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INTERPRETING QUALITATIVE DATA

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For Len, Joe, Marie, Marion, Lillian, Alan, Tony, Bernard, John, Anita and Dennis and all my other friends on the Second Floor, Stella and Harry Freedman House

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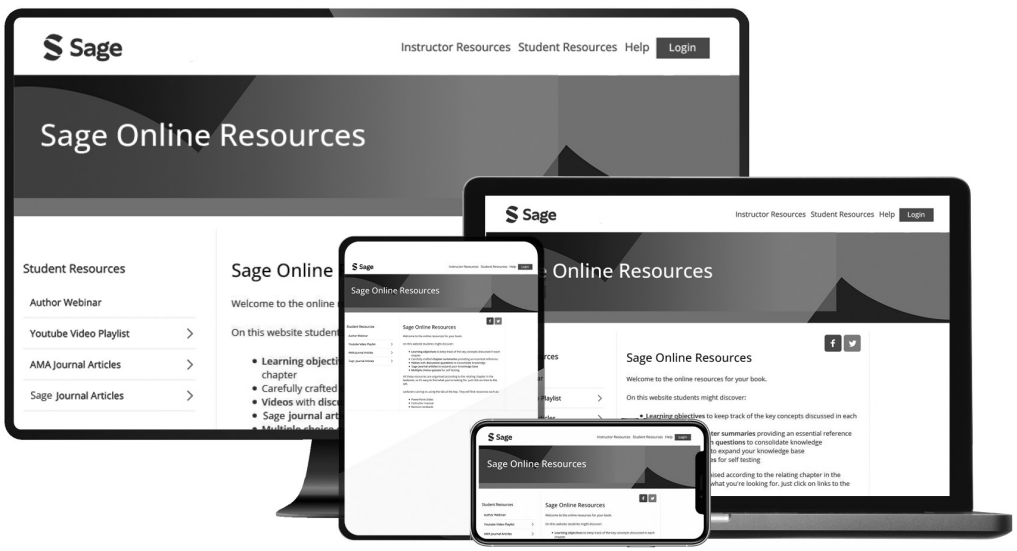

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A detailed **lecturer's guide** supports you with using this book to teach, featuring key learning objectives, teaching suggestions, tips for assessment, as well as additional further reading and video resources for every chapter.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Silverman trained as a sociologist at the London School of Economics and the University of California, Los Angeles. He taught for 32 years at Goldsmiths, University of London, where he is now Emeritus Professor in the Sociology Department as well as Visiting Professor in the Business Schools, King's College, London, Leeds University and University of Technology Sydney and Adjunct Professor, Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology. He is interested in conversation and discourse analysis and has researched medical consultations, shelters for homeless people and HIV-test counselling.

He is the author of *Doing Qualitative Research* (sixth edition, 2022) and *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting, Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research* (second edition, 2013c). He is the editor of *Qualitative Research* (fifth edition, 2021) and the Sage series *Introducing Qualitative Methods*. In recent years, he has offered short, hands-on workshops in qualitative research for universities in Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia.

Now retired from full-time work, he aims to watch 100 days of county cricket a year. He also enjoys spending time with his grandchildren and great-grandsons as well as voluntary work in an old people's home where he chats and sings with residents.

PREFACE TO SEVENTH EDITION

This new edition has been substantially rewritten. Drawing upon the very helpful comments of anonymous contributors to a development report, I have made the following changes:

- A new chapter on research models in qualitative research.
- An extended discussion of the uses and limits of thematic analysis.
- An enlarged chapter on mixed methods.
- A wider range of illustrative research studies from many continents.
- Each Methods in Action study is now followed by helpful reflective questions.
- Greater attention to research based on digital data and to recording data on smartphones.
- Online resources with many helpful learning features including a new Teaching Guide for lecturers. For ease of access, all links provided in this book now appear on the website. All links listed in this book were checked in early 2023.

My aim has been to develop the book further as an undergraduate introductory qualitative methods text which complements the postgraduate focus of *Doing Qualitative Research* (2022). Rather than attempting to turn this volume into simply an undergraduate research project book, my focus is on introducing first-degree students to the theory, methods and practice of qualitative research. In this way, I have tried to make this book suitable for both taught courses and research projects at the undergraduate level.

Like earlier editions of this book, I aim to demonstrate that qualitative research is not simply a set of techniques to be slotted into any given research problem. That is why this book concentrates on data analysis rather than simply data gathering. Indeed, at the very start of qualitative research, analytic issues should be to the fore.

Contrary to the common tendency simply to select any given social problem as one's focus, I try to demonstrate that research problems, at any level, need to be analytically defined. Indeed, in qualitative research, it often makes sense to begin *without* a clearly defined problem and to gradually work towards a topic by confronting data with the simple question: 'What is going on here?'. Here, as elsewhere, my position derives from a *constructionist* stance in which my preference is to gather naturalistic data in order to study how people put their world together in everyday situations. This involves:

- studying what people do (i.e. their behaviour) rather than focusing upon their thoughts and perceptions
- a concern with what is taken for granted in everyday life, finding extraordinary features in apparently ordinary activities and noting the ordinary organization of apparently extraordinary events (see Silverman, 2013b and Chapter 1)
- a preference for naturalistic data (e.g. observations, documents and digital data, audios and videos)
- a concern with the sequences in which behaviour is embedded

- an attention to context and a refusal to triangulate data gathered in different ways
- contributing to practice often by revealing the potential of unnoticed participant skills.

You should be aware that this is a minority position within the qualitative research community. Most qualitative research is based on what I call a *naturalistic* model (see Chapter 2). This involves:

- studying what people think or feel (i.e. their 'experiences')
- a preference for interviews and other kinds of manufactured data
- using methods of analysis which pay little attention to sequential organization (e.g. content analysis or thematic analysis)
- a willingness to triangulate data from different contexts.

In brief, for me, this majority position has many faults:

- Its focus on 'experience' more or less replicates the predominant focus of contemporary Western cultures (i.e. it is the arena of talk-show hosts like Oprah Winfrey rather than a specifically social science perspective).
- Its assumption that subjective factors like beliefs, perceptions and motives shape behaviour is over-rationalistic. Most of the time we just get on with things and only worry about what they 'mean' if something out of the ordinary occurs.
- The lack of attention to how people attend to the sequencing or positioning of actions tends to define people as 'dopes'. I see this as a problem with both content analysis and thematic analysis.
- Its use of triangulation can be a form of crude *positivism*. Ironically, positivists are often in a better position to study 'meanings' than naturalists (e.g. they can study large numbers of people, use reliable measures and come up with reliable correlations).

