SUCCESSFUL QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

a practical guide for beginners

VIRGINIA BRAUN
& VICTORIA CLARKE

SUCCESSFUL
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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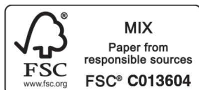
SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Editor: Michael Carmichael
Editorial assistant: Alana Clogan
Production editor: Imogen Roome
Copyeditor: Neil Dowden
Indexer: Cathryn Pritchard
Marketing manager: Alison Borg
Cover design: Wendy Scott
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



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First published 2013

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2012940758

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-84787-581-5
ISBN 978-1-84787-582-2 (pbk)

For Pene, Marion and Reg, with love

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Acknowledgements

Tempting as it is just to write a long list of names and then lie on the sofa for an hour, for the benefit of the curious reader who, like us, reads the acknowledgements first, we will write something a little more interesting. We apologise in advance to anyone we have forgotten to mention, and to those (many) people whose work has influenced our understanding and practice of qualitative research, but who are not listed here or not cited in the book. (To those of you wondering why you are thanked under 'X' heading and not *also* under 'Y': everyone we mention is only listed once.)

This book's place of conception is an indication of the quality we have aspired to, and hopefully come close to achieving. We wrote our book proposal in the sublime city of Paris, in the summer of 2007, and we thank her for the beauty and inspiration she provided, as well as all the delectable food we happily ate our way through! Although it sometimes feels like we have spent four solid years researching and writing this book, unfortunately chronic health problems (and a chronic inability to say 'no') slowed us down considerably. For this reason, first and foremost we sincerely thank our commissioning editor at Sage, Michael Carmichael, for his patience! We hope it was worth the wait. We also thank Michael for his infectious enthusiasm for the project, and his sterling advice at every stage of the process. To him, and to everyone else involved at Sage: thanks and have a gold star!

Our first foray into writing about methods was a little paper on thematic analysis, published in 2006 in *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, which much to our bemusement has become rather popular. So we must thank Brendan Gough for publishing this paper, and to everyone who has conveyed to us their enthusiasm for it, and the approach and guidelines we outline – your enthusiasm inspired us to write this book!

Anyone who has written a book will know that it is something of an epic undertaking; as one of our colleagues aptly observed, it's like writing a PhD in your 'spare time'. Lots of people have helped directly and indirectly, and in ways big and small. Our thanks go to all those people who, through teaching, supervision, and mentoring, have inspired our love of qualitative research and contributed to our own development as teachers, supervisors and mentors of qualitative research: Nicola Gavey, Karen Henwood, Bruna Seu, Corinne Squire, Mick Billig, Derek Edwards, Celia Kitzinger, Jonathan Potter, Sue Wilkinson (and other members of the Discourse and Rhetoric Group at Loughborough University), Adrian Coyle, Hannah Frith and Kate Gleeson ... Our friends and colleagues at UWE and The University of Auckland, and beyond, have been most excellent in providing direct and indirect support (and some thought-provoking discussions of qualitative research), including Debra Gray, Andrea Halewood, Tim Kurz, Helen Malson, Tim McCreanor, Elizabeth Peel, Paul Redford, Damien Riggs, Merran Toerien, Leonore Tiefer, and Susan Speer, as have various students whose work we have supervised over the years. A special thank-you goes to the students who have taken our research methods classes and taught us how to teach, and write about, qualitative research.

As we conceived this book, we wanted to provide as many real-world material examples as we could, to illustrate *what qualitative research looks like* ... for people who don't know. So we are enormously appreciative to everyone who provided material for the book including our super-duper box authors Sonja Ellis, Sally Wiggins and Brett Smith, and William (Will) Hanson for being brave enough to allow us to make public the first focus group he moderated. (Will did a great job of piloting and conducting the focus group, and helping us to fix a terrible transcript that was supposedly 'professionally' transcribed – beware the bad transcriber!) Thanks to: Barbara Douglas, Panteá Farvid, Nikki Hayfield, Nicola Rance and Gemma Tricklebank for allowing us to use their awesome posters (and a special thanks to Nikki for making our life a lot easier in the final few months of producing this book, by being fabulously organised and supremely capable); Bethany Cooper, Eleni Demetriou, Cassandra Rogers and Katharine Spence for allowing us to use material from their fantastic final year research projects; and Paulette Benton-Greig, Kate Mitchell, Elyse Oberland and Emily Opperman for research assistance; the latter two for your work on the views on pubic hair and experiences of orgasm projects. Since much qualitative research relies on participants, a big thank-you also goes to everyone who participated in the research projects featured in this book, *especially* the six weight and obesity focus group participants, and Dan, Danni, Owen and the four undergraduate students who participated in the body art focus group (and Sophie Gray the moderator's assistant) for their generosity in allowing the groups to be made public. Finally, this book has had various permutations in the last four years, and we kindly thank Irmgard Tischner, who, at one stage, was going to provide some data for the book from her research on experiences of being large.

A special thank-you must go to The University of Auckland library for never letting us down, no matter how seemingly obscure the material we sought; to the Department of Psychology at The University of Auckland for support in various ways; and to Margarete Sandelowski for writing *brilliant* papers on every topic related to qualitative research one could possibly imagine. We almost feel redundant. Thanks to Sara-Jane, Guy, Oliver and Ryann, and to various non-academic friends, for providing some delightful and much needed distractions in the final stages of writing the book, and to Naomi Moller for pep talks and much much more.

Finally, having thanked peers, participants, publisher and Paris, it's time to thank pet, partner and parents! To Toby for being so delightful, and reminding us that books are rubbish and the park, catch and tummy rubs are what it's all about. To David: you probably won't believe it, but we have finished 'the bloody book' and we promise not to write another one ... for a while (and we haven't bought any more cookery books recently either, honest ...); you have been splendid. To Pene for instilling a love of learning and thinking critically about the world; and to Marion and Reg for being proud parents (and for all those trips to the library – they paid off!): this one is for you.

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SECTION 1

Successfully getting started in qualitative research

Some very important starting information

OVERVIEW

What is qualitative research?
Qualitative research as a paradigm
The emergence of a qualitative research paradigm (in psychology)
What do I need to become a good qualitative researcher?
Why we love qualitative research
Our approach in this book

We're about to introduce you to the wonderful world of qualitative research. It's vast and exciting, full of new areas to discover. We hope you'll learn to love and feel as passionate about it as we do. As we know that won't be the case for everyone, we want you to feel that you *really* 'get' it: that you understand both the purpose and premise of qualitative research, *and*, crucially, that you know how to actually go about doing a qualitative research project. In order for this to happen, you may need to put aside ideas you have about what research is, and approach this field with 'open eyes' – like an explorer who can only understand a completely different culture if they don't view and judge it by the perspectives and values of their own culture.

