QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
WHY AND HOW TO DO IT

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CHAPTER OBJECTIVES
After reading this chapter, you should be able to
• understand qualitative research in relation to its history and background.
• comprehend the common features of qualitative research.
• understand why qualitative research is a timely and necessary approach in social research.
The Relevance of Qualitative Research

Why use qualitative research? Is there a special need for such an approach in the current situation? As a first step, I will outline why the interest in qualitative research has been growing so much in the last few decades. Qualitative research is of specific relevance to the study of social relations, due to the fact of the pluralization of life worlds. Key expressions for this pluralization are the “new obscurity” (Habermas 1996), the growing “individualisation of ways of living and biographical patterns” (Beck 1992), and the dissolution of “old” social inequalities into the new diversity of milieus, subcultures, lifestyles, and ways of living.

This pluralization requires a new sensitivity to the empirical study of issues. Advocates of postmodernism have argued that the era of big narratives and theories is over. Locally, temporally, and situationally limited narratives are now required. With regard to the pluralization of lifestyles and patterns of interpretation in modern and post modern society, Blumer’s statement becomes relevant once again and has new implications: “The initial position of the social scientist and the psychologist is practically always one of lack of familiarity with what is actually taking place in the sphere of life chosen for study” (1969, p. 33).

Rapid social change and the resulting diversification of life worlds are increasingly confronting social researchers with new social contexts and perspectives. These are so new for them that their traditional deductive methodologies—deriving research questions and hypotheses from theoretical models and testing them against empirical evidence—are failing due to the differentiation of objects. Thus, research is increasingly forced to make use of inductive strategies. Instead of starting from theories and testing them, “sensitizing concepts” are required for approaching the social contexts to be studied. However, contrary to widespread misunderstanding, these concepts are themselves influenced by previous theoretical knowledge. But here, theories are developed from empirical studies. Knowledge and practice are studied as local knowledge and practices (Geertz 1983).

Concerning research in psychology in particular, it is argued that it lacks relevance for everyday life because it is not sufficiently dedicated to exactly describing the details of a case in its concrete circumstances. The study of subjective meanings and everyday experience and practice is as essential as the contemplation of narratives (Bruner 1991; Sarbin 1986) and discourses (Harré 1998).

Limits of Quantitative Research as a Starting Point

Beyond these general developments, the limitations of quantitative approaches have always been taken as a starting point to give reasons why qualitative research should be used. Traditionally, psychology and social sciences have taken the natural sciences
and their exactness as a model, paying particular attention to developing quantitative and standardized methods. Guiding principles of research and of planning research have been used for the following purposes: to clearly isolate causes and effects, to properly operationalize theoretical relations, to measure and to quantify phenomena, to create research designs allowing the generalization of findings, and to formulate general laws. For example, random samples of populations are selected in order to make a survey representative of that population. General statements are made as independently as possible about the concrete cases that have been studied. Observed phenomena are classified on their frequency and distribution. In order to classify causal relations and their validity as clearly as possible, the conditions under which the phenomena and relations under study occur are controlled as far as possible. Studies are designed in such a way that the researcher’s (as well as the interviewer’s, observer’s, and so on) influence can be excluded as far as possible. This should guarantee the objectivity of the study, whereby the subjective views of the researcher as well as those of the individuals under study are largely eliminated. General obligatory standards for carrying out and evaluating empirical social research have been formulated. Procedures such as how to construct a questionnaire, how to design an experiment, and how to statistically analyze data have become increasingly refined.

For a long time, psychological research has almost exclusively used experimental designs. These have produced vast quantities of data and results, which demonstrate and test psychological relations of variables and the conditions under which they are valid. For the reasons mentioned above, for a long period empirical social research was mainly based on standardized surveys. The aim was to document and analyze the frequency and distribution of social phenomena in the population (e.g., certain attitudes). To a lesser extent, standards and procedures of quantitative research have been fundamentally examined and analyzed in order to clarify the research objects and questions they are appropriate to or not.

