epistemology is in direct opposition to the idea that researchers can represent or author the 'real world' through the marshalling of evidence or even through reflexive interpretations. Not all qualitative researchers would want to go that far, and some might use an evocative argument simply to help them to get the audience on their side by engendering sentiment and empathy, or by endeavouring to 'make the argument come alive'. However, evocative arguments do not have to be mere stylistic or rhetorical devices either. Sometimes they are required because the phenomena or processes which we are seeking to understand are located in the senses, as discussed in Chapter 6. In these instances the use of evocation and illustration may be the major processes through which understanding can be engendered, because only in these ways can the researcher give a sense of what 'things of the senses' are like.

Whichever way of arguing you adopt, you should think about how *categorical* you want your argument to be. It is of course important to ensure that your argument is clear and well made, but these different ways of arguing imply different things about how categorical arguments can or should be. Qualitative researchers often feel pressurized into making highly categorical claims and arguments, for a range of reasons, but this approach is not always the most appropriate. I am not suggesting that we should be vague or slipshod in our arguments, on the contrary, but sometimes we may require them to convey a great deal of complexity, messiness, contradiction, ambiguity and so on, because we see these as intrinsic to the phenomena or processes which we are arguing about. In that case, being overly categorical can constitute a sanitization of the argument, and risks missing the point entirely. Denzin (1997) talks of the virtues of

‘open-ended’ and ‘conflictual’ arguments for the ‘new’ postmodern writers, but these are virtues which can usefully extend to a whole range of qualitative forms of argument. At the very least, you should take a considered, rather than an automatic or unthinking, stance on this issue.

### ***Deciding What Your Data Do for Your Argument***

What role do my data play in my argument?

How do I ‘read’ my data?

Does the empirical exist independently of my attempts to explain it?

Finding answers to these questions involves thinking about whether you see your data as constituting the argument in themselves, or whether your data provide a way into an argument, or represent or signify in it. In other words, to what extent do you need to interpret your data, or read behind or beyond them, in order to produce the materials necessary to construct your explanation?

For example, your view may be that empirical observations, or events, or patterns can demonstrate connections, causal correlations, explanations or even laws in and of themselves. In other words, if you can chart the circumstantial connections between, say, empirical variables, then these *in themselves* will constitute your explanation. This ‘variable analysis’ view of course, fits with a classic positivist version of social science research, and is unlikely to encapsulate everything that a qualitative researcher would wish to do, as we saw in the previous two chapters. Alternatively, you may consider that such empirical patterns are useful not so much in themselves, as because they can provide circumstantial evidence for *underlying processes* or causal mechanisms which are not explicitly manifest in the empirical patterns themselves. This would be broadly consistent with a realist view of social science research (and indeed a realist critique of variable analysis: see Pawson, 1989). In this view, you would be saying that empirical observations can be explained by underlying mechanisms that are not directly observable in themselves. Or, you may consider that interpretations of meanings, experiences, accounts, actions, events, can be developed into explanations and understandings and indeed that other analytical logics, such as variable analysis, make no sense because they exclude these dimensions (see Blumer, 1956, for the classic interpretivist critique of variable analysis). According to this broadly interpretivist view the role of the researcher is to understand everyday or *lay interpretations*, as well as supplying *social science interpretations*, and to move from these towards an explanation.

Whatever your answer to this question, you must consider whether or not you are organizing, sorting and analysing your data in ways which are consistent with that answer. If, for example, your answer locates you towards the interpretivist position, then you need to make sure that, among other things, you are

indeed searching your data for, and organizing them around, relevant interpretive categories or themes. You will need to develop transparent and systematic mechanisms for arriving at your interpretations, and for drawing on lay interpretations.

Your answers to these questions will centre on the extent to which you view ‘the empirical’ as having an independent existence from the research endeavour. Although the different approaches to the question of whether data are literal or significant are distinctive, and represent differing degrees of interpretation, or of moving behind or beyond data, I have also argued quite strongly in previous chapters for a position which sees data as the product of processes of generation and interpretation in which the researcher is inevitably implicated. I am suggesting, therefore, that data cannot exist in an uninterpreted or literal form, but you will need to engage with this question yourself, in relation to your own research.

Most qualitative researchers would probably favour a view that the social world is ‘always already interpreted’, and can only be ‘known’ by socially located ‘knowers’ (be they social scientists or not). This can be contrasted with the view that social reality is made up of social facts which can be observed independently as empirical patterns, regularities, and irregularities. The middle route would suggest that an empirical or ‘real world’ does exist independently, but that it can only be known and understood interpretively.

Again, you will need to ensure that your methods of data generation, and your research practice in general, enable you to adopt the appropriate forms of data analysis here. So, for example, if you agree with the reflexive and interpretivist view that ‘knowers’ are centrally implicated in the production of knowledge, then you must make sure that you have generated the means and materials necessary to understand that process, and the interpretations of the ‘knowers’, yourself included. If you have conducted a questionnaire survey whose logic is premised on the assumption that data objectively exist ‘out there’, and can be neutrally collected using standard research tools, then you will be unlikely to have generated the appropriate materials for a reflexive and interpretive explanation.

As these comments imply, we do not make decisions about what data do for our arguments in a theoretical vacuum, so let us now turn to consider theory directly, before discussing how theory and data can usefully be brought together.

### ***Deciding What Theory Does for Your Argument***

What role does theory play in my argument?

When and how does theory come into play?

By now it should be clear that I am arguing that qualitative research design and research practice are imbued with theory throughout. All our key research decisions have both theoretical grounds and theoretical consequences. As Coffey and Atkinson put it: ‘Theories are not added only as a final gloss or justification; they are not thrown over the work as a final garnish. They are drawn on repeatedly as

ideas are formulated, tried out, modified, rejected, or polished' (1996: 158). It might seem, therefore, a little late at this stage to be asking when and how theory might come into play, but this is an exercise worth pursuing so that you can be clear about which of a number of possible broad models you might be drawing upon. There are at least three possible answers as follows, which link in with different philosophical positions in the social sciences.

- 1 Theory comes first, before empirical research and analysis, and is tested on or measured against data. The theory is not derived from data in this version, except in the sense of having been refined through previous studies which may have confirmed or refuted earlier theories. If you are developing theory in this way, you will have stated clear hypotheses in advance, and your analytical task will be to measure or match up your data against these.
- 2 Theory comes last and is developed from or through data generation and analysis. If you are developing theory in this way, you will probably begin the process of analysis whilst data generation is under way, and use a version of theoretical sampling to augment this. You will scrutinize your data so that you can develop explanations which appear to fit them.
- 3 Theory, data generation and data analysis are developed simultaneously in a dialectical process. If you are developing theory in this way, you will devise a method for moving back and forth between data analysis and the process of explanation or theory construction.

You will undoubtedly be able to match these different possibilities more or less with different research philosophies, although you will also discover that different commentators may match them in different ways (see Blaikie, 1993 and 2000). For example, the 'theory comes first' view (answer 1) is probably most closely allied with *deductive reasoning*, or what is sometimes called the 'hypothetico-deductive method', whereby theoretical propositions or hypotheses are generated in advance of the research process, and then modified – usually through a process of falsification – by the empirical research. This is often characterized as moving from the general to the particular.

The 'theory comes last' view (answer 2) looks like *inductive reasoning*, where the researcher will develop theoretical propositions or explanations out of the data, in a process which is commonly seen as moving from the particular to the general. This is probably most famously associated within the qualitative research tradition with Glaser and Strauss's 'grounded theorizing', whereby explanation and theory are fashioned directly from the emerging analysis of the data – using what Glaser and Strauss (1967) call the 'constant comparative method'. However, it is worth pointing out that in practice the grounded theory approach is often matched with the third option, where theory, data analysis and data generation are produced dialectically.

What Blaikie calls the 'abductive research strategy' probably is closest to answer 3 (Blaikie, 2000: 25). This is associated with the interpretive tradition and, in particular, the process of moving between everyday concepts and meanings, lay accounts, and social science explanations. Others have conceptualized abductive reasoning as moving back and forth between our own data, our experience, and

broader concepts (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996).

Blaikie also refers to the ‘retroductive research strategy’, which falls somewhere between answers 1 and 2, in that it begins with data but theorizes a model of an underlying mechanism which might have produced patterns seen in the data, and then works backwards from the data towards verifying or otherwise that model. The model will include some kind of statement about how – if it is correct – it might operate under different circumstances, and what the empirical manifestations would look like, so that it can in effect be empirically tested.

However, although such associations can be made between different approaches to the timing and logistics of the production and development of theory, and different philosophical traditions in the social sciences, it is worth pointing out that most research strategies in practice probably draw on a combination of these approaches. It is certainly debatable whether ‘pure’ forms of, for example, inductive, deductive, abductive or retroductive reasoning are ever actually practised. I would also argue that researchers with widely differing theoretical orientations do actually engage in the practice, associated with abductive reasoning, of moving back and forth between data, experience and wider concepts, whether or not they always explicitly recognize this as part of their research strategy. Certainly, the idea that theory can ever come last has been much criticized, since in its most naïve form this appears to assume that research can be begun and undertaken in a theoretical vacuum, an assumption which I have criticized earlier.

