Part One
THEORY AND METHOD IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

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

- recognize the problems that arise in organizing a qualitative research project and know about simple solutions to these problems
- understand the major concepts used by researchers
- generate an interesting research topic
- understand the main methods used in qualitative research.

If you are like many readers of this book, you will be scanning these pages looking for some useful advice about the research project that is required for your research methods course. In that case, I have some good and some bad news for you. It turns out that researching can be a complicated, tricky business. Nonetheless, with a little guidance (and some effort), most students can bring off an acceptable, or even highly graded, project.

Let us begin with a hypothetical case. Imagine that you have ‘innocently’ decided to gather some interview data for a research project which is part of a research methods course. Making use of the accessibility and good nature of your fellow students, you decide to embark on a study of, say, ‘students’ perceptions of their future job prospects’.

Because you have read a bit about research design, you decide to ‘pre-test’ some preliminary questions on a friend to find whether they are easily understood (in the way that you intend). Having sorted out your questions, you find half a dozen students and interview them. Now, you think, all you have to do is to summarize their answers and you will have a legitimate research report on your chosen topic.
Well, maybe. Perhaps, along the way, you failed to ask yourself a number of questions. These include:

- Why (and in what way) is your chosen research topic significant? Does it relate to any concepts or theories in your chosen discipline? Or is it simply a topic that matters to you and your friends? If so, how, if at all, will your report differ from the kind of story you might find in a newspaper? And why does this matter?
- How far do your topic and findings relate to other research? Have you read the relevant literature or are you in danger of reinventing the wheel? Have you thought laterally – considering, for instance, the variety of contexts in which people’s expectations are shaped by a range of institutions (e.g. not just universities but schools, families, churches, peer groups etc.)?
- Why is an interview method appropriate for your topic? Why not simply look at existing records of graduates’ first jobs? Maybe this kind of simple quantitative study is the best way of addressing your topic. Or perhaps you should compare such statistics with your interviews?
- Are the size and method of recruitment of your sample appropriate to your topic? Should you be worried by what quantitative researchers tell us about the limits of small, non-random samples?
- Did you audio or video record your interviews? How did you transcribe them (if at all)? How can you convince your professor that you did not simply pick out a few extracts to support your preconceived ideas?
- Did you need to interview your respondents face-to-face? Why not use e-mail? Or find webpages where students discuss such issues and where employers describe what they have to offer to graduates?
- Did you think about using a focus group where respondents are offered some topic or stimulus material and then encouraged to discuss it amongst themselves?
- What status will you accord to your data? For instance, are you seeking objective ‘facts’, subjective ‘perceptions’ or simply ‘narratives’?
- How thoroughly have you analyzed your data? For instance, have you just reported a few ‘telling’ extracts? Or have you worked through all your material searching out examples which don’t fit your original suppositions (deviant-case analysis)?

Without answers to these questions, your professor may disappoint you with a surprisingly poor grade for your research project. This book will show you why such questions are important and provide some straightforward ways to answer them.

1.1 COMMON PROBLEMS (AND SOLUTIONS)

No doubt you are impatient. Perhaps the submission date for your research plan is approaching and there is little time left to read a whole book. With this in mind,
I have set out below a list of common problems that confront student researchers and offered some simple answers. Since I want you to read more of this book, I do not claim that these answers provide the whole story. But they will give you a rapid take on the issues.

### 1.1.1 Unworkable research topics

One merit of the research project that I have been considering is that it concerns a relatively narrow (and hence manageable) topic. For instance, it has narrowed down the issue of students’ perceptions to just one topic. This is praiseworthy because it is quite common for novice researchers to take on what turns out to be an impossibly large research problem.

Let us look at one example. It is important to find the causes of a social problem like homelessness, but such a problem is beyond the scope of a single researcher with limited time and resources. Moreover, by defining the problem so widely, one is usually unable to say anything at great depth about it. Indeed, the issues raised may be unanswerable in the sense that it is difficult to see what data are required to address it or how the data will be obtained (see Punch, 1998: 49).

As I tell my students, your aim should be to say ‘a lot about a little (problem)’. Do not worry if your topic is too small or too narrow. I have never seen a student project assessed in these terms. This is because your professor will commend you for choosing a small-scale and hence manageable topic.

Avoid the temptation to say ‘a little about a lot’. Indeed, the latter path can be something of a ‘copout’. Precisely because the topic is so wide-ranging, one can flit from one aspect to another without being forced to refine and test each piece of analysis (see Silverman, 2005: 80–2, 85–8).

### 1.1.2 Under-theorized topics

Students commonly assume that the strength of qualitative research is its ability to get under the surface in order to understand people’s perceptions and experiences. This particularly applies where the researcher sets out to record faithfully the ‘experiences’ of some, usually disadvantaged, group (e.g. battered women, gay men, the unemployed etc.). However, as we saw in our hypothetical student interview project, it can also involve trying to get inside the heads of any group you find around you.

Trying to understand the other’s experiences is very much a feature of the twenty-first-century world; it is not just the topic of (much) student research but also the rationale behind such mass media settings as talk shows and celebrity magazines. However, in a way, this concern with ‘experience’ also goes back to the
nineteenth century. This was the time in which people expected that literature, art, and music would express the inner world of the artist and engage the emotions of the audience. This movement was called romanticism.

As I argue in Chapter 4, there is more than a hint of this romanticism in some contemporary qualitative research (see also Gubrium and Holstein, 1997; Atkinson and Silverman, 1997). Yet the romantic approach, although appealing, is also dangerous. It may neglect how ‘experience’ is shaped by cultural forms of representation. For instance, what we think is most personal to us (‘guilt’, ‘responsibility’) may be simply a culturally given way of understanding the world (see my discussion of the mother of a young diabetic person in Section 6.4.2). So it is problematic to justify research in terms of its ‘authentic’ representation of ‘experience’ when what is ‘authentic’ is culturally defined.

This under-theorization of ‘experience’ can also be seen when a researcher follows an approach to different cultures which is uncritically ‘touristic’. I have in mind the ‘upmarket’ tourist who travels the world in search of encounters with alien cultures. Disdaining package tours and even the label of ‘tourist’, such a person has an insatiable thirst for the ‘new’ and ‘different’. The problem is that there are worrying parallels between the qualitative researcher and this kind of tourist. Such researchers often begin without a hypothesis and, like the tourist, gaze rapaciously at social scenes for signs of activities and experiences that appear to be new and different. The danger in all this is that ‘touristic’ researchers may so focus on cultural and ‘subcultural’ (or group) differences that they fail to recognize similarities between the culture to which they belong and the cultures which they study. For instance, once you switch away from asking ‘leading’ questions (which assume cultural differences) to observation of what people actually are doing, then you may find certain common features between social patterns in the West and East (see Ryen and Silverman, 2000; and my discussion below of Moerman’s, 1974, study of a Thai tribe).

This discussion of romanticism and tourism has implications for analyzing interview data which I discuss fully in Chapter 4. It is a symptom of what I have called ‘under-theorization’ not because such research is without a theory but rather because it theorizes the world tacitly or unconsciously. Instead, I suggest you try to draw consciously upon the theories and concepts of your discipline (see Section 1.2.3).

