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## SECTION 8 DOING A QUALITATIVE STUDY

### 8.1 INTRODUCTION

While the distinction between qualitative and quantitative approaches is not clear-cut, we can identify two features which distinguish most qualitative research from most quantitative research.

The first is that in qualitative research much if not all of the data employed are unstructured: that is, they are not collected in forms which reflect the analytic categories of the researcher. Thus, qualitative researchers produce and analyse fieldnotes that are lengthy open-ended reports of what people said and did, transcriptions of audio- or video-recordings, free-form written text, and even visual images.

This distinction between a reliance on unstructured and on structured data is a matter of degree, of course. Quantitative research sometimes employs unstructured data, as in the case of 'free response' questions in social surveys. And some research which is primarily qualitative in character also uses structured data, in the form of official statistics or questionnaire data. However, in general quantitative research relies on structured data, and most qualitative research depends primarily on unstructured data.

A second feature which helps to differentiate qualitative and quantitative research concerns the degree to which the intended product is predetermined before the research begins. Typically, but not always, quantitative analysis involves processing data in order to find an answer to some set of specific questions which the data production process has been carefully organized to address. By contrast, qualitative analysis is often portrayed as concerned with discovering what might be learned from a particular body of data. (A good example of this is Nias's research on

'teachers talking': see her article in the set book *Doing Educational Research* or in Reader 1.) This contrast is often formulated in terms of the opposition between deductive and inductive research: between research which deduces a hypothesis from a theory and sets out to test it; and research which begins from some data, describes them, and tries to find interesting ways of making sense of them. The grounded theorizing of Glaser and Strauss which is discussed in Section 6.1 is often formulated in terms of this contrast.

Here again, though, what we have is a dimension rather than a simple opposition between two types of research. Most research lies somewhere in the middle of this spectrum and uses both deductive and inductive forms of inference. After all, theories and hypotheses are always developed inductively in some sense, on the basis of previous experience; and all experience is structured by theoretical assumptions. However, it is true that qualitative research is usually nearer the inductive end of the spectrum, in the sense that it is more concerned with exploring and describing particular situations or people's perspectives and *developing* theory about them, where much quantitative work is devoted to testing theoretical or explanatory hypotheses.

However, while in qualitative research the topic may be relatively open-ended, formulated for instance in terms of finding out the perspectives of some group or category of person (students, teachers, governors, parents, etc.), or describing what goes on in particular situations (a senior management team meeting, the playground, the classroom, etc.), qualitative researchers nevertheless have to try to be as clear as possible about the boundaries of the topic they are investigating. And these will be determined not just by what is of interest, what the researchers judge to be important, or what they have been funded to investigate, but also by what it proves feasible to negotiate access to and collect data about, given the time and resources available. These matters must be considered in the early stages of planning, even though judgments may have to be revised subsequently in the light of experience. And pilot work can play an important role in assessing the analytic fruitfulness and practical feasibility of research plans.

Given that you are not required to do a full-scale piece of qualitative research for this module, our discussion here focuses specifically on the practicalities of planning a qualitative study and carrying out a piece of qualitative pilot research. As well as using the guidance in this section, you may well need to consult Section 10.4, which deals with qualitative methods, and follow up some of the literature it lists. It would be sensible, at the very least, to read relevant sections of one of the introductions to qualitative research referred to there.

Our aims here are twofold:

- 1 to identify the important issues which need to be addressed at the stage of initial planning in qualitative research;
- 2 to outline the sort of qualitative pilot work that might be useful in preparing a research proposal.

## 8.2 DEVELOPING YOUR RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Right at the beginning, you will need to think about what kinds of data are required to address your research topic. You can then work back from this to consider what access and data collection strategies are necessary. At the same time, you must consider what is feasible given the resources available. You will need to address the following questions:

- 1 What site(s), or group(s) of people, are to be studied; and how is access to be gained?
- 2 What sources of data are to be employed?
- 3 How will the data be recorded?
- 4 How will the data be processed?
- 5 What kind of analysis will be used?