While matching the way in which you handle theory with well-known social science research strategies is a useful exercise, what is most important is that you recognize all the ways in which you are using theory in your everyday research practice, and that you incorporate the appropriate style and approach into your analytical explanations and arguments. That means it can be useful to bring your thoughts about theorizing down from any lofty heights and into the everyday, by thinking about the processes of having ideas and using data theoretically.

### ***Making Theory Useful, and Data Theoretical***

How can I use theoretical insights to understand and explore my data?

How can I use my data to think theoretically?

In a very useful piece of advice, Coffey and Atkinson suggest that we should concentrate more on how we ‘make and use’ ideas, than upon constructing theory *per se*:

It is more important in the long run to think in terms of having ideas and using ideas than to become unduly preoccupied with the logic of inquiry, or with the more daunting connotation of theory and theory construction. A lot of people find theory a rather daunting prospect, not least because the social and cultural

disciplines too often celebrate grand theories that seem to have little contact with the empirical data of field research. Equally, there is too great a reverence for difficult, obtuse theorizing that does little or nothing to illuminate the realities of everyday social life. What are needed are the generation and imaginative use of ideas that guide our exploration and interpretation of the social world. (1996: 156)

Of course this means that we are still engaging directly with theory, since if you accept my arguments about the pervasiveness of the practice of abductive reasoning you will agree that that ‘making ideas’ is a theory- and data- laden activity, and data are in any case already full of theory. But instead of focusing on the construction of theory as a grand scale or lofty heights activity, I am suggesting that it is a more useful practice to concentrate your efforts on thinking about your data in theoretically and conceptually inspired ways, and thinking about theory with your data. Of course it is helpful if you can do this reflexively, so that you are effectively tracking the ways in which theoretical and empirical influences, as well as your own experiences and understandings, work in your analyses and your arguments. However, while I fully advocate that you try to do this, since I think it is good practice to be as explicit as possible about our own epistemological assumptions, I should also caution that creativity and inspiration are difficult to pin down and attribute in these ways, and we should probably never be entirely confident that we have fully understood all the processes in our own practice that produced them.

## **MAKING ARGUMENTS CONVINCING**

I have suggested that making arguments is a relational process, and that therefore we should have a sense of engagement with others in how we do it. That of course must extend to how we substantiate our arguments, and I want to focus in this section on the idea that we should make our arguments convincing, and on how that might be achieved. I think the process can be begun by asking yourself some very searching questions, as proposed above, and working carefully and in some detail through the possible answers. Specifically, you should analyse the claims that you are making as part of your argument, and ask each time on whose or what authority they are based?

Your answers will involve an engagement with questions about how we judge the quality of research and who judges it, which I introduced in Chapter 2, and that includes *inter alia* questions about reliability, validity and generalization. However, as I argued in Chapter 2, these particular manifestations of ‘scientific criteriology’ do not always fit comfortably with the spirit of qualitative research, so our discussion should not be framed by a fixation with how we measure them, but instead should focus on the bigger issues of quality and rigour of which they are but a part. Thinking about how we judge research should entail critical scrutiny of the question ‘who judges?’, and on what basis?

The fact that arguments are expressed and are essentially relational means that we need to be concerned with how we put them across and the media we use,

whether those be written or non-text based. This raises practical as well as epistemological questions about how to get qualitative data into an argument, how to select, represent and ‘display’ them, and so on, in ways that will be coherent, meaningful and ultimately convincing. Thinking about these issues squares the circle with questions of quality, because the ‘argument as it is expressed’ needs to include the tools and materials the audience might need to assess its quality, or that you need to demonstrate that quality. Of course that also means knowing who or what that audience might look like, and what it might require in order to understand your argument and be convinced by it. Taken together, these are the issues which form the focus of this section.

### ***Selecting Data to Include in Your Argument***

Is this ‘slice’, segment or form of data illustrative or constitutive of my argument?

What is the relationship of the ‘slices’ of data I have chosen to include in my argument, to those I have not?

How can I show that I have not just conveniently selected bits that support my argument?

Whose perspectives do they represent?

It is important to focus your mind on whether a slice or segment of data is actually integral to, or constitutive of, your argument, or whether it merely provides an illustration of it. Platt (1988) makes a similar distinction between the ‘logical’ and ‘rhetorical’ functions of data.

Imagine, for example, that you have extracted from a set of interview transcripts some quotable chunks of text in relation to a cross-sectional indexing category. The quotations might be, for example, taken from 25 out of 30 transcripts, and might involve interviewees explaining their household division of labour to the interviewer. You might be wishing to construct an explanation of gender relations in the household. You will need to think carefully about how and whether you use these quotations to develop your explanation. First, is this theme itself – the household division of labour – integral to, or constitutive of, the explanation? In other words, does the household division of labour simply illustrate something about household gender relations, or does it produce or epitomize such relations? Did you actually use this slice of data to develop your explanation, or did you develop the explanation and then use this slice of data to illustrate it? Could the explanation have been developed without this slice of data? Or, was the explanation developed on the basis of other data? If so, do the quotations contained within this slice add anything to your explanation? Do they make logical sense when presented simply as quotations, or do they need to be contextualized in some way? Do they simply help to illustrate key points in

your explanation, or to make the explanation more immediate and grounded for a potential audience?

Answering these questions will help you to decide whether your slice of data is constitutive or illustrative of your explanation, and you will then need to decide how to use it in presenting and demonstrating your explanation. Is it, for example, relevant to your explanation that quotations of this type were found in 25 out of 30 transcripts – that is, a majority? Is it relevant – it almost certainly is – which transcripts they were found within, and at what point in the sequence of dialogue, and so on? The answers to these questions will of course be fairly meaningless unless you tie them in with your sampling strategy, and the composition of your sample. For example, the answers will be contingent upon whether your sample is empirically representative of a wider population, or whether it constitutes a relevant range in relation to a wider empirical or theoretical universe, and so on (see Chapter 7). Do you need to cite any of the quotations when establishing and presenting your explanation – can you imagine presenting this part of your explanation without doing so? What would be the implications of that? Could you, for example, instead simply state that 25 interviewees said *x* or *y* about their division of household labour without directly quoting any of them?

If you decide you do need to cite some of the quotations, on what basis are you going to decide which to choose? You must make clear what is the strategic rationale for such choices. Are you, for example, choosing at random because any of the quotations, and the interviewees and contexts which yielded them, will perform the same function in the explanation? This is unlikely, and instead you will need to make selections strategically (again probably in connection with your sampling strategy). Perhaps most importantly, you will need to explain what the relationship of the quotations or slices of data you have chosen to include is to those that are left out. You can express this relationship numerically (for example, this quotation, made by a man, is one of 25 similar types generated from 20 women and 5 men, and so on) and/or qualitatively (this quotation is typical, extreme, a particularly articulate expression of a point, and so on). In practice, you may wish to express the relationship in both numerical and qualitative terms.

In thinking about these issues you may find the distinction between whether or not slices of data are illustrative or constitutive of your explanations begins to blur or at least overlap. I do not think this matters, because the purpose of the exercise is to ensure that you are thinking carefully, every time, about the role you expect slices and segments of data to perform in your arguments, rather than expecting them simply to work for you in an unthought-out way. Although I have used the example of interview data, the same issues apply to any form of data from any source, that is, you need to think through its role in your argument, and its relationship to pieces of data that you did not select. You will need to do this whether or not you are intending to integrate different forms of data in your analysis. However, where you are attempting to achieve this kind of integration, you must think clearly about which parts of the intellectual puzzle you expect different forms or types of data to address (see discussion of validity, below; see also Chapter 2; and see Mason, 1994).

Some researchers regard the idea of ‘selecting’ data to include in an argument



with some suspicion, since this arguably entrenches or promotes the researcher's own perspective or reading at the expense of possible alternative or multiple perspectives. As a consequence, some try to minimize their authorial presence, and instead to 'let the data speak for themselves', by presenting them with minimal or no commentary (although usually selections still have been made). However, I regard that idea with suspicion myself, given my arguments about the ways in which the generation of any form of data is imbued with selectivity and perspective. How are the data that 'speak for themselves' constructed and selected? I do not recommend, therefore, the idea of presenting data without commentary or argument, as though they are literal and uninterpreted. This conceals rather than removes the researcher's perspective and authorial presence. I think it is better that this presence is articulated and substantiated in an argument that makes clear the grounds on which data were included or excluded.

That same caution and criticism should, in my view, be extended to attempts to loosen the researcher's grasp on the telling of a story – an ethnographic narrative – by incorporating 'multivocality' through 'montage' texts that aim to represent a range of different perspectives simultaneously, without privileging the academic social scientific researcher's version (see Marcus, 1995). I agree that it is very important that we get to grips with different and often diverging perspectives in our arguments, and with different ways of expressing those (including non-narrative forms), but I think we should be cautious in assuming that we can absent ourselves and in so doing create a genuinely democratic multivocality (see Denzin, 1997; James et al., 1997). Therefore, I want to suggest that qualitative researchers are always involved in data selection, and that you should make clear the principles on which you do this.