1.1.3 Over-theorized topics

Any apparent solution, when carried too far, can create a new problem. This is very much the case with theory. Just as some research projects are under-theorized, others carry theory beyond its proper limits. Sometimes the topic is so large and speculative that it is difficult to see how the student will ever get out of the
library to gather and analyze some data. Sometimes one finds a quite sensible, well-organized research project dressed up in totally inappropriate theoretical clothes.

The other day I listened to a student giving a talk about his MA project. In most respects, this seemed to be an excellent piece of research. The topic was interesting yet manageable and the analysis was thorough. Unusually for such work, it had been published and its clear policy recommendations had started an important public debate.

I had only one complaint about this research. This was about how the student presented his data analysis. He chose to define his work in terms of discourse analysis. As we will see in Chapter 6, this is a complicated methodology which has a quite specific approach to data. However, it turned out that the student’s approach, while thorough, was far less complicated. Basically, he had scanned his interviews without any prior hypotheses and sought to develop a set of categories to illuminate his data. This approach, as we shall see later in this book, is associated with grounded theory.

So here was a highly worthwhile piece of student research which undercut itself by flirting with an inappropriate theoretical approach. But this is only a minor case of over-theorization. Far worse instances arise when researchers find it necessary to portray their work in terms of general theories of which they have very little grasp and which often bear little relation to their research. I have lost count of the run of the mill qualitative research papers I have come across which find it necessary to define their work in terms of obscure philosophical positions such as phenomenology or hermeneutics. You will not find either of these terms in the glossary of this book for one simple reason. In my view, you do not need to understand these terms in order to carry out good qualitative research. Indeed, if you try to understand them, my guess is that you will not emerge from the library for many years!

The moral of these two stories is clear. If you have a simple approach that is working well for you, don’t try to dress up your work in fancy terms. Don’t over-theorize!

1.1.4 Too many data

Lack of confidence can create many of the difficulties I have been discussing. For instance, if you are unsure of yourself, you may think it will impress your professor if you set up a huge problem and perhaps define it in grand theoretical terms. Similarly, collecting vast amounts of data may appear to reassure you that you are making progress on your project.

Unfortunately, as generations of PhD students could tell you, until you have analyzed your data you have achieved precisely nothing. If depth rather than
breadth is the aim of experienced qualitative researchers, how much more so for
the beginner!

To make your analysis effective, it is imperative to have a limited body of data
with which to work. So, while it may be useful initially to explore different kinds
of data, this should usually only be done to establish the dataset with which you
can most effectively work within the timescale open to you. And don’t worry that
this means that you will not be able to compare different cases. The comparative
method is indeed worthwhile, but it can be used within very small datasets.

1.1.5 Inaccessible data

Time problems are caused not just by having too many data but by setting your
mind on getting certain kinds of data regardless of their accessibility. There are no
‘brownie points’ given by most disciplines for having gathered your own data.
Indeed, by choosing ‘difficult’ situations to gather data (either because nothing
‘relevant’ may happen or, for instance, because background noise may mean you
have a poor quality tape), you may condemn yourself to have less time to engage
in the much more important activity of data analysis.

Make data collection as easy as possible and beware of complexity. For instance,
although video data are very attractive, they are often very complex to work with.
So try to keep data gathering simple. Go for material that is easy to collect. For
instance, the Internet is a wonderful source of material. Do not worry if it only
gives you one ‘angle’ on your problem. That is a gain as well as a loss!

1.1.6 Inappropriate methods

Both science and everyday life teach us that there is no ‘right’ method to proceed.
Everything depends on what you are trying to achieve.

Despite this truism, students regularly use methods that are quite inappropriate
to their research topic. As I noted about our hypothetical student project, how can
we be sure that a qualitative approach was appropriate? On the face of it, if you
are interested in something as concrete as people’s perceptions of their job
prospects, surely a quantitative survey of a larger number of students would be
more appropriate than a few ‘intensive’ interviews?

Even if you can convince your professor that a qualitative method is appropri-
ate, are you sure that you have chosen the right method? As I have already sug-
gested, it is possible that many people choose to gather interview data less because
those data are appropriate to their topic and more because they have unthinkingly
assimilated a romantic outlook. Decide the kind of data to use by asking yourself
which data are most appropriate to your research problem: for instance, are you
more interested in what people are thinking or feeling or in what they are doing? And make an informed choice between the many different kinds of data and methods that are freely available to us in the twenty-first century.

1.1.7 Too many methods

Lack of confidence can also manifest itself in an incapacity to choose or to commit oneself. You may be so impressed by the different methods you have learned on your qualitative research course that, somehow, you want to use more than one on your student project. Wouldn’t it be nice, you ask yourself, to combine your interviews with some observation or, say, a focus group? My response is simple: take this path only if you seriously want to complicate your life and, perhaps, end up having passed the time limit for delivery.

Often the desire to use multiple methods arises because you want to get at many different aspects of a phenomenon. However, this may mean that you have not yet sufficiently narrowed down your topic. Sometimes a better approach is to treat the analysis of different kinds of data as a ‘dry run’ for your main study. As such, it is a useful test of the kind of data which you can most easily gather and analyze.

‘Mapping’ one set of data upon another (or data triangulation) is a more or less complicated task depending on your analytic framework. In particular, if you treat social reality as constructed in different ways in different contexts (or constructionism), then you cannot appeal to a single ‘phenomenon’ which all your data apparently represent.

Research design should involve careful thought rather than seeking the most immediately attractive option. However, none of the points above exclude the possibility of using multiple means of gathering data. Ultimately, everything will depend on the quality of your data analysis rather than upon the quality of your data. Just make sure you have the time and the ability.

**LINK**

A very useful website based on Clive Seale’s edited book *Researching Society and Culture* is: www.rscbook.co.uk

See especially the links recommended in the pages on Chapters 6 and 11.

1.2 RESEARCH DESIGN: SOME BROADER ISSUES

I hope the brief list above will offer an initial quick fix on some of the practical problems involved in carrying out a small-scale qualitative research project. The
rest of this book will develop and context these themes. However, even at this stage, there are three broader issues which can be dealt with:

- avoiding social problem directed research
- thinking theoretically
- types of sensitivity in generating a research problem.

### 1.2.1 Avoiding social problem directed research

One has only to open a newspaper or to watch the TV news to be confronted by a host of social problems. In 2005, the British news media was full of references to the disorderly behaviour of young people on city streets – from fights after binge drinking to assaults on respectable citizens. Politicians responded to these reports by talking about a ‘culture of disrespect’ and by setting a ‘Respect’ agenda involving more police on the streets armed with new powers.

The stories and the politicians’ speeches have this in common: both assume some sort of moral decline in which families or schools fail to discipline young people. In turn, the way each story is told implies a solution: tightening up ‘discipline’ in order to combat the ‘moral decline’.

However, before we can consider such a ‘cure’, we need to consider carefully the ‘diagnosis’. Has juvenile crime increased or is the apparent increase a reflection of what counts as a ‘good’ story? Alternatively, might the increase be an artefact of what crimes get reported to the police?

