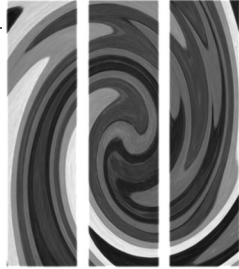


CHAPTER 2



What You Can (And Can't) Do With Qualitative Research

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter you will be able to

1. Recognize that there is no simple distinction between qualitative and quantitative research
2. Understand the uses and limitations of both forms of research
3. Understand that *qualitative research* refers to a wide range of **models** and research practices
4. Work out whether qualitative methods are appropriate to your research topic

INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers practical help in answering three very concrete questions that you should consider before beginning a qualitative research study. Namely:

- Are qualitative methods always the best?
- Is qualitative research appropriate to the topic in which I am interested?
- If so, how should it influence the way I define my research problem?

Arguably, these are recurring concerns throughout this book, as they are relevant to all phases of the research process (e.g., data collection, analysis, writing, etc.).

In this chapter, however, we treat these questions as items in a “buyer’s guide directory,” so to speak. Our aim is to challenge some common misconceptions and help our readers assess the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative methods before committing to them for their thesis or dissertation. As in the rest of the book, we will set out our argument through examples of actual research studies.

ARE QUALITATIVE METHODS ALWAYS THE BEST?

The sociology department in which David used to work offered a degree in qualitative research. The offerings for this program included a course largely taught by ethnographers who themselves mainly used qualitative methods. However, such a title seemed to attract students more in terms of what it promised to avoid rather than by reason of what it offers.

Specializing in qualitative research sometimes implies avoidance or downplaying of statistical techniques and mechanical, quantitative methods used in survey research or demography. In fact, this was indeed the case in David’s former sociology department—although students were expected to take a course in survey methods and to be aware of how the issues of validity and reliability so often posed by quantitative researchers are relevant to any kind of credible research (albeit in varying ways).

There is a potential danger in overemphasizing one’s qualitative training or orientation. For some novice researchers, qualitative methods are embraced to the point of a dogmatic stand against all other methodological **paradigms**. It is particularly troubling to hear students speak of a fixed preference or predefined evaluation of what is “good” or at least “appropriate” (i.e., qualitative) and “bad” or “inappropriate” (i.e., quantitative) research. Any good researcher knows that your choice of method should not be predetermined. Rather, you should choose a method that is appropriate to what you are trying to find out (see Punch, 1998, p. 244).

For instance, if you want to learn about the demographic characteristics of Americans who favor the death penalty, a quantitative approach would do very nicely. In their article “Racial Prejudice and Support for the Death Penalty by Whites,” Steven Barkan and Steven Cohn (1994) use General Social Survey (an opinion survey conducted annually in the United States) data to do exactly that. In particular, their study shows how **variables** like racial stereotyping, political conservatism, and antipathy toward blacks are associated with support for the death penalty. Table 2.1 represents some of the findings from this research.

As seen in Table 2.1, Barkan and Cohn use quantitative analysis of survey data to show that there is indeed a statistically significant relationship (as indicated by the starred correlation and regression coefficients) between respondents’ political

Table 2.1 Correlations and Logistic Regression of Racial Stereotyping, Political Conservatism, and Antipathy Toward Blacks on Support for the Death Penalty

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>r (Correlation Coefficient)</i>	<i>B (Regression Coefficient)</i>
Racial stereotyping	.10	.08
Political conservatism	.18	.30
Antipathy toward Blacks	.17	.26

SOURCE: Adapted from Barkan and Cohn (1994).

NOTE: $p < .05$

and racial attitudes and their support for the death penalty. In this example, researchers' use of statistical techniques is quite appropriate. That is not to say that the research is beyond critique. On the contrary, one can raise legitimate questions about the validity of the dependent variable as measured by the question, "Do you support or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?" On its face, this question offers nothing about the circumstances and context of a death penalty case. For example, what if the offender was a minor, or what if the offender had been abused by the victim? In other words, serious questions can be posed about the extent to which the dependent variable in this study in fact measures what it claims. However, we should be careful not to throw away the proverbial baby with the bath water in our critique of quantitative methods. The findings here are significant, worthy of discussion and further analysis, and very appropriate for the research question and data at hand.