### *Selection of cases and access to them*

Your research topic will indicate some type of site or category of person for investigation. Sometimes just one case will be implied; in other words, you are intrinsically interested in some particular person, situation, event or institution. Here the issue of the case to be studied has already been resolved to a large extent. Alternatively, your research topic may relate to a general type of case, or population of cases. Here, you will need to decide how many cases you plan to investigate and how these are to be selected. And, even where a single case is selected for study, some sampling within it may be necessary. It may not be possible to study the whole of an educational institution; some sub-site (or a sub-group of its members) may need to be chosen as the main focus.

Closely associated with the selection of the cases for investigation, and sampling within them, is the issue of gaining access to the data. The problems here can vary a great deal. It could be, for instance, that the case or cases you have selected for study are not situations, persons or institutions but texts; and that these are publicly available, or access to them can be obtained relatively easily. For example, school prospectuses might be studied to see what they can tell us about the strategies schools use to attract parents; or the focus could be government policy documents (see, for example, Donald, 1979). But the data you require may not already exist in this way, in which case you will need to gain access to settings to carry out observation and/or to informants to conduct interviews. You may, of course, nominate yourself as researcher and select cases for study with which you already have contact or in which you are already involved; though even here some negotiation will be necessary in order to gain access to data for research purposes. However, where there is no such contact or involvement on the part of the researcher, access will have to be negotiated from scratch, and some consideration will need to be given to how this might be achieved. In thinking about the negotiation of access you must consider what demands the research will make on participants and what they ought to be told about the research. There are both methodological and ethical issues involved in this. (For reviews of the ethical issues involved in qualitative research, see Dockrell, Article 6 in the *Offprints Reader*, and Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, Chapter 10.)

### *Data sources*

Qualitative researchers usually draw on one or more of the following data sources: observation, interviews, and documents. Indeed, it is common to combine all three of these.

Observation can take a variety of forms, though as we have seen qualitative researchers generally adopt a relatively unstructured approach. As was pointed out in Section 6, however, decisions still have to be made about where, when, and whom to observe. And the effects of these decisions on the nature of the data produced must be borne in mind.

In Section 6 we also discussed the distinction sometimes drawn between participant and non-participant observation, and pointed out that there is a sense in which all observation involves participation by the researcher. The only exception to this is where it is carried out without the knowledge of the people being observed and without any social contact with them. An important consideration in the planning of research involving observation, then, is the role that the researcher will play in the setting. The practical implications of this will need attention, as will the consequences for the kinds of data which will be produced.

Generally speaking, qualitative researchers also use an unstructured rather than a structured approach to interviewing. Indeed, the distinction between observation and interviewing is not clear-cut. Often, 'interviews' will consist of informal chats with participants in the course of observation. Qualitative researchers also use formal interviews, but even here the approach tends to be unstructured. The

researcher enters the interview with a set of topics in mind, and perhaps with a few starter questions, but the main aim is to encourage informants to talk in their own terms about topics which are relevant to the research. The role of the interviewer is to facilitate this and to stimulate informants to clarify and extend comments which seem of interest from a research point of view. (It is worth adding that while interviews are often one-to-one, group interviews may also be used.)

There is a very wide range of types of document which may be used for research purposes, from personal letters and diaries, through semi-official and official unpublished documents, to published accounts of one sort or another, factual and fictional, officially-sponsored and individually produced. In much qualitative research these serve as a source of background information rather than being the primary form of data. However, as we have already noted, they can be central.

### *Data recording*

Besides considering the sources of data to be used, you might also need to discuss in your research proposal how the data are to be recorded. In the case of documents this problem should not arise, assuming you can obtain copies. However, data recording is an issue in most qualitative research. And, once again, there are both methodological and practical considerations to be taken into account.

It is now very common for qualitative researchers to use audio-recording in interviews. This has great advantages over taking notes because it increases the likelihood that exactly what was said will be recorded in full, and it prevents the need for the interviewer to take notes and think about appropriate questions simultaneously. However, the feasibility of using an audio-recorder depends on the kind of interview involved. There is little problem in relatively formal, pre-planned interviews, so long as the interviewee agrees to being recorded. But audio-recording is more difficult where interviewing occurs on the spur of the moment or takes place 'on the hoof', walking round a school or college, or is carried out in contexts where there is a lot of background noise. It is also important to think about the effects that audio-recording might have on what people will and will not say. This might be a particular problem where very sensitive topics are involved. In general, however, audio-recording of interviews is to be recommended.