But apparent ‘social’ problems are not the only topics that may clamour for the attention of the researcher. Administrators and managers point to ‘problems’ in their organizations and may turn to social scientists for solutions.

It is tempting to allow such people to define a research problem – particularly as there is usually a fat research grant attached to it! However, we must first look at the terms which are being used to define the problem. For instance, many managers will define problems in their organization as problems of ‘communication’. The role of the researcher is then to work out how people can communicate ‘better’.

Unfortunately, talking about ‘communication problems’ raises many difficulties. For instance, it may deflect attention from the communication ‘skills’ inevitably used in interaction. It may also tend to assume that the solution to any problem is more careful listening, while ignoring power relations present inside and outside patterns of communication. Such relations may also make the characterization of ‘organizational efficiency’ very problematic. Thus ‘administrative’ problems give no more secure basis for social research than do ‘social’ problems.

Of course, this is not to deny that there are any real problems in society. However, even if we agree about what these problems are, it is not clear that they directly provide a researchable topic.
Let me turn to another issue which has been at the forefront of our attention since the 1970s: the case of the problems of people infected with HIV. Some of these problems are, quite rightly, brought to the attention of the public by the organized activities of groups of people who carry the infection. What social researchers can contribute are the particular theoretical and methodological skills of their discipline. So economists can research how limited health care resources can be used most effectively in coping with the epidemic in the West and in the Third World. Among sociologists, survey researchers can investigate patterns of sexual behaviour in order to try to promote effective health education, while qualitative methods may be used to study what is involved in the ‘negotiation’ of safer sex or in counselling people about HIV and AIDS.

As these examples demonstrate, the initial impetus for a study may arise from the needs of practitioners and clients. However, researchers from different disciplines will usually give an initial research topic their own theoretical and methodological ‘twist’. For instance, in my research on HIV counselling (Silverman, 1997), the use of tape-recordings and detailed transcripts, as well as many technical concepts, derived from my interest in conversation analysis (CA).

This example shows that it is usually necessary to refuse to allow our research topics to be totally defined in terms of the conceptions of ‘social problems’ as recognized by either professional or community groups. Ironically, by beginning from a clearly defined social science perspective, we can later address such social problems with, I believe, considerable force and persuasiveness. This issue is discussed in more detail in Chapter 11.

1.2.2 Thinking theoretically

Some people become qualitative researchers for rather negative reasons. Perhaps they are not very good at statistics (or think they are not) and so are not tempted by quantitative research. Or perhaps they have not shone at library work and hope that they can stimulate their sluggish imagination by getting out into ‘the field’.

Unfortunately, as most scientists and philosophers are agreed, the facts we find in 'the field' never speak for themselves but are impregnated by our assumptions. For instance, the initial reports of bystanders in Dallas at the time of the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 were not of shots but of a car backfiring (Sacks, 1984: 519). Why did people hear the sounds this way?

We all know that people who think they have heard a shot every time a car backfires may be regarded as unstable or even psychotic. So our descriptions are
never simple reports of ‘events’ but are structured to depict ourselves as particular kinds of people who are usually ‘reasonable’ and ‘cautious’.

But, you may say, surely social scientists are more objective than that? After all, they have scientific methods for making observations more trustworthy.

Well, yes and no. Certainly, social scientists will usually go through a more cautious process of sorting fact from opinion than most of us ever need to do in everyday life (see Chapter 8). However, even scientists only observe ‘facts’ through the use of lenses made up of concepts and theories. Sacks has a basic example of this:

Suppose you’re an anthropologist or sociologist standing somewhere. You see somebody do some action, and you see it to be some activity. How can you go about formulating who is it that did it, for the purposes of your report? Can you use at least what you might take to be the most conservative formulation – his name? Knowing, of course, that any category you choose would have these kinds of systematic problems: how would you go about selecting a given category from the set that would equally well characterise or identify that person at hand? (1992, I: 467–8)

Sacks shows how you cannot resolve such problems simply ‘by taking the best possible notes at the time and making your decisions afterwards’ (1992, I: 468). Whatever we observe is impregnated by assumptions.

**Attempt Exercise 1.2 about now**

In scientific work, these assumptions are usually given the fancy term ‘theories’. But what are ‘theories’? Martin O’Brien (1993) has used the example of a kaleidoscope to answer this question. As he explains:

a kaleidoscope … [is] the child’s toy consisting of a tube, a number of lenses and fragments of translucent, coloured glass or plastic. When you turn the tube and look down the lens of the kaleidoscope the shapes and colours, visible at the bottom, change. As the tube is turned, different lenses come into play and the combinations of colour and shape shift from one pattern to another. In a similar way, we can see social theory as a sort of kaleidoscope – by shifting theoretical perspective the world under investigation also changes shape. (1993: 10–11)

How theory works as a kaleidoscope can be seen by taking a concrete, if crude, example. Imagine that a group of social scientists from different disciplines are observing people at a party through a two-way mirror. The sociologist might observe the gender composition of various conversational groups, while the linguist might listen to how ‘small-talk’ is managed between speakers. The psychologist might focus on the characteristics of ‘loners’ versus people who are the ‘life
and soul' of the party, and the geographer might observe how the spatial organization of the room influenced how people conversed.

The point is that none of these observations are more real or more true than the others. For instance, people are not essentially defined in terms of either their social characteristics (like gender) or their personalities (extrovert or introvert). It all depends on your research question. And research questions are inevitably theoretically informed. So we do need social theories to help us to address even quite basic issues in social research.

However, O'Brien's analogy of a kaleidoscope only takes us so far. For instance, how does a 'theory' differ from a 'hypothesis'? And how do we develop both of them?

Questions like this mean that I can no longer postpone the potentially tiresome business of defining my terms. In this chapter, we shall be discussing models, concepts, theories, hypotheses, methodologies and methods. In Table 1.1 I set out how each term will be used.

As Table 1.1 implies, what I call 'models' are even more basic to social research than theories. Models provide an overall framework for how we look at reality. In short, they tell us what reality is like and the basic elements it contains ('ontology') and what is the nature and status of knowledge ('epistemology'). In this sense, models roughly correspond to what are more grandly referred to as 'paradigms' (see Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Relevance</th>
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<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>An overall framework for looking at reality (e.g. behaviouralism, feminism)</td>
<td>Usefulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept</td>
<td>An idea deriving from a given model (e.g. 'stimulus–response', 'oppression')</td>
<td>Usefulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory</td>
<td>A set of concepts used to define and/or explain some phenomenon</td>
<td>Usefulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesis</td>
<td>A testable proposition</td>
<td>Validity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>A general approach to studying research topics</td>
<td>Usefulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>A specific research technique</td>
<td>Good fit with model, theory, hypothesis and methodology</td>
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In social research, examples of such models are functionalism (which looks at the functions of social institutions), behaviourism (which defines all behaviour in terms of ‘stimulus' and ‘response’), symbolic interactionism (which focuses on how we attach symbolic meanings to interpersonal relations) and ethnomethodology (which encourages us to look at people’s everyday ways of producing orderly social interaction). Drawing on Gubrium and Holstein (1997), I will discuss the importance of models further in Chapter 2.