On the other hand, if you are concerned with exploring people's life histories or everyday behavior, then qualitative methods may be favored. Depending on the data and the research question, attitude toward the death penalty can also be investigated using qualitative techniques. For example, in their article "I Hope Someone Murders Your Mother!': An Exploration of Extreme Support for the Death Penalty," Margaret Vandiver and her colleagues show how publicized executions engender hostility against the opponents of the death penalty. Using participant observations, newspaper accounts, and interviews, the researchers display the tumultuous and brutal attitudes of some of the supporters of the death penalty. Below are excerpts from this article based on letters sent to death penalty abolitionists in the state of Tennessee.

Since I can't be sure what if anything is going to happen to these murdering scumbags in the afterlife, I'll opt to fry them right now! If this is insensitive to weakling [sic] such as yourself, it's just too fucking bad! While people stand around executions with candles, I'm popping the cork on my

bubbly and celebrating that another useless (that's right—useless) mother-fucker is gone. According to you, we should try to “understand what transformed a human being into a murderous monster.” Guess what? Who the fuck cares? Get rid of them, end of story, period! I don't know what Bible you read but mine talks about “an eye for an eye” and that's EXACTLY what I want! (Vandiver, Giacomassi, & Gathje, 2002, p. 400)

Compared to Barkan and Cohn's quantitative article, Vandiver and her colleagues' research question and data focus on the nuances of pro-death penalty attitudes. The data and analysis in this case underscores how the themes of revenge and retribution are used as rhetorical justification for brutal punishment.

These two studies of attitudes toward the death penalty show how the questions and the data shape the research design and focus. In this book, we favor a purely pragmatic argument, according to which research problems define the most appropriate method. Research methods are not inherently right or wrong, they simply fulfill different purposes. On the one hand, an insistence that any research worth its salt should follow a purely quantitative logic would simply rule out the study of many interesting phenomena relating to what people actually do in their day-to-day lives, whether in homes, offices, or other public and private places. Similarly, an exclusive qualitative orientation excludes the possibility of understanding and appreciating social trends that are evinced in aggregate, numerical data. So, in choosing a method, everything depends on what we are trying to find out. No method of research, quantitative or qualitative, is intrinsically better than any other.

Moreover, as we shall see later, research problems are not neutral. How we frame a research problem will inevitably reflect a commitment (explicit or implicit) to a particular model of how the world works. And, in qualitative research, there are multiple, competing models. Simply declaring, “I am a qualitative researcher,” in and of itself, explains little about your particular take on the diverse practices and languages of qualitative research. Our commitment to qualitative methods should accompany answers to the following questions:

- Exactly what methods do we have in mind (e.g., interviews, **focus groups**, observation, texts, audio or video recordings)?
- In what ways are these methods relevant to our research problem and to our model of how the world is put together?

In the next two sections, we show how you can begin to answer these questions.

SHOULD I USE QUALITATIVE METHODS?

Table 2.2 offers some general answers to this question.

Table 2.2 Should I Use Qualitative Research?

1. What exactly am I trying to find out? Different questions require different methods to answer them.
2. What kind of focus on my topic do I want to achieve? Do I want to study this phenomenon or situation in detail? Or am I mainly interested in making standardized and systematic comparisons and in accounting for variance?
3. How have other researchers dealt with this topic? To what extent do I wish to align my project with this literature?
4. What practical considerations should sway my choice? For instance, how long might my study take and do I have the resources to study it this way? Can I get access to the single case I want to study in depth? Are quantitative samples and data readily available?
5. Will we learn more about this topic using quantitative or qualitative methods? What will be the knowledge payoff of each method?
6. What seems to work best for me? Am I committed to a particular research model, which implies a particular methodology? Do I have a gut feeling about what a good piece of research looks like?

SOURCE: Adapted from Punch (1998), pp. 244–245.

This table shows that qualitative research is not always appropriate to every research problem. For example, following Item 2 of Table 2.2, if you are mainly interested in making systematic comparisons in order to account for the variance in some phenomenon (e.g., crime or suicide rates), then quantitative research is indicated. Equally, as a rule of thumb, if it turns out that published research on your topic is largely quantitative (Item 3), does it pay to swim against the tide? As we stress several times in this book, if you can align your work with a previous, classic study, this makes a lot of sense. The last thing you want to do is to try to reinvent the wheel!

Let us try to flesh out the broad guidelines provided in this table by using one example, which, we believe, shows the issues you need to think about when fitting your choice of methodology to your research problem. To concretize the discussion, we will use a research example to help us focus on Items 5 and 6 from Table 2.2.