WHAT IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

The most basic definition of qualitative research is that it uses *words* as **data** (see Chapter 2), collected and analysed in all sorts of ways. Quantitative research, in contrast, uses

numbers as data and analyses them using statistical techniques. The term qualitative research is used to refer both to *techniques* (of data collection or data analysis) and to a wider **framework** for conducting research, or **paradigm**. Paradigm here refers to the beliefs, assumptions, values and practices shared by a research community (see Kuhn, 1962), and it provides an overarching framework for research. Qualitative research, as we define it, is not just about data and techniques – it's about the application of qualitative techniques within a qualitative paradigm, which is quite different from a quantitative paradigm (see Table 1.1). It has been referred to as **Big Q qualitative research**, and contrasted with **small q qualitative research** (Kidder & Fine, 1987), which is the use of specific qualitative data collection and techniques, not (necessarily) within a qualitative paradigm (see Box 1.1).

Table 1.1 Some *broad* differences between qualitative and quantitative paradigms

Quantitative	Qualitative
Numbers used as data	Words – written and spoken language – (and images) used as data
Seeks to identify relationships between variables, to explain or predict – with the aim of generalising the findings to a wider population	Seeks to understand and interpret more local meanings; recognises data as gathered in a context; *sometimes* produces knowledge that contributes to more general understandings
Generates 'shallow' but broad data – not a lot of complex detail obtained from each participant, but lots of participants take part (to generate the necessary statistical power)	Generates 'narrow' but **rich data**, '**thick descriptions**' – detailed and complex accounts from each participant; not many take part
Seeks consensus, norms, or general patterns; often aims to reduce diversity of responses to an average response	Tends to seek patterns, but accommodates and explores difference and divergence within data
Tends to be theory-testing, and deductive	Tends to be theory generating, and inductive (working *up* from the data)
Values detachment and impartiality (objectivity)	Values personal involvement and partiality (subjectivity, reflexivity)
Has a fixed method (harder to change focus once data collection has begun)	Method is less fixed (can accommodate a shift in focus in the same study)
Can be completed quickly	Tends to take longer to complete because it is interpretative and there is no formula

Adapted (and expanded) from Tolich & Davidson (2003)

BOX 1.1 EXAMPLES OF *SMALL Q* QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The use of qualitative techniques outside a qualitative paradigm (*small q* qualitative research) happens in different ways:

- A qualitative research project may be conducted in a realist, positivist way, where the values and assumptions of *Big Q* qualitative research are rejected.
- Qualitative methods can be used as a *precursor* for quantitative research. For example, in a study of the effects of the experiences of depression, US professors of psychiatry and nursing James Coyne and Margaret Calarco (1995) conducted two focus groups and thematically organised participants' statements into eight categories, drawing on these to develop a survey, which they used to generate the data they analysed.
- It can be used *alongside* quantitative methods as part of a mixed methods design (see Mertens, 2005). In many **mixed method** designs, the qualitative component may be subsumed within a primarily quantitative, realist project, and it is rarely *Big Q* qualitative research. For instance, in food and farming researcher Charlotte Weatherall and colleagues' (2003) study of UK consumer's perceptions of food, farming and buying locally produced goods, the qualitative data from six focus groups were used to identify consumers priorities when buying food, perceptions of farming/food provision, and interest in local food production, and informed the development of a quantitative survey. The qualitative analysis was presented and interpreted alongside the quantitative results. The analysis described the content of what was said, assuming a direct relationship between what people say and what they believe (and do).
- Qualitative data might be converted to a numerical representation, and analysed *quantitatively*. For instance, public health researchers Mary Story and Patricia Faulkner (1990) collated a selection of episodes of 11 of the most popular US prime-time TV shows and coded the text of those programmes according to food references. The frequency of codes was compared, and was used to determine messages about food and eating presented during prime-time. Overall, they reported 'pervasive' (p. 740) references to food, the majority of which were related to low-nutritional-value snacks, and concluded that the shows and advertising promote poor nutritional practice. The typical method here is content analysis, where qualitative data are coded and analysed numerically, and there is debate about whether it is, or can be, a *qualitative* method. Many say no – for instance, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b) barely discusses it; we don't consider it in this book because we want to focus on *wholly* qualitative methods. The quantitative focus in content analysis has been substantively critiqued (Mayring, 2004), and more interpretative forms developed – often referred to as *qualitative* content analysis (e.g. Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2004), which is similar to **thematic analysis**.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AS A PARADIGM

A broad cluster of features and assumptions make up a non-positivist qualitative research paradigm. One thing absolutely fundamental is that it tends *not* to assume there is only one correct version of reality or knowledge. Instead, it comes from a perspective that argues that there are multiple versions of reality – even for the same person – and that these are very closely linked to the context they occur in. Most qualitative researchers would argue that we should not, even *must not*, consider knowledge outside of the context in which it was generated. This refers both to the context of data *generation*, such as an **interview** setting, and to the broader sociocultural and political contexts of the research. New Zealand psychologists Maree Burns and Nicola Gavey's (2004) work on the meanings and **discourses** of body weight, body size and body **practices** provides a nice illustration of this (which they actually built into their **research design**). They contextualised their analysis of the talk of women who practise bulimia through also analysing public health messages promoting 'healthy weight' (as a response to the 'obesity epidemic'), and demonstrated a conceptual linking of 'healthy weight' to slenderness. This common-sense meaning was deployed by women who practised bulimia to explain and justify their purging and compensating practices (e.g. vomiting, excessive exercise): such practices were framed as about obtaining a '*healthy'* (i.e. slim) body. Through contextualising the women's accounts, and specifically analysing public health messages, their analysis provided a compelling insight into the ways something which seems to be a useful message in one domain – that of 'healthy weight' – can actually be deployed in very 'unhealthy' ways in another.

Other elements of a qualitative paradigm include (Silverman, 2000: 8):

- the use of qualitative data, and the analysis of words which are not reducible to numbers;
- the use of more 'naturally' occurring data collection **methods** that more closely resemble real life (compared to other possibilities, such as experiments) – this develops from the idea that we cannot make sense of data in isolation from context;
- an interest in meanings rather than reports and measures of behaviour or internal cognitions;
- the use of inductive, theory-generating research;
- a rejection of the natural sciences as a model of research, including the rejection of the idea of the objective (unbiased) scientist;
- the recognition that researchers bring their **subjectivity** (their views, perspectives, frameworks for making sense of the world; their politics, their passions) into the research process – this is seen as a strength rather than a weakness.

So the qualitative paradigm is quite *different* from the quantitative one. Depending on where you are in your studies, and what you're studying, this might contradict what you've been taught constitutes *good research* – controlled, rigorous, reliable, validated, quantitative and experimental. We're teaching you about a whole different world of

research that grew as a response and challenge to the perceived limits of *that* model of research.

THE EMERGENCE OF A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PARADIGM (IN PSYCHOLOGY)

Quantitative approaches and 'the scientific method' have dominated psychology (in a way that isn't the case in all other social sciences). It's tempting to see the emergence of qualitative research in two ways: a) as a *new* development; and b) as simply offering a *complementary* data collection and analysis toolkit for quantitative psychology. We would warn against both conclusions, and offer a very brief history of qualitative research in psychology to illustrate why.