Concepts are clearly specified ideas deriving from a particular model. Examples of concepts are ‘social function’ (deriving from functionalism), ‘stimulus–response’ (behaviourism), ‘definition of the situation’ (interactionism) and ‘the documentary method of interpretation’ (ethnomethodology). Concepts offer ways of looking at the world which are essential in defining a research problem.

Theories arrange sets of concepts to define and explain some phenomenon. As Strauss and Corbin put it: ‘Theory consists of plausible relationships produced among concepts and sets of concepts’ (1994: 278). Without a theory, such phenomena as ‘gender’, ‘personality’, ‘talk’ or ‘space’ cannot be understood by social science. In this sense, without a theory there is nothing to research.

So theory provides a footing for considering the world, separate from, yet about, that world. In this way, theory provides both:

- a framework for critically understanding phenomena
- a basis for considering how what is unknown might be organized (Gubrium, personal correspondence).

By provoking ideas about what is presently unknown, theories provide the impetus for research. As living entities, they are also developed and modified by good research. However, as used here, models, concepts and theories are self-confirming in the sense that they instruct us to look at phenomena in particular ways. This means that they can never be disproved but only found to be more or less useful.

This last feature distinguishes theories from hypotheses. Unlike theories, hypotheses are tested in research. Examples of hypotheses, discussed later in this book, are:

- How we receive advice is linked to how advice is given.
- Responses to an illegal drug depend upon what one learns from others.
- Voting in union elections is related to non-work links between union members.

In many qualitative research studies, there is no specific hypothesis at the outset. Instead, hypotheses are produced (or induced) during the early stages of research. In any event, unlike theories, hypotheses can, and should be, tested. Therefore, we assess a hypothesis by its validity or truth.
A methodology refers to the choices we make about cases to study, methods of data gathering, forms of data analysis etc. in planning and executing a research study. Gobo (forthcoming) suggests that a methodology comprises the following four components:

1. a preference for certain methods among the many available to us (listening, watching, observing, reading, questioning, conversing)
2. a theory of scientific knowledge, or a set of assumptions about the nature of reality, the tasks of science, the role of the researcher, and the concepts of action and social actor
3. a range of solutions, devices and stratagems used in tackling a research problem
4. a systematic sequence of procedural steps to be followed once our method has been selected.

So our methodology defines how one will go about studying any phenomenon. In social research, methodologies may be defined very broadly (e.g. qualitative or quantitative) or more narrowly (e.g. grounded theory or conversation analysis). Like theories, methodologies cannot be true or false, only more or less useful.

Finally, methods are specific research techniques. These include quantitative techniques, like statistical correlations, as well as techniques like observation, interviewing and audio recording. Once again, in themselves, techniques are not true or false. They are more or less useful, depending on their fit with the theories and methodologies being used and the hypothesis being tested and/or the research topic that is selected. So, for instance, behaviouralists may favour quantitative methods and interactionists often prefer to gather their data by observation. But, depending upon the hypothesis being tested, behaviouralists may sometimes use qualitative methods – for instance in the exploratory stage of research. Equally, interactionists may sometimes use simple quantitative methods, particularly when they want to find an overall pattern in their data.

**TIP**

Get in the habit of thinking about research design in terms of how useful a particular approach is for your research topic. Models, concepts, methodologies and methods cannot be right or wrong, only more or less useful.

Having set out some basic definitions, we can now turn to the more practical issue of how we can use theoretical thinking to generate a research problem. As we shall see, part of what is involved is being sensitive to the wider context in which researchable issues arise.
1.2.3 Sensitivity in generating a research problem

I have been arguing that it is often unhelpful for researchers to begin their work on the basis of a ‘social problem’ identified by either practitioners or managers. It is a commonplace that such definitions of ‘problems’ often may serve vested interests. My point, however, is that if social science research has anything to offer, its theoretical imperatives drive it in a direction which can offer participants new perspectives on their problems. Paradoxically, by refusing to begin from a common conception of what is ‘wrong’ in a setting, we may be most able to contribute to the identification both of what is going on and, thereby, of how it may be modified in the pursuit of desired ends.

The various perspectives of social science provide a sensitivity to many issues neglected by those who define ‘social’ or administrative ‘problems’. Let me distinguish three types of sensitivity:

- historical
- political
- contextual.

I will explain and discuss each of these in turn.

**Historical sensitivity**

Wherever possible, we should examine the relevant historical evidence when we are setting up a topic to research. For instance, in the 1950s and 1960s it was assumed that the ‘nuclear family’ (parents and children) had replaced the ‘extended family’ (many generations living together in the same household) of pre-industrial societies. Researchers simply seemed to have forgotten that lower life expectancy may have made the ‘extended family’ pattern relatively rare in the past.

Again, historical sensitivity helps us to understand how we are governed. For instance, until the eighteenth century, the majority of the population were treated as a threatening ‘mob’ to be controlled, where necessary, by the use of force. Today, we are seen as individuals with ‘needs’ and ‘rights’ which must be understood and protected by society (see Foucault, 1977). But, although oppressive force may be used only rarely, we may be controlled in more subtle ways. Think of the knowledge about each of us contained in computerized databanks and the pervasive video cameras which record movements in many city streets. Historical sensitivity thus offers us multiple research topics which evade the trap of thinking that present day versions of ‘social problems’ are unproblematic.

**Political sensitivity**

Allowing the current media ‘scares’ to determine our research topics is just as fallible as designing research in accordance with administrative or managerial
interests. In neither case do we use political sensitivity to detect the vested interests behind this way of formulating a problem. The media, after all, need to attract an audience. Administrators need to be seen to be working efficiently.

So political sensitivity seeks to grasp the politics behind defining topics in particular ways. For instance, if you set out to research crime today, you should bear in mind that the ‘law and order’ discourse that politicians use is based, at the least in the UK, on a simple formula: ‘alcohol plus young men equals violent crime’ (Noaks and Wincup, 2004: 34).

This shows how political sensitivity helps in suggesting how ‘social problems’ arise. For instance, Barbara Nelson (1984) looked at how ‘child abuse’ became defined as a recognizable problem in the late 1960s. She shows how the findings of a doctor about ‘the battered baby syndrome’ were adopted by the conservative Nixon administration through linking social problems to parental ‘maladjustment’ rather than to the failures of social programmes.

In case I am misunderstood, political sensitivity does not mean that social scientists argue that there are no ‘real’ problems in society. Instead, it suggests that social science can make an important contribution to society by querying how ‘official’ definitions of problems arise. To be truthful, however, we should also recognize how social scientists often need tacitly to accept such definitions in order to attract research grants.

**Contextual sensitivity**

This is the least self-explanatory and most contentious category in the present list. By ‘contextual’ sensitivity, I mean the recognition that apparently uniform institutions like ‘the family’, ‘a tribe’ or ‘science’ take on a variety of meanings in different contexts. Contextual sensitivity is reflected most obviously in Moerman’s (1974) study of the Lue tribe in Thailand. Moerman began with the anthropologist’s conventional appetite to locate a people in a classificatory scheme. To satisfy this appetite, he started to ask tribespeople questions like ‘How do you recognize a member of your tribe?’