None of this means that the reader should expect to find that this book contains a polemic (a polemical treatment is offered in Silverman, 2013b). My central aim here is to show the value of a range of methodologies in social research and to equip the reader with some of the skills necessary to apply these methodologies. *I recognise that many qualitative researchers follow this majority position and so this book shows how to make intelligent use of interview and focus group data.*

Writing a book, like most things we do, is related to our own biography. I say 'related to' because it is both inappropriate and foolish to *reduce* a piece of writing to the personal experiences of its author. Indeed, nothing makes me cringe more than those endless chat shows where the topic is always someone's 'personality' rather than their work. Here, as elsewhere, then, one should trust the tale and not the teller, although my biographical background is sketched out in Chapter 17.

It is the *craft* of social research that this book sets out to convey rather than the passive ability to regurgitate appropriate answers in methodology examinations. I believe that knowledge has little to do with rote learning about the advantages and disadvantages of various approaches or methods. To this end, my discussion is illustrated by many detailed examples of qualitative research studies. Please note that some examples include terms which I would not now use. The purpose of including the examples is to contribute to a critical discussion, not to endorse the language or its associations.

Technical terms are highlighted and included in the Glossary at the end of this book and explained in more detail in the online glossary.

To be effective, a textbook should offer an active learning experience. In ancient Greece, Socrates encouraged understanding by asking his students pointed questions. Much more

recently, another philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, filled his book *Philosophical Investigations* (1968) with hundreds of provocative questions. Interestingly enough, a period of teaching in an elementary school had shown him how real learning often comes by working through particular examples.

Learning through doing is a wonderful way of appropriating knowledge and turning it into useful skills. The point has not been lost in distance-learning programmes (like those at the Open University in the UK). Thus, I provide many exercises, linked to the surrounding text.

These exercises often involve the reader in gathering and/or analysing data. My aim is that the users of this book will learn some basic skills in generating researchable problems and analysing qualitative data. As I have confirmed through using these materials for assessment on an undergraduate course, the exercises also give students an ability to show the skills of their craft in a way that is not usually possible within the confines of a normal examination method.

I believe that the most challenging of these skills arises in defining research problems and in analysing data. So this present book is not a 'cook-book'; it does not discuss in detail many of the practical issues involved in the research process (e.g. how to obtain access or how to present oneself to research subjects). Some of these matters can only be settled by practical experience. Others involve concealed analytic issues (e.g. about the character of observation), which are discussed in this book.

I envisage this reshaped text as a companion volume to the sixth edition of my recent book *Doing Qualitative Research* (2022). That book is a guide to the business of conducting a research project at the graduate level. This book is more introductory and, together with its accompanying volume of key readings (Silverman, 2021), seeks to offer the background that undergraduate students need for a methods course or when contemplating their own small-scale qualitative research study.

For my sense of this 'background', I will use the words of Wittgenstein, who, in closing his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, tells us:

> My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognises them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them (he must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it). He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright. (1971: 6.54)

It is my hope that this book may serve as something like Wittgenstein's ladder, providing an initial footing for students then to go off to do their own research – charting new territories rather than restating comfortable orthodoxies.

I am also most grateful for the students mentioned in this book who have allowed me to quote from their research questions sent to me. I thank Christian Heath, Paul Luff and Cambridge University Press for allowing me to reproduce passages from Heath and Luff's book *Technology in Action* (2000). I am also grateful to Clive Seale for giving me permission to mention certain Internet links recommended in his edited textbook (Seale, 2017) and to Sara Cordell for keeping my back in good enough shape to be able to finish this book.

My editors at Sage, Umeeka Raichura and Hannah Cavender-Deere, have been a constant source of help. Umeeka did a very useful survey of responses to the previous edition of this book and, together with Hannah, made many helpful suggestions about how this present volume and its digital companion could be adapted. I am also most grateful to Victoria Nicholas and her wonderful copyeditors for getting my manuscript into shape. Naturally, I alone am responsible for any errors or omissions contained in this book.

Part I

THEORY AND METHOD IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

1
WHAT IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- recognise what is distinctive about scientific knowledge
- understand the differences between quantitative and qualitative research
- link your research topic to an appropriate methodology
- recognise the advantages and disadvantages of both qualitative and quantitative methods.

1.1 A simple definition of research

If you ask someone what 'research' means, they may well tell you that it involves 'finding things out'. There is nothing wrong in this response as far as it goes. But it leaves hanging *how* we find things out.

There are many ways of acquiring knowledge. For instance:

- asking a friend or teacher whom you think knows about the topic
- searching the Internet by using Google or Wikipedia or by asking friends on Facebook or Twitter
- gathering information from 'old-fashioned' media like newspapers or television.

However, none of these ways may be reliable. We tend to get information from individuals and websites composed of people like us. How do we know that we are establishing what is true and not simply locked in a self-confirming circle? This is a serious matter. As Michiko Kakutani points out:

> Without commonly agreed-on facts ... there can be no rational debate over policies, no substantive means of evaluating candidates for political office, and no way to hold elected officials accountable to the people. Without truth, democracy is hobbled. (*The Guardian*, Review Section, 14 July 2018)

Scientific research offers us a solution to this problem in a number of ways:

- it determines what needs to be 'found out' by reviewing existing scientific knowledge on the topic, often by consulting scientific journals
- it formulates a 'problem' or research topic by reference to particular scientific theories and concepts
- it uses rigorous **methods** to discover new and surprising facts rather than just to confirm what we previously think we know or expect
- rather than being interested in knowledge simply to solve a practical problem, scientific research is often interested in knowledge 'for knowledge's sake'.

1.2 Scientific reasoning

Now we need to complicate things slightly. We have seen how gathering scientific knowledge differs from how we ordinarily sort fact from fiction. There are three main kinds of scientific reasoning:

1. Deduction is when, given two facts, you deduce a third, e.g. you can see it is very cloudy, you know that cloudy skies often lead to rain, you deduce that it is likely to rain. 'In deductive inferences, what is inferred is *necessarily* true if the premises from which it is inferred are true; that is, the truth of the premises *guarantees* the truth of the conclusion' (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2021).
2. Induction occurs when you draw implications from one observation. For instance, you observe that your two friends have both chosen a particular pizza. You induce that this probably means that the pizza tastes good, so you choose it yourself.

3. **Abduction** involves drawing conclusions from partial knowledge. Like Sherlock Holmes, you treat evidence at a crime scene as clues to what may have happened. For instance: 'You happen to know that Tim and Harry have recently had a terrible row that ended their friendship. Now someone tells you that she just saw Tim and Harry jogging together. The best explanation for this that you can think of is that they made up. You conclude that they are friends again … Tim and Harry's being friends again would, if true, *best explain* the fact that they have just been seen jogging together' (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2021).

Behind these ways of reasoning, there are sets of assumptions about the nature of reality and of our knowledge of it. There are two important terms used to discuss this:

1. *Ontology* is about what things are, e.g. is the social world composed of social facts independent of our actions or does social reality exist only through what people do?
2. *Epistemology* is about how we gain knowledge about things, e.g. either through measuring things such as crime or suicide rates or through understanding how people make sense of situations.