From the emergence of psychology as a discipline in the second half of the nineteenth century, it has been marked by contestation over the 'appropriate' ways to research and theorise the things we study in psychology. The focus, topic and purpose of psychology itself are similarly contested, but we won't discuss those here. Qualitative ideas and approaches have been part of psychology from its inception. However, first with behaviourism in the early twentieth century, and subsequently with the cognitive revolution in the second half of the twentieth century, quantitative methods employed within a (post)positivist, experimental paradigm dominated the discipline (Ashworth, 2003; Howitt, 2010). Such approaches situated themselves in opposition to the more subjective, interpretative introspective (qualitative) techniques of early psychology, which became classified as 'unscientific' – a criticism of qualitative research which continues to this day, from some quarters, although that of course depends on how we define science itself (Kvale, 1996). What we think of *as* psychology, and indeed how you *do* it, has been strongly shaped by the behavioural and cognitive traditions. Within such approaches, psychology should seek to understand and determine an observable, objective (universal) psychological reality.

The dominance of behaviourism and then cognitive experimentalism meant that it wasn't until the 1980s that qualitative approaches regained a foothold, and subsequently flourished, in some areas of psychology (their history in other social sciences, such as sociology, is different, e.g. Vidich & Lyman, 1994). Their (re)appearance reflected the development of a number of *oppositional* approaches within the social sciences, which challenged mainstream (post)positivist empiricist research design and practice, and the bases on which psychology and the other social sciences theorised and conceptualised their subjects (Ashworth, 2003; Howitt, 2010). Approaches including **feminism** (Crawford & Unger, 2004), **poststructuralism** (Gavey, 1989), **postmodernism** (Gergen, 1990), **social constructionism** (Burr, 2003), **hermeneutics** (Schwandt, 2000) and **phenomenology** (Langdridge, 2007) in different ways questioned or rejected the idea of an observable, independent (singular and universal) reality, with humans understood as *responding to* external and internal influences. Instead, the person was theorised as operating within a subjective, interpreted world, the organisation of which offered

a certain version of reality. The relationship between person and context was seen as more fluid and reciprocal, with influence in *both* directions. Qualitative methods were touted as allowing access to people's subjective worlds and meanings, and to groups marginalised (e.g. by their gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity/culture) and often invisible within western psychology. They were seen as crucial for identifying and theorising different *constructed* versions of reality, and for the ways people are both constructed by, and constructors of, reality (see Box 1.2 for a classic example). The use of a qualitative paradigm was in many cases then an implicit and often explicit *rejection* of the values, assumptions and practices of quantitative, experimental psychology (although see Michell, 2004). This rejection was driven from anything from theoretical convictions to political social change agendas.

What we wish to emphasise is that qualitative research has a long, but often marginal, history in psychology, and its strong emergence in certain places (e.g. the UK) in recent decades reflects a shakeup of the very foundations of the discipline. That explains why, in some cases, the response to qualitative research is hostile. You don't need to know much of this history to do qualitative research, but it's important to understand that it's not simply a complementary approach to a quantitative research paradigm, and why this is.

BOX 1.2 A CLASSIC OF QUALITATIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

British social psychologist Michael Billig's (1978a, 1978b) interview-study of members of the British far-right group the *National Front* provided profound insights into the nature of the organisation, and into the frameworks of meaning and logic that *National Front* members deployed when talking about race, racism and their ideal of a 'white only' Britain. Like many others who have been shown to 'do racism without being racist', *National Front* members often denied they were racist, and instead argued that their position was a logical response to the situation of increased non-white migration to the UK. In simultaneously providing compelling insights into this group, and demonstrating the limitations of social cognitive frameworks (e.g. attitudes) for explaining these insights, Billig's study was at the forefront of the development a *new* approach to social psychology, providing the foundations for the critique and alternative approaches of what would soon become discursive (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and rhetorical psychology (Billig, 1987) (see Chapter 8).

CONTEXTS OF LEARNING

Reflecting this history, within the psychology undergraduate curriculum, qualitative methods tend to be sidelined in favour of quantitative methods. This occurs even in the UK, where they are required in any British Psychological Society (BPS)-accredited psychology

curriculum. If taught, qualitative methods are typically allocated far less time on the curriculum than quantitative methods, and often treated as a single approach, rather than a field as diverse as 'quantitative methods'. They are also often taught *after* quantitative methods and experimental design have been presented. If this is the case, qualitative research often comes as a culture shock (Howitt, 2010) at best; at worst, it is seen as 'unscientific' or as anxiety provoking because it lacks the clarity and control of quantitative research and experimentation, which have often been presented as the pinnacles of research excellence. To become a good qualitative researcher requires a different way of thinking about research.

WHAT DO I NEED TO BECOME A GOOD QUALITATIVE RESEARCHER?

Obviously, there's quite a bit you need to *know* – you'll learn that throughout this book. Do you need a whole lot of technical skills? Not really. If you're a bit of a Luddite (like Victoria), you've found a home in qualitative research! Assuming you know basic word processing, and are familiar with the internet, qualitative research is unlikely to pose technical challenges. However, if you're a tech-savvy gadget kid (which Virginia tries to be), qualitative research also offers you a home. Qualitative research can be conducted low-tech or high-tech, so there's something for everyone. But there is one thing that's really essential: developing a qualitative sensibility.

A QUALITATIVE SENSIBILITY

A qualitative sensibility refers to an orientation towards research – in terms of research questions, and analysing data – that fits within the qualitative paradigm. Certain skills or orientations that make up a qualitative sensibility include:

- an interest in process and meaning, over and above cause and effect;
- a critical and questioning approach to life and knowledge – you don't take things at face value and simply accept the way they are, but ask questions about *why* they may be that way, whose interests are served by them and *how* they could be different;
- the ability to reflect on, and step outside, your cultural membership, to become a cultural commentator – so that you can see, and question, the shared values and assumptions that make up being a member of a particular society – this involves identifying your own assumptions, and then putting them aside (referred to as bracketing them off) so that your research is not *automatically* shaped by these. It is hard to do, but vitally important for being able to get 'deep' into qualitative data;
- the development of a double-consciousness or an analytic 'eye' or 'ear', where you can listen intently, and critically reflect on what is said, simultaneously (e.g. in an interview, being able to focus both on the *content* of what is being said, and

possible *analytic* ideas within it) – this helps produce much better (more complex, richer) data;

- **reflexivity**: critical reflection on the research process and on one's own role as researcher (Finlay, 2002a, 2002b), including our various **insider** and **outsider** positions (Gallais, 2008) – we have insider status when we share some group identity with our **participants** (for example, a *male* researcher researching *men* would be an insider), and outsider status when we do not share some group identity with our participants (for example, a *white* man researching *Asian* men would be an outsider), but for any research, we are likely to have multiple insider and outsider positions;
- good interactional skills – a warm/friendly manner that puts people at ease and helps establish '**rapport**' and 'trust'. This is does not mean you need to be really extroverted or outgoing.

Some of these may come naturally to you; others may be a bit of a struggle. Give them time. In addition, to become a good qualitative researcher, the following need to be added to the qualitative sensibility you have and are developing:

- a basic grasp of some methods of data collection and analysis, which you build to in-depth understanding;
- a conceptual understanding of qualitative approaches.