He reports that his respondents quickly became adept at providing a whole list of traits which constituted their tribe and distinguished them from their neighbours. At the same time, Moerman realized that such a list was, in purely logical terms, endless. Perhaps if you wanted to understand this people, it was not particularly useful to elicit an abstract account of their characteristics.

So Moerman stopped asking ‘Who are the Lue?’ Clearly, such ethnic identification devices were not used all the time by these people, any more than we use them to refer to ourselves in a Western culture. Instead, Moerman started to examine what went on in everyday situations.

Looked at this way, the issue is no longer who the Lue essentially are but when, among people living in these Thai villages, ethnic identification labels are invoked and the consequences of invoking them. Curiously enough, Moerman concluded that,
when you looked at the matter this way, the apparent differences between the Lue and ourselves were considerably reduced. Only an ethnocentric Westerner might have assumed otherwise, behaving like a tourist craving for out-of-the-way sights.

But it is not only such large-scale collectivities as tribes that are looked at afresh when we use what I have called contextual sensitivity. Other apparently stable social institutions (like the ‘family’) and identities (gender, ethnicity etc.) may be insufficiently questioned from a social problem perspective.

For instance, commentators say things like ‘the family is under threat’. But where are we to find the unitary form of family assumed in such commentary? And doesn’t ‘the family’ look different in contexts ranging from the household to the law courts or even the supermarket (see Section 3.4)? Rather than take such arguments at face value, the researcher must make use of the three kinds of sensitivity to discover how things actually operate in a social world where, as Moerman shows us, people’s practices are inevitably more complex than they might seem.

**TIP**

Try to avoid thinking of social institutions as unitary phenomena. Get in the habit of considering the various contexts in which such institutions become relevant. By choosing to focus on just one such context, you can help to make your research topic more manageable.

One final point. The three kinds of sensitivity we have been considering offer different, sometimes contradictory, ways of generating research topics. I am not suggesting that all should be used at the beginning of any research study. However, if we are not sensitive to any of these issues, then we run the danger of lapsing into a ‘social problem’ based way of defining our research topics.

**Attempt Exercise 1.3 about now**

### 1.3 THE RANGE OF QUALITATIVE METHODS

There are four major methods used by qualitative researchers:

- observation
- analyzing texts and documents
- interviews and focus groups
- audio and video recording.
These methods are often combined. For instance, many case studies combine observation with interviewing. Moreover, each method can be used in either qualitative or quantitative research studies. As Table 1.2 shows, the overall nature of the research methodology shapes how each method is used.

Table 1.2 underlines the point made in Table 1.1: methods are techniques which take on a specific meaning according to the methodology in which they are used.

So, in quantitative research, observation is not generally seen as a very important method of data collection. This is because it is difficult to conduct observational studies on large samples. Quantitative researchers also argue that observation is not a very ‘reliable’ data collection method because different observers may record different observations. If used at all, observation is held to be only appropriate at a preliminary or ‘exploratory’ stage of research.

Conversely, observational studies have been fundamental to much qualitative research. Beginning with the pioneering case studies of non-Western societies by early anthropologists (Malinowski, 1922; Radcliffe-Brown, 1948) and continuing with the work by sociologists in Chicago prior to the Second World War (see Deegan, 2001), the observational method has often been the chosen method to understand another culture (see Section 3.1.1).

These contrasts are also apparent in the treatment of texts and documents. Quantitative researchers try to analyze written material in a way which will produce reliable evidence about a large sample. Their favoured method is ‘content analysis’ in which the researchers establish a set of categories and then count the number of instances that fall into each category. The crucial requirement is that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Quantitative research</th>
<th>Qualitative research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Preliminary work, e.g. prior to framing questionnaire</td>
<td>Fundamental to understanding another culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textual analysis</td>
<td>Content analysis, i.e. counting in terms of researchers’ categories</td>
<td>Understanding participants’ categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Survey research: mainly fixed-choice questions to random samples</td>
<td>‘Open-ended’ questions to small samples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio and video recording</td>
<td>Used infrequently to check the accuracy of interview records</td>
<td>Understanding the organization of talk, gaze and body movements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1.2 Different uses for four methods
the categories are sufficiently precise to enable different coders to arrive at the same results when the same body of material (e.g. newspaper headlines) is examined (see Berelson, 1952).

In qualitative research, content analysis is less common (but see Marvasti, 2004: 90–4). The crucial issue is to understand the participants’ categories and to see how these are used in concrete activities like telling stories (Propp, 1968; Sacks, 1974), assembling files (Cicourel, 1968; Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1982) or describing ‘family life’ (Gubrium, 1992). The reliability of the analysis is less frequently addressed. Instead, qualitative researchers make claims about their ability to reveal the local practices through which given ‘end-products’ (stories, files, descriptions) are assembled.

Interviews are commonly used in both methodologies. Quantitative researchers administer interviews or questionnaires to random samples of the population; this is referred to as ‘survey research’. ‘Fixed-choice’ questions (e.g. ‘yes’ or ‘no’) are usually preferred because the answers they produce lend themselves to simple tabulation, unlike ‘open-ended’ questions which produce answers which need to be subsequently coded. A central methodological issue for quantitative researchers is the reliability of the interview schedule and the representativeness of the sample.

For instance, after surveys of voting intention did not coincide with the result of the British general election of 1992, survey researchers looked again at their methodology. Assuming that some respondents in the past may have lied to interviewers about their voting intentions, some companies now provide a ballot box into which respondents put mock ballot slips – thereby eliminating the need to reveal one’s preferences to the interviewer. Attention was also given to assembling a more representative sample to interview, bearing in mind the expense of a completely random sample of the whole British population. Perhaps as a result of these methodological revisions, pollsters’ final figures of voting intentions fitted much more closely the actual result of the 1997 British election.

‘Authenticity’ rather than sample size is often the issue in qualitative research. The aim is usually to gather an ‘authentic’ understanding of people’s experiences and it is believed that ‘open-ended’ questions are the most effective route towards this end. So, for instance, in gathering life histories or in interviewing parents of children with disabilities (Baruch, 1982) people may simply be asked: ‘tell me your story’. Qualitative interview studies are often conducted with small samples and the interviewer–interviewee relationship may be defined in political rather than scientific terms (e.g. Finch, 1984).

Finally, audio and video data are rarely used in quantitative research, probably because of the assumption that they are difficult to quantify. Conversely, as we shall see (Chapters 6 and 7), audio and video recordings, as well as other visual images, are an increasingly important part of qualitative research. Transcripts of such recordings, based on standardized conventions, provide an excellent record of ‘naturally occurring’ interaction. Compared to field notes of observational data,
recordings and transcripts can offer a highly reliable record to which researchers can return as they develop new hypotheses.

This rather abstract presentation can now be made more concrete by examining a number of qualitative studies using each method. I will take the example of research on social aspects of AIDS because it is a highly discussed, contemporary topic and an area in which I have worked. For each study presented, I will show how different theoretical and methodological imperatives shaped the choice and use of the method concerned.