A few months ago, when David was idly reading the job advertisements for university researchers, he came across an advertisement that caught his eye. This was the research question to be tackled: How is psychosocial adversity related to asthma morbidity and care? It was explained that this problem would be studied by means of qualitative interviews.

David's immediate question was, how can qualitative interviews help to address the topic at hand? The problem is not that people with asthma will be unable to answer questions about their past nor, of course, that they are likely to lie or mislead the interviewer. Rather, like all of us, when faced with an outcome (in this case, a chronic illness), they will document their past in a way that fits the present, highlighting certain features and downplaying others. In other words, the interviewer will be inviting a retrospective **rewriting of history** with an unknown bearing on the causal problem with which this research is concerned.

This is not to deny that valuable data may be gathered from such a qualitative study. Rather, it will address an altogether different issue—**narratives** of illness in which “causes” and “associations” work as rhetorical moves to establish a coherent present.

By contrast, a quantitative study would seem to be much more appropriate to the research question proposed. Quantitative surveys can be used on much larger **samples** than qualitative interviews, allowing inferences to be made to wider populations. Moreover, such surveys have standardized, reliable measures to ascertain the causal relationship and “facts” with which this study is concerned.

For that matter, why should a large-scale quantitative study be restricted to surveys or interviews? If we wanted reliable, generalizable knowledge about the relation between these two variables (psychosocial adversity and asthma morbidity), we would start by looking at hospital records.

This example illustrates the need to fit your research design to your research topic. But, of course, it overplays the opposition between qualitative and quantitative methods.

If resources allow, many research questions can be thoroughly addressed by combining different methods, using qualitative research to document the detail of, say, how people interact in one situation and using quantitative methods to identify variance (see Chapter 8). The fact that simple quantitative measures are a feature of some good qualitative research shows that the whole qualitative/quantitative dichotomy is open to question. In the context of this book, we view many such dichotomies or polarities in social science as highly dangerous. At best, they are pedagogic devices for students to obtain a first grip on a difficult field—they help us learn the jargon. At worst, they are excuses for not thinking, which assemble groups of researchers into “armed camps,” unwilling to learn from one another.

As Table 2.2 (Point 6) suggests, such armchair debates are of less relevance than the simple test “what works for me.” As Howard Becker comments about his use of qualitative data,

It's the kind of research I've done, but that represents a practical rather than an ideological choice. It's what I knew how to do, and found personal enjoyment in, so I kept on doing it. (1998, p. 6)

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

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

Not only does it sometimes pay to think of qualitative research, as Becker suggests, in terms of quantitative frameworks, it can also be helpful occasionally to combine qualitative and quantitative methods. As we show in Chapter 14, simple tabulations can be a useful tool for identifying deviant cases.

In this section, we have used one example to show the importance of thinking through your research problem before committing yourself to a choice of method. But, as we have already hinted, the situation is rather more complicated than this.

UNDERSTANDING RESEARCH IN TERMS OF DIFFERENT MODELS

We can understand this complication better by returning to Point 6 of Table 2.2: namely, are we committed to a particular research model, which implies a particular methodology? Models provide an overall framework for viewing reality. They inform the **concepts** we use to define our research problem.

For instance, in the example we have been considering, the problem was defined in terms of the relation between an independent variable (psychosocial adversity) and two dependent variables (asthma morbidity and asthma care). These kinds of concepts appear to derive from a positivist model, which encourages us to chart the relation between variables that are operationally defined by the researcher.

Now, although **positivism** is the most common model used in quantitative research (i.e., the default option), it sits uneasily within most qualitative research designs. This is why David was puzzled by the choice of qualitative data in the design of the asthma study.

Qualitative research designs tend to work with a relatively small number of cases. Generally speaking, qualitative researchers are prepared to sacrifice scope for detail. Moreover, even what counts as detail tends to vary between qualitative and quantitative researchers. The latter typically seek detail in certain aspects of correlations between variables. By contrast, for qualitative researchers, detail is found in the precise particulars of such matters as people's understandings and interactions. This is because qualitative researchers tend to use a nonpositivist model of reality.

To underline the intellectual diversity of the field, in the next section we offer a brief summary of Gubrium and Holstein's analysis of four models of qualitative research.