The skills you will develop in doing qualitative research don't just apply to this field: reading and engaging with information critically; learning to discern and distil out what is vital from a large body of information; active listening; writing and presenting interesting and compelling 'stories' – all these skills will stand you in good stead in the 'real world', as well as in qualitative research.

WHY WE LOVE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

We love qualitative research: it's rich, exciting, and challenging in lots of ways; it captures the complexity, mess and contradiction that characterises the real world, yet allows us to make sense of *patterns* of meaning. In line with the importance of reflexivity and contextualisation for qualitative research (see Chapter 2), you can find out a bit about why we each love qualitative research, and what we each bring to it as researchers, in Boxes 1.3 and 1.4.

OUR APPROACH IN THIS BOOK

Learning to do qualitative research has been seen by some as akin to riding a bike. British psychologist Jonathan Potter (1997) likened the analytic method **discourse analysis** (see Chapter 8) to a 'craft skill', something that not only takes time to learn, but also requires the 'doing'. This suggests it cannot be learnt by following a recipe,

BOX 1.3 MEET VIRGINIA BRAUN

I have been doing qualitative research in psychology for over 15 years, on topics like cervical cancer prevention policy (e.g. Braun & Gavey, 1999), female genital cosmetic surgery (e.g. Braun, 2010), and (hetero)sexual health and 'risk' (e.g. Braun, 2008). What drew me to qualitative research wasn't that I hated statistics; I liked and had always been good at maths and stats. But from my first moments of learning about qualitative research in only a handful of lectures in my undergraduate degree, qualitative research captivated me. I felt it captured ways of knowing, and the richness of real complex lives, in ways that quantitative approaches couldn't, and was compelled to use it. I've never looked back. While I always emphasise that the methods you use *must* be determined by your research question, I find that the questions I have are typically most suited to qualitative approaches – although I do dabble in quantitative research from time to time. A long way on from those first lectures, my passion for qualitative research has only grown.

Qualitative research emphasises that we see things *from a perspective*. So what are some of my influences? As a researcher, I come from both a traditional and non-traditional background. It is 'traditional' in that following a 'bored senseless' gap year, I went to university, completing a bachelors, masters (both at The University of Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand), and PhD (at Loughborough University, UK), and then jumped straight into an academic job. And I occupy a raft of categories of privilege: white, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, thin. Yet this surface belies a more complex background that informs my 'lefty' politics and my strong commitment to social justice, and my awareness of and reflection on those positions of privilege. My parents (mother: teacher; father: academic) separated when I was very young; for eight years, to the start of my teens, I lived with my mother (and others) on a very remote hippy commune. It had no electricity or flushing toilets. Road access was a half-hour walk away, but we had no car and there was no public transport. I don't share the pop-cultural knowledge of my peers. I grew up on the margins of western culture, occupying simultaneously positions of privilege and of marginalisation; at primary school, I occupied the lowest social category, and experienced frequent marginalisation and bullying from students and teachers. My experience of white privilege is also tempered by my location: as a Pākehā New Zealander, whiteness cannot be an unproblematic or unquestioned category of privilege – and rightly so! I am part of a collective who have been, and continue to be, privileged as a result of New Zealand's colonised past (and present), which continues to significantly negatively impact Māori, who were colonised by people 'like me'. And I am a woman. Despite my strong, amazing, busy, achieving mother and my alternative secondary school education, it wasn't until university that I discovered feminism. It was a natural fit, and, along with **critical psychology**, provided a framework to bring this all together. I cannot turn off a tendency to critically analyse socially and systemically, rather than individually, **representations** and **constructs** which reinforce inequitable social arrangements, marginalisation and discrimination (and privilege).

BOX 1.4 MEET VICTORIA CLARKE

When I was at school, although I was good at maths and science, I really loved subjects like English literature and history that were less about right and wrong answers and more about interpretation. When studying for my A levels, I was fascinated by debates in sociology about paradigms and methodologies, and critiques of science. So when I began studying psychology as an undergraduate at Brunel University (UK), I was already committed to qualitative and interpretive approaches to research, and their emphasis on the provisional, multiple and context-bound nature of knowledge. In addition, I am drawn to qualitative approaches because they afford us a privileged insight into worlds we have no direct personal experience of – doing qualitative research has allowed me to see ways of life and to hear about experiences that are far removed from my own in rich, vivid detail. Like Virginia, I have been doing qualitative research for over 15 years, on topics such as lesbian and gay parenting (e.g. Clarke, 2001), partner relationships (e.g. Clarke, Burgoyne, & Burns, 2006), and sexuality and appearance (e.g. Clarke & Turner, 2007). Although I am strongly committed to qualitative approaches in general, I'm not, as are many researchers, wedded to a particular qualitative approach; rather my view is that different qualitative approaches can capture something useful and interesting about the complex and messy world in which we all live.

Like Virginia, my research is strongly informed by my left-leaning politics and a commitment to social justice. In many ways my life is shaped by social privilege – as white, as middle class, as a member of a 'respectable' profession like university lecturing – yet these positions of privilege intersect with experiences of social marginality as non-heterosexual, as a woman and, currently, as disabled (by virtue of a chronic health condition). Unlike Virginia, I grew up in fairly conventional circumstances – in the 'burbs with my mother and father. Our outer London, largely working-class town had a large South Asian (Indian sub-continent) immigrant community and I quickly became sensitised to issues of race and racism when I was often the only white child to attend the birthday parties of my South Asian class mates. I was a passionate feminist by my early teens and my passion was further fuelled by a teacher who gave me the books of radical feminists like Sheila Jeffreys to read. I came out as a lesbian in my early twenties, during my undergraduate degree (I now identity as non-heterosexual), and this was highly influential in my choice of lesbian and gay parenting as a topic for my PhD research (at Loughborough University, UK). My training in qualitative research was almost exclusively unpinned by critical frameworks such as feminism, social constructionism, poststructuralism and discourse analysis. This training, combined with my personal commitments to criticality and social justice, means that most of my research is conducted through a critical lens.

or picked up from a 'how to' guide; others feel the same about qualitative research in general. In contrast, some (e.g. McLeod, 2001) argue that clear guidance is vital for demystifying qualitative research, and making it accessible to everyone, and in recent years there has been an increased focus on practical guidance (e.g. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Both positions hold validity: clear guidelines are important for learning, but *doing* qualitative research remains an essential part of the learning process. The point is nicely expressed by a British student talking about his experience of learning qualitative methods: 'the more you do [qualitative research] the better you get, it's practice, it's like art you have to do it to learn it you can't just sit there read a book and think "oh that's how I do it," it's not like you can just pick up a manual and go how do I analyse this, not like with stats' (PD in Shaw, Dyson, & Peel, 2008: 187).