Audio-recorders can also be used to record aural data in meetings, classrooms, and other sites. Many of the same considerations apply here as apply to interviews. In addition, where multi-party talk is involved it needs to be remembered that it may be very difficult to identify speakers in the recording. (This problem can also arise with group interviews.) And activities which involve a substantial element of physical action may be impossible to describe on the basis of an audio-recording; though, of course, this can be remedied if the recording is supplemented by fieldnotes. Indeed, the writing of supplementary notes is common practice where audio-recording is being used to produce observational data. At the very least, this may provide background information which enables the researcher to contextualize the recording.

Video-recorders are sometimes used to record observational data. These have the obvious advantage that they record visual as well as aural data, though they will not necessarily record everything that is going on within shot, and much will take place out of shot. Furthermore, video-recording is more disruptive than audio-recording, even though camcorders are much smaller in size and much more familiar to people than they used to be. It should also be remembered that processing video-recorded data takes considerably more time than processing audio-recordings.

Where audio or video technology is not used, the standard data recording technique in qualitative research is the writing of fieldnotes. Initially these will take the form of jotted notes, to be written up in a more explicit and detailed way later. Such notes set out to describe what is going on in concrete terms and in as much detail as possible. For instance, it is important to try to record exactly what people

say in their own words, rather than by paraphrase. Of course some selectivity is essential, guided by the research focus. But it is necessary to err on the side of including rather than excluding data, since it will be very difficult to recover subsequently any relevant data which were not recorded in the fieldnotes at the time. Reliance on memory long after the event is always dangerous.

### *Data processing*

Whatever means are adopted for the collection of data, a considerable amount of time will need to be set aside for processing these data, and some consideration will have to be given to how this is to be achieved. Where audio- or video-recording is used, decisions need to be made about how to transform the recordings into a usable form. This may involve producing an index of what data occur at various points in these recordings. However, at least some of the data will have to be transcribed; and for many purposes it will be necessary to transcribe the recordings in full.

Further decisions are involved in the transcription process itself. Transcriptions can vary in their form and in what they include. In many ways transcriptions are like maps, and they are subject to something of the same range of alternative forms of representation and levels of detail. Transcriptions are usually organized in the form of a playscript, with the names of the speakers down the left hand side; though there are other systems of representation (see Ochs, 1979). Furthermore, transcriptions may or may not include information about non-verbal behaviour (including tone of voice) and timings for pauses. Again, standard orthography may be used, or an attempt may be made to capture something of the actual sound of the speech, for example preserving dialect (see Atkinson, 1992, pp. 22-9). For some purposes representation of changes in pitch may even be necessary (see Brazil, 1985). The sort of transcription that is appropriate depends on the kind of analysis proposed. Equally important to remember, though, is that different kinds of transcription will take substantially different amounts of time. And all transcription is quite time-consuming: broadly speaking, it can require anywhere between five and twenty times as long as the actual length of the recording.

As we have already noted, fieldnotes written in the course of an interview or observation generally need to be expanded into fuller notes later. There is some scope for variation in the nature of fieldnotes. Judgment about this must be made on the basis of what is appropriate given the purposes of the research, and in terms of what is practicable on the basis of the resources available. However, as we noted earlier, in writing fieldnotes it is best to err on the side of inclusion rather than exclusion. In general, then, fieldnotes should be detailed and concrete in character. We can illustrate this by comparing two sets of fieldnotes dealing with the same event:

Below we reproduce two extracts from notes that purport to recapture the same interaction, taken from a study of the staffroom talk of secondary school teachers (Hammersley, 1980). They are recognizably 'about' the same people and the same events. Neither lays any claim to completeness. The first obviously compresses things to an extreme extent, and the second summarizes some things, and explicitly acknowledges that some parts of the conversation are missing altogether:

- 1 The teacher told his colleagues in the staffroom about the wonders of a progressive school he had been to visit the day before. He was attacked from all sides. As I walked with him up to his classroom he continued talking of how the behaviour of the pupils at X had been marvellous. We reached his room. I waited outside, having decided to watch what happened in the hall in the build-up to the morning assembly. He went into his classroom and immediately began shouting at his class. He was taking it out on them for not being like the pupils at X.
- 2 (Walker gives an enthusiastic account of X to his colleagues in the staffroom. There is an aggressive reaction.)