1.3.1 Observation

In 1987, I began sitting in at a weekly clinic held at the genito-urinary department of an English inner-city hospital (Silverman, 1989b). The clinic’s purpose was to monitor the progress of HIV-positive patients who were taking the drug AZT (Retrovir). AZT, which seems able to slow down the rate at which the virus reproduces itself, was then at an experimental stage of its development.

Like any observational study, the aim was to gather firsthand information about social processes in a ‘naturally occurring’ context. No attempt was made to interview the individuals concerned because the focus was upon what they actually did in the clinic rather than upon what they thought about what they did. The researcher was present in the consulting room at a side angle to both doctors and patient.

Patients’ consent for the researcher’s presence was obtained by the senior doctor. Given the presumed sensitivity of the occasion, tape-recording was not attempted. Instead, detailed handwritten notes were kept, using a separate sheet for each consultation.

The sample was small (15 male patients seen in 37 consultations over seven clinic sessions) and no claims were made about its representativeness. Because observational methods were rare in this area, the study was essentially exploratory. However, as we shall see, an attempt was made to link the findings to other social research about doctor–patient relations.

As Sontag (1979) has noted, illness is often taken as a moral or psychological metaphor. The major finding of the study was the moral baggage attached to being HIV-positive. For instance, many patients used a buzzer to remind them to take their medication during the night. As one commented (P = patient):

P: It’s a dead giveaway. Everybody knows what you’ve got.

However, despite the social climate in which HIV infection is viewed, there was considerable variation in how people presented themselves to the medical team. Four styles of ‘self-presentation’ (Goffman, 1959) were identified. Each style is briefly noted below:
• **Cool**  Here even worrying medical statements were treated with an air of politeness and acceptance rather than concern or apparent anxiety. For example, one patient generally answered all questions in monosyllables. His only sustained intervention was when he asked about the name of a doctor he would be seeing at another hospital for his skin infection. He made no comment when a doctor observed that AZT was keeping him alive.

• **Anxiety**  At the other extreme, some patients treated even apparent greetings as an opportunity to display ‘anxiety’. For instance:

  Dr: How are you?

• **Objective**  As has been noted in other studies (see Baruch, 1982, discussed in Section 4.8), health professionals commonly present themselves to doctors as bundles of objective symptoms. One such professional, who was a patient in this clinic, behaved in exactly this way. For instance:

  P: I was wondering whether Acyclovir in connection with the AZT might cause neutropenia ... [describing his herpes symptoms]. It was interesting. So you’d suggest it four times a day. Because normally they recommend five times a day.

• **Theatrical**  One way of responding to questions about one’s physical condition was to downplay them in order to make observations about social situations, acknowledging the listening audience. For instance:

  Dr: How are you feeling physically?
  P: Fine. The other thing was [account of doctor who didn’t wave to him in the street]. He’s just a bloody quack like you. No offence. [to researcher and medical student] I’m a bad case by the way so don’t take no notice of me.

Three important points need to be made about this discussion. First, there was no simple correspondence between each patient and a particular ‘style’ of self-presentation. Rather each way of presenting oneself was available to each patient within any one consultation, where it might have a particular social function. So the focus was on social processes rather than on psychological states. Second, I have only been able to offer brief extracts to support my argument. As we shall see in Chapter 8, such use of evidence has led to doubts about the validity or accuracy of qualitative research.

My third point is that these findings reflect only part of the study. We also discovered how the ethos of ‘positive thinking’ was central to many patients’ accounts and how doctors systematically concentrated on the ‘bodies’ rather than
the ‘minds’ of their patients. We get a sense of this in the extract immediately above where the patient resists an attempt by the doctor to get him to talk more about his physical condition. This led on to some practical questions about the division of labour between doctors and counsellors.

1.3.2 Texts and visual images

Kitzinger and Miller (1992) have looked at the relation between media reporting of AIDS and the audience’s understanding. Their analysis of British television news bulletins provides a good example of how textual analysis may be used in qualitative research on social aspects of AIDS.

It also shows how qualitative researchers try to avoid questions deriving from ‘social problem’ perspectives, while recognizing that phenomena are always socially defined. Kitzinger and Miller’s concern with the social definition of phenomena is shown by the inverted commas they place around concepts like ‘AIDS’, ‘Africa’ and what is ‘really’ the case. As the authors explain:

This chapter focuses on audiences and the role of the media in changing, reinforcing or contributing to ideas about AIDS, Africa and race. It does not argue that HIV either does or not, originate in Africa ... Here we are not directly addressing questions about where the virus ‘really’ came from or the actual distribution of infection. Instead we are focusing on how different answers to these questions are produced, framed and sustained, what these tell us about the construction of ‘AIDS’ and ‘Africa’ and what socio-political consequences they carry with them. (1992: 28, my emphasis)

Over three-years of television news reports were examined. In one such report, statistics on HIV infection were given for the whole of Africa and a map of Africa was shown with the word ‘AIDS’ fixed across the continent. The map was also stamped with the words ‘3 Million Sufferers’.

In the three-year period, the only country to be distinguished as different from the rest of Africa was South Africa. Indeed, on one occasion, South Africa was described as ‘holding the line’ against an HIV invasion from black Africa. By contrast, images of black Africans with AIDS were used in all the news reports studied. Moreover, the spread of the epidemic was related to ‘traditional sexual values’ or, more generally, to ‘African culture’.

To see how these media images impacted upon their audience, many discussion groups were established among people with particular occupations (e.g. nurses, police, teachers), perceived ‘high involvement’ in the issue (e.g. gay men, prisoners) and ‘low involvement’ (e.g. retired people, students).

Although members of all groups were sceptical about media coverage of news issues, they nonetheless accepted the general assumption that AIDS came from
Africa and is prevalent there. White people usually began from the assumption that Africa is a hotbed of sexually transmitted diseases. This was based on the belief that sexual intercourse typically begins at an early age and that sexual diseases are spread through polygamy.

However, not all individuals shared these beliefs. Kitzinger and Miller refer to several factors which led people to doubt the media treatment. Among these were the following: personal contact with alternative information from trusted individuals or organizations, personal experience of being 'scapegoated', personal experience of conditions in Africa, and being black yourself.

The authors conclude:

Our research shows both the power of the media and the pervasiveness of stock white cultural images of black Africa; it is easy to believe that Africa is a reservoir of HIV infection because 'it fits'. Journalists draw on these cultural assumptions when they produce reports on AIDS and Africa. But, in so doing, they are helping to reproduce and legitimize them. (1992: 49)

Kitzinger and Miller’s study has a much bigger database than my study of one medical clinic. However, it shares two features in common. First, in both studies, the researchers began without a hypothesis. Instead, as in much qualitative research, they sought to induce and then test hypotheses during their data analysis. Second, both studies were driven by the theoretical assumption that social phenomena derive their meaning from how they are defined by participants. Both these features are found in the remaining two studies we shall consider.