### ***Using Data Creatively and Imaginatively***

Should I, and how can I, make creative and imaginative use of my data in my argument?

Researchers who wish to argue evocatively, either because they want to argue about the senses or things that do not exist in words (see Stoller, 1997; Pink, 2001; Tilley, 2001), or because in a postmodern vein of multivocality they take issue with the idea that a researcher has authority to speak for others (see Denzin, 1997), will certainly be interested in a range of forms of expression. As Denzin puts it:

The new writers question the 'natural' relationship between narratives, truth, and reality – that relationship that sees the text mirroring the external world. The intent, instead, is to create a reflexive text. This text allows the reader to re-experience the events in question, coming to see the truth of the narrative that contains them. This truth is not based on mimesis, but rather is grounded in the process of self-formation and self-understanding . . . A performance-based, storytelling, listening, and hearing framework is privileged. Truth is

fragile – a coproduction and an interactional experience lodged in the moment that connects the reader-as-audience-member and coperformer to a performance text. (1997: 267–268)

While more imaginative and creative forms of expression have tended to emerge from, for example, visual ethnography and postmodernism, I think it is useful for all qualitative researchers to think about their value for their own projects. Such forms of expression might include: drama, interactive performance-based media that involve active audience participation, poetry, visual forms such as video diaries and film, fiction, experimental writing styles that, for example, try out a range of voices and authorial ‘selves’, and hypermedia (Denzin, 1997; Pink, 2001; Plummer, 2001).

Pink explains hypermedia and their potential thus:

Interactive hypermedia publications usually consist of sets of interlinked files that might contain written words, still or moving images, sound, or a combination of these. The interlinkages between files, or points (e.g. words and images, theoretical sections and ethnographic description) within files support the interactivity of hypermedia; ‘the links themselves have meaning’ (Biella 1996: 595). Users can normally move between files through hyperlinks embedded in their text as well as using other navigation tools. Links are usually represented with words or hyperlink from one text to another. The ways users can interact with different texts depends on how their authors have used specific software packages to develop and construct links between different text files . . . Hypermedia texts may contain different texts and narratives, some of which may conform to conventional styles of ethnographic writing or visual representation, whereas other parts of the text represent ‘experimental’ forms created by the author, informants’ texts, or other research documents of various origins. Some texts may be composed completely of ethnographic research materials and reports; in others only certain strands will represent the ethnographic elements of a project. The ‘ethnographicness’ of hypermedia texts is determined partially by the intentions of its authors and users and the routes that they choose to imply and take through it. (2001: 156–157)

The key is to think through the value of these approaches for the kind of arguments you want to make, rather than either reject them out of hand in favour of conventional textual expression, or become so excited about the media or the performance that you lose sight of the purpose.

### ***Checking Up on Yourself and Showing How You ‘Got There’***

Am I really convinced by my own argument?

How can I convince others?

However you decide to select and present data in your argument, you will need to work out how best to ensure that your explanation, and the analysis on which it is

based, is convincing. This presents you with a twofold task: first, you must check up on yourself – are you really convinced by your own argument? Then you must work out how to convince others that this is what you have done. This should involve explaining why your explanation, rather than potential alternatives, is the best or most appropriate. You should anticipate that others will not be easy to convince, and you should not be easily convinced yourself, either. This will involve putting your analysis and your own assumptions to the test, and making sure that they are both systematically and transparently constructed. You need to be able to demonstrate to yourself and others that you proceeded in a rigorous fashion and that you made reasonable and well founded assumptions in the process. Making all of this transparent effectively means that you should be demonstrating to others how you reached your argument – how you ‘got there’, and how you checked up on yourself in the process. In Seale’s terms, this is about demonstrating a ‘fallibilistic’ approach (Seale, 1999, see also Chapter 2 in this book).

### ***‘Getting There’ with Reliable and Accurate Methods***

How can I demonstrate that my methods are reliable and accurate?

As I argued in Chapter 2, conventional measures of reliability are more comfortably associated with quantitative research where standardized ‘research instruments’ are used than they are with qualitative research. So, for example, reliability is sometimes measured by observing the consistency with which the same methods of data ‘collection’ produce the same results. The logic is that, if you measure the same phenomenon more than once with the same instrument, then you should get the same measurement, just as, for example, three accurate and standardized tape-measures will produce consistent measurements of the same length or piece of cloth. Reliability is therefore being conceptualized in terms of how reliable, accurate and precise the research tools or instruments are, and this in turn is being judged by the consistency with which known instruments produce certain ‘measurements’. All of this is premised on the assumption that methods of data generation can be conceptualized as tools, and can be standardized, neutral and non-biased. As I argued in Chapters 3–6, however, these assumptions are ones with which most qualitative researchers would want to take issue. At the very least, given the non-standardization of many methods for generating qualitative data, a researcher will be unable to perform simple reliability tests of this type because the data they generate will not take the form of a clearly standardized set of measurements. Indeed, it is possible to argue that an obsession with reliability – which may occur precisely because it can apparently be ‘measured’ – inappropriately overshadows more important questions of validity, resulting in a nonsensical situation where a researcher may be not at all clear about what they are measuring (validity), but can nevertheless claim to be measuring it with a great deal of precision (reliability).

Despite these criticisms of conventional measures of reliability, it is important to emphasize that qualitative researchers must of course be concerned with overall questions of accuracy in their methods and research practice, albeit in a rather different way. I think this concern should be expressed in terms of ensuring – and demonstrating to others – that your data generation and analysis have not only been appropriate to the research questions, but also thorough, careful, honest and accurate (as distinct from true or correct – terms which many qualitative researchers would, of course, wish to reject). At the very least, this means you must satisfy yourself and others that you have not invented or misrepresented your data, or been careless and slipshod in your recording and analysis of data. In order to convince others, you must provide some sort of account of exactly how you achieved the degree of accuracy you claim to be providing. The presentation of your analysis must therefore include an explanation of why it is that the audience should believe it to be reliable and accurate.

### ***'Getting There' with a Good Research Design and Appropriate Methods***

How can I demonstrate that my methodology is valid?

Judgements of validity are, in effect, judgements about whether you are 'measuring', or explaining, what you claim to be measuring or explaining. They therefore concern your conceptual and ontological clarity, and the success with which you have translated these into a meaningful and relevant epistemology. If you claim you are studying, for example, the effects of a specified social policy, can you demonstrate that your explanation does concern the effects of that policy, rather than perhaps a wider set of influences and social changes, or a completely different set of policies? If you claim you are studying everyday views or attitudes about national government, can you demonstrate that you are tapping into views or attitudes, rather than behaviours, or discourses? Can you show that these are everyday views, rather than views initiated by a specific context such as a political event which occurred the day before, or indeed the fact of your own research and the impact of your interest on those whom you are researching? Can you be sure that you are getting at views of national government, rather than, for example, local government, or a particular political figure? These questions of validity involve ontological and conceptual clarity in the sense that you will need to be clear about what it is you mean by, for example, everyday views or attitudes, and they also involve relevant epistemology in that you will need to demonstrate that your research strategy has appropriately honed in on these elements.

Given the concerns about the appropriateness of measures of reliability of method, qualitative researchers tend to prefer to focus their interest and efforts on what they see as the more sophisticated and meaningful concept of validity. I

think it is useful to consider how to demonstrate the validity of your method and analysis in at least two ways.

Validity of data generation methods is the first of these. This involves asking what it is that you think your data sources and generation methods can potentially tell you, and how well they can do this (see Chapter 3, and also Chapters 4–6)? You will of course already have engaged with these questions in planning and designing your research, and in thinking through the logic of each of your chosen data generation methods. You can think about the validity of your methods in both broad and detailed ways.

Broadly, you will be asking how well matched the logic of the method is to the kinds of research questions you are asking, and the kind of social explanation you are intending to develop. So, for example, if you want to explain the process of learning and individual development in children, you will already have decided how you think such a process can potentially be explained (as distinct from what the content of the explanation is). As a qualitative researcher, you are probably more likely to pursue an explanation constructed from a detailed and close-up analysis of what you see as the mechanics of this process, perhaps by developing longitudinal case studies of individual children's experiences, lives, biographies, their own interpretive understandings of learning and development, and so on. An alternative approach might be to trace empirical 'indicators' of learning and development, by perhaps taking 'snapshots' of the performance of large numbers of children in school examinations and relating these to variables like age, gender, social class, and so on. You will have developed your own views on which methodological approach is the more valid in relation to your own research questions, and which kinds of explanations can account for which kinds of social phenomena. In the process of data analysis and the presentation of your explanation to others, you should therefore revisit those difficult questions which you asked yourself about linking research questions, methodology and methods, when you were designing your research. When it comes to convincing others, you must show how you reached decisions on these issues, and by what logic you are connecting your chosen methods with your intellectual puzzle and research questions.