THE DIFFERENT LANGUAGES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

A thorough discussion of differences in method and theory among qualitative researchers is found in Gubrium and Holstein's *The New Language of Qualitative Method* (1997). This book classifies qualitative research in terms of various orientations on the **empirical** data under analysis. In particular, Gubrium and Holstein focus on how each qualitative approach uses a particular analytical language to emphasize a particular facet of social reality. As the authors put it,

Our strategy for understanding the diversity of qualitative research is to treat each variant as an enterprise that develops, and is conducted in, a language or idiom of its own. Accordingly, each idiom represents a distinctive reality, virtually constituting its empirical horizon. (p. 5)

At the heart of this classification system is the division between substance and process, or between *what* is being studied and *how* it is constructed. Take the topic of nudity, for example. A qualitative researcher might ask the following: *What* are the deviant traits that characterize nudists and *what* practices are associated with a nudist? Another researcher studying the same topic could examine *how* nudity could be made normal or routine. In "The Nudist Management of Respectability," Martin Weinberg (1994) explores how nudist colonies achieve the "respectability" of the unclothed body through a set of locally defined and enforced norms like "no body contact" and "no accentuation of the body" (e.g., sitting with one's legs open). Weinberg's goal is to answer the question, "How can they see their behavior as morally appropriate?" (p. 392).

With this distinction between *how* (process of constructing reality) and *what* (reality as substantive truth), let us now look at the four models of qualitative research discussed in Gubrium and Holstein's book (i.e., **naturalism**, **emotionalism**, **ethnomethodology**, and **postmodernism**).

Naturalism

As a model of qualitative research, *naturalism* focuses on the factual characteristics of the object under study. Gubrium and Holstein cite William Whyte's *Street Corner Society* as a classic example of naturalism. In this urban ethnography from the 1940s, Whyte's goal is to describe what life is really like in an inner-city Italian neighborhood located in Boston. The observations and analysis are intended to objectively reflect *what* Whyte saw and heard in this real world of poverty. Naturalism's strength is its representational simplicity. A naturalistic **ethnography** is almost formulaically built around the following tasks: entering the setting, establishing rapport, recording observations with an eye toward sociological concepts (social status and group dynamics), and presenting the findings. The major shortcoming of this approach, according to Gubrium and Holstein, is this:

Because they view the border [between the topic of study and the way in which it is socially constructed] as a mere *technical* hurdle that can be overcome through methodological skill and rigor, they lose sight of the border as a region where reality is constituted within representation. (1997, p. 106)

This criticism suggests that naturalists overlook *how* people create meaning in their lives. Respondents are treated as mere sources of data without any interpretive capacity of their own. In a naturalistic framework, the participants' "interpretive practice" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997), or how they make sense of their own world, is irrelevant.

Emotionalism

Like naturalism, *emotionalism* takes for granted the reality of the topic under study. The difference between the two is that where naturalism searches for objective reality in physical places, emotionalism locates the real in the emotional life of the researcher and the respondents, or as Gubrium and Holstein put it, an emotionalist "virtually takes naturalism to heart" (1997, p. 59). Emotionalists are especially concerned with authenticity, which for our purposes can be defined as "deeper truths about the self." For emotionalists, alternative writing techniques can be used in qualitative research to better represent "true feelings." In the following extract, for example, Laurel Richardson describes why she chose poetry to represent her interview data:

Writing poetry is emotionally preoccupying; it opens up unexpected, shadow places in my self. As a kind of time-saving/snaring-two-birds-with-one-net

strategy I decided to fashion material from an unmarried mother interview into a poem. (1992, p. 131)

For Richardson, transforming interview data into poetry enables the researcher to preserve the authenticity and breadth of her respondent's story—information that she feels would otherwise be lost in a traditional style of writing and analysis. As she puts it, "For sociological readers, the poem may seem to omit 'data' that they want to know. But this is Louisa May's [her interview respondent's] story not the sociologist's" (p. 126).

The problem with emotionalism, as Gubrium and Holstein note, is that "by peering so intently into subject's interior lives and inner realms, emotionalists can blind themselves to the ways that subjects shape these spheres by way of their own interpretive actions" (1997, p. 108). Under emotionalists' exclusive focus on inner feelings and self-reflective confessions, all substantive inquiries about social reality dissolve into self-exploratory texts.