1.3 Examples

Enough of esoteric terminology. Let us take some examples of scientific research. Say you are interested in the uses of different smartphones. The practical question here might be simply knowing which phone to buy. To answer this question, we might consult friends and/or Internet information. By contrast, scientific research on phone use would set out to answer different, more theoretical, questions. For instance:

1. What brands do different consumers prefer, related to factors like their age, gender and occupation?
2. How do particular groups of people in certain situations actually use their phones?

Example 1 is the kind of research question that is often addressed by quantitative methods, for instance by a survey of a random sample of people who are asked questions about their consumer preferences. Their answers are then tabulated and related to 'facesheet variables' like age, gender and occupation. By contrast, example 2 involves a study of what people actually do in real-life contexts. It is best addressed by qualitative methods, including observation, video or diary-keeping.

These two examples seem to give a quite straightforward distinction between the ontological assumptions of quantitative and qualitative research:

- Quantitative research involves numerical analysis of the relationship between variables.
- Qualitative research involves verbal description of real-life situations.

These simple differences are set out in Table 1.1.

I thought it would be helpful to begin by setting out some simple distinctions. Unfortunately, matters are a little more complicated, as the following list indicates:

- Example 2 (studying how particular groups of people actually use their phones) can be studied quantitatively by using 'big data' collected by the companies themselves.
- As we shall see at the end of this chapter, 'qualitative research' covers a wide range of different, even conflicting, activities based on different, conflicting theoretical perspectives.

TABLE 1.1 Differences between quantitative and qualitative research

Quantitative research	Qualitative research
Generates data that allow numerical analysis	Describes phenomena in context
Uses statistical calculations	Interprets processes or meanings
Uses statistical software and pre-tested scales	Uses theoretically based concepts
Seeks explanations and correlations	Seeks 'understanding'

Source: adapted from Justesen and Mik-Meyer (2012: 15–17)

So we should not assume that qualitative researchers always study real-life situations in their actual contexts. Much qualitative research is based on **researcher-provoked data** derived from methods like interviews or **focus groups**. So many qualitative researchers might prefer to interview people about their phone use.

- If 'qualitative research' is being used merely as some sort of negative epithet (saying what we are *not*, i.e. non-quantitative), then I am not clear how useful it is. As Grahame puts it: 'the notion that qualitative research is non-quantitative is true but uninformative: we need more than a negative definition' (1999: 4).

This means that it is no simple matter to distinguish between qualitative and quantitative research. Let's take another attempt to do this, set out in Table 1.2.

TABLE 1.2 Assumed characteristics of research

Qualitative research	Quantitative research
Uses words	Uses numbers
Concerned with meanings	Concerned with behaviour
Induces hypotheses from data	Begins with hypotheses
Case studies	Generalisations

Source: adapted from Hammersley (1992b)

Unfortunately, as Hammersley (1992b) himself makes clear, each of the assumed differences in Table 1.2 is problematic, as follows:

- Quantitative researchers clearly use words as well as numbers. For instance, they usually offer verbal interpretations of their statistical tables. It is also not true that numbers are absent from qualitative research. Having discovered some phenomenon by qualitative means, there is every reason to see how frequently it occurs (see my discussion of the use of simple tabulations in qualitative research in Section 5.3.2).
- Quantitative research is often concerned with meanings – questionnaires or surveys are commonly designed to establish how people 'see' themselves or others. Qualitative researchers can be interested in behaviour just as much as how people see things. Many qualitative studies examine how people interact with one another, in particular settings like the workplace, a museum or an auction house (see Heath, 2013, discussed in Chapter 13).
- The standard, published quantitative study usually does begin with a **hypothesis**, which it then seeks to test. However, it is becoming more common for qualitative researchers to begin with a

hypothesis. My research on advice-giving in HIV-test counselling (Silverman, 1997), discussed in Section 7.1.3 was based on a relevant earlier study. After more than a century of qualitative research, we would be in a bad way if we had no findings that were worthy of further study!

- The same applies to generalisations. As I argue in Chapter 4, following Flyvbjerg (2004), we can make certain kinds of generalisations from case studies.

It would be foolish, however, to maintain that there is *no* distinction between qualitative and quantitative research. This can be seen clearly if we compare the format in different journals. Quantitative journals expect their authors to begin with a hypothesis which is then tested using accepted statistical measures on a large number of cases that are often randomly selected. Much of the material consists of tables of numbers. The interpretation of such tables is usually postponed until a final section, which is often called 'discussion'.

By contrast, the papers in qualitative journals do not routinely begin with a hypothesis, the 'cases' studied are usually far fewer in number and the authors' interpretation is carried on throughout the writing. There is usually far greater attention paid here to the particular theory or 'model' of qualitative research which the author is using. This allows me to make some simple, working distinctions, set out in Table 1.3.

TABLE 1.3 Qualitative research: some simple characteristics

Usually begins with a single case or a few individuals (as in interview or focus group studies). These cases or individuals are often chosen because of their convenience or interest (see Chapter 4).
Unlike quantitative research, a substantial minority of qualitative researchers study phenomena in the contexts in which they arise through observation and/or recording or the analysis of printed and Internet material.
Hypotheses are often generated from the analysis rather than stated at the outset.
There is no one agreed way to analyse your data. Multiple research models exist (e.g. **naturalism** and **constructionism**) and there are different ways to analyse data (e.g. **grounded theory**, **thematic analysis**, narrative analysis and **discourse analysis**) which sometimes conflict with each other.
Where numbers are used, these are usually in the form of simple tabulations designed to identify deviant cases and do not lead to statistical correlations or tests.

Table 1.3 attempts to paint a realistic picture of what *most* qualitative research looks like – of course, there are exceptions. However, as I argue in the next section, research methods are rarely intrinsically 'right' or 'wrong'.

1.4 Methods should fit your research question.....

The term 'qualitative research' seems to promise that we will avoid or downplay statistical techniques and the mechanics of the kinds of quantitative methods used in, say, survey research or epidemiology. The danger in the term, however, is that it seems to assume a fixed preference or predefined evaluation of what is 'good' (i.e. qualitative) and 'bad' (i.e. quantitative) research. In fact, the choice between different research methods should depend upon what you are trying to find out.

For instance, if you want to discover how people intend to vote, then a quantitative method, like a social survey, may seem the most appropriate choice. On the other hand, if you are concerned with exploring people's life-histories or everyday behaviour, then qualitative methods may be favoured. Table 1.4 gives three more examples of how your research topic should guide your use of quantitative or qualitative methods.

TABLE 1.4 Qualitative or quantitative methods?