Thinking in a detailed way about validity in your data generation methods involves a more particular application of the same kind of logic. So, instead of demonstrating how and why your methodological strategy is a valid way to pursue your research questions, this involves showing how particular methods, aspects of methods, or data sources, do this. There is a blurring of the distinction between validity and reliability here, since you will be reflecting on the quality of your methods in relation to your research questions, and on how well they produce relevant data which can be used in constructing your explanation. So, for example, if you are conducting interviews, or analysing documents, you will need to reflect not only on how effectively interviewing or documentary analysis as strategies can illuminate the concepts in which you are interested, but also on the capacity of *this* interviewee or document, or *this* set of questions, or *this* interaction, to do so.

You might ask, for example, how authentic, accurate or relevant is a particular document in relation to what you want to know. You may wish to regard data

generated from some interviews as more valid in relation to your research questions than those generated from others. If so, you must figure out for yourself, and be able to demonstrate to others, how you are able to make such judgements. Do you, for example, think that a particular interviewee is deceiving you? Is it that you were unable to understand or communicate effectively with a particular interviewee? Do you think that one interviewee is better placed than another to account for whatever it is that you are interested in? Do you think that something to do with the social dynamics of the interview interaction has had a specific influence on validity? Of course, as discussed in Chapter 4, most qualitative researchers see the very fluidity and flexibility of methods such as semi-structured interviewing as enhancing validity, and criticize the rigidity and standardization of structured questionnaires by contrast for lack of sensitivity to validity in favour of an excessive concern with reliability and ease of quantification in analysis. But if this is the case, you must explain how and why you reach that conclusion, if you are to convince others.

I think that a general dictum that you should explain how you came to the conclusion that your methods were valid is a better way to demonstrate validity to others than some of the more specific methods which are sometimes recommended. In particular, I am thinking of the technique of ‘triangulation of method’ here. In its broadest sense, triangulation refers to the use of a combination of methods to explore one set of research questions, and I have no argument with that idea. Indeed, in Chapter 2, I advocated the careful and considered inclusion of multiple methods in research designs.

However, at its worst, the logic of triangulation says that you can use different methods, or data sources, to investigate the same phenomena, and that in the process you can judge the efficacy or validity of the different methods and sources by comparing the products. The idea is that, if you measure the same phenomenon from different angles or positions, you will get an accurate reading or measurement of it. This is problematic because, as I have consistently argued throughout the book, different methods and data sources are likely to throw light onto different social or ontological phenomena or research questions (or to provide different versions or ‘levels’ of answer). Furthermore, it implies a view of the social world which says that there is one, objective, and knowable social reality, and all that social researchers have to do, is to work out which are the most appropriate triangulation points to measure it by – a view with which many researchers in the qualitative tradition would of course take issue.

You are highly unlikely, therefore, to be able straightforwardly to use the ‘products’ of different methods or sources to corroborate (or otherwise) each other. If you are expecting to use triangulation in this sense, you are likely to become very confused about matters of validity, because you will have more than one data set which seem inexplicably to be pointing in different directions. At its best, I think the concept of triangulation – conceived as multiple methods – encourages the researcher to approach their research questions from different angles, and to explore their intellectual puzzles in a rounded and multi-faceted way. This does enhance validity, in the sense that it suggests that social phenomena are a little more than one-dimensional, and that your study has accordingly

managed to grasp more than one of those dimensions. However, the use of the term ‘methodological triangulation’ for this best case scenario is probably misleading, since it is commonly understood to be a technique for checking out one method against another. The general message, then, is that you should not expect the use of multiple methods or triangulation to provide an easy or well trodden route to the demonstration of validity of method.

### ***‘Getting There’ through Valid Interpretation***

How can I demonstrate that my interpretations are valid?

Whose interpretation? Whose truth?

Validity of interpretation is the second way to think about validity. This involves asking how valid your data analysis is, and the interpretation on which it is based. It is of course dependent upon validity of method, since your interpretation cannot be valid unless your methods and sources have enabled you at least to get at the concepts you say you are getting at. However, it goes further than this in that it directs attention to the quality and rigour with which you have interpreted and analysed your data in relation to your intellectual puzzle. What makes you think that your analysis is a valid one? Why should your audience accept your interpretation over any alternatives? Why should they believe that you have not misinterpreted your data?

In my experience, many researchers encounter crises of confidence about the validity of their own interpretations. Given that qualitative researchers are usually wanting to make interpretive readings of their data, there sometimes comes a point when they find themselves asking, ‘Have I simply made this interpretation up? Have I invented it?’ You may be especially vulnerable to this feeling if you have, along with many other qualitative researchers, rejected the notion of one objective and true reality which can simply be ‘discovered’ with rigorous and careful research instruments. Furthermore, what is often referred to as the ‘crisis of representation’ in ethnography has ensured that qualitative researchers, quite rightly, have to try to substantiate their perspectives and interpretations in a more modest way, rather than just asserting them as universal truths. The challenge in this case is how to demonstrate that your interpretation is indeed valid, without resorting to claims to ultimate truth and objectivity which you are likely to see as emanating from a discourse you have rejected.

In my view, validity of interpretation in any form of qualitative research is contingent upon the ‘end product’ including a demonstration of how that interpretation was reached. This means that you should be able to, and be prepared to, trace the route by which you came to your interpretation. You must spell out on what basis you have felt able to, for example, interpret a piece of dialogue from an interview, or a set of observations from a particular setting, or a section of a document, as reflecting upon a particular ontological concept or set of issues.

Furthermore, you must explain how you have woven sections of data together (for example, you might have done this cross-sectionally by theme, or holistically by 'case') to produce an interpretation of how specific instances in your data set can be read together as saying something about, for example, social processes. The basic principle here is that you are never taking it as self-evident that a particular interpretation can be made of your data but instead that you are continually and assiduously charting and justifying the steps through which your interpretations were made.

If you do this effectively, it should enable you to show both that you have understood and engaged with your own position, or standpoint, or analytical lens, in a reflexive sense, and also that you have tried your best to read your data from alternative interpretive perspectives.

I do not think that all of this implies that the qualitative researcher is compelled to write an enormous treatise on their methodology to accompany every publication or presentation of their analyses. It certainly means that methods and methodology must be explained and justified, but the most effective way to do this is to get into the habit of taking nothing for granted about, for example, the transparency to an audience of the logic of your methodological choices or analytical decisions and practices. This means remembering habitually to explain such logic – although you may do this in more depth for some purposes than others – rather than simply presenting your interpretations. In other words, it involves presenting an argument that is fallibilistic (Seale, 1999) because it contains enough contextual and reflexive material for the audience to be able to judge how convincing it is.

The recommendation that you make transparent how it is that you got to your interpretations, just as I argued that you should trace the logic whereby you made certain methodological choices, runs counter to the idea that there can be 'quick-fix' solutions to the dilemma of validity of interpretation. I want to illustrate this by briefly considering two examples of techniques for enhancing or demonstrating validity of interpretation which can be criticized for failing to take on board the complexity of the issues. The first involves claiming that you have a particular 'standpoint' which grants you epistemological privilege, and the second involves checking the validity of your interpretation with people whom you see as having this kind of epistemological privilege – a procedure sometimes called 'respondent validation'.

The standpoint position has received much critical discussion and scrutiny in feminist research and epistemology (see especially Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1988; Smith, 1988; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994; Maynard, 1994; Rose, 1994; Skeggs, 2001), but has also been influential in other areas such as disability or emancipatory research (see especially Oliver, 1992). The argument is one which suggests that epistemological privilege is granted by one's social location and experience, particularly in relation to oppression (for example, based on gender, or based on disability), and in relation to the focus of the research. The crude position is, therefore, that women are best placed as researchers to understand women's oppression, as are disabled people to understand oppression based on disability. I do not wish to take issue with the idea that



one's personal experiences are relevant to, and useful in, research, and indeed the notion of reflexivity of course is built on recognition of the salience of such experiences through the process of turning one's analytical lens on oneself. However, the problem lies in the suggestion that the experience of a form of oppression by an individual researcher unquestionably gives that researcher insider knowledge of such oppression as it is experienced by everyone else. Much of the feminist critical debate about standpoint epistemologies has focused on the misleading impression this gives of, for example, the unity and sameness of women's experiences. But the problem is exacerbated in the extent to which such claims to epistemological privilege are used to support validity claims, by effectively placing the researcher and their judgement beyond question or critical scrutiny. My point really is this: standpoint positions cannot be unequivocally regarded as granting epistemological privilege to such an extent that the researcher has no need to demonstrate the validity of their interpretations in any other way. They are, therefore, not the quick-fix of interpretive validity (see Adkins, 2002; and Skeggs, 2001, for interesting discussions of these issues).

The second example seems, on the face of it, to be less controversial, since it involves arguing that others – not you yourself as researcher – have epistemological privilege. The classic example of this is the practice of presenting research 'subjects' such as interviewees, or people involved in settings that were observed, with extracts of your analysis and interpretation. The idea that this can be used to support validity is based on the notion that research subjects are in a position to judge and confirm (or otherwise) the validity of the interpretations the researcher has made. However, this too, is problematic. As Skeggs has noted, the most common response from her research subjects to this practice was 'Can't understand a bloody word it says' (Skeggs, 1994: 86), and of course this is more than a practical problem.