Ethnomethodology

The third qualitative approach reviewed by Gubrium and Holstein is *ethnomethodology*, which could roughly be translated into the study of people's methods of constructing reality in everyday life. Unlike the other two approaches, ethnomethodology is very much concerned with *how* social reality is constructed in everyday interaction. Ethnomethodologists' primary aim is to understand how people go about doing things in their everyday lives by creating meaningful categories for themselves and others. Thus, for example, an ethnomethodologist might ask seemingly curious questions like: What does it mean to be a "man"? The researcher would then *bracket* any prior knowledge about the topic (i.e., keep preconceived understandings from entering the analysis). In essence, bracketing means ontological detachment from the topic. Therefore, in representing the analysis, the word *man*, for example, would be placed in quotation marks to indicate its bracketed usage for the purpose of the study.

Harold Garfinkel, one of the founders of ethnomethodology, offers numerous examples of this qualitative approach in *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Some of the studies cited in this book are labeled "breaching experiments," or small research projects deliberately designed to violate taken-for-granted social order in order to reveal the process of its construction. In one such study, college students were asked to "engage an acquaintance or a friend in an ordinary conversation and, without indicating that what the experimenter was asking was in any way unusual, to insist that the person clarify the sense of his commonplace remarks" (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 42). The goal of the study was to reveal

“seen but unnoticed” (p. 42) norms used in everyday conversations. Here is an extract from the study (S = subject, E = experimenter):

The victim waved his hand cheerily.

S: How are you?

E: How am I in regard to what? My health, my finances, my school work, my peace of mind, my...?

S: [Red in the face and suddenly out of control.] Look! I was just trying to be polite. Frankly, I don't give a damn how you are. (p. 44)

In this case, by problematizing conversational norms, the experimenter reveals how the question “How are you?” is used to achieve “politeness” in everyday encounters.

For Gubrium and Holstein, although analytically powerful, the problem with ethnomethodology is that it risks losing sight of the topic of analysis in the name of focusing on the process of its creation. As they put it, “As the substantively meaningful aspects of local culture are shunted aside in order to concentrate on constitutive interactional activity, the content of lived experience becomes almost incidental” (1997, p. 107).

While ethnomethodology's analytical rigor can free us of trite or stereotypic understandings of a research problem, it does, on the other hand, impose restrictions on substantive interests. For example, one cannot study poverty ethnomethodologically without bracketing its meaning, or placing it in quotation marks (i.e., “poverty”). In this way, poverty loses its significance as a global social problem and becomes a particular achievement at a particular place and time. As a whole, a strict ethnomethodological analysis trades the substance of everyday life for a rigorous understanding of the activities that define it.

Postmodernism

Although *postmodernism* refers to a vast body of literature, for the sake of simplicity and flow of discussion, let us assume the term encapsulates an analytical orientation that questions all the achievements of modernity (e.g., humanism, rationality, reason, science, and so on). One of the key contributions of postmodernism to qualitative analysis is its critique of the representational authority of the written text. In particular, postmodernists ask, Who owns the knowledge embedded in the text and what power or authority supports it?

Gubrium and Holstein assert that the common theme of postmodernism is how and through what cultural forces we come to understand and accept

certain representations of reality as being “true,” “legitimate,” or “acceptable.” Whereas ethnomethodologists study the processes through which **members** construct their reality, postmodernists question the power relations and the political rhetoric embedded in the representations and constructions of social reality. While some postmodernists call for experimenting with alternative modes of representing social reality, others fundamentally question all forms of representation to the point of nihilism by arguing that nothing can be known as “true” or “good” (for a discussion of the different branches of postmodernism, see Pauline Rosenau, 1992). Gubrium and Holstein’s critique of postmodernism is best illustrated by these ominous words:

Postmodernism in the guise of qualitative inquiry is very risky business. Rhetorical ubiquity notwithstanding, at the lived border, reality is always on the verge of collapsing into representation, taking with it the substantively distinct parameters of experience whose “qualities” are qualitative method’s unique subject matter. Trying to capture that which is not there, or to describe the inexpressible, using mere rhetoric that begs its own deconstruction, is hazardous indeed. Qualitative inquiry is surely in peril as it gambles with empirical nihilism. (1997, p. 109)

Thus, while raising very important questions about the content of social reality and the methods of its production, in its extreme forms, postmodernism threatens the very need for scientific investigation and analysis. If, according to some postmodernists, we cannot and should not separate fact from fiction or truth from falsehood, then there is no point in spending precious resources to empirically study and analyze social reality—we could just as well write poems or a novel about our experiences. Nonetheless, it is possible to learn from the important insights of postmodernism without drowning in its whirlpool of intellectual nihilism. The most important of these insights is an emphasis on the rhetorical and constructive aspects of knowledge. That is, the realization that facts (social science facts included) are socially constructed to serve the interests of a particular group. In fact, this limited interpretation of the postmodern project is consistent with our own position in this book about qualitative research being a pragmatic enterprise that serves different interests.