Negative results abound when the targets previously mentioned are balanced. The ideals of objectivity are largely disenchanted; some time ago Weber (1919) proclaimed that science’s task is the disenchantment of the world. Bonß and Hartmann (1985) have stated the increasing disenchantment of the sciences—their methods and their findings. In the case of the social sciences, the low degree of applicability of results and the problems of connecting them to theory and societal developments are taken as indicators of this disenchantment. Less widely than expected—and above all in a very different way—have the findings of social research found their way into political and everyday contexts. Utilization research (Beck and Bonß 1989) has demonstrated that scientific findings are not carried over into political and institutional practices as much as expected. When they are taken up, they are obviously reinterpreted and picked to pieces: “Science no longer produces ‘absolute truths,’ which can uncritically be adopted. It furnishes limited offers for interpretation, which reach further than everyday theories but can be used in practice comparatively flexibly” (1989, p. 31).
It has also become clear that social science results are rarely perceived and used in everyday life. In order to meet methodological standards, their investigations and findings often remain too far removed from everyday questions and problems. On the other hand, analyses of research practice have demonstrated that the (abstract) ideals of objectivity formulated by methodologists can only be met in parts in conducting concrete research. Despite all the methodological controls, influences from interests, social and cultural backgrounds are difficult to avoid in research and its findings. These factors influence the formulation of research questions and hypotheses as well as the interpretation of data and relations.

Finally, the disenchantment that Bons and Hartmann discussed has consequences for what kind of knowledge the social sciences or psychology can strive for and above all are able to produce:

On the condition of the disenchantment of ideals of objectivism, we can no longer unreflectively start from the notion of objectively true sentences. What remains is the possibility of statements which are related to subjects and situations, and which a sociologically articulated concept of knowledge would have to establish. (1985, p. 21)

To formulate such subject- and situation-related statements, which are empirically well founded, is a goal which can be attained with qualitative research.

### Essential Features of Qualitative Research

The central ideas guiding qualitative research are different from those in quantitative research. The essential features of qualitative research (Box 2.1) are the correct choice of appropriate methods and theories; the recognition and analysis of different perspectives; the researchers’ reflections on their research as part of the process of knowledge production; and the variety of approaches and methods.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Box 2.1 A Preliminary List of Qualitative Research Features</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Appropriateness of methods and theories</td>
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<td>• Perspectives of the participants and their diversity</td>
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<td>• Reflexivity of the researcher and the research</td>
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<td>• Variety of approaches and methods in qualitative research</td>
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Appropriateness of Methods and Theories

Scientific disciplines used defining methodological standards to distinguish themselves from other disciplines. An example of such includes the use of experiments as the method of psychology or of survey research as the key method of sociology. In this process of establishing as a scientific discipline, the methods become the point of reference for checking the suitability of ideas and issues for empirical investigations. This sometimes leads to suggestions to refrain from studying those phenomena to which methods like experiment or surveys cannot be applied. Sometimes a clear identification and isolation of variables is not possible, so that they cannot be framed in an experimental design. Or, to keep away from phenomena which can be studied only in very few cases, what makes it difficult to study them in a big enough sample for a representative study, and for findings ready for generalization.

Of course it makes sense to reflect on whether a research question can be studied empirically or not (see Chapter 9). Most phenomena cannot be explained in isolation, which is a result of their complexity in reality. If all empirical studies were exclusively designed according to the model of clear cause–effect relations, all complex objects would have to be excluded. Not to choose such objects is often suggested for how to treat complex and rare phenomena in social research. A second solution is to take contextual conditions into account in complex quantitative research designs (e.g., multi-level analyses) and to understand complex models empirically and statistically. The necessary methodological abstraction makes it more difficult to reintroduce findings in the everyday situation under study. The basic problem—the study can only show what the underlying model of reality represents—is not solved in this way.

Lastly, designing methods open to the complexity of a study’s subject is also a way to solve rare issues with qualitative research. Here, the object under study is the determining factor for choosing a method and not the other way round. Objects are not reduced to single variables, but represented in their entirety in their everyday context. Therefore, the fields of study are not artificial situations in the laboratory but the practices and interactions of the subjects in everyday life. Here, in particular, exceptional situations and persons are studied frequently (see Chapter 11). In order to do justice to the diversity of everyday life, methods are characterized by openness towards their objects, which is guaranteed in different ways (see Chapters 13 through 21).