We have designed this book as a *practical* introduction to qualitative research, for people relatively new to the field. It is intended to demystify the process of qualitative research, and help emerging qualitative researchers feel they have a grasp of what they need to do to be a *successful* qualitative researcher. Our experience tells us that practically oriented information and the use of examples from real research projects are crucial for a productive learning experience. Because of this, we do some things differently in this book, compared to most other qualitative teaching guides:

- We prioritise practice over theory; we aim to teach you what you need to know to *do* qualitative research, from design to data collection, analysis and reporting, without deeply engaging with theory. Obviously theory *is* important. It's absolutely *vital* for developing a fuller and deeper understanding of qualitative methods and **methodologies**, and what knowledge we can and cannot generate from the methods we use. But these debates can be inaccessible (and less meaningful) if you first don't have some basic understanding of qualitative data and what you might do with it, analytically. Requiring deep theoretical engagement at the start can actually cloud the process, making qualitative research (in general) harder to understand than it needs to be. In contrast to the usual model of learning theory first, we believe that the theory can more easily become clear, and relevant, to people, through the process of starting to actually *do* qualitative research – that is, 'getting your hands dirty' with data collection and analysis. So we suggest you only need *limited* theoretical knowledge before you jump right in and start doing qualitative research, and for this reason, our discussion of theory is limited to an introduction in Chapter 2, and theory specific to certain analytic approaches in Chapter 8. Once you feel you have understood the basics of what qualitative research is, and how you do it, we encourage you to start to read more deeply into theory (e.g. Burr, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Nightingale & Cromby, 1999) to enhance your analytic skills.
- We understand qualitative data analysis as having one of three basic forms or frameworks: searching for *patterns*, looking at *interaction*, or looking at *stories.* We focus on pattern-based analysis, as the most basic and common qualitative approach (in psychology), and teach you to analyse qualitative data within this

patterns framework. We aim to teach 'basic' and 'generic' qualitative research skills and knowledge, which can be applied to different analytic methods. So instead of providing several chapters on different analysis 'methods', we systematically walk you through a basic thematic approach, and compare and contrast this with other approaches, where relevant. This different approach to teaching analysis ensures you understand the core premise and purpose of pattern-based ways of analysing qualitative data, and the similarities and differences between different methods, and their language and concepts.

- We aim to guide you through the entire process of qualitative research. In keeping with our very practical orientation, we do so using lots of 'real' research examples, both in the text itself, and on the ***companion website***.

WHO WE'VE WRITTEN THE BOOK FOR

This book is written first and foremost for students learning qualitative research within a (undergraduate or taught postgraduate) psychology degree (we are both psychologists). The book supports a teaching block on qualitative methods, and is designed as a resource for students doing a qualitative research project – from the process of research design to the writing-up of the report. Students learning and doing qualitative research in the context of other social and health disciplines should also find it useful, as will more established researchers encountering or doing qualitative research for the first time. Although we're both psychologists, and a lot of the material orients to psychology, qualitative psychology isn't clearly disciplinary-bound: it bleeds across the boundaries of related disciplines such as sociology, social work, counselling, nursing, education, social anthropology, socio-legal studies and social geography. We therefore use examples from within and outside psychology and we draw from qualitative research around the globe; in fitting with qualitative psychology's emphasis on knowledge as contextual (see Chapter 2), we always note where the research examples are from.

SOME INFORMATION ABOUT OUR TAKE ON THINGS, INCLUSIONS AND EXCLUSIONS

There are a few other specific things that will be useful to know in reading and making sense of this book:

- We're not *neutral* when it comes to qualitative research – we think it's fantastic! But more specifically, we also advocate particular *forms* of qualitative research – those that are contextualist or constructionist in their orientation (see Chapter 2), and typically part of a Big Q approach. Given that, we don't discuss qualitative research used in a (post)positivist (small q) way.
- To give some sense of coherence and comparability, many of our examples come from research related to weight, eating, diet and 'obesity' (including the **focus group** [FG] data we analyse in Chapters 9–11). You'll quickly see we often use the language of *fat*. This might seem shocking to some readers, and may be taken as derogatory. On the contrary, in line with fat politics, fat is

not a 'dirty word' (Wann, 2009) – or indeed a 'dirty' state of embodiment – and in order to counter fat phobia, we must shift from euphemistic language around fatness. Terms like 'obesity', which have the ring of medical neutrality, also are far from neutral, and convey a whole lot of (problematic) values and assumptions.

- Given that qualitative research is a diverse field, and given that this is an introductory textbook, we can't cover everything. Our decisions on what to include and exclude reflect a combination of factors: a) methods that are generally considered to be core in qualitative psychology; b) methods we feel are realistically useable within a limited amount of time; c) methods that require limited resources, and which are thus amenable to student projects; d) methods which don't require a lot of technical expertise; and e) methods which are primarily text based. This means we don't discuss in any depth increasingly popular conversation analytic (e.g. Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008), discursive psychological (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992), **narrative** analytic (e.g. Riessman, 2007) or visual methods (e.g. Frith, Riley, Archer, & Gleeson, 2005), various participatory or action research approaches (e.g. Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) including memory work (e.g. Willig, 2008) and ethnography (e.g. Griffin & Bengry-Howell, 2008), or methods which can blur qualitative/ quantitative boundaries, such as Q-methodology (e.g. Watts & Stenner, 2005) or repertory grids (e.g. Jancowicz, 2004).
- Throughout the book we refer to small, medium and large projects. To give some examples of what we mean by these terms, we provide examples of student projects from our own universities in Table 1.2.

THE WAY WE'VE STRUCTURED THE BOOK

There are three *types* of questions in qualitative research:

1. your research question(s): what you're trying to find out;
2. the questions you ask participants to generate data (NB: only in qualitative research that collects data from *participants*);
3. the questions you ask of your data, in order to answer your research question(s).

Each of these types of questions is *different*, and they are the focus of different stages in the research process. The book guides you through the entire research process from conceiving and designing qualitative research, through to collecting and analysing qualitative data and writing up, evaluating and disseminating qualitative research, in a more or less sequential order.

- *Section 1: Successfully getting started in qualitative research* deals with some of the basic issues in qualitative research, and covers aspects of planning and design. We recommend *definitely* reading these chapters first if you're (relatively) new to qualitative research, or research at all.
- *Section 2: Successfully collecting qualitative data* covers various methods of data collection. Because interactive methods (where the researcher interacts with participants to generate data) are very common, two chapters are devoted to the

Table 1.2 Sizes of projects in different countries

Country	Small Project	Medium Project	Large Project
UK (Department of Psychology, University of the West of England)	*Final year undergraduate project* • 7½ months part time (PT) • 10,000 word report*	*MSc dissertation* • 1 year PT • 15,000 word report* *MPhil thesis* • 18–36 months full time (FT); • 40,000 word report* *Professional doctorate thesis* • 3 years PT • 30–40,000 word report*	*PhD thesis* • 3–4 years FT • 80,000 word report*
Aotearoa/ New Zealand (Department of Psychology, The University of Auckland)	*Honours dissertation* • 7½ months PT • 8–10,000 word report (length only a guideline)*	*MA/MSc thesis* • 9–12 months FT • 35–40,000 word report	*Professional doctorate (DClinPsy) dissertation* • 3 years PT • 60,000 word report *PhD thesis* • 3–4 years FT • 100,000 word report

*Excludes reference list and appendices

most widely used of these (interview and FGs). We have also included some textual approaches which are *particularly* useful for small-scale, time-limited projects.