1. Imagine that you want to study ambulance crews' responses to emergency calls. One way to do this would be to examine statistics giving the time which such crews take to get to such an emergency. However, such statistics may not tell the whole story. For instance, when does the timing of the emergency services' response begin (when the caller picks up the phone or when the ambulance crew receives the information from the operator)? And isn't it also important to examine how operators and ambulances services grade the seriousness of calls? If so, qualitative research may be needed to investigate how statistics are collected, e.g. when timing starts and what locally counts as a 'serious' incident. Note that this is an issue not just of the statistics being biased (which quantitative researchers recognise) but of the inevitable (and necessary) intrusion of common-sense judgements into practical decision-making (Garfinkel, 1967).
2. Say you are interested in what determines adolescents' diets. So you do a survey which asks them about the influences on their choice of food (e.g. parents, siblings, peer groups, health or disability, social media or advertisements). But is 'influence' really a suitable way of describing the phenomenon? For instance, a qualitative study may show that eating patterns arise in a variety of contexts, including negotiations with parents over such practical matters as who does the cooking and when the food is served. Hence young people's diet is not a simple outcome of different sets of 'influences' (Eldridge and Murcott, 2000).
3. Imagine that you want to study decisions by the police to charge juvenile offenders with a crime. It looks like being found with a weapon will lead to a criminal charge. But what kind of weapon? To answer this question, you code official records, giving a code of '1' to the use of a firearm and '2' to the use of a blunt instrument such as a baseball bat. But what are you to do if some offenders used *both* weapons (Marvasti, 2004: 9–10)? Do you just modify your coding system or do you add a qualitative study of meetings where police and public prosecutors grade the 'seriousness' of an offence and the likelihood of obtaining a conviction in deciding whether to charge a juvenile with a crime (Sudnow, 1968b)?

So far we have been dealing with little more than empty terms, apparently related to whether or not researchers use statistics of some kind. If, as I already have argued, the value of a research method should properly be gauged solely in relation to what you are trying to find out, we need now to sketch out the uses and abuses of both quantitative *and* qualitative methods.

PRACTISE YOUR SKILLS

Should I use qualitative research?

When planning your research project, try to answer the following six questions suggested by Punch (1998: 244–5):

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 standardised 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 pay-off 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?

1.5 The good sense of quantitative research.....

In our digital age, we often experience an echo chamber in which our own conceptions are echoed on the social media sites we visit. Opinion formers know this and carefully design their messages for different groups. So how are we to distinguish 'real' news from 'fake' news? As the economist Tim Harford puts it:

> [a] moment of reflection is often missing when we deal with politically fraught claims in the media, or in our Facebook feeds. If the claim slots into our preconceptions about the world, we accept it and perhaps repeat it. If it challenges us, we reject it instinctively. (*Financial Times*, 29 September 2018)

Harford asks us to be more curious and more tolerant of being surprised. Curiosity and surprise can be satisfied by obtaining accurate numbers which can reveal the importance of any phenomenon and show us whether it is getting bigger or smaller, better or worse. As he puts it:

> It is impossible to make sense of a complex world without some statistical tools in your cognitive toolbox ... it may be possible to lie with statistics but it is easier to lie without them. (Harford, 2018)

What are these statistical tools? Up to now we have been assuming that quantitative research always involves studying official statistics or doing a survey. Before you can decide whether to use quantitative research, you need to know the range of options available to you. The main methods of quantitative social research are set out in Table 1.5.

TABLE 1.5 Methods of quantitative research

Method	Features	Advantages
Social survey	Random samples Measured variables	Representative Tests hypotheses
Experiment	Experimental stimulus and control group not exposed to stimulus	Precise measurement
Administrative data	Numbers generated by governments or private companies	Large data sets
Phone data	Records of who called whom, when and where	Large data sets
Digital data	Scraping website activity	Big data

(Continued)

TABLE 1.5 (Continued)

Method	Features	Advantages
'Structured' observation	Observations recorded on predetermined 'schedule'	Reliability of observations
Content analysis	Predetermined categories used to count content of mass media products	Reliability of measures

Source: adapted from Bryman (1988: 11–12) and Tim Harford (*Financial Times*, 14 July 2018)

To flesh out the bare bones of Table 1.5, I will use an example based on a recent survey of how heterosexual couples divide household chores.

METHODS IN ACTION

Gender sharing of household chores

The household division of labor has frequently been cited as one way in which couples can demonstrate … gendered conventions. Conventional arrangements dictate that female partners do the most routine, onerous, 'indoor' housework, while male partners do the less frequent, more interesting, and 'outdoor' chores. Recently, the division of household labor has become somewhat more equal, with women decreasing and men increasing their relative shares of household chores. Nonetheless, some scholars argue that such changes have not been felt equally by couples across the social class spectrum (Carlson et al., 2018).

There is also evidence that the household division of labour varies between ethnic groups. An Australian study (Ting et al., 2015) found that where both partners come from Aboriginal or Torres Straits backgrounds, women do the lowest percentage of the housework (59%), with percentages for all other groups being much higher and similar to each other (71–74%).

To assess shifts in the division of individual housework tasks and their association with couples' relationship quality, Carlson et al. used data from two sources: the Marital and Relationship Survey (MARS) and wave 2 of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), initially gathered in 1987–8 (NSFH2). Collected in early 2006 by Knowledge Networks, the MARS is an Internet-based probability sample of 1095 individuals in 605 married and cohabiting heterosexual couples.

To work out how the division of housework tasks is associated with couples' relationship quality, they examined six outcomes: sexual frequency, sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, relationship trouble, discussed separating and physical arguments.

They found that the distribution of cooking, cleaning, dishes and laundry was more equal in the mid-2000s cohort than in the early 1990s cohort. Not only was the division of routine tasks more equal in the mid-2000s, but more individuals also reported the male partner doing the majority of routine tasks compared with the early 1990s. Nonetheless, women in the mid-2000s were still responsible for routine housework tasks, on average. Although the routine tasks with the most gender arrangements shifted towards egalitarianism over time, the one that was the least traditional, shopping, did not. The division of bill paying, a non-routine task, also changed, but fewer couples shared this task in the mid-2000s than in the early 1990s. There appeared to be no changes in the division of home maintenance.

In the mid-2000s, in heterosexual couples, men's responsibility for any of the five routine housework tasks was associated with less sexual satisfaction than sharing those tasks, and the

coefficients were all significantly different than for the early 1990s cohort (the lone exception being laundry). The results also indicated that women's responsibility for cooking, dishes and shopping – the three routine tasks that were least often the responsibility of women in the mid-2000s – was also associated with less sexual satisfaction than sharing these tasks equally. Carlson et al. (2018) conclude:

> … although egalitarianism in most tasks has become increasingly beneficial to couples' well-being, role reversal has become more deleterious. Increases in stay-at-home fatherhood and male homemaking have been lauded as signs of progress, but these results suggest that whether it is conventional or counter-conventional arrangements, inequality undermines relationship quality, which is best enhanced by equally sharing routine domestic labor. Our findings suggest that although the gender revolution continues to progress, it is certainly far from complete.

Reflective questions

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of using surveys to find out how couples divide housework tasks?
- What kinds of qualitative data might we use to address the same topic?