- Greaves: Projects are not education, just cutting out things.
- Walker: Oh no, they don't allow that, there's a strict check on progress.
- Holton: The more I hear of this the more wishy washy it sounds.
- Walker: There's a craft resources area and pupils go and do some dress-making or woodwork when they want to, when it fits into their project.
- Holton: You need six weeks' basic teaching in woodwork or metalwork.
- Holton: How can an immature child of that age do a project?
- Walker: Those children were self-controlled and well-behaved.
- Holton: Sounds like Utopia.
- Dixon: Gimmicky.
- Walker: There's no vandalism. They've had the books four years and they've been used a lot and I could see the pupils were using them, but they looked new, the teacher told me that if they damaged the books she would have to replace them herself.

Holton: Sounds like those kids don't need teaching.

((Walker and I go up to his room: he continues his praise for X. When we reach his room I 'wait outside to watch the hall as the build-up for the morning assembly begins. He enters his room and immediately begins shouting. The thought crosses my mind that the contrast between the pupils at X he has been describing and defending to his colleagues and the 'behaviour' of his own pupils may be a reason for his shouting at the class, but, of course, I don't know what was going on in the classroom.))

(( )) = observer descriptions

= omission of parts of conversation in record.

The second version is much more concrete in its treatment of the events; indeed, much of the speech of the actors is preserved. We can inspect the notes with a fair assurance that we are gaining information on how the participants themselves described things, who said what to whom, and so on. When we compress and summarize we not only lose 'interesting' detail and 'local colour', we can lose vital information. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, pp. 181-2)

In general, it is best to produce indexes, transcriptions and written up fieldnotes on a word processor. This allows for future reorganization and re-use of the data. In addition, it facilitates the sorting of the data, which is an essential element of much qualitative analysis. Most word-processing programs allow the copying of segments of text and storage of them in separate files. However, there are also programs specially designed for handling qualitative data (see Section 10.4).

### *Analysis*

In the case of qualitative research, even more than survey or experimental work, it is not easy to be precise in the initial stages of planning about the nature of the analytic techniques which will be employed. This is because such techniques are rather less formalized than in the case of quantitative research, and because of the inductive tendency of this kind of work. Nevertheless, an *outline* of the sort of approach that is to be adopted should be possible in the research proposal.

All analysis involves the coding of data; that is, assigning data items to categories as instances. Qualitative and quantitative analysis differ in their approach to coding, however. In the latter, the categories are usually already known, having been established early on in the research; and they should be closely-defined and mutually exclusive. In other words, the task of coding amounts to deciding in which category each piece of data belongs. In qualitative analysis, on the other hand, the task of coding involves simultaneously deciding what are the most appropriate categories to make sense of the data and assigning data items to them. This means that the category system employed develops and changes over the course of the analysis; and, as a result, the coding of the data has to be repeated from the beginning each time new categories emerge. Furthermore, the meaning of the categories is clarified on the basis of the data analysis, not fixed at the start; and, initially at least, the categories will not be mutually exclusive — data items may be assigned to more than one category.

We can identify two basic approaches, which cover the vast bulk of qualitative research. We have already given a brief account of one of these - theme analysis - in Part 1, Section 4.1, and this was also the kind of analysis introduced in Section 6. The other approach is what is often referred to as discourse analysis.

### *Theme analysis*

As the name implies, what we mean by theme analysis is the search for themes of relevance to the research topic under which reasonably large amounts of data from different sources (observations in different contexts, interviews with different people, documents, etc) can be organized. And, to one degree or another, these themes will be mutually related. They may concern the preoccupations of the people studied, recurrent features of their behaviour, key policy issues, etc. Some authors have put forward general classifications of themes (see, for example, Lofland and Lofland, 1984, Chapter 6). Thus, a common organizing model centres on social strategies. In this, some distinctive problem faced by a group of participants is identified and the strategies they use for dealing with it are documented. However, there are many other possible models. While, normally, the themes will be relevant to the original research focus, the data analysis may produce an important reformulation or even transformation of that focus.