- *Section 3: Successfully analysing qualitative data* includes five chapters, first describing the process of **transcription**, then introducing different approaches to analysis and finally moving to a practical discussion and demonstration of the stages of *doing* analysis.
- *Section 4: Successfully completing qualitative research* covers the very important issue of how to ensure that your qualitative research is of an excellent standard, and the dissemination of your results through reports and presentations.

This structure invokes a simple, directional process for qualitative research, from design to completion, like climbing a staircase where you start at one point and finish at the other with no chance of digression. Is qualitative research like this? Not at all, sorry! Qualitative research is instead a *recursive rather than linear* process; it often involves going sideways and backwards, as well as forwards, to reach the answers you're looking for. While you can read the book from end to end, you may also want to move back and forth through it, to match where you are in your learning or research

process, and definitely revisit questions of theory (Chapters 2 and 8) as you learn more.

PEDAGOGICAL FEATURES YOU'LL FIND IN THE BOOK

The book contains a range of distinct pedagogical features to assist your learning:

- a succinct *overview* and *summary* of each chapter;
- suggestions for *further resources* relevant to the focus of each chapter (e.g. further reading, online resources, content on the ***companion website***);
- *classroom exercises* and *questions for discussion* – usually at least four provided for each chapter;
- *research examples* – demonstrating the use of a particular method;
- *tables* – for easy comparisons and reference;
- *boxes* – to highlight particular bits of information;
- a *glossary* of terms to demystify some of the jargon of qualitative research – the first time a glossary term appears in the text, it will be **emboldened**;
- a set of *research design tables* to aid in determining the scope of your research project and in ensuring an appropriate fit between all aspects of your qualitative project (Tables 3.1–3.3);
- some *material examples* to guide you in producing research materials.

The book is supported and expanded by a thorough ***companion website*** (www.sagepub.co.uk/braunandclarke) that includes multiple additional resources, including:

- an extensive qualitative data archive (the full **transcript** of the weight and obesity FG we ran for the book; a full transcript and audio file from a second FG on body art; various sample textual **datasets**);
- an extensive collection of material resources which provide examples of different qualitative research documents (some additionally annotated);
- information about an additional textual data collection method (**vignettes**);
- examples of qualitative presentations and posters;
- chapter-by-chapter learning resources, including extended examples of certain boxes and tables;
- self-test multiple-choice questions for each section of the book;
- an interactive flashcard glossary;
- answers to certain chapter exercises;
- links to the Sage journal articles recommended as further reading.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter:

- provided a brief introduction to what qualitative research is;
- introduced the idea of research paradigms, and outlined a qualitative paradigm;
- briefly summarised the emergence of qualitative research (within psychology);
- explained the all-important qualitative sensibility;

- introduced ourselves and our perspectives;
- introduced the approach and scope of this book.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Further reading:

For accessible introductions to the history and emergence of qualitative psychology, we recommend: Ashworth, P. (2003). The origins of qualitative psychology. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (pp. 4–24). London: Sage.

Howitt, D. (2010). Part 1 Background to qualitative methods in psychology, especially Chapter 2, How qualitative methods developed in psychology. In *Introduction to qualitative methods in psychology*. Harlow: Prentice Hall.

WWW.

Online resources:

See the ***companion website*** (**www.sagepub.co.uk/braunandclarke**) for:

- self-test multiple choice questions relating to Section 1;
- the flashcard glossary – test yourself on the definitions of key terms used in this chapter;
- further readings (articles from Sage journals).

2 Ten fundamentals of qualitative research

OVERVIEW

Qualitative research is about meaning, not numbers
Qualitative research doesn't provide a single answer
Qualitative research treats context as important
Qualitative research can be experiential or critical
Qualitative research is underpinned by ontological assumptions
Qualitative research is underpinned by epistemological assumptions
Qualitative research involves a qualitative methodology
Qualitative research uses all sorts of data
Qualitative research involves 'thinking qualitatively'
Qualitative research values subjectivity and reflexivity
Knowing what you now know, is qualitative research right for your project?

If you're travelling to a completely foreign country, some basic knowledge – such as what language is spoken and what the key aspects of culture and etiquette are – is vital for a successful trip. This chapter provides such an introduction for qualitative research, so that rather than blundering uninitiated into the wilderness of qualitative research, and potentially getting lost or making some fundamental errors, you can walk confidently, with solid ground beneath your feet. We introduce ten basic things you really need to know about qualitative research before you start to do it, and then discuss how you determine the suitability of qualitative research for a project.

Before we begin, it's important to note that qualitative research is a rich, diverse and complex field (see Madill & Gough, 2008). It can aim to do one or more different things: 'give voice' to a group of people or an issue; provide a detailed description of events or

experiences; develop theory; interrogate the meaning in texts; identify discourses or demonstrate the discursive features of a text; and/or engage in social critique. Qualitative research is *not* a single thing, although people who don't understand it often treat it as if it were.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IS ABOUT MEANING, NOT NUMBERS

In a nutshell, if asked what the *central* thing that distinguishes qualitative research as a field is, our answer would be that it deals with, and is interested in, *meaning*. At its core, qualitative research is about capturing some aspect of the social or psychological world. It records the messiness of real life, puts an organising framework around it and interprets it in some way.

To gain an understanding of what it *is*, it's also helpful to understand what it is *not*. As noted in Chapter 1, qualitative and quantitative research have quite different foci and purposes, and result in quite different knowledge and claims. Box 2.1 provides a useful comparison of two studies on the same broad topic, one using a qualitative approach and one using a quantitative approach; see also Table 1.1 in Chapter 1. Qualitative research is not about testing hypotheses, and not typically about seeking comparisons between groups. This isn't to say you cannot make comparisons in qualitative analysis, but only quantitative methods provide a framework for *testing* difference between groups in any concrete or absolute way. And it does *not* aim for replication, either as a principle, or as the criterion by which the quality of research is established (see Chapter 12). Because of a focus on knowledge as something that comes from, and makes sense within, the contexts it was generated from (see below), qualitative research does not assume the 'same' accounts will always be generated, every time, by *any* researcher.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DOESN'T PROVIDE A SINGLE ANSWER

If you love certainty, qualitative research is going to present you with some challenges. Among most qualitative researchers, it's generally agreed upon that there is more than *one* way of making meaning from the data that we analyse, which means there isn't a single 'right' answer. One of the criticisms of qualitative research from some quantitative researchers is that, if that's the case, then our analyses are simply 'made up' and don't tell us anything meaningful; that 'anything goes' in qualitative research. This is emphatically *not* the case. An analysis of qualitative data tells one *story* among many that could be told about the data. The idea that analysis is like a story is a useful concept, but don't think this means it's fictional. Imagine you've gone on holiday with your family. When you come back, your story of the holiday may be quite different to your parents' story – they may have had a fantastic time, while you were bored senseless. Each is an equally true story of the holiday. Qualitative researchers recognise that the data analyses we produce are like such stories – they are partial, and

they are **subjective** (see below). But any good analysis needs to be plausible, coherent and grounded in the data. You don't need to be claiming to tell the only or absolute truth to be telling a compelling 'truth' about your data.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TREATS CONTEXT AS IMPORTANT