For some quantitative researchers, this kind of social survey is the single most important tool of quantitative social science:

> **The sample survey, it is claimed, and so we tell our students, allows us to generalize and predict through revealing enduring regularities by the use of inferential statistics. Through inference we can be confident that questionnaires on a limited number of people have more general resonance and can form the basis of scientific sociology. (Savage and Burrows, 2007: 889)**

For instance, using surveys collected from more than half a million American teenagers, Jean Twenge (2017) found that adolescents who spent more time on social media were more likely to report being pessimistic about their life.

Before rushing to draw conclusions from Twenge's research, we need to bear in mind its two limitations:

- As Twenge acknowledges, her study does not prove a causal link between social media use and depression. It may be that depressed teenagers are more likely to seek refuge in their phones.
- Twenge's data are drawn from surveys. In our digital age, contemporary quantitative researchers are more likely to be drawn to analysing the wealth of big data now available.

Savage and Burrows put it like this:

> **Most powerful institutional agents now have more effective research tools than sample surveys … they can draw on the digital data generated routinely as a by-product of their own transactions: sales data, mailing lists, subscription data, and so forth … where data on whole populations are routinely gathered as a by-product of institutional transactions, the sample survey seems a very poor instrument. (2007: 891)**

As the following examples demonstrate, big data can allow researchers to explore new areas of social life or revisit established research with a new approach.

METHODS IN ACTION

Big data research

Scarborough (2018) lists some recent studies based on big data:

- Stephens-Davidowitz (2014) used Google search trends to investigate the role of racism in the 2008 presidential election, finding that explicit racism cost Barack Obama at least 4% of the vote in 2008.
- Tinati et al. (2014) tracked the Twitter hashtag #FeesProtest during the 2011 London protests against rising university tuition fees. Using network analysis, these researchers were able to identify flows of information, pinpoint influential actors and recognise the unique content of tweets that travelled across networks.
- Bermingham and Smeaton (2011) analysed both sentiment and volume of tweets during the Irish national election to predict outcomes.
- Several scholars have used big data to predict changes in the stock market, with some performing sentiment analysis to identify how social moods affect financial shifts (Bollen et al., 2011).

Moreover, big data have several practical advantages compared to surveys:

1. Big data are inexpensive compared with survey data, e.g. you don't need to train interviewers.
2. Big data are timeless: researchers can analyse shifts in public opinion in response to social events literally in real time.
3. Big data are complete. While survey researchers have experienced declining response rates, individuals' contributions to big data are increasing as more and more people use the Internet and have smartphones (Scarborough, 2018).

Reflective questions

- For any research topic that interests you, what big data would be relevant?
- What are the limitations of using big data?
- What qualitative data could be more relevant?

However, we should not exaggerate the extent to which big data have replaced the survey in quantitative research. As Savage and Burrows comment:

> There are some arenas in which the sample survey will continue to be a central research tool because of the limits of transactional data. One challenge is posed by those 'outside the grid', and sample surveys in some cases are better able to represent the missing, 'representative' population. The British Crime Survey, for instance, is valuable precisely because it is able to show that the 'real data' gathered by the police as part of their auditing process understates crime as experienced by individuals. (2007: 892)

When considering surveys and big data studies, you may have been struck by the extent to which quantitative social research uses the same language that you may have been taught in say physics, chemistry or biology. As Bryman notes: 'Quantitative research is … a genre which uses a special language … [similar] to the ways in which scientists talk about how they investigate the natural order – variables, control, measurement, experiment' (1988: 12). Sometimes this has led critics to claim that quantitative research ignores the differences between the natural and social world (ontology) by failing to seek knowledge of the 'meanings' that are brought to social life (epistemology). This charge is often associated with critics who label quantitative research as 'positivistic' (e.g. Filmer et al., 1972).

Unfortunately, **positivism** is a very slippery and emotive term (see Chapter 2). Not only is it difficult to define, but also there are very few quantitative researchers who would accept it (see Marsh, 1982: Chapter 3). Instead, most quantitative researchers would argue that they do not aim to produce a science of laws (like physics) but simply to produce a set of cumulative generalisations based on the critical sifting of data (epistemology); that is a 'science' as defined above.

As I argue, at this level, many of the apparent differences between quantitative and qualitative research should disappear – although some qualitative researchers remain insistent that they want nothing to do with even such a limited version of science (see Section 1.8 below). By contrast, in my view at least, qualitative researchers should celebrate rather than criticise quantitative researchers' aim to assemble and sift their data critically (see Chapter 5). As the next case study shows, they occasionally also need to reconsider whether qualitative methods might be inappropriate for particular research questions.

METHODS IN ACTION

Asthma and psychology

A newspaper job advertisement sought to recruit a researcher for a study of how 'psycho-social adversity' is related to asthma morbidity and care. The advert explained that this problem would be studied by means of qualitative interviews.

Now consider how qualitative interviews can 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 which fits it, highlighting certain features and downplaying others. In other words, the interviewer will be inviting a retrospective 'rewriting of history' (Garfinkel, 1967) 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. By contrast, a quantitative study would seem to be much more appropriate to the research question proposed. Quantitative surveys or the scrutiny of big data can be used on much larger samples than qualitative interviews, allowing inferences to be made to wider populations. Moreover, such studies can use standardised, reliable measures to ascertain the relevant 'facts'. Indeed, why should a large-scale quantitative study be restricted to surveys or the scrutiny of big data? If I wanted reliable, generalisable knowledge about the relation between these two variables (psycho-social adversity and asthma morbidity), I would start by looking at hospital records.

(Continued)

Reflective questions

- What do you gain and lose by using interviews to find out what is happening in settings like medical consultations?
- What problems arise when we design qualitative research in terms of 'variables'?

1.6 The nonsense of quantitative research.....

Increasingly, contemporary organizations seek to improve performance by using quantitative *metrics* aimed at measuring how successful people are at meeting targets. The implicit claim is that numbers cannot lie. However, this fails to take account of the inventive ways in which employees can work the system. As a consequence, meeting measured targets can displace the very goals which the metrics were meant to achieve.

METHODS IN ACTION

Unintended consequences of metrics

The American historian Jerry Muller (2018) gives many examples of how setting up a metric to measure performance can have unintended consequences:

- When American teachers' performance was assessed by using pupils' maths and English scores, pupils' education declined as their teachers diverted time away from all those aspects of education that didn't show up in the metrics.
- When the UK Department of Health introduced penalties for hospitals with Accident & Emergency waiting times exceeding 4 hours, some hospitals responded by keeping patients in arriving ambulances, only starting the clock when they were actually admitted.

This is why a dependence on purely quantitative methods may neglect the social and cultural features of the 'variables' which quantitative research seeks to correlate. As Kirk and Miller argue, 'attitudes', for instance, do not simply attach to the inside of people's heads and researching them depends on making a whole series of analytical assumptions. They conclude: 'The survey researcher who discusses is not wrong to do so. Rather, the researcher is wrong if he or she fails to acknowledge the theoretical basis on which it is meaningful to make measurements of such entities and to do so with survey questions' (1986: 15).