It is worth noting that although these four models differ in how they emphasize the nature of social reality, they are not mutually exclusive. For example, the emotionalists and the postmodernists share a common concern with exploring alternative representational strategies. David discusses the emotionalist position further in Silverman, 2004, and the nature and purpose of models is examined in greater depth in Chapter 7. For the moment, we just want to leave you with the thought that qualitative research can mean many different things.

Table 2.3 Four Models Compared

	<i>Naturalism</i>	<i>Emotionalism</i>	<i>Ethnomethodology</i>	<i>Postmodernism</i>
Focus	Objective reality	Meaning, emotions, self	Practice in everyday life	Representation and power
Objective	Observing and reporting things as they really are	Revealing deeper, authentic truths about the self	Understanding how things become what they are	Relentless critique of all form of authority and all claims to "truth"

By now, this whole debate may have left you thoroughly confused. As a beginning researcher, you may rightly feel that the last thing you need is to sink into an intractable debate between warring camps. However, it helps if we treat this less as a war and more as a clarion call to be clear about the issues that animate our work and help define our research problem. As we argue in Chapter 6, purely theoretical debates are often less than helpful if we want to carry out effective research. The point is to select a model that makes sense to you (and, of course, there are more than the two models relevant to qualitative research—see Chapter 7). The strengths and weaknesses of any model will only be revealed in what you can do with it.

We will, therefore, conclude this chapter with a single case study that we believe is an inspiring example and that shows the value of using a clear-cut model and, thereby, demonstrates the particular explanatory power of qualitative research.

CASE STUDY: "POSITIVE THINKING"

Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger (2000) (henceforth WK) were interested in the way in which both laypeople and many medical staff assume that "positive thinking" helps you cope better with cancer. They point out that most of the evidence for this belief derives from questionnaires in which people tick a box or circle a number.

What alternative can we offer to this kind of quantitative research? The preferred qualitative route has been to analyze what people with cancer say in open-ended interviews. Deriving from what is referred to as the emotionalist model, such research has generally sought out patients' meanings and emotions and, as WK point out, has broadly supported the findings of quantitative studies.

However, there is a problem here, namely: "There is a widespread assumption in [both] these literatures that research participants are naïve subjects,

intent primarily upon accurately reporting their cognitions to the researcher” (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2000, p. 801).

By contrast, WK prefer to treat statements about “thinking positive” as actions and to understand their functions in particular contexts of speaking. So, although they use similar data to the emotionalists (interviews and focus groups), the way they analyze that data is very different. Using an ethno-methodological model, WK place quotation marks around “positive thinking” (i.e., they bracket its meaning) to show when and how it is used.

Let us look at one data extract that they use from a focus group of women with breast cancer:

EXTRACT 1.1

Fiona: Life’s too short to worry about whether you can afford or whether you can’t afford, or whether you should spend the money or whether you shouldn’t spend the money, you know, I think we, we’re sort of thinking that towards the back end of next year, we’re off on a holiday to Australia. I think you’ve got to feel like that. If you wanna do it, I think you’ve gotta go for it, because none of us, I mean, it’s all very well, they say, “Oh yeah, you’re fine now,” you, you know, “Everything’s gonna be okay,” but none of us know what next week, or next month, or next year has in store. And I, so I think you, you have to be positive. (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2000, p. 805; see Appendix for transcript conventions)

Fiona ends her comments about spending money now because “life’s too short” by saying “you have to be positive.” But should we take this to mean that this shows she is a positive thinker?

First, as WK note, Fiona shows that the object of her positive thinking is vague and diverse. She is “thinking positively neither about the cancer and its effects, nor about [her] possible recovery, but about [her life] apart from the cancer” (2000, p. 805).

Second, if we inspect closely what Fiona says, we can notice that she uses a multiplicity of different voices to frame what she is saying. “You” expresses the voice of any reasonable person (e.g., “if you wanna do it” and “you have to be positive”). “They” occurs once to refer to other people who tell you things that may not turn out to be true. “I” is used to refer to someone who ponders about all this (“I think”).

Like many of the women in these focus groups, Fiona frames her references to positive thinking in the voice of “you.” Used in this way, as what “you have got to do,” positive thinking is used as a kind of maxim.