The issue really is this. Just as I have argued that a single researcher cannot unequivocally claim epistemological privilege simply because they belong to a specifically defined social group, or occupy a specific social location, so too we cannot assume that a single research subject (or even a group of research subjects) unequivocally possesses such privilege. Indeed, given that qualitative researchers are likely to be trading in social science interpretations, based on social science conventions, there is no reason to suppose that research subjects who are unfamiliar with these will have either interest in them, or knowledge about how they operate. That does not necessarily mean they are invalid. I am not arguing that researchers should never share their research in some way with their research subjects. Nor am I denying that it can be useful to check the reliability and accuracy, of, for example, interview transcripts with interviewees (although again, where accuracy is disputed, you will need to think about how you will judge whether this is because it is indeed an inaccurate record of the interview which took place, or whether it is based on a *post hoc* rationalization, or on the interviewee's current ideas about what they meant to say in the interview, and so on). Instead, I am pointing out that you cannot expect the practice of asking research subjects to check your interpretations to be a quick-fix to the problem of interpretive validity. If you think they do have epistemological privilege enabling them

to do this, just as if you think you yourself have epistemological privilege based on a standpoint position, then you will need to demonstrate how and why they (and you) have come to hold that privilege. You cannot assume that such a position is beyond question.

I should add that this technique is not necessarily the liberatory one it is sometimes claimed to be either. The idea is that it forces the researcher to relinquish control, but as Skeggs points out:

this means that the researched should control the outcome and analysis of the research. If the researched does not like the explanations given or do not want the research to be published they should have the right to control it. It was after all their lives which formed the basis for the research. But what if they do not agree with something that the researcher thinks is important and can ultimately improve the quality of their lives? What if, as happened in my research, they deny ever having said what they did when they hear themselves on tape or read the transcript? What if the research is about exploring the contradictions that go into producing the murky waters of subjectivity, which when given back to the participants exposes the fragmentation of their lives that they have invested a great deal of time in covering over. I would argue, in this case, that it is about exercising discretion and responsibility. (2001: 434)

Validity of method and of interpretation therefore must be demonstrated through a careful retracing and reconstruction of the route by which you think you reached them, and there are no easy answers or shortcuts in this process. In my view, rather than relinquishing control of the argument, it requires taking responsibility for it, and what Spencer calls a 'strong reflexivity'. He argues that:

A strong reflexivity . . . recognizes that the ethnographer and his or her language are inevitably a part of the phenomenon that is being investigated . . . Linked to this reflexivity is a sense of responsibility for the consequences of a particular way of representing the words and practices of other people; in this case a responsibility to recognize complexity and difference, rather than hide them beneath a veil of homogeneity and generalization . . . This sense of responsibility can be a source of liberation, rather than simply an unwelcome burden; it is now possible to write extraordinarily rich, and even sometimes extraordinarily readable, ethnographies which are quite open about their limitations and partiality, and which manage to acknowledge the complexity of the world, and thus the difficulty of rendering it through words on a page, without sacrificing coherence or clarity. (2001: 450)

### ***'Getting There' by Making Appropriate Generalizations***

What kinds of generalizations or wider claims can I make on the basis of my analysis and explanation?

How can I demonstrate that I have tested out my ideas?

How can I show that I have used numbers appropriately?

The quotation from Spencer above, points to the unacceptability – morally, politically and intellectually – of making inappropriate generalizations. It is important to think very carefully, critically and sensitively about how to generalize, and about the wider resonance of your research. I think that it is important that qualitative researchers do work hard to establish a wider resonance, however, and we shall discuss in this section how that might be done.

If you have conducted a study, for example, of one political organization, or of 30 people's illegal activities, or of the process of change in three educational institutions, you will need to think carefully about the extent to which your explanations have any wider resonance outside of those specific contexts.

Generalization is sometimes thought about in two distinct ways: empirical generalization and theoretical generalization. The first is based on a logic whereby you are able to make generalizations from an analysis of one empirical population (say, your sample) to another, wider, population (say, all adults in Britain), on the basis that your study population was statistically representative of that wider population. We discussed the logic of this kind of sampling in Chapter 7, and pointed out there that this is the least commonly used method in qualitative research. Therefore, most qualitative researchers are unable or unwilling to attempt to generalize their explanations in this way. The second type of generalization – theoretical generalization – is often seen as more productive. However, it does not represent one uniform method of generalizing, but instead encompasses a range of strategies based on differing logics, some of which look more obviously 'theoretical' than others. Importantly, all of these should be grounded within the empirical contours of your project. If you want to make this kind of generalization, your first task will be to work out what kinds of theoretical generalizations can be made – and on what basis – in the context of your specific research project. Let us consider some of the possibilities, beginning with the least 'theroetical'.

- 1 You may wish to argue that, although you have not based your analysis on data derived from a sample that is representative of a wider population, and you are therefore not attempting to make empirical generalizations, nevertheless you have no reason to assume that your sample and therefore your analysis are atypical. This is, of course, a rather weak way to attempt to generalize, since you are unlikely to be able to make any stronger claims about the typicality of your sample and analysis, unless your sampling strategy actively supports them (see Chapter 7). It is a mode of generalizing that has more in common with an empirical than a theoretical logic. Having *no reason to suspect atypicality* is therefore usually viewed as an adjunct to stronger ways of generalizing theoretically, and ways which are more appropriate to qualitative research. You might therefore compare the characteristics of your sample of interviewees, of settings, of documents, of photographs, or whatever, to the characteristics of the wider population from which they were drawn, in order to be able to support a 'no reason to suspect atypicality' claim, or indeed to chart some of the dimensions on which your sample is indeed atypical. But you are unlikely to view this as the only basis on which you can argue your research has a wider resonance.
- 2 You may produce an analysis, for example, of processes in a specified setting

which demonstrate at the very least that it is possible for such processes to work in a specified way. Your explanation of how and why these processes worked in this way in this setting may be based on a detailed and holistic analysis of the setting, derived from a range of data sources and methods. On this basis – that is, establishing what is possible (that is, ‘this happened therefore it can happen’), and having an explanation of how and why it happened in this setting (that is, ‘these seemed to be the key explanatory factors and elements in the process in this setting’) – you can try to widen the resonance of your argument by asking questions about the *lessons for other settings*. This form of generalization is therefore based on the idea that you can use your detailed and holistic explanation of one setting, or set of processes, to frame relevant questions about others. Your ability to go further, and to draw conclusions about those other settings and processes, will of course be limited by the extent of their similarity or difference, on the key dimensions as you have defined them, to the first setting.

- 3 You may wish to argue that you have produced an explanation of *an extreme or pivotal case, or set of processes*, and you might have done this in tandem with your sampling strategy. You might, therefore, argue that you are able to explain a set of issues or processes which are, perhaps, central to a developing body of theory, or which involve pivotal elements of social and political change, or what Schofield calls cases at the ‘leading edge of change’ (1993: 214), or which are extreme or unusual in other ways which are both definable, and relevant to a ‘wider body of theory, knowledge or existence.’ In each of these examples, you will be seeking to generalize, or to claim a wider resonance, following a slightly different logic, but the common thread is that your explanation throws light on processes or issues which are pivotal or central to some wider body of explanation or knowledge.
- 4 Whatever else you do, you should make some claims for the wider resonance or generalizability of your explanations which are based on *the rigour of your analysis*. It should go without saying that you must be able to demonstrate accuracy of method, and validity of both method and interpretation, if you are going to have anything meaningful to generalize. Taking these as a starting point, there are further ways in which you can nevertheless increase the generalizability of your analyses and explanations. For example, you may wish to argue that you have built *strategic comparisons* into your research practice and your analysis. Strategic comparisons will be those which enable you to test and develop theoretical and explanatory propositions, and they can be incorporated via your sampling strategy (see Chapter 7), and your analytical practice. Thus, you may choose to include sampling units in your study which you think express key dimensions of your intellectual puzzle, or interesting possibilities which you want to ‘test out’ in some way. You are therefore defining the significance of your sampling categories in both theoretical and empirical terms, and are thinking about what can usefully be compared with what, in order to test out and advance your explanatory thinking. The same principles can guide your analytical practice, whether you are making comparisons between sampling categories, people, documents, themes, instances, experiences, processes, cross-sectional indexing categories, holistic elements, or whatever. Basically, you will be seeking to make comparisons which can contribute more to your explanation than a simple statement of sameness or difference.
- 5 Probably the strongest version of the previous two ways of generalizing involves showing how and why things work in a strategically selected range of contexts (see Chapter 7). By making comparisons between these contexts you can then produce

cross-contextual generalities that are derived from an understanding of processes or phenomena in specific contexts, that are strategically compared. This is a particularly strong way of generalizing from qualitative data because it is based on a logic of demonstrating how context and explanation are intimately connected, and which uses rather than glosses over specificity and difference.