Another key tenet of qualitative research is an appreciation that information and knowledge always come from somewhere. Qualitative data are understood as accounts that are *not* produced in the ether. Instead, they are seen to be produced in particular contexts, by participants who come from, and are located within, specific contexts. What does that mean? It means that, in contrast to the positivist/quantitative ideal of being able to obtain 'uncontaminated' knowledge, with all biases removed, qualitative research recognises that these exist, and incorporates them into the analysis. It recognises the subjectivity of the data we analyse, and the analyses we produce. Subjectivity basically refers to the idea that what we see and understand reflects our identities and experiences – the contexts we've existed in, a concept sometimes also referred to as '*perspectival* subjectivity' (Kvale, 1996: 212). Qualitative research does not treat this subjectivity as **bias** to be eliminated from research, but tends to involve contextualised analysis, which takes this into account.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH CAN BE EXPERIENTIAL OR CRITICAL

Qualitative research is exploratory, open-ended and organic, and produces in-depth, rich and detailed data from which to make claims. As a field, it can be divided into two broad camps (Reicher, 2000), which we term experiential and critical. **Experiential qualitative research** validates the meanings, views, perspectives, experiences and/or practices expressed in the data. We call it experiential because participants' **interpretations** are prioritised, accepted and focused on, rather than being used as a basis for analysing something else. **Critical qualitative research** takes an interrogative stance towards the meanings or experiences expressed in the data, and uses them to explore some other phenomenon. Typically, it seeks to understand the factors influencing, and the effects of, the particular meanings or **representations** expressed. We call it critical because it doesn't take data at face value. This means that analysts' interpretations become more important than participants'. We'll explain these two camps in a bit more detail.

EXPERIENTIAL QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: TELLING IT 'LIKE IT IS'

Experiential research is driven by a desire to know people's own perspectives and meanings, to 'get inside' people's heads as it were, and to prioritise them in reporting the research. Research becomes a process of collecting such information, and then putting an organising, interpretative framework around what is expressed in the data.

BOX 2.1 COMPARING A QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE APPROACH

Here we contrast two studies (Christianson, Lalos, Westman, & Johansson, 2007; Herlitz & Ramstedt, 2005) on the same (broad) topic – sexual risk – conducted in the same country (Sweden) to give you a sense of the different sorts of understandings that are generated by quantitative and qualitative research.

Quantitative Study	Qualitative Study
Assessment of sexual behaviour, sexual attitudes, and sexual risk in Sweden (1989–2003) (Herlitz & Ramstedt, 2005). *Research aim*: to identify changes in the general Swedish population's attitudes, knowledge, beliefs and behaviours related to HIV/AIDS, over time. Specific hypotheses: a) sexually risky behaviour would have decreased; b) that attitudes to sex would be more conservative, due to risk of HIV/AIDS.	'Eyes wide shut' – sexuality and risk in HIV-positive youth in Sweden (Christianson et al., 2007). *Research aim/question*: to explore perceptions of sexual risk taking among HIV positive youth, and their understandings of why they contracted HIV.
Sample: a random sample, stratified for age, was generated from the general population in 1989, 1994, 1997 and 2003 (n = 4000 each year), and a sample in 2000 randomly selected but weighted toward urban dwellers (n = 6000). Overall response rate was 63%, and total n = 13,762.	*Sample*: a **purposive** sample of 10 HIV positive Swedish residents (five female; five male; seven born in Sweden; three born abroad) aged between 17 and 24. Participants were recruited through three HIV clinics/organisations.
Method of data collection: quantitative questionnaire (closed response options), consisting of 85–90 items, delivered by mail to sample. Up to three reminders were sent.	*Method of data collection*: in-depth semi-structured interviews (see Chapter 3); tape recorded; transcribed 'verbatim' (all utterances transcribed as spoken).
Method of data analysis: statistical. Multiple logistical regression, a statistical method that allows determination of the (relative) influence of multiple variables (e.g. age, sex, education level) on a particular outcome (e.g. practising unsafe sex), in order to predict the likelihood of that outcome.	*Method of data analysis*: grounded theory (see Chapter 8). **Coding** and analysis began from the first interview. Analysis involved multiple stages of (open) coding and re-coding and organising the data into core categories and subcategories; for credibility, four participants also read and commented on the preliminary analysis (Chapter 12 discusses '**member checking**').

Key results: neither hypothesis supported: significant increases in casual sexual contacts without condoms, and multiple partners, between 1989 and 2003; attitudes to 'sex' outside relationships more permissive in 2003 than 1989; attitudes were more liberal, with regard to acceptability of casual sex, than behaviour; youngest participants *more* likely to use condoms for casual sex than older participants.	*Key results*: identified two main clusters of factors that limited the individuals' possibilities for agency in sexual interactions: a) '*sociocultural blinds*' referred to factors which make safer sex a hard topic to broach, like the idea that 'being in love' protects you from sexual risk; b) '*from consensual to forced sex*' referred to factors within consensual encounters, like pleasure and trust, and coercion, which resulted in risky sex.
Conclusions: need for continuous, extensive sexuality education to help reduce sexual risk which can be controlled by behaviour (e.g., condom-use).	*Conclusions*: the data and analysis emphasise the context-bound nature of sexual experiences and practices, and the way power and gender inflect most experiences. Contrary to the idea that informs health promotion, of a rational agent who makes (informed) choices about their behaviour, these accounts show that agency can be compromised by various factors beyond the individual's control.
This type of research can *show*: changes in sexual attitudes and practices (at a population level); factors that might predict particular outcomes a researcher might be interested in – can be useful for targeting interventions.	*This type of research* can *show*: the richness of (reported) real lived experiences; nuances and diversity within accounts; patterns across accounts. Can offer insights into the lived complexity of negotiating safer sex practices. Can help understand how and why young people are at risk for HIV.
This type of research cannot *show*: the meanings of different experiences; *why* these changes may have occurred.	*This type of research* cannot *show*: general patterns across the population; cause and effect relationships.
Evaluation: this sort of research is useful for mapping large population-level patterns in behaviour – it provides a 'breadth' of knowledge. The focus on association between factors can be very useful for targeting interventions. However, it does not provide 'deep' or 'rich' understanding around sexual attitudes, perceptions of risk, or behaviour, and so cannot offer understandings of *why* people do what they do.	*Evaluation*: this sort of research is useful for providing a compelling sense of what sexual risk/safety (or any other topic) really is like, for individual people in their lives. It provides both rich and deep understandings of the ways people make sense of, and put into practice, scientific 'facts' about sexual risk and safety. While it can inform interventions, it cannot be generalised to *all* people, and so cannot be used to make population-level claims about sexual safety and risk.

There are many reasons why a qualitative approach is more suitable than a quantitative one when trying to understand people's meanings:

- it allows us to retain a focus on people's *own* framing around issues, and their own terms of reference, rather than having it pre-framed by the researcher (e.g. items in a questionnaire);
- it allows a far richer (fuller, multi-faceted) or deeper understanding of a phenomenon than using numbers, not least because the complexity of people's meanings or experiences is revealed and retained in qualitative data;
- reality, meaning and experience for people often tend to be messy and contradictory; qualitative research can 'embrace this messiness' (Shaw et al., 2008: 188). Participants' language can reveal both 'mess' and contradiction in a way quantitative methods cannot;
- as it can be open-ended, exploratory, organic and flexible, it can evolve to suit the needs of the project (such as accommodating unanticipated ideas expressed by participants);
- by collecting and analysing such data, we can find out things that we might never have imagined; things that would be lost using quantitative methods. This means the scope of knowledge and understanding is opened up considerably.