1.3.3 Interviews

Weatherburn et al. (1992) note that many studies assert that there is an association between alcohol and drug 'misuse' and 'risky' sexual behaviour. Conversely, Weatherburn et al. suggest that:

the link is asserted but not proven; that the evidence is at best contradictory and that this assertion is informed by a puritanical moral agenda. (1992: 119)

In their own research, we find two assumptions which are absent from these earlier, generally quantitative, research studies:

1 No assumption is made about a strong interrelation between alcohol use and engagement in unsafe sex.
2 Psychological traits (like defects of character or weakness of resolve under the influence of alcohol) are held to be an inadequate explanation of enduring unsafe sexual practices (1992: 122–3).
Weatherburn et al.’s research was part of Project SIGMA, which is a British longitudinal study of a non-clinic-based cohort of over 1000 gay men. Like other qualitative researchers, they distrusted explanations of behaviour which reduced social life to a response to particular ‘stimuli’ or ‘variables’.

Consequently, they favoured ‘open-ended’ questions to try to understand the meanings attached to alcohol use by their sample. For instance:

The first question asked respondents: ‘Would you say alcohol plays a significant role in your sex life?’ Those respondents who said ‘yes’ were probed in detail about its exact nature. Respondents were also asked whether alcohol had ever influenced them to engage in unsafe sexual behaviours. (1992: 123)

Typically, in an open-ended interview study, respondents were encouraged to offer their own definitions of particular activities, ‘unsafe sex’ for example.

The findings of the study reflect the complexity of the attempt to explain the ‘causes’ of social behaviour. The effects of alcohol were found to depend upon ‘the context of the sexual encounter and the other party involved in the sexual negotiation’ (1992: 129). Only in a minority of reports was alcohol treated as the ‘cause’ of unsafe behaviour. In the majority of cases, although people might report themselves as ‘fairly drunk’, they described their sexual activities as the outcome of conscious deliberation.

However, the authors raise a crucial issue about the meaning we should attach to such descriptions, given that people may recall those features that depict their behaviour as socially desirable:

it is recognized that asking people retrospective questions about alcohol use may well be problematic, both because of social desirability phenomena and because alcohol itself impairs recall. (1992: 123)

As we shall see in Chapter 4, this observation goes to the heart of an unresolved debate about the status of interview accounts, namely:

• Are such accounts true or false representations of such features as attitudes and behaviour?
• Or are they simply ‘accounts’ where the researcher’s interest is in how they are constructed rather than their accuracy?

This interview study highlights the advantages of qualitative research in offering an apparently ‘deeper’ picture than the variable-based correlations of quantitative studies. However, it also implies why it can be difficult to get funding or acceptance for qualitative research. However questionable are the assumptions behind some quantitative research, it tends to deliver apparently reliable and valid correlations between ‘variables’ that appear to be self-evident. Moreover, these correlations usually lead in clear-cut policy directions.
However, some qualitative research can combine sensitivity to participants’ definitions with correlations carrying direct policy implications. We shall see this in our final research study.

1.3.4 Audiotapes

Silverman’s (1997) study was based on audiotapes of HIV/AIDS counselling from 10 different medical centres in Britain, the USA and Trinidad. The focus was on advice (both how advice was given and how it was received). The interest in advice derived from three sources:

1. The research was part funded by the English Health Education Authority: this meant that analysis of advice sequences would be appropriate to its interest in health promotion.
2. Early work on the project had identified two basic ‘communication formats’ through which such counselling was conducted. The analysis of these ‘information delivery’ and ‘interview’ formats provided a crucial resource for the analysis of how advice giving worked (see Peräkylä and Silverman, 1991).
3. A study by Heritage and Sefi (1992) of health visitors and mothers had provided important findings about the relationship between different forms of advice giving and their uptake by the client.

We were able to tabulate the relationship between the form in which advice was given and how it was received in 50 advice sequences. Broadly speaking, personalized advice, offered after clients had been asked to specify their concerns, was associated with a ‘marked acknowledgement’ (e.g. a comment on the advice or a further question from the client). Conversely, counsellors who gave generalized advice, without first getting their clients to specify a particular problem, generally received only ‘unmarked acknowledgements’ (e.g. ‘mm’, ‘right’, ‘yes’).

However, the availability of detailed transcripts meant that we could go beyond this predictable finding. In particular, we sought to address the functions of counsellors’ behaviour – particularly given the fact that, if asked, many of them would have recognized that generalized advice giving is likely to be ineffective. We hoped, thereby, to make a constructive input into policy debates by examining the functions of communication sequences in a particular institutional context.

Let us look at a relevant data extract (Extract 1.1). The transcription symbols are provided in the Appendix at the end of the book.

Extract 1.1 (SW2 – A)
(C = counsellor; P = patient)
1 C: hhhh Now when someone is tested (.) and they have a negative test result
hh it’s obviously ideal uh:m that they then look after themselves to prevent any further risk of P: Mm hm
C: =infection. hhhh I mean obviously this is only possible up to a point because if .hhh you get into a sort of serious relationship with someone that’s long term. hh you can’t obviously continue to use condoms forever. hh Uh:m and a point has to come where you make a sort of decision (0.4) uh:m if you are settling down about families and things that you know (0.6) you’d- not to continue safer sex. [.hhhh Uh:m but obviously: (1.0) you= P: [Mm: C: =nee:d to be (.) uh:m (.) take precautions uhm (0.3) and keep to the safer practices .hhh if: obviously you want to prevent infection in the future. P: [Mm hm C: [.hhhh The problem at the moment is we’ve got it here in {names City} in particular (.) right across the board you know from all walks of life. P: Mm C: Uh::m from you know (.) the sort of established high r- risk groups (.) now we’re getting heterosexual (.) [transmission as well. hh Uh=m= P: [Mm hm C: =so obviously everyone really needs to careful. hhh Now whe- when someone gets a positive test result er: then obviously they’re going to ke- think very carefully about things. hhhh Being HIV positive doesn’t necessarily mean that that person is going to develop ai:ds (.) later on. P: Mm hm

We can make three observations about this extract. First, right at the start, C delivers advice without having elicited from P a perceived problem. Reasons of space do not allow us to include what immediately precedes this extract, but it involves another topic (the meaning of a positive test result) and no attempt is made to question P about his possible response to this topic, i.e. how she might change her behaviour after a negative test result. Moreover, within this extract, C introduces fresh topics (what to do in a ’serious’ relationship on lines 6–13; the spread of HIV in the city on lines 15–19) without attempting to elicit P’s own perspectives.
Second, predictably, P only produces variations on ‘mm hm’ in response to C’s advice. While these may indicate that P is listening, they do not show patient uptake and might be taken as a sign of passive resistance to the advice (see Heritage and Sefi, 1992). Third, C does not personalize her advice. Instead of using a personal pronoun or the patient’s name, she refers to ‘someone’ and ‘they’ (line 1) and ‘everyone’ (line 21).

Advice sequences like these were very common at three out of the five centres we examined. So we have to ask ourselves why counsellors should use a format which is likely to generate so little patient uptake. Since our preference was not to criticize professionals but to understand the logic of their work, we need to look at the functions as well as the dysfunctions of this way of proceeding.

A part of the answer may be found in the content of the advice given. Note how in Extract 1.1 the counsellor is giving advice about what she tells patients after a particular test result. But the patient here does not yet have her result: indeed, she has not yet even consented to the test. This leaves it open to the patient to treat what he is being told not as advice but as information delivery (about the advice C would give if P turned out to be seropositive or seronegative). Moreover, throughout C avoids personalizing her advice. Rather than saying what she advises P to do, she uses the non-specific term ‘someone’. All the available research suggests that behaviour change rarely occurs on the basis of information alone. Why, therefore, would counsellors want to package their advice in a way which makes patient uptake less likely?