The goal of your research then is less to test what is already known (e.g., theories already formulated in advance), but to discover and develop the new and to develop empirically grounded theories. Also, the validity of the study is assessed with reference to the object under study and does not exclusively follow abstract academic criteria of science as in quantitative research. Rather, qualitative research’s central criteria depend on whether findings are grounded in empirical material or whether the methods are appropriately selected and applied, as well as the relevance of findings and the reflexivity of proceedings (see Chapter 29).
Perspectives of the Participants and Their Diversity

The example of mental disorders allows us to explain another feature of qualitative research. Epidemiological studies show the frequency of schizophrenia in the population and furthermore how its distribution varies: in lower social classes, serious mental disorders like schizophrenia occur much more frequently than in higher classes. Such a correlation was found by Hollingshead and Redlich (1958) in the 1950s and has been confirmed repeatedly since then. However, the direction of the correlation could not be clarified. Do the conditions of living in a lower social class promote the occurrence and outbreak of mental disorders? Or do people with mental problems slide into the lower classes?

Moreover, these findings do not tell us anything about what it means to live with mental illness. Neither is the subjective meaning of this illness (or of health) for those directly concerned made clear, nor is the diversity of perspectives on the illness in their context grasped. What is the subjective meaning of schizophrenia for the patient, and what is it for his or her relatives? How do the various people involved deal with the disease in their day-to-day lives? What has led to the outbreak of the disease in the course of the patient’s life, and what has made it a chronic disease? How did earlier treatments influence the patient’s life? Which ideas, goals, and routines guide the concrete handling of this case?

Qualitative research on a topic like mental illness concentrates on questions like these. It demonstrates the variety of perspectives (those of the patient, of his or her relatives, of professionals) on the object and starts from the subjective and social meanings related to it. Qualitative researchers study participants’ knowledge and practices. They analyze interactions about and ways of dealing with mental illness in a particular field. Interrelations are described in the concrete context of the case and explained in relation to it. Qualitative research takes into account that viewpoints and practices in the field are different because of the different subjective perspectives and social backgrounds related to them.

Reflexivity of the Researcher and the Research

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative methods take the researcher’s communication with the field and its members as an explicit part of knowledge instead of deeming it an intervening variable. The subjectivity of the researcher and of those being studied becomes part of the research process. Researchers’ reflections on their actions and observations in the field, their impressions, irritations, feelings, and so on, become data in their own right, forming part of the interpretation, and are documented in research diaries or context protocols (see Chapter 22).

Variety of Approaches and Methods

Qualitative research is not based on a unified theoretical and methodological concept. Various theoretical approaches and their methods characterize the discussions and the research practice. Subjective viewpoints are a first starting point.
of research studies the making and course of interactions, while a third seeks to reconstruct the structures of the social field and the latent meaning of practices (see Chapter 6 for more details). This variety of approaches results from different developmental lines in the history of qualitative research, which evolved partly in parallel and partly in sequence.

**A Brief History of Qualitative Research**

Here only a brief and rather cursory overview of the history of qualitative research is given. Psychology and social sciences in general have a long tradition of using qualitative methods. In psychology, Wundt (1928) used methods of description and verstehen in his folk psychology alongside the experimental methods of his general psychology. Roughly at the same time, an argument between a more monographic conception of science, which was oriented towards induction and case studies, and an empirical and statistical approach began in German sociology (Bonß 1982, p. 106). In American sociology, biographical methods, case studies, and descriptive methods were central for a long time (until the 1940s). This can be demonstrated by the importance of Thomas and Znaniecki’s study *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–1920) and, more generally, with the influence of the Chicago School in sociology.

During the further establishment of both sciences, however, increasingly “hard,” experimental, standardizing, and quantifying approaches have asserted themselves against “soft” understanding, open, and qualitative descriptive strategies. It was not until the 1960s that in American sociology the critique of standardized, quantifying social research became relevant again (Cicourel 1964; Glaser and Strauss 1967). This critique was taken up in the 1970s in German discussions. Finally, this led to a renaissance of qualitative research in the social sciences and also (with some delay) in psychology (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, and Tindall 1994; Willig and Stainton-Rogers 2007). The developments and discussions in the United States and in Germany not only took place at different times but also are marked by differing phases.

**German-Speaking Areas**

In Germany, Habermas (1967) first recognized that a “different” tradition and discussion of research was developing in American sociology related to names like Goffman, Garfinkel, and Cicourel. After the translation of Cicourel’s (1964) methodological critique, a series of anthologies imported contributions from the American discussions. This has made basic texts on ethnomethodology or symbolic interactionism available for German discussions.