Whatever you do, you will wish to show that you have tested out your developing explanation by trying out alternative explanations, and in particular by looking for negative instances. This is a strategy which can be employed via both your sampling strategy and your analytical practice. I emphasized in Chapter 7 that, if you are using some form of theoretical sampling, then you should ensure that you select sampling categories not only in a way which supports your own developing explanation of your intellectual puzzle, but also in a way which allows you to put it to the test. Similarly, in your analytical practice, you can ensure that you make comparisons, and ask questions of your data set, in such a way as to try not only to build up your explanation, but to seek and try out alternative explanations. The role of negative instances is that you would look for examples, themes, cases, or whatever, which run counter to the explanation that you are developing. These might take the form of situations which you would least expect to see, if your explanation were adequate, although this is a technique which has been developed as part of a broader approach called ‘analytic induction’ (see Denzin, 1989), and sometimes is used in the search for universal laws or truths. You do not have to take on board all the elements of that approach in order to employ it usefully, and indeed such a ‘grand theory’ approach is arguably not the best use for it. If you are able to demonstrate not only that you developed an explanation of your intellectual puzzle, but that you put it to the test in this way, then the rigour of your analysis, and the potential for saying it has a wider theoretical resonance, are greatly increased.

You will also wish to demonstrate the rigour of your analysis by showing that you have used *aggregation*, *numbers* and *counting in a meaningful fashion*. To begin with, this means making sure that you have not tried to make inappropriate empirical generalizations which cannot be supported by your sampling strategy or research practice. So, if your sample is not empirically representative of a wider population, you must not make claims which suggest that it is. Similarly, as argued in Chapter 8, you should not treat cross-sectional indexing categories as though they are variables (unless you have adopted a practice which is consistent with this) that can be fed into a quantitative form of variable analysis. Some CAQDAS packages will tempt you to do this, and will produce statistical data on the content and shape of your indexing categories (such as the percentage of material categorized by each one). This may be useful, but the fact that a cross-sectional indexing category such as ‘inheritance strategies’ applies to 40 per cent of the text in a given document or interview transcript is not in itself very interesting or significant. You will need to establish a great many other things about the document or interview in order to make any sense of this information, and your analytical activities may be more usefully spent in making strategic comparisons between different versions of inheritance strategies in the context of different biographies or life stories.

Similarly, counting up or aggregating analytical units within your data set makes little sense on its own unless the units are equivalent, which frequently they are not in qualitative analysis. So, for example, experiences, instances, interactions, expressions of belief, accounts, and so on, are not readily aggregated without a great deal of qualification and contextualization. Therefore, it is very important that numbers, aggregation and quantification, are used in ways that are sensitive to the type and form of data, and to the context of their production, and in ways which are complementary to the other methods of achieving theoretical generalizability. Used in such a way, these strategies can indeed augment the generalizability of your explanations. The fact that 30 of your 40 interviewees had specific sets of experiences might indeed have a wider resonance, and you will have a clearer understanding of what that resonance is if you can establish that you selected them on the basis that they were particularly unlikely to have these experiences, or if your interview practice made it rather unlikely that such experiences would get mentioned at all. In other words, the numbers make sense only in the wider context of your research strategy and practice (see Mason, 1994).

### **Linking Claims about Generalization to Your Research Design and Practice**

What kinds of generalizations do my *research questions* imply?

What kinds of generalizations does my *sampling strategy* support?

What kinds of generalizations do my *methods of organizing data* support?

Different ways of generalizing, or claiming a wider resonance, for qualitative research, must therefore clearly be linked with other aspects of your research design and practice if they are to be effective, and it is worth asking yourself questions about what kinds of links you can and should be making.

We saw earlier that explanations can do a number of things: for example they can trace development, analyse mechanics, compare, or assign causality. Your research questions will imply not only certain kinds of explanation, but also certain kinds of generalization, and it is of course important to ensure that your research design and practice actually support these. This is part of the art of research design, and in particular of the linking of research questions, methodologies and methods (see Chapter 2).

So, for example, you might have asked a question that implies an empirical generalization to a wider, specified, population, such as ‘do people in France believe that the threat of nuclear war is over?’ Or you might have asked a question which implies a theoretical generalization, such as ‘how has the process of educational change evolved?’ You probably will, nevertheless, have expressed some empirical parameters in relation to your proposed theoretical generalizations, and you might also have been fairly specific about what kinds of theoretical

generalizations you would be able to make. So, for example, we could rephrase the last question as ‘how has the process of educational change evolved in Toytown University since the early 1980s?’ and ‘what lessons can we learn from this for other English universities?’ You must, therefore, make clear links between the kinds of questions you ask, the forms of generalization they imply, and your research and analytical practice.

Questions of sampling were discussed in some detail in Chapter 7, and some of the key forms of generalization outlined above are clearly contingent on your having sampled in certain ways, and on understanding the implications of your sampling strategy. In most cases, empirical generalizations cannot be supported by qualitative sampling strategies, but theoretical generalizations can be supported by theoretical and strategic or purposive sampling. Your sampling strategy may provide the key to how you should understand numerical patterns in your data, as well as what significance you should grant to the ‘discovery’ of what you think are pivotal cases or examples. It can aid the process of theory development and testing. In general, your sampling strategy should provide an important backdrop against which you ‘read’ and interpret your data (see Platt, 1988). This remains the case even where, possibly for pragmatic reasons, you think you have been unable to be very strategic about sampling. Nevertheless, understanding your own strategy, and in particular the relationship you have established between your sample and a wider universe, is a vital part of the analytical endeavour.

Your methods for organizing your data, influence how you can generalize. Basically, cross-sectional indexing and categorical analysis, on the one hand, and contextual, case study or holistic approaches, on the other, potentially support different analytical logics. They imply that you will build up your explanations in certain ways, and therefore they influence the claims to generalizability that you will be able to make. In practice, as I pointed out, many qualitative researchers use both strategies. Cross-sectional analysis implies that you are making comparisons across the whole of your data set, on certain specified themes. This form of analysis therefore does not insist upon, although it can certainly tolerate, a strategic approach to comparison. In other words, the focus of the activity is in comparing everything on the basis of specified themes, rather than selecting specific comparisons in order to test out developing explanations. Contextual, case study or holistic analysis more obviously fits the latter form of comparison although, again, it does not insist upon it. You will need to think carefully about which form of analysis (or whether both together) would provide the better support for your developing argument. This contributes to the generalizability of your explanation by improving the rigour of your analysis.

Generalization is not easy to achieve in qualitative research – or indeed in any research. It requires that you think carefully, and act strategically, throughout the whole research process, not just at the end when you are writing up. You will need to be aware of what kinds of arguments you are attempting to construct, as discussed in the first part of this chapter. This means knowing what your argument is doing (for example, comparing, developing, and so on), and knowing what is its relationship to the production of theory (for example, at what point theory comes

in the analytical process, and also what type of theory – universal laws, underlying mechanisms, interpretive understandings – you are intending to contribute towards).

You will need to have framed a research project, and have engaged in a research practice, that allow you to do these things. You will need to ensure that your methods are accurate, and that your analysis is valid. And finally, you will need to be clear about what kinds of generalizations you want to, and are able to, make, and to understand fully how these are supported by all these other elements of your research design and practice. All of this needs to be done in order that you can convince yourself that you are making reasonable and well-supported generalizations.

In order to convince others, you need to make visible these strategic and logical elements in your route from designing and conducting your research, to claiming it has this or that wider resonance. Again, as with demonstrating validity to others, I do not think this has to involve you in producing a massive treatise on your methodology, but instead you must get into the habit of supporting each claim you make with the relevant linking material. Thus, if a claim to generalizability is based upon an element of your sampling strategy, or on a particular set of strategic comparisons you made in your analytical practice, or on a search for negative instances that produced none, then you must spell this out when you make the claim. Indeed, in this sense a separate and lengthy treatise on your methodology would be unhelpful, since what is really required is a contextual grounding of generalizability claims in the strategies that produced them. In other words, you need to get used to spelling out in what you write or present to others not only what your claims are, but what are your grounds for making them, just as you might if you were making the case for the prosecution or defence in a court of law.

### ***Playing to Audiences***

Who or what is my argument directed towards?

Who am I trying to convince?

Arguments are made to audiences, and you will need to have a sense of yours. Of course, there may be more than one, and this may change over time in ways you cannot predict. Your view of the audience will influence the form, shape and style you use in expressing your argument, and may also affect the way and degree to which you substantiate it. Recognizing that some audiences require more or less substantiation is not of course the same as saying that insubstantial arguments are acceptable.



## ARGUING ETHICALLY AND MORALLY

Finally, you will need to consider the ethics and politics of your arguments, analyses, and explanations, and of the way you are presenting them to a wider audience. This involves asking the familiar questions, raised earlier, about the ongoing morality of your research practice, but addressing yourself to the specific issues raised by qualitative analysis and data presentation. I do not intend to try to anticipate all of the ethical and political dilemmas that you might face, and indeed there are some very useful discussions of these existing in the literature (Homan, 1991; Hammersley, 1995; Skeggs, 2001; Murphy and Dingwall, 2001; Pink, 2001). Instead, I select a few key issues which apply in particularly sharp form to the analysis and presentation of qualitative data.

### ***Honouring Your Commitments and Fulfilling Your Responsibilities***

Have I honoured my commitments about confidentiality and privacy? Have I acted in the spirit of the informed consent which I received?

Have I fulfilled my responsibility to produce good quality research?

Have I used my research, and my explanations, effectively and morally? Have I generalized appropriately?