What we can understand with qualitative research is not limited by the researcher's imagination and existing knowledge in the field. Instead, participants' experiences and meanings (personal and wider societal meanings) *drive* experiential qualitative research. For example, researchers wanting to understand more about young women and eating might conduct interviews or focus groups (FGs) to understand the meanings that 'food' has for a small group of young women, the place it has in their lives, and their experiences of eating (or not eating) food, instead of getting young women to complete a quantitative survey about food and eating which would involve them responding to categories and options pre-determined by the researcher.

So experiential qualitative research seeks to make sense of how the world is seen, understood and experienced from the person's perspective. Language is treated as if it provides a window to the person's interior; it is understood as the way people report their experiences, practices and meanings in a straightforward fashion; it is the vehicle researchers use to access and make sense of that inner world. Research often involves what is talked about as 'mapping' or 'giving voice' to 'the rich tapestry of people's lives' – analysis provides 'rich' or 'thick' descriptions of meaning and experience (see Box 2.2).

BOX 2.2 'THICK' OR 'RICH' DESCRIPTION

The idea that qualitative research should provide thick description came from US anthropologist Clifford Geertz's writing about ethnography in the 1970s (Geertz, 1973). Description was 'thick' when contexts of behaviour were described; it was 'thin' when context was excluded. Subsequently taken up in different ways throughout qualitative research, the idea now is often used synonymously with the term 'rich' to refer to detailed descriptions of the object of study, in which the complexity and contradictions of participants' stories of their lives are included.

CRITICAL QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: INTERROGATING THE STORIES WE COLLECT

In critical qualitative research, in contrast, the focus is not on language as a means to get *inside* the person's head, but on language as it is used 'out there' in the world. Its interest is in how language gives shape to certain social realities – and the impact of these. While critical qualitative research is essentially about language as a mode of communication, interest shifts away from only looking at the semantic content (the objects the words refer to). Rather, language is understood as the main mode by which the reality of our world is *created*, and so researchers within this tradition use language to explore the ways different versions of reality are created. They take what is called a constitutive or productive view of language; its central premise is that language creates rather than reflects reality (Weedon, 1997). For example, a project concerned with young women and eating might examine the ways young women talk about food in ways which **construct** distinct categories around different food types and eating patterns and habits (obvious ones might be healthy/unhealthy; good/bad; fattening/non-fattening; controlled/uncontrolled). Unlike experiential qualitative research, critical qualitative research doesn't see such talk as offering a window into how these young women *really feel* about food/eating. Rather, talk is seen as depicting a reality about food that they are *creating* or *constructing* through the way they talk about it, and which reflects broader ways of understanding available in their sociocultural contexts (see Chapter 7 for more on this approach).

Within this approach, research can broadly be divided between that interested in **representation** and **construction** and that interested in **language practice**. An interest in representation and/or construction is an interest in factors which shape or create meaning and the effects and implications of particular patterns of meaning. Language is one of the main means by which representation and construction occur; qualitative research is therefore ideal for researchers interested these. Qualitative research is used to understand the ways language (or imagery) tells *particular* stories about **research objects**. (Research objects – the things we study – can be concrete things, like clothing, or abstract things, like love.) To continue the previous example, a project concerned with young women and eating might analyse the ways weight and dieting are represented in teen magazines, and the explicit and implicit ideas about food, weight and eating that exist there. One common representation might be of food as something that is a threat to health, self and well-being – with the implication that eating should be approached with caution, with the right types of food consumed in a controlled fashion. A key assumption is that there are numerous ways objects could be represented, and that different representations have different implications for individuals and society (Hall, 1997). For instance, the representations of body size as the result of genetics and hormones or of individual eating and exercise behaviour carry quite different inferences about how a person can or should feel, and indeed behave, regarding their body size. For a fat person, a genetic/hormonal account means that they are seen as not responsible for their fatness; an eating/exercise account makes them potentially responsible and blameworthy. Some research in this tradition involves the practice of **deconstruction** (Norris, C., 2002a; Parker, 1988), whereby texts are 'taken apart' and interrogated for the dominant and hidden assumptions (or oppositions) they rely on.

In terms of *language practice*, qualitative research seeks to examine the ways language is used to create particular versions of reality. The analytic focus ranges widely: some is quite micro, with a focus on the *detail* of language use, such as the function of particular features of talk and texts (Hutchby, 2002). Hong Kong linguist Amy Tsui (1991), for instance, examined the ways the expression 'I don't know' functions in conversation not (just) to express a cognitive state, but to avoid or ameliorate certain delicate activities, such as a disagreement or making an assessment about something (see also Potter, 1997). Some is more macro, and considers the ways language produces a certain version of reality. For example, researchers have examined the ways people deploy different constructions of identity at different points in a conversation, identifying that these serve different purposes for the speaker (as Edley & Wetherell, 1997, show around heterosexual masculinities). For example, consider a fat man talking to a doctor about his desire to lose some weight. At one point in the conversation he may use language which suggests he is an 'in control' independent person who can choose to act in ways which will determine his weight. At another point, he may use language which suggests his fatness is not his 'fault', and that it results from forces beyond his control, such as biology or culture. Each construction has different implications, allowing the doctor to blame him, or not, for his weight, and to feel confident offering one of a range of weight-loss suggestions.

A BRIEF SUMMARY, AND AN INTRODUCTION TO THEORY

So qualitative research is concerned with words, and sometimes images, and is typically either experiential or critical. Each camp contains diverse interests (e.g. the critical camp is concerned with representation, construction or language practices). In whatever form it takes, qualitative research accesses the richness of the worlds we all exist in – whether they are the worlds that exist 'in our heads', or the social and physical worlds external to us. Regardless of which camp it's in, qualitative research overall tends to come from a different theoretical position than quantitative and experimental research. And then different qualitative methodologies also have their own particular theoretical frameworks and do different sorts of things with data. In setting out a framework for research practice, methodology relies on **ontology** and **epistemology** (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). These complicated-sounding words refer, respectively, to theories about the nature of reality or being and about the nature of knowledge. Each demarcates what can and

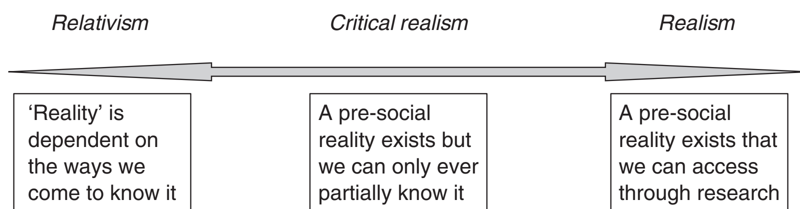

Figure 2.1 The ontology continuum