The beauty of maxims is that, because they are supposed to reflect a shared world, their recipients can do little other than agree with them (Sacks, 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 23–25). So, if you say, “you have to be positive,” you are likely to get agreement, in the same way as if you say, “many hands make light work.” And, interestingly enough, WK report that Fiona’s last comment does indeed elicit agreement.

What Fiona is saying turns out to be complex and skillful. A lot of the time we want to obtain the agreement of others and Fiona structures her talk to do just that—notice that she also invokes a maxim (“life’s too short”) to justify spending money.

This suggests that, at the very least, we should not tear out what Fiona says about positive thinking from the multifaceted structure of her comments. Let me underline this point with one more extract:

EXTRACT 1.2

- Hetty: When I first found out I had cancer, I said to myself, I said right, it’s not gonna get me. And that was it. I mean (Yvonne: Yeah) obviously you’re devastated because it’s a dreadful thing
- Yvonne: (overlaps) Yeah, but you’ve got to have a positive attitude thing, I do
- Betty: (overlaps) But then, I was talking to Dr. Purcott and he said to me the most helpful thing that anybody can have with any type of cancer is a positive attitude
- Yvonne: a positive outlook, yes
- Betty: Because if you decide to fight it, then the rest of your body will st-, will start
- Yvonne: Motivate itself, yeah
- Betty: to fight it (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2000, p. 807)

Once again, on the surface, Extract 2 seems to support the idea that “positive thinking” is an internal, cognitive state of people with cancer. However,

this overlooks the extent to which these women are discussing “thinking positive” not as a natural reaction to having cancer (the natural reaction [cited elsewhere in their data] is that, “obviously you’re devastated because it’s a dreadful thing”), but rather as a moral imperative: “you’ve got to have a positive attitude.” (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2000, pp. 806–807)

So WK's analysis suggests two different ways in which these women formulate their situation:

Positive thinking is presented as a moral imperative, part of a moral order in which they should be thinking positive.

Other reactions (including fear and crying) are simply described as what "I did," not as "what you have got to do."

This distinction shows the value of looking at how talk is organized and not just treating it "as providing a transparent 'window' on underlying cognitive processes" (2000, p. 809). By contrast, WK's constructionist model has allowed us to get a quite different, more processual grasp of the phenomenon.

This has two useful consequences. First, we come to understand the place of "positive thinking" within a broader range of activities like troubles-telling. In so doing, we move from substantive theories to **formal theories** and, thereby, open up the possibility of broader comparisons (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Second, rather than simply confirm lay or medical beliefs about the phenomenon, it provides new insights of potential value to both patients and health care workers.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Wilkinson and Kitzinger's study gives a new twist to our earlier comments about the haziness of the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research. Earlier qualitative studies of "positive thinking" have simply replicated the findings of quantitative surveys but at the cost of precision because of the smaller sample size involved. By contrast, by using a radically different research model, they have come up with new findings that would be difficult to establish through quantitative methods.

Nonetheless, we must not draw too sharp a distinction between quantitative and qualitative research. Qualitative research can mean many different things, involving a wide range of methods and informed by contrasting models.

Ultimately, everything depends on the research problem you are seeking to analyze. We conclude this chapter, therefore, with a statement that shows the absurdity of pushing too far the qualitative/quantitative distinction:

We are not faced, then, with a stark choice between words and numbers, or even between precise and imprecise data; but rather with a range from more to less precise data. Furthermore, our decisions about what level of precision is appropriate in relation to any particular claim should depend

on the nature of what we are trying to describe, on the likely accuracy of our descriptions, on our purposes, and on the resources available to us; not on ideological commitment to one methodological paradigm or another. (Hammersley, 1992, p. 163)

KEY POINTS

One of the main points we have made in this chapter is that research methods should be chosen based on the specific task at hand. Amir's personal experience with a study of juvenile offenders who were charged with adult criminal offenses is a good illustration of this point (Frazier, Bishop, Lanza-Kaduce, & Marvasti, 1999). In this federally funded research, one of the goals was to isolate the factors that cause legal authorities to recommend a minor for adult judicial processing. The data came from two official sources. One was a statewide database called Client Information System (CIS). The CIS data contained numerically coded information on thousands of offenders from around the state. This information came to the researchers in the form of magnetic cartridge tapes that had to be mounted on a mainframe computer before they could be accessed and analyzed. The other source of data for the project was local court records, which contained arrest reports, indictments, sentencing reports, and a host of other documents about the cases. Summarizing and analyzing the numerical data was relatively easy. Once the data tapes were mounted on the mainframe, Amir used statistical programs like SAS or SPSS to read the data. With amazing speed, the computer programs could peruse thousands of records and extract just what was needed for analysis. For example, if Amir wanted to know the average age of offenders who had committed a violent crime like robbery, he would write a few lines of computer syntax, submit the request, and have the report, or output, back in seconds.