In the practical terms of data processing, theme analysis requires the systematic labelling of particular data items in terms of one or more categories and the filing of copies of all the data items relevant to each category in the same place, so that they can be compared and contrasted. This can be done by making physical copies and storing them in folders or, as we mentioned earlier, by creating files on a microcomputer for each category and storing the data there ready to be printed out. Whichever method is used, it is important to retain a copy of the data in the original 'chronological' format. (For further details see Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, Chapter 7.)

### *Discourse analysis*

Almost all theme analysis involves the analysis of discourse, so there is a fuzziness built into the distinction we are using here. However, the two approaches differ in how they approach the analysis of verbal data. We can get some sense of this if we look at the criticisms of work done using theme analysis by those committed to what we are calling discourse analysis (see, for example, Stubbs, 1986). The core criticism is that theme analysts do not pay enough attention to the way in which discourse works. There are two rather different grounds for this argument. One is that theme analysts neglect an important topic: it is suggested that looking at how discourse works is at least as important as the themes with which theme analysts are concerned. The second argument is that theme analysis is likely to be misleading, that it can result in misinterpretation because it neglects the immediate context in which data items were produced. In short, the accusation is that theme analysis rips



data items out of their original contexts in order to place them into general categories.

Discourse analysis can take different forms, but in general it focuses on a particular text, or set of closely related texts. These may have been produced orally or in written form. The task which discourse analysts set themselves is to analyse the ways in which the text has been constructed and functions: they try to understand why particular combinations of words or juxtapositions of words and images have been used, how they function within the text, and/or what their effect is likely to be on audiences. (For a useful introductory account, see Potter and Wetherell, 1987.)

It is worth noting that, in return, theme analysts also often accuse discourse analysts of neglecting context. What *they* mean by context, however, is the wider organizational and socio-political circumstances in which discourse operates. Some discourse analysts have taken this to heart, seeking to understand texts against the background of these wider contexts (see, for example, Fairclough 1989, and 1992).

### *Summary*

In your research proposal, then, you will need to include the following kinds of information.

- 1 An outline of your research topic and of the rationale for it.
- 2 An indication of what case or cases are to be investigated (these should be described, not necessarily named), and an explanation of why they have been selected.
- 3 A consideration of how access is to be gained to these and how the data are to be collected. Here, you must address any likely problems, methodological, practical and ethical. Think, in particular, about the role of the researcher, what this would involve, and the possible implications for the kinds of data produced.
- 4 Some indication of the sort of data analysis to be employed, and the kinds of themes or discourse features which might be the focus of the analysis.
- 5 The outline of a timetable for the research. Here you must remember that analysis of unstructured data is extremely time consuming: it usually takes much longer to process and analyse the data than it does to collect them.

## **8.3 PLANNING YOUR PILOT RESEARCH**

Please bear in mind that your pilot research must be quite limited in scope. It is very easy to become absorbed by the process of collecting data, so that you build up huge quantities and leave little or no time for processing and analysing the material you have produced.

Possible pilot research projects include:

- three or four in-depth interviews with key informants, or with members of particular categories of personnel;
- the observation of one or two meetings or classroom sessions;
- an in-depth analysis of some relevant document(s).

Of course, it is possible to combine interviews, observation, and/or documentary sources of information. Indeed, this can be very fruitful. But in planning your pilot work you must take account of the limits of time and other resources operating on you.

In the plan of the pilot research (required for STMA 04), we expect a clear specification of what the pilot research is intended to achieve. While it will relate to the same topic as the research proposal, it should have a distinctive purpose of its own; one which is designed to contribute to the development of the research

proposal. You should also indicate what sorts of data you are planning to collect, how this will be accomplished, and what kinds of analysis you intend to use.

In the report of the pilot research (required for STMA 05), there should be:

- 1 a resume of its intended purpose;
- 2 a discussion of the methods used, of any problems that arose, and of how they were dealt with;
- 3 an analysis of the data, and an outline of the implications of this for the proposed research.