From the same period, the model of the research process created by Glaser and Strauss (1967) has attracted a lot of attention. Discussions are motivated by the aim
to do more justice to the objects of research than is possible in quantitative research, as Hoffmann-Riem’s (1980) claim for the “principle of openness” demonstrates. Kleining (1982, p. 233) has argued that it is necessary to understand the object of research as preliminary until the end of the research, because the object “will present itself in its true colors only at the end.” Also the discussions about a naturalistic sociology (Schatzmann and Strauss 1973) and appropriate methods are determined by a similar initially implicit and later also explicit assumption. To apply the principle of openness and the rules that Kleining suggests (e.g., to postpone a theoretical formulation of the research object) enables the researcher to avoid constituting the object by the very methods used for studying it. Rather it becomes possible “to take everyday life first and always again in the way it presents itself in each case” (Grathoff 1978; quoted in Hoffmann-Riem 1980, p. 362, who ends her article with this quotation).

At the end of the 1970s, a broader and more original discussion began in Germany, which no longer relied exclusively on the translation of American literature. This discussion deals with interviews, how to apply and how to analyze them, and with methodological questions that have stimulated extensive research (see Flick, Kardorff, and Steinke 2004a for a recent overview). The main question for this period was whether these developments should be seen as a fashion, a trend, or a new beginning.

At the beginning of the 1980s, two original methods were crucial to the development of qualitative research in Germany: the narrative interview by Schütze (1977; Rosenthal and Fischer-Rosenthal 2004; see here Chapter 14) and objective hermeneutics by Oevermann, Allert, Konau, and Krambeck. (1979; see also Reichertz 2004). Both methods were no longer just an import of American developments as was the case in applying participant observation or interviews, with an interview guide oriented towards the focused interview. Both methods have stimulated extensive research practice (mainly in biographical research: for overviews see Bertaux 1981; Rosenthal 2004). But the influence of these methodologies in the general discussion of qualitative methods is at least as crucial as the results obtained from them. In the middle of the 1980s, problems of validity and the generalizability of findings obtained with qualitative methods attracted broader attention. Related questions of presentation and the transparency of results have been discussed. The quantity and, above all, the unstructured nature of the data require the use of computers in qualitative research too (Fielding and Lee 1991; Gibbs 2007; Kelle 1995, 2004; Richards and Richards 1998; Weitzman and Miles 1995). Finally, the first textbooks or introductions have been published on the background of the discussions in the German-speaking area.

The United States

Denzin and Lincoln (2005b, pp. 14–20) refer to phases different from those just described for the German-speaking area. They see “seven moments of qualitative research,” as follows. The traditional period ranges from the early twentieth century to World War II. It is related to the research of Malinowski (1916) in ethnography and the
Chicago School in sociology. During this period, qualitative research was interested in the other—the foreign or the strange—and in its more or less objective description and interpretation. For example, foreign cultures interested ethnography and a society's outsiders interested sociology.

The modernist phase lasts until the 1970s and is marked by attempts to formalize qualitative research. For this purpose, more and more textbooks were published in the United States. The attitude of this kind of research is still alive in the tradition of Glaser and Strauss (1967), Strauss (1987), and Strauss and Corbin (1990) as well as in Miles and Huberman (1994).

Blurred genres (Geertz 1983) characterize the developments up to the mid 1980s. Various theoretical models and understandings of the objects and methods stand side by side, from which researchers can choose and compare “alternative paradigms,” such as symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, phenomenology, semiotics, or feminism (see also Guba 1990; Jacob 1987).

In the mid 1980s, the crisis of representation discussions in artificial intelligence (Winograd and Flores 1986) and ethnography (Clifford and Marcus 1986) impact qualitative research as a whole. This makes the process of displaying knowledge and findings a substantial part of the research process. The process of displaying knowledge and findings receives more attention as a part of the findings per se. Qualitative research becomes a continuous process of constructing versions of reality. The version people present in an interview does not necessarily correspond to the version they would have formulated at the moment when the reported event happened. It does not necessarily correspond to the version they would have given to a different researcher with a different research question. Researchers, who interpret the interview and present it as part of their findings, produce a new version of the whole. Readers of the book, article, or report interpret the researchers’ version differently. This means that further versions of the event emerge. Specific interests brought to the reading in each case play a central part. In this context, the evaluation of research and findings becomes a central topic in methodological discussions. This is connected with the question of whether traditional criteria are still valid and, if not, which other standards should be applied for assessing qualitative research.