However, the work was much more challenging where the local court files were concerned. To transform these documents into data suitable for statistical analysis, the researchers put together a lengthy data collection instrument. After making an appointment at the appropriate courthouse, which could be hundreds of miles away, Amir and his colleagues would drive to the location and peruse the dossiers in search of information that corresponded to the hundreds of variables on the data collection instrument. For example, if the minor offender had used a firearm during an offense, that would be coded as "1," a blunt weapon, such as a baseball bat, would be coded as "2," etc. As the project proceeded, the principal investigators and Amir had to add more variables to capture the nuances of each case. For example, Amir came across a few cases that started in one jurisdiction and were transferred to another. This required the inclusion of

new variables to the data collection instrument. Amir and his colleagues soon realized that no matter how many variables were added, many details of the case simply did not fit a precoded, standardized format. Additionally, they were faced with the problem of overlapping categories. For instance, Amir had difficulty recording a case in which the offender began beating his victim with a baseball bat and then pulled out a firearm and shot his victim. Should this case be coded as a “1” or “2”? To remedy these problems, Amir and his colleagues had to supplement the numerical data about a case with a qualitative narrative or a case history to capture additional nuances. These case histories were written on a blank sheet of paper that was provided on the back of the data collection form. For example, Amir would write that Offender X lost his father to cancer at the age of 12, and was placed in a foster home after his mother refused to care for him, and so on. Finally, the principal investigators for this project (Amir was a graduate student at the time and served on the project as a research assistant) added more depth to their data by conducting in-depth interviews with a small sample of offenders. They would go to prisons, halfway houses, or other venues and interview the juvenile offenders face-to-face.

As you can see from this example, methods need not guide the research but can be used as tools when they are needed. It would have been silly for Amir and his colleagues to turn away from the case study method because it seemed “too qualitative.” It would have been equally unreasonable to exclude the statewide (CIS) data from the research because they were “too quantitative.” As we have repeatedly noted in this chapter, you can become much more effective as a researcher if you reject arbitrary, self-imposed limitations, and instead systematically pursue knowledge about a topic wherever the data might take you.

FURTHER READING

The most useful introductory texts are Alan Bryman’s *Quantity and Quality in Social Research* (1988); Nigel Gilbert (editor), *Researching Social Life* (1993); Clive Seale (editor), *Researching Society and Culture* (2004); and Keith Punch, *Introduction to Social Research* (1998). More advanced qualitative analysis is offered by Silverman’s *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analyzing Talk, Text and Interaction* (2001), especially Chapter 2; Miles and Huberman’s *Qualitative Data Analysis* (1984); Hammersley and Atkinson’s *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (1983); and Denzin and Lincoln (editors), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2000). A particularly useful source is “Inside Qualitative Research,” the introduction to Seale, Gobo, Gubrium, and Silverman’s edited book *Qualitative Research Practice* (2004, pp. 1–11).

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In addition to these general texts, readers are urged to familiarize themselves with examples of qualitative and quantitative research. Strong (1979) and Lipset, Trow, and Coleman (1962) are good examples of each. Sue Wilkinson elaborates on her work in Wilkinson (2004). Sensible statements about the quantitative position are to be found in Marsh (1982) (on survey research) and Hindess (1973) (on official statistics).

EXERCISE 2.1

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

1. To what extent are its methods of research (qualitative, quantitative, or a combination of both) appropriate to the nature of the research question(s) being asked?
2. Apply the criticisms of either qualitative or quantitative research discussed in this chapter to this research.
3. In your view, how could this study have been improved methodologically and conceptually?

EXERCISE 2.2

In relation to your own possible research topics,

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

EXERCISE 2.3

Visit the following Web site for the journal of *Qualitative Research* at <http://qrj.sagepub.com/>. Browse the table of contents for the most recent issue of the journal and read the abstracts (you can do this without a subscription).

1. List the topics or questions, as listed in the abstracts, from three articles.
2. List qualitative research methods used in the three articles.
3. Describe to what extent the topics and methods are similar. In what ways are they different?