Do I have a responsibility to anticipate how others might use my research and explanations?

In general, am I clear about both my rights, and my responsibilities, in respect of my data, my analysis and my explanations?

These questions require you to revisit the issue of informed consent and ask yourself whether you do actually have the informed consent of research participants to analyse data gained from them in the way you have, to make connections and construct explanations in the way you have, and to present in some kind of public way data which are sufficiently contextualized for judgements about accuracy, validity and generalizability to be made. It is precisely because qualitative data are not entirely reducible to numbers and charts, but are often based on holistic analyses and presentations of what may be personal, identifiable and idiosyncratic material, that questions of confidentiality and anonymity are raised in particularly sharp form. You should bear in mind the arguments of researchers such as Finch (1984) that qualitative methods – in her case, interviewing – promote a high degree of trust among research subjects, which in turn gives us a special responsibility to ensure that we do not abuse that trust by renegeing on commitments, acting deceitfully, or producing explanations that may damage the interests of those subjects. The use of visual data, especially literal images like

photographs, can make confidentiality impossible to maintain. You will need to make decisions, at this stage, about whether your analytical and presentational practices do allow you to honour your commitments (and I argued earlier that you should not see your commitments in minimalist terms), or whether you will have to jettison some of your data. You should not let yourself off the hook with platitudes like ‘it will only be published in an academic journal so my research subjects will probably never see it’. If your research is entering the public domain in any sense whatsoever, and it almost certainly is, then you cannot assume that only those people whom you want to see it will see it.

Researchers have a responsibility to produce good quality research (see Miles and Huberman, 1994, and especially their discussion of ‘competence boundaries’ on p. 291). This can be seen as a responsibility to yourself, your research participants, your funders or sponsors, your institution and colleagues, your profession, the reputation of qualitative research, the advancement of knowledge in general, and so on. It means that all the earlier questions about reliability and accuracy, validity, and generalizability, are not only intellectual issues, but also cast in a moral and political hue. So, for example, you will need to put your ethical and political hats on to ask ‘have I produced a careful and well founded analysis?’, ‘have I made any false or inappropriate generalizations?’

Different researchers will have a different sense of responsibility to use their research to contribute to some wider body of debate or practice, and this relates to the questions posed in Chapter 1: ‘What is the purpose of my research? What am I doing it for?’ Some research is seen as highly political, or ‘emancipatory’, and if this applies to you then you will have been grappling throughout the research process with questions about how to use it most effectively and who should control that process. However, I agree with Hammersley that all qualitative research, whether or not it is overtly politic or emancipatory, should be ‘relevant to some legitimate public concern’ (1992: 68). I think this means that, at the very least, if you are to use your research effectively you will need to ensure that:

- You do try to make some forms of appropriate generalization.
- You do not make inappropriate or false generalizations.
- Your generalizations are framed in such a way that they feed into wider sets of issues or questions, or help to initiate debate about issues and questions which you see as ‘legitimate public concerns’.

The questions of whether or not researchers are responsible for the ways their research is used by others is often discussed in the context of protecting the rights or interests of your research participants. Do you have a responsibility to anticipate how others might use your research, and even how they might misappropriate it, or misinterpret it? If you accept the argument that qualitative researchers have a special responsibility because of the high degree of trust generated between researcher and research subject through the use of some qualitative methods, or because of their power to make an interpretation of the lives of others, then your answer must be Yes, you do have this responsibility. At the very least, you will have to think carefully about, and work out your stance on, the interests of those

directly and indirectly involved in your research. Of course this might apply not only to your research subjects, but to other groups or interests to which you (or others – appropriately or inappropriately) might generalize your arguments. It will also apply to other ‘stakeholders’ in the research process, such as your funders or sponsors, your institution, your colleagues, your profession, and so on.

I have encouraged you throughout to think carefully about your ethical and political responsibilities, but you should also, of course, think about your rights. You will need to be clear about who owns the data you have generated, and what rights the owners have over them. While legal issues about ownership are, to an extent, enshrined in, for example, copyright and patenting laws, and codes of practice relating to intellectual property, there are many grey areas where the issues are less than clear-cut. You must explore what your rights and responsibilities seem to be, not just for your own sake but again for the sake of others who have interests in the research. For example, are you legally in a position to make the kinds of guarantees about confidentiality that you would like to make to your research subjects? Can you guarantee privacy and confidentiality in relation to the use of a set of documents?

There is, of course, no ethical or political blueprint to guide you through your analytical practice. As always, you will need to make decisions which are difficult, and where there is not one clear ethical course of action. You may be balancing competing interests, all of which you see as legitimate. You will therefore have to make decisions based on compromise and context but these must, of course, come from a considered ethical position (as I argued in Chapter 2).

## **CONCLUSION**

We have covered some difficult ground in this chapter, and come full circle back to questions about research design and quality. The analysis of qualitative data is not an easy task, and the construction of explanations needs to be done with rigour, with care, and with a great deal of intellectual and strategic thinking. Until recently, almost all of the published literature on qualitative research focused on methods for generating data, and although there are now some very useful contributions about how you might analyse such data and construct explanations and theories on their basis, the territory is still rather sparsely charted.

I have tried to emphasize throughout the chapter that there are different types of social explanation, and different ways of supporting them, even within what some commentators might like to see as a unified qualitative tradition. Ultimately, what you do must depend upon the way you have framed your research questions, the philosophical and methodological posture which they encapsulate, the way you have designed your project to support these, and the realities of the research process that you have pursued.

Your task in doing qualitative research is both a challenging and exciting one. Good quality qualitative research is a much needed resource and practice in our contemporary social world. It holds many pleasures and rewards, with only the occasional mountain to climb.

## **FURTHER READING**

Useful sources on making and expressing arguments include: Coffey and Atkinson's *Making Sense of Qualitative Data* (1996), Silverman's *Doing Qualitative Research* (2000), Plummer's *Documents of Life 2* (2001) and Pink's *Doing Visual Ethnography* (2001). Seale's *The Quality of Qualitative Research* (1999) is an excellent analysis of procedures and philosophies for understanding and judging quality in qualitative research.

# Appendix: Difficult Questions for Qualitative Research

This Appendix contains a summary of the ‘difficult questions’ raised in the whole book, organized chapter by chapter. This is for ease of reference, and to help the reader to remember what questions need asking at what time and stage in the research process. The logic and rationale of asking questions in this way are set out in the Introduction, and discussions of a range of possible answers or responses to each question can be found in the relevant chapters.

## **1 FINDING A FOCUS AND KNOWING WHERE YOU STAND**

What is the nature of the phenomena, or entities, or social ‘reality’, that I wish to investigate (ontology)?

What might represent knowledge or evidence of the entities, or social ‘reality’ that I wish to investigate (epistemology)?

What topic, or broad substantive area, is the research concerned with?

What is the intellectual puzzle?

What do I wish to explain or explore?

What type of puzzle is it?

What are my research questions?

Do they express or problematize my intellectual puzzle?

Are they consistent with each other, and linked to each other?

Do they add up to a sensible whole?

Are they coherent and transparent?

Would anyone but me understand them?

Do they make possible, and probable, intellectually interesting answers or arguments?

Are they open enough to allow for the degree of exploratory enquiry I require?

Will they allow me to generate further questions at a later stage, in the light of my developing data analysis, should I wish?

Are they original and worth asking, as well as grounded in an understanding of the relevant background?

Am I asking an appropriate number of research questions at this stage?

What is the purpose of my research?

What am I doing it for?

## 2 DESIGNING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Do I need to design my qualitative research project?

What is the fullest and most creative range of methods of data generation and data sources I can think of?

Which of my research questions does each method or data source help me to address?

How should I focus?

What is my guiding methodological strategy?

What am I trying to achieve in integrating data and method?

How – according to what logic – do I expect to be able to add the products together or to integrate them?

What kind of analytical strategies should I adopt?

What scale of study do I wish to undertake?

How will I turn my data in ‘evidence’ which can be used to address my research questions?

How will I be able to demonstrate that my evidence is meaningful, my arguments are convincing, and my research is of good quality?

Are my concepts meaningful?

Are my methods appropriate?

Have I designed and carried out the research carefully, accurately, well?

Have I analysed my data carefully, accurately and well?

Are my conclusions supported by my data analysis?

Are they more widely applicable?

How can I demonstrate this?

What is the purpose or are the purposes of the research?

Which parties, bodies, practices or whatever, are potentially interested or involved in or affected by this research?

What are the implications for these parties, bodies, practices, and so on, of framing these particular research questions?

What is possible, given my resources?

What is the most sensible use of my resources in relation to my research questions?

## 3 DATA SOURCES, METHODS AND APPROACHES

From which sources might I generate data?

What am I interested in?

Where is it ‘located’ and therefore from which potential sources can I generate knowledge of it?

What do I expect these sources to be able to ‘tell’ me?

How well does the use of these data sources match my ontological perspective on what constitutes the social world, and my epistemological perspective on how knowledge about that world can be produced?

What are the practicalities of using these data sources?

What are the ethics of using these data sources?