A partial answer lies in the dysfunctions of recipient-designed advice. Throughout our corpus of interviews, counsellors exit quickly from personalized advice when patients offer only minimal responses like ‘mm hm’. It seems that, if someone is giving you personalized advice, if you don’t show more uptake than ‘mm hm’, this will be problematic to the advice giver. Conversely, if you are merely giving somebody general information, then the occasional ‘mm hm’ is all that is required for the speaker to continue in this format. Moreover, truncated, non-personalized advice sequences are also usually far shorter – an important consideration for hard-pressed counsellors.

Another function of offering advice in this way is that it neatly handles many of the issues of delicacy that can arise in discussing sexual behaviour. First, the counsellor can be heard as making reference to what she tells ‘anyone’ so that this particular patient need not feel singled out for attention about his private life. Second, because there is no step-by-step method of questioning, patients are not required to expand on their sexual practices with the kinds of hesitations we have found elsewhere in our research (Silverman, 1997: ch. 4). Third, setting up advice sequences that can be heard as information delivery shields the counsellor from some of the interactional difficulties of appearing to tell strangers what they should be doing in the most intimate aspects of their behaviour. Finally, predictably, information-oriented counselling produces very little conflict. So in Extract 1.1, there
is no *active* resistance from P. Indeed, topic follows topic with a remarkable degree of smoothness and at great speed.

So the character of HIV counselling as a focused conversation on mostly delicate topics explains why truncated advice sequences (like that seen in Extract 1.1) predominate in our transcripts. Clearly, such sequences are functional for both local and institutional contexts. This underlines the need to locate ‘communication problems’ in a broader structural context. Our research had much to say about how counsellors can organize their talk in order to maximize patient uptake. However, without organizational change, the impact of such communication techniques alone might be minimal or even harmful.

For instance, encouraging patient uptake will usually involve longer counselling sessions. Experienced counsellors will tell you that, if they take so long with one client that the waiting period for others increases, some clients will simply walk out – and hence may continue their risky behaviour without learning their HIV status.

Undoubtedly, then, there are gains for the counsellor in setting up advice packages which are truncated and non-personalized. Obviously, however, there are concomitant losses of proceeding this way. As we have shown, such advice packages produce far less patient uptake and, therefore, their function in creating an environment in which people might re-examine their own sexual behaviour is distinctly problematic. Two possible solutions suggest themselves from the data analyzed by this study. First, necessarily ‘delicate’ and unstable advice sequences should be avoided but patients should be encouraged to draw their own conclusions from a particular line of questioning. Second, more time should be provided since both this method and step-by-step advice giving are very time-consuming. I take up these matters in greater detail in Chapter 11.

### 1.4 CONCLUSIONS

By focusing on the topics of HIV and AIDS, I have tried to show how four different research methods can be used in qualitative research. Despite the different kinds of data which they generate, they lead to a distinctive form of analysis which avoids a ‘social problem’ perspective but instead asks how participants attach meaning to their activities and ‘problems’.

Having set out four different qualitative methods, I want to make two general observations. First, as I have emphasized, no research method stands on its own. So far, I have sought to show the link between methods and methodologies in
social research. Second, however, there is a broader, societal context in which methods are located and deployed. As a crude example, texts depended upon the invention of the printing press or, in the case of television or audio recordings, upon modern communication technologies.

Moreover, such activities as observation and interviewing are not unique to social researchers. For instance, as Foucault (1977) has noted, the observation of the prisoner has been at the heart of modern prison reform, while the method of questioning used in the interview reproduces many of the features of the Catholic confessional or the psychoanalytic consultation. Its pervasiveness is reflected by the centrality of the interview study in so much contemporary social research. For instance, in the two collections of papers from which the research studies above have been selected, 14 out of 19 empirical studies are based on interview data. One possible reason for this may not derive from methodological considerations. Think, for instance, of how much interviews are a central (and popular) feature of mass media products, from ‘talk shows’ to ‘celebrity interviews’. Perhaps we all live in what might be called an ‘interview society’ in which interviews seem central to making sense of our lives (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997).

All this means that we need to resist treating research methods as mere techniques. This is reflected in the attention paid in this book to the analysis of data rather than to methods of data collection.

Part Two of this book sets out each research method in greater detail, and Part Three returns to issues of validity and relevance which are touched upon in this chapter. However, before we deal with these detailed issues, it will be helpful, in the light of the studies discussed here, to review what other writers have said about the distinctive properties of qualitative research. This is the topic of Chapter 2.

**KEY POINTS**

- The biggest mistake that beginning researchers can make is to attempt a too ambitious research project.
- In both science and everyday life, the facts never speak for themselves. This is because all knowledge is theoretically impregnated.
- Theory provides a framework for critically understanding phenomena and a basis for considering how what is unknown might be organized.
- Research problems are distinct from social problems.
- We can generate valuable research problems by employing three types of sensitivity: historical, political and contextual.
There are four major methods used by qualitative researchers: observation; analyzing texts, documents and images; interviews; and recording and transcribing naturally occurring interaction.

There is a broader, societal context in which research methods are located and deployed.

**RECOMMENDED READING**


**EXERCISE 1.1**

Discuss how you might study people who take the law into their own hands (‘vigilantes’). Is there any difference between your proposed study and a good television documentary on the same subject (i.e. are there differences in the questions you would ask and how you would test your conclusions)?

Now consider: (1) whether this matters; and (2) what special contribution, if any, social science research can bring to such social problems.

**EXERCISE 1.2**

Harvey Sacks (1992) offers a case where you observe a car drawing up near you. A door opens and a teenage woman emerges and runs a few paces. Two other people (one male, one female) get out of the car. They run after the young woman, take her arms and pull her back into the car which now drives off.

Now answer these questions:

1. Without using your social science knowledge, prepare at least two different interpretations of what you have seen. Focus on whether this is something you should report to the police.
2. Examine at least two different interpretations of your behaviour if: (a) you report this matter to the police; or (b) you do not report it.
3 Now use any ideas you know from your own discipline to describe and/or explain what you have seen.

4 Consider: (a) whether these ideas are likely to give a more ‘accurate’ picture than your description in 1; and (b) to what extent we need to choose between the descriptions in 1 and 3.

**EXERCISE 1.3**

Return to your interpretation of ‘vigilantes’ in Exercise 1.1. Now examine how you could generate different research problems using each of the three kinds of ‘sensitivity’ discussed in the chapter, namely:

- historical
- political
- contextual.

**EXERCISE 1.4**

Once more focus on ‘vigilantes’. Now suggest what research questions can be addressed by any two of the four methods discussed in the chapter, namely:

- observation
- analyzing texts, documents and visual images
- interviews
- recording and transcribing.

Now consider: (1) what are the relative merits of each method in addressing this topic; and (2) what, if anything, could be gained by combining both methods (you might like to refer forward to my discussion of ‘triangulation’ in Section 8.3.2).