Moreover, we should not assume that the meaning of quantitative data is self-evident, as the following example shows.

Reflective question

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of using metrics to study behaviour?

METHODS IN ACTION

Participation in online forums

Forty-nine researchers were asked to work on a big dataset consisting of 3.9 million words drawn from nearly 8000 comments on an online forum. The researchers were asked to explore two seemingly straightforward hypotheses:

1. Whether a woman's tendency to participate would rise as the number of women in the conversation increased.
2. Whether high-status participants would talk more than their low-status counterparts.

Sixty-four per cent of researchers reported that hypothesis 1 was proved but 21% denied it. There was even more conflict about hypothesis 2: 29% of researchers said the data supported it but 21% disagreed. The differences arose because the researchers chose different definitions of what they were studying and applied different techniques. Some analysts focused on word counts, others on the number of characters, still others on how often someone participated but not on its length.

As the article concludes: 'truth can be a slippery customer, even for simple sounding questions [unless] scientists specify exactly how they chose to perform their analysis' (The Economist, 2021).

Reflective questions

- What quantitative data would be relevant for any research topic in which you are interested?
- What different interpretations of such data might arise?

According to its critics, much quantitative research applies a set of ad hoc procedures to define, count and analyse its variables (Blumer, 1956; Cicourel, 1964; Silverman, 1975). The implication is that quantitative researchers unknowingly use the methods of everyday life, even as they claim scientific objectivity (Cicourel, 1964; Garfinkel, 1967). This is why some qualitative researchers have preferred to describe how, in everyday life, we actually go about defining, counting and analysing.

Let me try to concretise this critique by means of some examples of surveys about national identity and briefly review how they have been criticised. In 1979, 56% of people in Scotland chose being Scottish as their 'best' identity. This compared with 38% who said they were 'British'. By 2001, the proportions were 77% and 16% respectively (Kiely et al., 2005: 66).

Such longitudinal data potentially raise fascinating questions about the direction of change. The data also directly tie into debates about citizenship and national identity. Unfortunately, robust correlations between variables are only as reliable as the methods which have been used to generate their data. As Fielding and Fielding argue: 'the most advanced survey procedures themselves only manipulate data that had to be gained at some point by asking people' (1986: 12). Even if we can ask questions in a reliable way, what people say in answer to interview questions may not have a stable relationship to how they behave in naturally occurring situations. In this sense, interview responses may be artefactual.

Again, Fielding and Fielding make the relevant point: 'researchers who generalize from a sample survey to a larger population ignore the possible disparity between the discourse of

actors about some topical issue and the way they respond to questions in a formal context' (1986: 21). Of course, good survey researchers are conscious of the problems involved in interpreting statistical correlations in relation to what the variables involved 'mean' to the participants (see Marsh, 1982: Chapter 5). As the researchers who produced the data on Scottish identity point out, even more nuanced five-point Likert scales would not solve this problem since such scales 'cannot provide information on what people mean by these categories and what sort of decision-making process they use in plumping for one category over another' (Kiely et al., 2005: 66).

An extreme example of what this means in practice is found in a relevant study by a graduate student of residents in a Chicago housing project for the poor (Venkatesh, 2008). Imagine the impact on gang members of being confronted by a researcher with a clipboard asking them questions like, 'How does it feel to be black and poor?', and offering multiple-choice answers such as 'very bad', 'somewhat bad', 'neither bad nor good', 'somewhat good' or 'very good'!

The surveys I have reviewed are dogged by the problem that their findings might be simply artefacts of the method employed. However, we should not take this argument too far:

- As we know from the uncertainty principle recognised in physics, all data are to some extent an artefact of how they are collected.
- This means that there are in principle no 'good' or 'bad' research methods and, therefore, the choice between different research methods should depend upon what you are trying to find out.

However, the quantitative desire to establish 'operational' definitions at an early stage of social research can be an arbitrary process which deflects attention away from the everyday sense-making procedures of people in specific milieux. As a consequence, the 'hard' data on social structures which quantitative researchers claim to provide can turn out to be a mirage (see also Cicourel, 1964). This is illustrated by the two examples in Table 1.6.

These brief (non-random!) examples should allow you to understand the kind of criticisms that are often directed at purely quantitative research by more qualitative 'types'. So the anthropologist Gillian Tett (2021) points out, 'Familiarity creates blind spots … as the anthropologist Ralph Linton noted: "the last thing the fish would notice would be the water"'. Because space is short, Table 1.7 attempts to summarise these criticisms.

It should be noted that Table 1.7 contains simply complaints made about *some* quantitative research. Moreover, many quantitative researchers treat such matters seriously and try to overcome them. So, for instance, epidemiologists, who study official statistics about disease, and criminologists are only too aware of the problematic character of what gets recorded as, say, a psychiatric disorder (Prior, 2003) or a criminal offence (Noaks and Wincup, 2004). Equally, good quantitative researchers are conscious of the problems involved in interpreting statistical correlations in relation to what the variables involved 'mean' to the participants (see Marsh, 1982: Chapter 5).

In the light of this qualification, I conclude this section by observing that an insistence that any research worth its salt should follow a purely quantitative logic would simply rule out the study of many interesting phenomena relating to what people actually do in their day-to-day lives, whether in homes, offices or other public and private places. But, as the next section shows, a balanced view should accept the strengths, as well as the limitations, of quantitative research.

TABLE 1.6 The limits of quantitative methods

1. Say you are interested in racial discrimination and think of doing a quantitative study. First, you will need an **operational definition** of your topic, e.g. should racial discrimination be defined legally, should you follow the perspective of the victims and potential aggressors or should you yourself define the term? Whatever you decide, your research will be stuck with how you define the phenomenon at the outset (Marvasti, 2004: 11).
2. Imagine you want to discover whether small children who are able to empathise with others will make good teachers. So you administer a psychological questionnaire to a sample of such children. Then you conduct a **laboratory study** to see whether those who score highly on 'empathy' are best at instructing other children on how to complete a simple task such as constructing a toy tower (O'Malley, 2005). However, do your questionnaire answers tell you anything about how 'empathy' is displayed and recognised in everyday life? Moreover, when you watch a video of the lab study, you will need to decide whether or not the instruction was successful in any particular case. But this raises a set of difficulties: if a child being tutored successfully completes the tower, how do you know this was due to the other child's tutoring? Moreover, how did the tutored child define what they were being taught? The very speed at which researchers' coding of the behaviour of the tutor–tutee takes place may underplay how the recipient of the action codes the activity.

TABLE 1.7 Some criticisms of quantitative research

1. Quantitative research can amount to a 'quick fix', involving little or no contact with people or the 'field'.
2. Statistical correlations may be based upon 'variables' that, in the context of naturally occurring interaction, are arbitrarily defined.
3. After-the-fact speculation about the meaning of correlations can involve the very common-sense processes of reasoning that science tries to avoid (see Cicourel, 1964: 14, 21).
4. The pursuit of 'measurable' phenomena can mean that unperceived values creep into research by simply taking on board highly problematic and unreliable concepts such as 'discrimination' or 'empathy'.
5. While it is important to test hypotheses, a purely statistical logic can make the development of hypotheses a trivial matter and fail to help in generating hypotheses from data (see my discussion of grounded theory in Section 7.4).

1.7 The good sense of qualitative research

Qualitative researchers suggest that we should not assume that techniques used in quantitative research are the *only* way of establishing the **validity** of findings from qualitative or field research. This means that a number of practices which originate from quantitative studies may be *inappropriate* to qualitative research. These include the assumptions that:

- social science research can only be valid if based on operational definitions of variables, experimental data, official statistics or the random **sampling** of populations
- quantified data are the only valid or generalisable social facts.

Consider the problem of counting attitudes in surveys. Do we all have coherent attitudes on any topics which await the researcher's questions? And how do 'attitudes' relate to what we actually do – our practices? Or think of official statistics on cause of death compared with studies of how hospital staff (Sudnow, 1968a), pathologists and statistical clerks (Prior, 1987) attend to deaths. Note that this is *not* to argue that such statistics may be biased. Instead, it is to suggest that there are areas of social reality which such statistics cannot measure.

The main strength of qualitative research is its ability to study phenomena which are simply *unavailable* elsewhere. Quantitative researchers are rightly concerned to establish correlations between variables. However, while their approach can tell us a lot about inputs and outputs to some phenomenon (e.g. how national identity is correlated with voting behaviour), it has to be satisfied with a purely 'operational' definition of the phenomenon and does not have the resources to describe how that phenomenon is locally constituted (see Figure 1.1). As a result, its contribution to social problems is necessarily lopsided and limited.

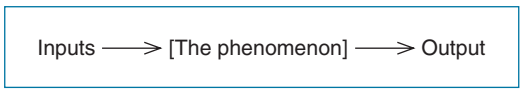

FIGURE 1.1 The missing phenomenon in quantitative research

One real strength of qualitative research is that it can use naturalistic data to find the sequences ('how') in which participants' meanings and practices ('what') are deployed. Having established the character of some phenomenon, it can then (but only then) move on to answer 'why' questions by examining the wider contexts in which the phenomenon arises (see Figure 1.2).

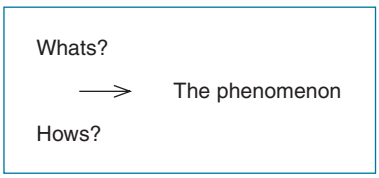

FIGURE 1.2 The phenomenon reappears

Figures 1.1 and 1.2 show that there are gains and losses in quantitative researchers' tendency to define phenomena at the outset through the use of operational definitions. Such definitions aid measurement but they can lose sight of the way that social phenomena become what they are in particular contexts and sequences of action. As we shall see in Chapter 3, what I call **contextual sensitivity** means that qualitative researchers can look at how an apparently stable phenomenon (e.g. a tribe, an organization or a family) is actually put together by its participants.

DAVID'S TOP TIPS

When researching any phenomenon, try putting it into inverted commas as an aid to thinking about what that phenomenon comes to be in a particular context. This may lead you to see that you are faced with a set of phenomena which can be marked by hyphens, for example the family-in-the-household; the family-in-public; the family-as-depicted-by-the-media; the family-as-portrayed-in-criminal-sentencing. This approach is also a useful way of narrowing down your research problem.

1.8 The nonsense of qualitative research

Unfortunately, contextual sensitivity is not always shown by qualitative researchers. Sometimes, they forget to put phenomena into inverted commas and chase some 'essential' object often apparently located inside people's heads, like 'meaning' or 'experience'. For instance, some qualitative researchers use open-ended interviews, like TV chat-show hosts, to try to tap directly into the perceptions of individuals. This romantic approach can make unavailable the situations and contexts to which their subjects refer (see Figure 1.3). This means that we are no wiser about the phenomenon being studied (see Silverman, 2017).

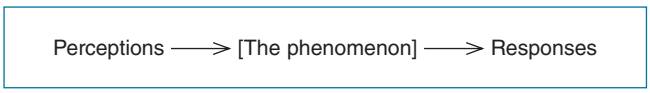

FIGURE 1.3 The missing phenomenon in (some) qualitative research

It was bad enough when **romanticism** was just the basis for some qualitative research and all chat shows. Now it is being used to justify wasting billions of dollars. Despite all the evidence that unstaffed space missions give you far more bang for the buck, on BBC World News, some years ago, I heard a professor at the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) support President Bush's plans for a manned Mars mission by saying: 'Actually having a human being experience being on Mars is important. That means that millions of people on Earth can experience it too.'

This idea of a totally new experience, as we shall see in Chapter 2, is the dream of upmarket tourists. In the context of space travel, it ignores the way in which both astronauts and TV viewers will necessarily draw on pre-existing images (ranging from *Star Wars* to previous visits to strange places) in order to make sense of what they see on a distant planet.

It is not just (some) qualitative researchers who misunderstand the potential of what they are doing. Qualitative research is regularly miscategorised by others. For instance, in many quantitatively oriented, social science methodology textbooks, qualitative research is often treated as a relatively minor methodology. As such, it is suggested that it should only be contemplated at early or 'exploratory' stages of a study. Viewed from this perspective, qualitative research can be used to familiarise oneself with a setting before the serious sampling and counting begin.

These reservations have some basis given the fact that qualitative research is, by definition, stronger on long descriptive narratives than on statistical tables. The problem that then arises is how such a researcher goes about categorising the events or activities described. This is sometimes known as the problem of **reliability**. As Hammersley puts it, reliability 'refers to the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions' (1992a: 67).

The issue of consistency particularly arises because shortage of space means that many qualitative studies provide readers with little more than brief, persuasive, data extracts. As Bryman notes about the typical observational study: 'field notes or extended transcripts are rarely available; these would be very helpful in order to allow the reader to formulate his or her own hunches about the perspective of the people who have been studied' (1988: 77).

Moreover, even when people's activities are audio- or video-recorded and transcribed, the reliability of the interpretation of transcripts may be gravely weakened by a failure to note apparently trivial, but often crucial, pauses, overlaps or body movements. This is shown in the following case study.

METHODS IN ACTION

Transcribing recordings of cancer consultations

A study of Australian medical consultations sought to establish whether cancer patients had understood that their condition was fatal. When researchers first listened to recordings of relevant hospital consultations, their transcripts showed no evidence that the patients had picked up on their doctors' often guarded statements about their prognosis. However, when the recordings were retranscribed, it was demonstrated that patients used very soft utterances (like 'yes' or more usually, 'mm') to mark that they were taking in this information. Equally, doctors would monitor patients' silences and rephrase their prognosis statements (see Clavarino et al., 1995).

Reflective questions

Look at any study based on recordings and see how it transcribes people's talk. Now compare its transcriptions with the transcript symbols in the appendix of this book.

- What symbols, if any, have not been used in this study?
- What might have been missed as a result?

A second criticism of qualitative research relates to how sound the explanations it offers are. This is sometimes known as the problem of **anecdotalism**, revealed in the way in which research reports sometimes appeal to a few, telling 'examples' of some apparent phenomenon, without any attempt to analyse less clear (or even contradictory) data (Silverman, 1989a). This problem is expressed very clearly by Bryman:

> There is a tendency towards an anecdotal approach to the use of data in relation to conclusions or explanations in qualitative research. Brief conversations, snippets from unstructured interviews ... are used to provide evidence of a particular contention. There are grounds for disquiet in that the representativeness or generality of these fragments is rarely addressed. (1988: 77)

This complaint of 'anecdotalism' questions the validity of much qualitative research. 'Validity' is another word for truth (see Chapter 5). Sometimes one doubts the validity of an explanation because the researcher has clearly made no attempt to deal with contrary cases. Sometimes the extended immersion in the 'field', so typical of qualitative research, leads to a certain preciousness about the validity of the researcher's own interpretation of 'their' tribe or organization. Or sometimes the demands of journal editors for shorter and shorter articles simply means that the researcher is reluctantly led only to use 'telling' examples – something that can happen in much the same way in the natural sciences where, for instance, laboratory assistants have been shown to select 'perfect' slides for their professor's important lecture (see Lynch, 1984).

PRACTISE YOUR SKILLS

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. How far does its use of these methods meet the criticisms of both qualitative and quantitative research discussed in this chapter?
3. In your view, how could this study have been improved methodologically and conceptually?

Despite these common problems, doubts about the reliability and validity of qualitative research have led many quantitative researchers to downplay the value of the former. However, as we have seen, this kind of 'damning with faint praise' has been more than balanced by criticisms of quantitative research offered by many qualitative researchers.

The methods used by qualitative researchers exemplify a common belief that they can provide a 'deeper' understanding of social phenomena than would be obtained from a purely quantitative methodology. As the following example shows, too often we draw upon faulty common-sense knowledge of how the world works.

METHODS IN ACTION

In 1990, the anthropologist Gillian Tett (2021) was doing her PhD on tribal peoples living in Tajikistan in central Asia. At the time, it was assumed that radical Islam was likely to make the people revolt against the Soviet Union. However, her research showed that: 'the locals embraced a tolerant inclusive vision of Islam and were adept at compartmentalizing "Soviet" and "Islamic" spaces, minimizing the sense of clash'. As she puts it, her qualitative approach corrected the 'bird's eye' view. Abstaining from too many assumptions and looking at how things actually worked on the ground, she got a 'worm's eye' view.

Reflective questions

Consider any research study (your own or others'):

- In Tett's terms, does it offer a 'bird's eye' view or a 'worm's eye' view?
- What does it gain or lose by doing so?

However, it is dangerous to push too far the qualitative/quantitative distinction. As Martyn Hammersley points out:

> We are not faced, then, with a stark choice between words and numbers, or even between precise and imprecise data; but rather with a range from more to less precise data. Furthermore, our decisions about what level of precision is appropriate in relation to any particular claim should depend on the nature of what we are trying to describe, on the likely accuracy of our descriptions, on our purposes, and on the resources available to us; not on ideological commitment to one methodological paradigm or another. (Hammersley, 1992a: 163)

The implication I draw is that doing 'qualitative' research should offer no protection from the rigorous, critical standards that should be applied to any enterprise concerned to sort 'fact' from 'fancy'. Ultimately, soundly based knowledge should be the common aim of all social science (see Kirk and Miller, 1986: 10–11). As Hammersley argues: 'the process of inquiry in science is the same whatever method is used, and the retreat into paradigms effectively stultifies debate and hampers progress' (1992a: 182).

PRACTISE YOUR SKILLS

This exercise requires a group of at least six students, divided into two discussion groups ('buzz groups').

Imagine that you are submitting a proposal to research drug use among school pupils. Each buzz group should now form two 'teams' (Team I = QUANTITATIVE; Team II = QUALITATIVE).

1. Team I should formulate a quantitative study to research this topic.
2. Team II should suggest limits/problems in this study (Team I to defend).
3. Team II should formulate a qualitative study to research this topic.
4. Team I should suggest limits/problems in this study (Team II to defend).
5. Both teams should now come to some conclusions.

DAVID'S TOP TIPS

Quantitative methods are usually the most appropriate if you want to find out social facts or the causes of some phenomenon. Qualitative methods are best suited if you want to ask 'what' and 'how' questions.

WHAT YOU LEARNED

- When we compare quantitative and qualitative research, we generally find, at best, different emphases between 'schools', which themselves contain many internal differences.
- Qualitative researchers should celebrate rather than criticise quantitative researchers' aim to assemble and sift their data critically.
- Reliability and validity are key ways of evaluating research.
- A dependence on purely quantitative methods may neglect the social and cultural construction of the 'variables' which quantitative research seeks to correlate.
- Qualitative research should not limit itself to the study of perceptions or subjective meanings (naturalism). Qualitative research has a unique ability to focus on how people construct their behaviour in naturalistic situations (constructionism).

TEST YOURSELF

1. What are the main differences between how people have used qualitative and quantitative methods?
2. Are there any similarities in how researchers have used qualitative and quantitative methods?
3. Which comes first: your research question or your choice of methods? Why?
4. What kinds of research questions are most appropriate for quantitative research?
5. What kinds of research questions are best addressed by qualitative methods?
6. What criticisms have been made about (some) quantitative research?
7. What criticisms have been made about (some) qualitative research?

EXPAND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

For a one-hour recent lecture by David on *Justifying Qualitative Research*, followed by a Q&A, go to: www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mwf6dugP3U

Good chapter-length treatments of the relation between qualitative and quantitative methods are:

Brannen, J. (2004) 'Working qualitatively and quantitatively', in C. Seale, G. Gobo, J. Gubrium and D. Silverman (eds), *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage, pp. 312–26.

Spicer, N. (2004) 'Combining qualitative and quantitative methods', in C. Seale (ed.), *Researching Society and Culture*, second edition. London: Sage, pp. 293–304.

Useful introductory texts are:

Bryman, A. (1988) *Quantity and Quality in Social Research*. London: Unwin Hyman.

Gilbert, N. (ed.) (1993) *Researching Social Life*. London: Sage.

Seale, C. (ed.) (2017) *Researching Society and Culture*, fourth edition: London: Sage.

For a book-length treatment of how qualitative research can use big data, see:

Mills, K.A. (2019) *Big Data for Qualitative Research*. London: Routledge.