How do qualitative approaches conceptualize and use sources and methods?  
 How useful are these approaches for my project?  
 What do I want to use from them?  
 How do I generate qualitative knowledge from my chosen data sources?  
 What is my logic?  
 What can different methods yield in relation to my research questions?  
 Which parts of the puzzle do they help me to address and in what ways?  
 How do the different methods feed into each other?  
 How do they integrate logically as well as intellectually?  
 Can I feasibly do everything I want to do?

#### 4 QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING

Why might I want to use interviews?  
 Why might I want to speak to or interact with people to generate data in order to answer my research questions?  
 Why might I want to use *qualitative* interviewing?  
 Why this style and approach rather than a more structured form of interviewing or questionnaire?  
 What are the shortcomings of qualitative interviewing for generating data which will help me to answer my research questions?  
 Am I collecting data (excavation)?  
 Am I generating data (construction)?  
 What should be the content of my interviews, and the substance of my questions?  
 How do I prepare my questions, and ensure the interviews are focused, without writing and following a script?  
 How much depth or breadth do I want to achieve on these issues?  
 What should be the *scope* of my questions?  
 Shall I follow up, or move on?  
 What should I ask next?  
 What should be the *sequence*?  
 How should I ask my questions?  
 What kind of demeanour should I adopt?  
 How should I act?  
 What procedures give my interview interactions the status of data?  
 Do different procedures yield data of differing status or quality?  
 Which elements count as data?  
 What shape or form do they need to take?  
 Should I focus only on the utterances?  
 Do other non-verbal aspects of the interaction and its context count?  
 Does my own written or tape-recorded account, and do my written or tape-recorded field notes, which are based on my interpretations of what went on, count as data?  
 Do my own memories and unwritten interpretations of the interview interaction count as data?

Does the interview or interaction become data only when it becomes text as, for example, in a transcription of a tape-recorded interview?

Does a visual or audio record of the interview count as data in itself?

Can diagrams, pictures, drawings, charts and photographs produced during the interview, or before or after it, count as data?

Do I wish to derive data from interviews in a literal, interpretive or reflexive manner?

How far is my own interview practice and style ethical?

On what basis am I judging what is ethical and what is not?

What justifications can I offer for the ethics of my interview practice and style?

On what basis, and to whom, are these acceptable?

Have I gained the 'informed consent' of my interviewees for their participation?

Whose consent should I seek?

How can I be sure that the consent is genuinely informed?

## **5 OBSERVING AND PARTICIPATING**

Why might I want to use observational methods?

Why might I want to enter or participate in a research setting in order to generate data for my research questions?

What are the shortcomings of using observational methods for my purposes?

Am I collecting data (excavation)?

Am I generating data (construction)?

What does my 'research setting' represent?

What is it telling me about?

What type of data can it yield?

What else do I need to know?

How do I generate or collect data?

Where do the data come from?

What do they look like?

What am I looking for in the setting?

What shall I observe?

What is the most appropriate setting to choose?

Where are the phenomena in which I am interested located – in time, space and place?

How does immersion in a particular setting shape what I see, and what I do not see?

Can I gain access to the setting?

What does access really mean?

Do I intend to be a participant, an observer, or a participant-observer?

What kind of identity, status or role shall I try to adopt?

What impression should I try to create?

How should I act?

How should I go about developing relationships in the setting?

How can I gain acceptance?



How will I know whether I have been accepted?  
 What kinds of limits should I create?  
 How and when will I negotiate my departure from the setting?  
 How should I record my observations?  
 What should I record?  
 When should I do it, and how often?  
 How should I make my fieldnotes?  
 What am I producing?  
 What is the status of fieldnotes?  
 How far is my fieldwork practice ethical?  
 What does ethical fieldwork look like?  
 How do I judge what is ethical fieldwork?  
 Have I gained informed consent from all participants?

## **6 USING VISUAL METHODS AND DOCUMENTS**

Why might I want to use or generate documents?  
 Why might I want to use visual methods?  
 Am I collecting data (excavation)?  
 Am I generating data (construction)?  
 What do I expect documents and visualizations to be?  
 What does visualization involve?  
 How should I visualize?  
 How should I record my visualizations?  
 What does the camera fail to 'see'?  
 How do I handle selectivity and perspective?  
 How should I go about developing relationships?  
 How can I gain acceptance?  
 How should I act?  
 How shall I handle the relational (and practical) aspects of using visual equipment?  
 What is the significance of the social relations through which the data are generated?  
 Do appropriate documents or visual data exist, and can I gain access to them?  
 Can I generate appropriate documentary or visual data?  
 What counts as data in documents?  
 Do I wish to 'read' my documents in a literal, interpretive or reflexive manner?  
 What counts as data in visual documents?  
 What counts as data in visualization?  
 Do I wish to 'read' in a literal, interpretive or reflexive manner?  
 What form should my data take?  
 Have I gained the appropriate consent from all the relevant parties?  
 What impact might using visual media have on participants?

## 7 SAMPLING AND SELECTION IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

- What work do I want my sample to do?
- What is the wider universe or population from which I wish to sample?
- What is the nature of my interest in this universe or population?
- What relationship do I want to establish, or do I assume exists, between the sample or selection I am making, and a wider population or universe?
- How can my sampling strategy help me to develop a theoretically and empirically grounded argument about ‘something in particular’?
- What should I sample?
- How do issues of time and space cross-cut my sampling categories?
- How many is enough, too few, or too many to address my research questions in an appropriately focused way?
- Can I make sensible and meaningful comparisons on this basis?
- How do I focus, strategically and meaningfully (not how do I represent)?
- Have I searched for ‘negative instances’?
- Have I challenged my own assumptions and arguments?
- When should I make my sampling decisions?
- How shall I keep track of my organic sampling practices?
- How, or by what methods and techniques, can I best achieve the kind of sample I want?
- Can I identify a sampling frame?
- Can I negotiate access?
- Is my sampling strategy practical and feasible?
- Do I have the necessary resources?
- Is my sampling strategy ethical?

## 8 ORGANIZING AND INDEXING QUALITATIVE DATA

- What count as data or evidence in relation to my research questions?
- How do I wish to ‘read’ my data?
- Do I wish to index my data cross-sectionally in some way?
- If yes, what are my reasons for wishing to do this?
- What kinds of indexing categories do I wish to produce?
- Categories of what? Categories for what?
- What explanatory or analytical logic does cross-sectional or categorical indexing support?
- How do I create and apply my indexing categories?
- When should I make final decisions about what the indexing categories will be?
- When should I start indexing?
- When should I finish?
- How many times should I index my data?
- How many indexing categories do I need to produce?
- How will I know whether I have the right number?
- Have I made the best use of the available technology?

Do I wish to organize my data in a non-cross-sectional way?  
 If yes, what are my reasons for wishing to do this?  
 How should I go about contextual, case study or holistic data organization?  
 What constitutes ‘the case’, ‘the context’, or ‘the whole’?  
 What explanatory or analytical logic does contextual, case study and holistic data organization support?  
 Do I wish to organize my data diagrammatically?  
 If yes, what are my reasons for wishing to do this?  
 How should I go about diagrammatical organization of data?  
 What explanatory or analytical logic does diagrammatical data organization support?

## **9 MAKING CONVINCING ARGUMENTS WITH QUALITATIVE DATA**

What kinds of explanations or arguments can I build from my data?  
 What kinds are outside the scope of my analysis?  
 What do I want the explanation or argument to do?  
 How do I want my argument to work?  
 How categorical do I want my argument to be?  
 What role do my data play in my argument?  
 How do I ‘read’ my data?  
 Does the empirical exist independently of my attempts to explain it?  
 What role does theory play in my argument?  
 When and how does theory come into play?  
 How can I use theoretical insights to understand and explore my data?  
 How can I use my data to think theoretically?  
 Is this ‘slice’, segment or form of data illustrative or constitutive of my argument?  
 What is the relationship of the ‘slices’ of data I have chosen to include in my argument, to those I have not?  
 How can I show that I have not just conveniently selected bits that support my argument?  
 Whose perspectives do they represent?  
 Should I, and how can I, make creative and imaginative use of my data in my argument?  
 Am I really convinced by my own argument?  
 How can I convince others?  
 How can I demonstrate that my methods are reliable and accurate?  
 How can I demonstrate that my methodology is valid?  
 How can I demonstrate that my interpretations are valid?  
 Whose interpretations? Whose truth?  
 What kinds of generalization or wider claims can I make on the basis of my analysis and explanation?  
 How can I demonstrate that I have tested out my ideas?  
 How can I show that I have used numbers appropriately?

What kinds of generalization do my *research questions* imply?

What kinds of generalization does my *sampling strategy* support?

What kinds of generalization do my *methods of organizing data* support?

Who or what is my argument directed towards?

Who am I trying to convince?

Have I honoured my commitments about confidentiality and privacy?

Have I acted in the spirit of the informed consent which I received?

Have I fulfilled my responsibility to produce good quality research?

Have I used my research, and my explanations, effectively and morally?

Have I generalized appropriately?

Do I have a responsibility to anticipate how others might use my research and explanations?

In general, am I clear about both my rights, and my responsibilities, in respect of my data, my analysis and my explanations?

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