The situation in the 1990s is seen by Denzin and Lincoln as the fifth moment: narratives have replaced theories, or theories are read as narratives. But here we learn about the end of grand narratives, as in postmodernism in general. The accent is shifted towards theories and narratives that fit specific, delimited, local, historical situations, and problems. The next stage (sixth moment) is characterized by post-experimental writing, linking issues of qualitative research to democratic policies. The seventh moment is characterized by further establishing qualitative research also through various new journals. The future of qualitative research, in particular in the light of new backdrops due to evidence-base practice as the new criterion of relevance for social science and to the new conservatism in the United States, is the eighth moment in the development of qualitative research for Denzin and Lincoln.
If we compare the two lines of development (Table 2.1) in Germany, we find increasing methodological consolidation complemented by a concentration on procedural questions in a growing research practice. In the United States, on the other hand, recent developments are characterized by a trend to question the apparent certainties provided by methods. The role of presentation in the research process, the crisis of representation, and the relativity of what is presented have been stressed, and this has made the attempts to formalize and canonize methods (canonization) rather secondary. The “correct” application of procedures of interviewing or interpretation counts less than the “practices and politics of interpretation” (Denzin 2000). Qualitative research therefore becomes—or is linked still more strongly with—a specific attitude based on the researcher’s openness and reflexivity.

### Qualitative Research at the End of Modernity

At the beginning of this chapter, some changes to the potential objects were mentioned in order to show the relevance of qualitative research. Recent diagnoses in the sciences
result in more reasons to turn to qualitative research. In his discussion of the “hidden agenda of modernity,” Toulmin (1990) explains in great detail why he believes modern science is dysfunctional. He sees four tendencies for empirical social research in philosophy and science as a way forward:

- the return to the oral traditions—carried out by empirical studies in philosophy, linguistics, literature, and the social sciences by studying narratives, language, and communication;
- the return to the particular—carried out by empirical studies with the aim “not only to concentrate on abstract and universal questions but to treat again specific, concrete problems which do not arise generally but occur in specific types of situations” (1990, p. 190);
- the return to the local—studied by systems of knowledge, practices, and experiences in the context of those (local) traditions and ways of living in which they are embedded, instead of assuming and attempting to test their universal validity;
- the return to the timely—placed problems to be studied and solutions to be developed in their temporal or historical context and to describe them in this context and explain them from it.

Qualitative research is oriented towards analyzing concrete cases in their temporal and local particularity and starting from people’s expressions and activities in their local contexts. Therefore, qualitative research is in a position to design ways for social sciences, psychology, and other fields to make concrete the tendencies that Toulmin mentions, to transform them into research programs, and to maintain the necessary flexibility towards their objects and tasks:

Like buildings on a human scale, our intellectual and social procedures will do what we need in the years ahead, only if we take care to avoid irrelevant or excessive stability, and keep them operating in ways that are adaptable to unforeseen—or even unforeseeable—situations and functions. (1990, p. 186)

Concrete suggestions and methods for realizing such programs of research will be outlined in the following chapters.

KEY POINTS

- Qualitative research has for several reasons a special relevance for contemporary research in many fields.

(Continued)
Quantitative methods and qualitative methods both have limitations to their research. Qualitative research exhibits a variety of approaches. There are common features among the different approaches in qualitative research. Also, different schools and trends may be distinguished by their research perspectives.

Exercise 2.1

Look for a qualitative study, read it, and answer the following questions:

1. How are essential features listed at the beginning of this chapter relevant to the example you chose?
2. Are the methods and approaches applied in this study appropriate to the issue under study?

Exercise 2.2

1. If you plan your own study, reflect why qualitative research is adequate for the study.
2. Discuss the reasons for or against using quantitative methods in your study.

Further Reading

Overviews of Qualitative Research

The first two references extend the short overview given here of the German and American discussions, while Strauss’s book represents the research attitude behind this book and qualitative research in general: