second edition

# Qualitative Research Methods in Public Relations and Marketing Communications

Christine Daymon and Immy Holloway

# Qualitative Research Methods in Public Relations and Marketing Communications

The second edition of this highly accessible core textbook continues to offer students a practical guide to the process of planning, undertaking and writing about qualitative research in public relations and marketing communications. Through clear explanations and illustrations, the book encourages undergraduate and masters level students to engage with the main approaches and techniques for conducting critical, reflective investigations.

This new edition:

- Identifies the skills and strategies needed to conduct authentic, trustworthy research
- Highlights specific analytical techniques associated within the main research approaches
- Provides new sections on internet-based research, critical discourse analysis, historical research, action research and mixed methods research.

*Qualitative Research Methods in Public Relations and Marketing Communications* will be invaluable for those undertaking research methods courses on public relations and marketing communication degrees, as well as those working on a dissertation.

**Dr Christine Daymon** is an Associate Professor in the School of Media, Communication and Culture at Murdoch University in Western Australia, where she is Academic Chair for postgraduate courses in Communication and Media Management. An active researcher, her interests centre on communication in organizations, gendered issues in public relations, and cross-cultural learning.

**Professor Immy Holloway** is based at Bournemouth University, UK at the Centre for Qualitative Research, where she teaches research and supervises research students. She has written numerous books on qualitative research, some of which have been translated into several languages.

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Second edition

**Christine Daymon**
**and Immy Holloway**

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**For the Parkers of Sandpiper Cove,**
**and Chris Holloway**

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# Preface

We have written this book for undergraduate and masters students of public relations and marketing communications, especially those undertaking dissertation research, or studying on research methods courses. Doctoral students may find this useful as an introduction to the available literature on distinctive qualitative methodologies.

Students of advertising, corporate communication, public affairs, communication management, internal communications and marketing are included within our focus. Practitioners in the field may find some of the chapters interesting for their alternative approach to the more commonly practised evaluative research with its numbers and statistics.

When writing the first edition of this text we had three aims in mind, which have continued (with only slight amendments) to motivate us when producing this second edition nine years later.

1 We want to help students make an informed judgement about the relevance of qualitative research to the investigation of core questions and current issues related to public relations and marketing communications. We want them to appreciate its value as an autonomous research methodology or as a complement to quantitative research in a mixed methods research design.
2 We wish to provide a tool that will enable students to engage effectively and critically with the practices and discourses of professional communication.
3 We hope to make a contribution towards raising the profile of qualitative methods within public relations and marketing communications research more generally, and to encourage those who already do qualitative research to write more transparently about their work.

We have sought to do this by offering practical guidance together with examples of empirical studies that are based on a qualitative approach, often from an interpretive or critical-interpretive stance. In places, we have presented the views of student researchers about their experiences of researching.

The idea for writing this book grew out of our experience of empirical social science as researchers and teachers. We came to the project with diverse interests which converged at the point of qualitative research theory and practice. We both have a keen desire to demonstrate how qualitative research can be used to provide critical, innovative insights into communicative processes, the motivations and involvement of human beings, and the cultural contexts in which they are situated. These areas relate to the depth, diversity and complexity of human (and societal and organizational) relationships and meanings that are constructed through communication, aspects that are intrinsic to the study of public relations and marketing communications.

In terms of layout, the book divides the research process into five parts and is structured accordingly, although, of course, in reality data collection, analysis and writing often occur simultaneously rather than in discrete stages. Part I deals with how to get started with research. This covers the ground between coming to an awareness of the nature of qualitative research and its relevance for contemporary public relations and marketing communications, through to writing a research proposal based on qualitative methods.

Part II is concerned with the design of a research project. It begins by extending the discussion in Chapter 1 on the philosophies of research, including the implicit stance of this book, which is interpretive underpinned by social constructivism. It also offers advice on how to choose between the different and often co-existing orientations towards research, examining each in detail in the subsequent chapters on case studies, grounded theory, ethnography, discourse analysis, phenomenology, historical research and action research. It notes that each of these approaches may encompass a number of specific techniques or methods.

Part III, which discusses the data collection stage, presents a variety of methods for sampling and gathering the data.

Part IV focuses on analysing and interpreting the data and writing them up. Part V considers the mixed methods approach, which, although likely to be too difficult for novice researchers to tackle, is stimulating increasing interest from researchers in a range of disciplines. We consider the contribution of qualitative methods to this approach and note some of the debates concerning the underlying philosophies associated with the mixing of methodologies and methods.

The second edition differs from the first in the following ways. Throughout this edition, we have given greater prominence to the notions of reflexivity and transparency because of their importance within both ethical and critical frameworks. We decided not to create a separate chapter on Internet-based research on the basis that because it is now intrinsic in some way to all public relations and marketing communications research it is more appropriate to include it within relevant chapters. Therefore, alongside a discussion of how to use the Internet for communication research, we have considered issues concerning the application and ethics of new technologies, multimedia platforms and software packages for data searching and analysis, as well as disseminating information.

Feedback from student readers told us of their difficulties in making decisions about which of the different research approaches to choose in order to achieve their research goals. Therefore, Chapter 6 offers guidance in this respect. Since the first edition, the study of discourse has become a topical theme, especially in public relations; for this reason, Chapter 10 is given over to discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis. Phenomenology also has a separate chapter because of its importance to marketing communications and growing interest by public relations scholars (Chapter 11). A new chapter covers two approaches which, although unrelated, are still nascent as research approaches in the professional communication disciplines; these are historical research and action research (Chapter 12).

Chapter 20, on mixed methods research, is new. It is self-evident that the emphasis and focus of this book are on qualitative research – particularly as an autonomous research methodology. But we are also cognisant of its value within a multiple methods research design, i.e. one that includes quantitative methods. For this reason, we note the different roles and debates associated with the use of mixed methods and the position of qualitative research as both a methodology and a method within a mixed methods approach.

In terms of the different methods of data collection, we have paid greater attention to documentary materials (Chapter 17), including written, visual and multi-media. This chapter includes a brief mention of semiotics as a method of analysing visual data. The chapter also outlines projective and elicitation techniques. In addition to the extant chapter on a generic approach to analysing qualitative data (Chapter 18), we have introduced into each of the chapters in Part II a separate section on the specific analytical techniques that are applied within the discrete research approaches.

There are many people who have offered their support, ideas and contributions to this text. We thank you all: Anne Surma, Catherine Archer, Elysha Hickey, Jo Fawkes, John Oliver, Kate Fitch, Kate Price, Katharina Wolf, Kathy Durkin, Kelly Gardiner, Kristin Demetrious, Lauren Magid, Nick Hookway, Nilam McGrath (née Ashra), Paul Elmer, Pete Simmons, Richard Scase, Stuart Mills, Terry McGowan and Veronica Lawrance.

Christine Daymon and Immy Holloway
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# Part I

# Getting started

# 1 The nature and usefulness of qualitative research for public relations and marketing communications

This chapter addresses the distinctiveness of qualitative research and the benefits it holds for exploring contemporary and historical issues in public relations and marketing communications. The chapter covers:

- ways of thinking about research, including how the researcher's worldview determines the type of knowledge that is generated;
- the characteristics of qualitative research and how these compare with those of quantitative research;
- the value and complementarity of both qualitative and quantitative types of thinking;
- suggested topics for studies involving qualitative research.

## Introduction

There are two core ways of doing research in public relations and marketing communications, namely qualitative and quantitative. Our interest in this book is in qualitative research, used on its own or in a role that complements quantitative research. Both types of research have distinct characteristics, making each valuable for uncovering a certain, different view of managed communication while obscuring another view. Therefore, both qualitative and quantitative research are needed if we are to properly understand public relations and marketing communications as distinct phenomena and disciplines, and their role in society.

Every research project is guided by what a researcher wants to achieve, what they believe is good research and what it means to conduct research into strategic communication. Each researcher, therefore, has particular priorities and orientations which direct the research project. To some extent, it is relatively easy to choose which set of qualitative or quantitative methods will provide the most effective investigatory tool. Where the challenge lies is in tackling the thinking that drives the research question in the first place. This is because how we structure our ideas concerning what we query determines, first, what we find to be relevant or what we discard and, more importantly, the answers we get (as well as those we overlook). Therefore, the type of knowledge we gain from doing research gives us a certain grasp on public relations and marketing communications and their consequences. It also shapes how we experience them.

**Helpful hint**

The research question influences your research methodology. Make sure you have a sound fit between the two. Qualitative research offers a powerful means to better understand communication relationships and the social world but not all research questions call for a qualitative approach.

Public relations and marketing communications are concerned with intentional, often persuasive, communication whereby communicators and stakeholders (and often the media) are relationally active in creating, amending and re-constructing meanings and, thus, in transforming their social worlds. What this means is that, as individuals and groups of people, we perpetuate or change our opinions about the world in which we live and work through relational communication in our daily lives. Managed or strategic communication plays a role as an 'unseen power' (Heath, 2009: 2) seeking to shape how and what we know at the individual and societal levels, and also how we define our own identities in relation to others. Social reality or culture, then, does not necessarily stem from an open dialogue between two equal parties who collaboratively reach a common understanding, but instead may spring from the 'struggle of actors in a public battlefield of meanings' (Ihlen and van Ruler, 2009: 10), with that battle won by the party which is most powerful in defining reality. It is through this process that private and public attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and opinions – or social and cultural realities – are constructed and enacted on a daily basis in groups, organizations and societies.

Ideally, research should help us understand something of this complex, contextualized and emergent process. It should give us insights into how managed communication influences the dynamic process through which we create our realities and cultures. It also should give us a sense of how public relations and marketing communications themselves are shaped by the cultures in which they are embedded.

However, the adequacy of the answers we get from our research is always reliant on how willing we are as researchers to peer into the unknown. This means we have to look at things in often unconventional ways or from different vantage points. When a range of methodologies and theoretical perspectives are employed by researchers working within an academic discipline, then new knowledge is generated, and the discipline is able to progress in its development. If you are a research student, then you have a role to play in this process of developing knowledge not only for yourself but also for future practitioners, academics and students of public relations and marketing communications.

## Different ways of thinking about research in a postmodern world

As in much management-related research, investigators of strategic and managed communication have tended on the whole to follow a linear way of understanding the world. Research from this vantage point is grounded in thinking known as positivism, and usually employs quantitative methods to gather numerical data. To date, most research in marketing communications is quantitative. A content analysis by West (2007) of articles published over 15 years in the *International Journal of Advertising* shows that qualitative studies are in the minority. In public relations, the emerging results from our ongoing content analysis of articles in five international public relations journals suggests the same thing.

The aim of quantitative research grounded in positivism is to explain phenomena based on what is already known about public relations and marketing communications. While this is relevant if you want to examine questions about cause and effect, or to measure and evaluate something, the linear focus and assumptions of stability associated with positivist research make it less suited to investigating the complexity and transformability of contemporary communication relationships.

The marketing scholar Gummesson refers to the 'excessive use of quantitative methods' (2007: 130), which he suggests precludes the openness, tolerance and critique which enable and motivate unconventional, creative thinking. It is especially incompatible with the increasingly interconnected, complex and volatile nature of the postmodern world, where, for example, the growth of digitalized media and subsequent democratization of access to and ownership of information have led to the erosion of the control structures of modern institutions, ranging from governments to corporations (e.g. Scase, 2007). This has consequences for strategic communications which historically have aligned themselves with the control and rationalization of inbound and outbound communication. How appropriate are such practices in an era where contemporary organizations are highly transparent, and today's citizens demand justice, integrity and socially responsible actions from those they interact with? Furthermore, to a generation of young consumers saturated with consumption imagery and emotionally charged symbols, how realistic is it to assume that there will be an homogeneity of meaning within stakeholder groups regarding the notions of integrity, ethics and responsibility? The implications for public relations and marketing communications practices in such a diverse, risky and uncertain environment are unlikely to be comprehended through traditional research approaches.

To study complexity, power relations and the co-construction of meaning in a holistic or critical sense requires a different, more flexible type of research where the process of discovery is blended with intuition (although this is not without rigour and order as well). It is in this type of research that qualitative methods can perhaps best reach their potential. This is because there is a more natural fit between qualitative research, with its ability to delve into meaning, and the critical or interpretive ways of thinking which are concerned with the social construction of reality. We discuss different types of research thinking in Chapter 6 but for now it is sufficient to think of interpretive or critical research as being shaped by distinct worldviews.

Critical researchers are interested in stimulating emancipation and social change by, for example, challenging orthodox practices and ways of thinking, or uncovering what has been marginalized. Their methodologies are usually grounded in interpretive thinking. Interpretive researchers are concerned primarily with reaching understanding about how meaning is constructed and re-constructed through communication relationships which they study in their 'natural' or 'local' setting. From such a vantage point, you are likely to be concerned with questions related to communication processes occurring in natural settings, such as how meaning is co-created through communication in interpersonal or organizational-stakeholder relationships; or how the impressions and understandings held by a community are informed by and have consequences for broader social and historical locations; or why the discourses of certain groups have become prevalent in certain situations and not others; and also the big questions that challenge conventional disciplinary thinking.

When researching managed communication related to organizations, people or societies, interpretive investigators endeavour to do so from the perspective of those they are studying, rather than imposing researchers' terms and concepts on the research. They want to know what the implications are of this knowledge for professional and academic practice and knowledge, and more broadly for the role of public relations and marketing communications in society. Their interest is in the voices and perspectives of stakeholders and practitioners engaged in communication at different levels, including the interpersonal, organizational, professional and societal. Researchers with this agenda, then, employ qualitative methods to examine communication as experienced by people not as something linear and logical but as typically open, complex and human. They also see communication and social relations as inseparable from their social and historical contexts.

**Key point**

Communication relationships are inseparable from the social and historical contexts in which they occur, and this is reflected in the contextualized nature of qualitative research.

The different orientations that guide research each have their own strengths and weaknesses and therefore are sometimes most effective when employed within multi-dimensional or mixed methods research, as we point out in Chapter 20. However, it is not always possible or appropriate to combine methodologies in this way and the challenge is knowing when it is best to design research that employs multiple approaches or sticks to a single one. Because familiarity with a range of approaches and methods is needed to carry out mixed methods research, we suggest that if you're an undergraduate student it is worth using *either* qualitative or quantitative (but not both), depending on which one will enable you to achieve your research goals.

We reiterate that the central interest of this book is in qualitative research, including not only qualitative methodologies and methods but also qualitative thinking. We have noted that methods are merely tools for gathering and analysing data which may be applied in any type of research. The thinking, skills and orientations of researchers are what generate and frame knowledge, not only the methods they employ. We present below some of the tenets of qualitative thinking and research, acknowledging that they are primarily associated with the assumptions of an interpretive orientation. After this, we outline some of the differences with quantitative research, noting how qualitative and quantitative sit on an interactive continuum of thinking about research in public relations and marketing communications.

## Features of qualitative research

### *Embracing complexity and diversity*

It is 'precisely the rigorous, reflective, reflexive, intuitive, contextualized subjectivity, embodied in excellent qualitative research which is [qualitative research's] greatest strength' (Keegan, 2006: 607). To some extent, qualitative researchers work 'at the edge of chaos', which is at the point of balance where the research has some structure but the researcher may not be totally in control if they are open to spontaneously following up on new and interesting ideas or experiences which may not have been anticipated when the research began. Qualitative researchers seek to uncover the views and meanings held by research participants, to understand the world in their terms and therefore to take account of the many, changing ways of understanding what it means to be involved in communicating as a member of a stakeholder group or as a practitioner.

Qualitative research methods are a powerful means of gaining an in-depth, holistic understanding of the relationship between international culture and communication from the perspective of those inside a society or ethnic group. Student dissertations which explore managed communication in different cultural contexts are increasingly common, especially those researched by international students, who generally have ready access to markets and organizations in their home countries.

If you undertake ethnographic research, where you glean insights from an emic (or insider) perspective, your work will help to build and broaden understandings about public relations and marketing communications because your conclusions will be based on indigenous concepts. That is, your findings won't necessarily be structured around supposedly universal, textbook principles that are grounded in North American research; instead, they will have been derived from a particular society's own terms and ideas about communication.

### *Generating meaning through cooperation*

Denzin and Lincoln (2002: ix) write that 'properly understood, qualitative enquiry becomes a civic, participatory, collaborative project. . .that joins the researcher with the researched in an on-going moral dialogue'. In qualitative research, the researcher is an active sense maker, seeing the research process as a way of learning and generating knowledge in conjunction with research participants. This contrasts with quantitative research, where the researcher is a detached investigator standing at a distance from their research. Ideally, in qualitative investigations informants are involved not only in providing data but also in some aspect of interpreting it, such as in interviews where researchers *probe* and encourage informants to talk about what something means to them. Again, because the qualitative research process is open and there is a desire to privilege participants' voices, at the analysis and writing stages informants are often asked to read and comment further. Chapter 5, especially Table 5.2, discusses this 'member checking' in detail.

### *Emergent and processual*

Thinking qualitatively means acknowledging that research is not only a collaborative process but also a creative one. In the same way that communication involves negotiating different meanings in order to co-construct social and cultural realities, so too qualitative research is about creativity and flexibility. Researchers start out with a topic and an agenda which fuel their research progress, but usually they are also committed to exploring new and often surprising avenues that emerge as informants reveal their understandings and interests. Research procedures may be unstructured, adaptable and sometimes spontaneous, allowing you to take advantage of serendipity, that is, unexpected and surprising occurrences or statements. At times the research process may even be described as untidy as you attempt to unpack the complexities and disorderliness of the social world of public relations and marketing communications.

For example, if you are researching in a culture different from your own, this is a process of inherent uncertainty because you are dealing with unfamiliar customs, values and expectations concerning your research topic. You may be unsure about how you will be perceived as a researcher and also how you should go about conducting your research in a culturally sensitive way. You may wonder also about how these decisions will impact on your overall investigation. In some countries, there may be profound differences between what you, as a Western trained researcher, and your research participants consider good research.

Qualitative research rarely provides static portraits of phenomena. Instead, it aims to capture processes that take place over time because it acknowledges that meaning is emergent and provisional. The often prolonged engagement of researchers with their research settings means that qualitative research can be attuned to social change, sequences of events and behaviours, and the transformation of cultures.

### *Holistic and contextualized*

There is a concern with context in qualitative thinking because researchers acknowledge that it is impossible to understand phenomena if they are isolated from the world in which they are experienced. Furthermore, meaning cannot be attained for a whole by looking at its parts.

Therefore, often research is carried out ‘in the field’, with the embeddedness of the exploration taken into account when interpreting the data. Most qualitative investigations are carried out in people’s natural environments, such as where they socialize, in their offices, at public meetings and events, or even in people’s homes. This enables researchers to observe how they go about their routine communication activities and interactions. For example, in writing about their participant observation examination of how communication functions in society, Edwards and Kreshel (2008) acknowledge that it was because they did not isolate the data from their setting that they were able to gain such unique insights. From a qualitative perspective, then, knowledge about public relations and marketing communications is described as contextualized.

However, in some cases research takes place away from the natural environment, such as when strangers meet together to take part in a focus group in an unfamiliar setting such as a conference room. Even here, though, researchers attempt to engage with participants *about* their natural setting. In a similar vein, historians and discourse and content analysts spend their days poring over written and visual texts without ever meeting the original creators and audiences of these documents. Yet, they too continue to be interested in the context in which the texts were produced and consumed, using their knowledge of this to base their interpretations on.

### ***The researcher as relevant and reflexive***

We have already noted how the researcher’s thinking puts a particular angle on a research project from start to finish. Because of the imperative to be objective and distanced in positivist thinking, the relevance of the researcher is excluded in quantitative studies. This ignores how an investigator’s subjectivity – their philosophical stance, background, experiences, biases and emotions – substantially influences both the design of enquiry and the eventual knowledge that is produced.

If you embed yourself in a research site, such as when you carry out face-to-face or online observations of a particular community’s communicative interactions, you are, in effect, engaging in two worlds simultaneously – as an outsider involved in research and as an insider participating in the social world of participants. This oscillating role, which requires you to be ‘intellectually poised between familiarity and strangeness’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 89), is an uneasy one. Probably you will be emotionally uncomfortable and this has unavoidable consequences for your research thinking, especially when you interpret the data, but also if you want to build genuine, personal research relationships (see Daymon and Hodges, 2009). Such emotion is a valid research input, and by openly acknowledging your emotional involvement as an intrinsic aspect of research you will broaden the scope of the research process. Your research will come closer to ‘real life’, thereby enabling you to generate more relevant knowledge (Keegan, 2006: 671).

Your subjectivity therefore can be a valuable resource in qualitative research, enhancing rather than distorting the credibility of your study. One effect of such reflexivity is that readers can make up their own minds about how your standpoint and location in the research have affected how you took account of the contradictory values you encountered in your research, and subsequently how you interpreted the evidence and came to your conclusions. Furthermore, if your research report includes a discussion about researcher reflexivity, then your work will not suffer from the quantitative tendency to present the researcher as a distant, authoritative and objective voice – which, of course, is far from the truth. Instead, your work will reveal how your findings are a co-construction between human beings, whereby both you and your participants have been actively involved in the research process of making sense of communication within a larger social context.

So how to be reflexive? It means thinking through and writing about your own background, theoretical perspectives and experiences, and the extent of your emotional engagement with participants. It means reflecting on and writing about the relational challenges of gaining access to sites, people and materials involved in enquiry, how conflicts or friendships affected how data was collected and how these acted as a filter through which the data was 'read'. It also means showing how the cultural understandings of participants as well as your own have influenced decisions at every stage of investigation.

Of course, to write so overtly about reflexivity means that the methodology and concluding sections of your research report will be longer. Until institutions become more empathetic to the qualitative worldview and journal editors allow methodologies to be articulated in proper detail, the reflexive concerns of qualitative researchers are unlikely to be articulated fully. The critical public relations scholar Pompper has already asserted that researchers must 'responsibly personalize' their work (2005: 155) because 'to grow as a discipline, we must be introspective, consider research process complexities, and be accountable for our findings' (p.140). We have written in greater depth on reflexivity in Chapter 19 and elsewhere in this book.

## What are the criticisms of qualitative research?

Despite its strengths, qualitative enquiry is not without its limitations, many of which are noted through the course of this book, especially in Chapter 5, where strategies are suggested to address these. Briefly, however, we note four common criticisms as identified by Bryman (2008: 391–92).

### *Too subjective*

Those holding to a quantitative research orientation sometimes accuse qualitative studies of being too impressionistic and subjective. However, subjectivity can be a resource for the qualitative researcher, as noted previously. Subjectivity is also about critical self-awareness as you need to state and examine your own location in the research. By paying attention to the criteria of authenticity and trustworthiness (or reliability and validity), as outlined in Chapter 5, your study will go some way to overcoming this charge.

### *Difficult to replicate*

Because qualitative investigators are the main research instrument, it is practically impossible to replicate a study. But qualitative researchers are not associated with an interest in replication; their interest lies in specific settings, and they do not always wish for generalizability. Their commitment is much more to the integrity of their findings. Careful articulation of the steps taken in the research process helps to clarify the quality of the study and diffuse criticisms of this nature.

### *Problems of generalization*

Qualitative research studies are not supposed to be representative of a larger population, yet a common challenge is that they are too restricted in their conclusions. By providing rich descriptions of what goes on in a particular context, they help to illuminate important issues in a specific case or regarding a particular group of people. Nevertheless, theory-based generalization can be presented, as we explain in Chapter 5.

### *Lack of transparency*

Bryman (2008) argues that qualitative researchers have been remiss in failing to articulate clearly the procedures they followed to select samples, collect the data and analyse them; in other words, the audit trail has to be described so that readers can follow it. How data were analysed and interpreted and how a study's conclusions were arrived at are details that are missing from the majority of published texts in managed communication. Although the problem is less pronounced in other disciplines, it has not yet been addressed in public relations and marketing communications, but needs to be as it relates to the overall quality of investigation. In Chapters 18 and 19, we offer some tips on doing this.

## Quantitative research

Qualitative thinking is influenced by an interpretive worldview. This contrasts with a positivist worldview, which usually – but not always – goes hand in hand with quantitative research methods. (We define and discuss interpretivism and positivism in Chapter 6.) Quantitative techniques seek to distance the researcher from the data in order to be 'objective' about how data are collected (say, by sending out a survey rather than listening to the voices – and often surprising topics of knowledge – of informants). Objectivity is also considered desirable at the analysis stage, where numbers and statistics are favoured over words and the organization of language. Other features of quantitative methods are that they tend to be large scale, with a focus on specific factors which are studied in relation to specific other factors. This requires researchers to isolate variables from their natural context in order to study how they work and their effect. You might, for instance, isolate budgets from all the different aspects of sponsorship and test the hypothesis that the larger the budget, the more effective the sponsorship programme will be. This contrasts with a qualitative study, which would be more interested in how a budget was used within a specific campaign and the implications for relationships with stakeholders targeted by the sponsorship activities.

A further feature of quantitative studies is that they tend to be structured from the beginning; procedures and questions are predetermined before primary research begins. This means that theory is tested out through research rather than emerging from the research. Because quantitative methods are associated with numbers and detachment, they are not well suited to description. This contrasts with qualitative methods, where deep, rich description is one of the key strengths.

## A research continuum of qualitative and quantitative thinking

Both qualitative and quantitative thinking have value. Certain research questions lend themselves more to a quantitative orientation, whereas other questions are more suitable for qualitative research. We need both forms of knowledge in order to create more robust, ethical and sound research, academic disciplines and professional practices.

In many cases, qualitative and quantitative are seen as competing types of research. We argue that it is more helpful to think of their distinctions not as absolute but as lying on an interactive continuum (e.g. Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005), with researchers being able to draw on different aspects of each depending on the needs of the research. In some research projects it may be necessary to exploit both ends of the continuum in a complementary fashion (as in mixed methods research, where both qualitative and quantitative research are used in combination; see Chapter 20). In other projects, a characteristic of one approach might be purloined by another, such as when qualitative researchers use the quantitative terms ‘reliability’ and ‘validity’. We illustrate these characteristics in Table 1.1 and draw your attention to the note at the foot of the table, which point to how some characteristics can shift along the continuum.

Our hope is that, in future, research into strategic and managed communication will more conscientiously accommodate different styles of enquiry so that both qualitative and quantitative approaches will co-exist on an equal footing. This may mean the increasing application of multiple strategies in a single research project (such as using discourse analysis, observation and interviews where one approach complements another), or it may mean looking at the same issue in different ways, using qualitative research for one part of an overall question and quantitative for another. Most interesting, though, will be the acceptance and deployment of qualitative research as a valid, standalone means for understanding meaningful patterns, connections and processes in the complex and unexplored, such as, *inter alia*, how and why an event or action occurs, how it functions in social contexts, what it means for the participants concerned and how they interpret what it means to others?

*Table 1.1* Qualitative and quantitative research: positioned at different ends of a continuum

| | *Qualitative* | *Quantitative* |
|---|---|---|
| *Main focus* | Meaning | Measurement |
| *Aim* | Exploration, understanding and description of participants' experiences and life world<br>Generation of theory from data | Search for causal explanations<br>Testing hypotheses, prediction, control |
| *Approach* | Initially broadly focused<br>Process oriented<br>Context-bound, mostly natural settings<br>Getting close to the data | Narrow focus<br>Outcome oriented<br>Context free, often in laboratory settings |
| *Sampling* | Participants, informants<br>Sampling units such as place, time, concepts<br>Purposive and theoretical sampling<br>Flexible sampling that can develop during the research | Respondents, participants (the term 'subjects' is now discouraged in the social sciences)<br>Randomized sampling<br>Sample frame fixed before the research starts |
| *Data collection* | In-depth non standardized interviews<br>Participant observation/fieldwork<br>Documents, diaries, photographs, videos | Questionnaire, standardized interviews<br>Tightly structured observation<br>Documents, experiments<br>Randomized controlled trials |
| *Analysis* | Thematic or constant comparative analysis, latent content analysis ethnographic, exhaustive description narrative analysis etc. | Statistical analysis |
| *Outcome* | A story, ethnography, a theory | Measurable and testable results |
| *Relationships* | Direct involvement of researcher<br>Research relationship close | Limited involvement of researcher with participant<br>Researcher relationship distant |
| *Quality/rigour* | Trustworthiness, authenticity<br>Typicality and transferability<br>Validity | Internal/external validity, reliability<br>Generalizability |

*Source*: Adapted from Holloway and Wheeler (2010: 10).

*Note*: These differences are not absolute; they are mainly at different ends of a continuum. For instance, some qualitative approaches seek causal factors or explanations such as grounded theory. The term 'validity' is used in qualitative research but has an alternative meaning. In some cases, qualitative inquiry may seek generalizability. Further, quantitative research is not always context free or completely objective. In some cases, the quantitative researcher can have a relationship with participants.

## Public relations and marketing communications as separate disciplines

So far, we have collapsed the notions of public relations and marketing communications into one which we refer to, for the sake of shorthand, as either strategic, managed or professional communications through the book. Not everyone would agree with our assumption that there is a connection between the two phenomena. Indeed, the disciplines of public relations and marketing communications have developed on parallel tracks, with the knowledge base of public relations informed primarily by communication and media studies and, to some extent, management. Marketing communications is a strand of the discipline of marketing, although advertising has been extensively influenced by communication studies. Where marketing communications has come closest perhaps to the focus of public relations is in the new school of thought called social marketing, whose interest in social responsibility and ethics touches upon a historically core concern of public relations.

In practice, public relations practitioners often employ techniques in pursuit of marketing-related goals, developing relationships internally and in the wider context that are beneficial to an organization in order to enhance the willingness of consumers, suppliers and influencers to think favourably of the organization or brand. Also in practice marketers employ media relations, promotional and personal influence strategies from the realm of public relations in order to achieve social, political and reputational objectives. Critical researchers in both public relations and marketing communications have at heart a concern with social critique, justice and moral dialogue. For example, recent studies in both disciplines have been interested in how managed communication reproduces gender and racial stereotypes, and often contributes to social practices that are harmful to personal welfare and the environment. For this reason, we have situated our discussion within the realms of both public relations and marketing communications, although we acknowledge them to be distinct phenomena and academic disciplines.

## Topics for future qualitative research in public relations and marketing communications

The primary goal of qualitative enquiry is to reveal and interpret what it means to be involved in or affected by public relations and marketing communications; this includes how stakeholders and practitioners make sense of communication activities, relationships and their worlds, and the subsequent implications for individuals, communities, organizations, professions and ultimately society.

Lindlof and Taylor (2002: 5) write that the questions which animate qualitative enquiry are: what's going on here? What is the communicative action that is being performed? How do they do it? What does it mean to them? How do they interpret what it means to others? How do we interpret and document how they act, what they tell us about what they know, and how they justify their actions? What is the relation of us to them, of self to other?

In terms of how these might apply to research into strategic communication while also addressing the primary goal of qualitative enquiry (as set out in the first paragraph of this section, p. 14), we list two specific areas from many, which are diversity and wellbeing.

In an overview of social research over the last 25 years, one of the leading qualitative scholars, Lincoln (2010), wrote that in all disciplines researchers have been blind to diversity and social justice. In a similar vein, the influential public relations scholar L.A. Grunig (2008) called for qualitative enquiry into diversity because of the topic's international importance and the distinct ability of qualitative research to tackle the topic from the perspective of those under investigation. 'Diversity in its many forms – racio-ethnicity, gender, age, class, physical ability, physical appearance, religion, sexual orientation, and so on – increasingly affects the global economy in general and the public relations profession in particular' (p. 128). Indeed, Lincoln emphasized that we need to 'let go of our lingering posture of color blindness and re-sensitize ourselves to difference and most importantly, to self-named and self-claimed difference' (2010: 5).

To do this, Lincoln recommends critical ethnography as a methodology (see Chapter 9 in this book) because it encourages researchers to trace over time the 'deviations, conflicts and contradictions' that make up the social realities of participants and researchers alike. As an example, one could imagine that this might involve spending lengthy periods of time living alongside members of a minority group, examining how corporate discourse may have reproduced a stereotypical worldview by community outsiders, and noting how this affects the identity of group members and their social opportunities. It would also involve noting how your own location in the project affects your sensitivity to 'diversity'. In the marketing communications arena, a similar approach might be taken to a study into the repercussions of advertising on the consumption patterns of certain underprivileged cultural groups.

The notion of wellbeing has currency in other disciplines but is yet to be addressed by researchers of strategic communications. It is an important topic which should be of concern because it involves not only the psychological health of individuals, but also the health of organizations and societies. The areas where qualitative research can offer original insights include cross-cultural studies into how different audiences respond communicatively and behaviourally to health promotions; investigations into corporate responsibility, power relations and their effects, such as social and economic resilience or otherwise; enquiries into the ethical impact of professional communication practices on individual practitioners, including their family relationships and personal identities; and so on.

Diversity and wellbeing are only two of a huge variety of topics suited to qualitative research. We argue that in future researchers need to draw upon a greater range of qualitative orientations and techniques in order to take full advantage of the unique ability of qualitative research – either in combination with quantitative thinking or autonomously – to provide innovative, situated knowledge about public relations and marketing communications. We present some of these approaches and techniques in the following chapters.

## Summary

- Your worldview determines your research question and the choices you make about the design of your research, including the methods you use to collect and analyse the data.
- Qualitative research is associated with an interpretive worldview. It is interested in exploring meaning and communication relationships, and how social reality is constructed from the point of view of the people being studied.
- Qualitative research can be used on its own in a research project or in combination with quantitative research.
- The distinctions between qualitative and quantitative thinking are not absolutes but are positioned on an interactive continuum.
- It is important to ensure a sound fit between your research orientation (qualitative or quantitative) and your main research question. 'How' and 'why' questions are suitable for qualitative research with an emphasis on process and description.

### Example 1.1: Student voices on doing qualitative research

Here are the views of current and recent research students who talk about their experiences of designing the qualitative research project and collecting the data. You will find further student comments about other aspects of doing research in later chapters of the book.

*Selecting a topic*

> I don't think I've ever signed up for a course of study that I didn't think would hold my attention for the duration of the course. My dissertation was the same. I was in my mid-forties and playing and coaching football. I have three teenage sons who all play so winter weekends are spent at football fields. I had been trained as a referee and found that some of the communication advice such as avoiding stating your expectations to players before a game didn't accord with my experience or communication theory. So the decision to study referee communication with players was part convenience and part curiosity.
>
> (Peter Simmons, successful doctoral candidate)

*Developing a research question*

> It took a great deal of time to narrow my field of study to a succinct and useful research question. I spent a lot of time brainstorming words and concepts related to the topic and considering how I could accurately reflect my research area with a question which I could conceivably answer within the timeframe.
>
> (Lauren Magid, successful undergraduate student)

> My research question evolved. First I sought everything and anything about sport referee communication practice. In particular I was interested in the way they manage and prevent player aggression and abuse. But when I interviewed elite-level referees and wrote a paper on managing aggression I realised that nobody had interviewed the players. All the researchers used the referee perspective; my question and contribution would be the exploration of the player perspective.
>
> (Peter Simmons)

> It was hard to focus down. It was fascinating finding all the different areas but hard to know what was relevant. I guess your supervisor helps you with that too because you narrow your research question. . .looking in the different fields and seeing, say, what the public relations literature had to say about relationships and then maybe looking at it from a marketing perspective and just comparing and contrasting how they deal with those areas – so I guess that's how I tackled it.
>
> (Catherine Archer, successful masters student)

*Carrying out the research*

> The biggest challenge was the logistics of the interview process. I spoke to a number of journalists working in the area of youth news, which meant travelling three hours away. It was also challenging getting decent responses from some of the teenagers I interviewed – some responses consisted of a few words! It was exciting to do your own research though – not read someone else's! I took it quite seriously and I felt like a real academic.
>
> (Elysha Hickey, current undergraduate student)

> I conducted interviews with social media experts in the communication industry. . .The interviews were my highlight as I was given the opportunity to discuss my research with people in the field and gain insight into the gap between research and reality. Conducting all the interviews in a short space of time was quite challenging. Having not previously conducted interviews, I was unaware of how energy zapping they are!
>
> (Lauren Magid)

> I based my methodology on established techniques of observation, adapting them and shaping them to suit my requirements. By doing this I felt that the research was truly my own. . .It was a challenge to unearth these techniques, but very rewarding when I did.
>
> (Stuart Mills, successful masters student)

# 2 Selecting a topic and relating to your supervisor

This chapter describes the first steps in carrying out research. It deals with:

- how to go about selecting an appropriate research topic;
- ways of triggering your ideas and developing a central research question;
- two key characteristics of research: originality and feasibility;
- the personal value of the research topic;
- relating to your research supervisor.

## Coming up with the initial idea

Finding an interesting and feasible research topic is rarely a straightforward, logical process because good ideas originate in a mix of theory, experience and prior findings. ‘What am I most interested in?’ is the first question to ask yourself. Unless a topic relates to something you have a genuine interest in – whether intellectually, politically, culturally or just because you’ve always been curious about it – it is unlikely that you will enjoy doing your research project, or even do it well. As you will be working with this topic for some time (up to a year for an undergraduate project, or several years for a PhD), it is important that the topic area sustains your interest.

### Helpful hint

Sources to trigger your ideas about a general area to research:

- the academic and professional literature;
- your own experiences and interests;
- discussions with experts;
- the priorities of research funders;
- talk with your academic supervisor.

### *Read the literature*

The professional literature draws attention to the companies and people involved in current industry issues. It helps to generate ideas for research topics as well as highlighting potential informants and case studies. A listing of the major trade journals (plus links) in advertising, public relations and marketing trade journals in the USA, UK, Australia–New Zealand, Asia and Germany is available at Web Market Central: http://www.webmarketcentral.com/advertising_trade_magazines.htm.

The academic literature points to topics that have already been researched, where there are gaps in the literature, or where research needs to be extended or developed. You might consider carrying out research on a similar topic to one that has been investigated elsewhere, using the same methods but conducting your investigation in a different context, such as a different culture, commercial sector or type of organization.

For example, much public relations research stems from the United States of America and similar research could usefully be undertaken in other geographical regions in order to confirm, add to or challenge its findings (as in many of the Examples in this chapter). Alternatively, you might think about applying the ideas of previous research to a different sample. This will, of course, depend upon your own interests and the particular gap in the literature that you have identified. However, as an example, much research on internal communication has focused on the views of management (where researchers have interviewed communication professionals and senior executives about the problems of implementing change management programmes). If you were more interested in employees as communicators, you might consider doing research on employee involvement in upward communication, or alternatively comparing the perspectives and experiences of employees towards work relationships and communication with those of managers, as in the study by Waymer and Ni (2009) mentioned in a later section (pp. 29–30).

**Example 2.1: Applying the ideas of previous research to a different cultural context**

In a study of the Chinese government's handling of a major crisis (the Sichuan earthquake), Ni Chen (2009) applied to the Chinese context two theoretical concepts which were originally developed in western contexts. These were: (1) the notion of 'institutionalization', or the extent to which PR is a top management function and therefore part of the decision-making process; and (2) models of crisis communications. (See also Example 20.4.)

An important point to keep in mind is that qualitative studies, unlike quantitative studies, cannot be truly replicated for a number of reasons. First, the researcher him- or herself is the research tool, that is, data are collected through direct interaction between the researcher and informants. Each researcher, therefore, sees the world through the unique lens of his or her own background, personality and understanding of the subject. Second, the in-depth exploration of a phenomenon or topic differs from one research project to another. Third, qualitative research is flexible; the sequence of interview questions or the focus of observation varies between studies. Therefore, while the use of other researchers' ideas and methods is helpful, you will not be able to completely replicate an earlier study in another context.

**Example 2.2: Applying and building upon the ideas of previous research**

The social uses of advertising were the focus of a study by Vince Mitchell, Jonathan Macklin and Jez Paxman (2007), who were interested in the way in which consumers use word-of-mouth communication to extend the lifespan of an advertising campaign. They applied and extended the ideas of Ritson and Elliott (1999) and O'Donohoe (1994). Ritson and Elliott pointed out that when advertising is shared within friendship groups, the social effects are strengthened. O'Donohoe's important study, which was based on data collected from mixed-gender focus groups, also highlighted the peer uses of advertising. Because friendship groups are often gender based, Mitchell *et al.* designed their own study around a sample of single-gender friendship groups (young male adults). They employed a male researcher to reduce gender interviewer effects, and also provided participants with a diary for recording instances of when they used, spoke of, recalled or replayed advertising. While the research of Mitchell *et al.* was grounded in the ideas and methodologies of the two previous studies, it extended that work through the different sampling choices and the additional data collection method of participant diaries.

Useful sources are journal articles and books (at the end of these, you will usually find suggestions and implications for further research), unpublished theses and dissertations, conference proceedings and reports, reports from government-sponsored bodies and research institutions, and reviews and overviews of the field of study, for example *Public Relations: Critical Debates and Contemporary Practice* (L'Etang and Pieczka, 2006) or *Advertising*, *Vols I–III* (Hackley, 2009), as well as the media (such as the dedicated media and marketing sections in some newspapers).

**Example 2.3: Finding a research idea from a newspaper article**

In 2006, the *Guardian* newspaper in the UK reported: 'Salmonella outbreak: poisoned patients and mystery samples – how food detectives traced

Cadbury's bug' (Lawrence *et al.*, 2006: 7). The story described a public health crisis stemming from the contamination of Cadbury chocolate bars. It highlighted Cadbury's potentially unethical decision not to notify the public initially. The *Guardian* article prompted masters student Kate Price to undertake an investigation of the extent to which consumer trust in Cadbury was affected by the crisis, and the role of corporate communications in maintaining or rebuilding trust (Price, 2007).

### *Relate it to your own experiences and concerns*

Your personal experiences and concerns can provide a rich source of ideas for research. Situations or activities at work may spark an initial thought or question which, on reflection, can provide the basis for an interesting research project.

Consider your gender, age or ethnic background; you may have access or insights into issues that are unavailable to others. However, be cautious about drawing on your own experiences. On the basis of these, you may have acquired particular biases or made prior assumptions. Therefore, it is advisable to enter the research arena with an open and flexible mind, suspending some of the ideas you already have about the research phenomenon so that you are unprejudiced about it.

#### Example 2.4: Drawing on personal background and the literature to find a research topic

During her first term of studying on a postgraduate public relations programme in the UK, Juan Du, a former PR practitioner in China, became interested in the ethics of public relations. She noted that although ethical concerns were a popular topic of discussion in the literature, she was able to find only a few examples where ethical ideas had been applied to communications in China. At the same time, she began to question from an ethical stance some of the media relations practices with which she had been involved in her work. Her experience in China taught her that 'ethics is a sensitive, but not taboo, subject in Chinese PR practice although it is not commonly discussed in the workplace' (Du, 2007: 6). Therefore, for her dissertation, she chose to examine the ethics of one highly prevalent, cultural aspect of PR which involved social networking and power relationships. Because she was already known to many journalists and PR people in China, she was able to gain good access for face-to-face interviewing.

### *Talk to experts*

Check out the biographies of staff in your institution as many of them will have research expertise in various aspects of public relations and marketing communications. When you find someone with an interesting research focus, knock on their office door or email them for an appointment. Usually they will be keen to offer some ideas that might resonate with your interests.

Conferences are useful for stimulating novel research topics for a number of reasons. First, they provide the opportunity to hear some of the most up-to-date thinking. Whereas the papers published in academic journals may have been written one to two years previously (because of long lead-times), conferences allow researchers to present and debate their working ideas. Second, conferences are useful for making contacts and networking. A casual conversation over coffee with an expert in your area may generate a whole new set of possible research topics.

### *Find out the priorities of research funders*

Grant-awarding and funding agencies regularly publish details of their current research priorities, inviting researchers to apply for financial support. While it is not wise to be driven by someone else's agenda, new research ideas may be triggered by a funder's call for applications and proposals.

If you are being sponsored to undertake a course of study, say by your employer, you might have little say in the selection of a research topic, which is determined by the priorities of your employing organization. Ideally, though, your employer will act as a sounding board, allowing you to test out ideas that may have both educational and commercial value. It is worth bearing in mind that the expectations of sponsoring organizations and educational institutions differ, and it is not uncommon for employers to try to influence the research design and dissemination of results. If this is the case, it is essential that you endeavour to uphold the academic aims and standards of your course.

### *Talk to your academic supervisor*

Aside from offering advice about how to brainstorm your way to a topic, or how feasible your research ideas are likely to be, your supervisor will have suggestions for topics, perhaps in areas he or she is currently researching. We discuss the student–supervisor relationship later in this chapter (pp. 34–38).

If you are a postgraduate research student, you should expect to cover more than one of the above in order to establish that your work is original and adds to current knowledge.

**Example 2.5: The student voice**

> I was at a conference and one of the speakers was talking about employer branding. Having worked in health, myself, I immediately thought about nurses and doctors and how difficult it was for hospitals to attract them unless the hospitals had a good reputation in the first

place. And also the whole marketing–public relations–human resources interface: in PR you have to work closely with human resources and you do have to cross boundaries – and it's really important that people get on well together. I don't think that's acknowledged much. Yet employer branding crosses all the different functions in an organization. So that conference really was one of those lightbulb moments when I thought, 'Oh, that's something I'd be interested in doing some sort of research on.' So I started reading major articles in the area and found that employer branding was more marketing based and there wasn't much material on it from a public relations point of view. It was really, really hard focusing down because there's so much that people have written on interesting tangents to the topic. It was fascinating finding all the different areas but hard to know what was relevant. Everything seems relevant when you first start out. But that's where your supervisor helps.

(Catherine Archer, successful masters student)

### *Identifying a topic and a central research question*

Having trawled through the literature, talked about your ideas and reflected upon them, it is probable that you have now identified a fairly general area that you would like to research. At this stage, it might be something as broad as social media usage by young people. However, this is too wide a topic to be achievable, so the next stage is to narrow down your ideas.

Wolcott (2009: 95) uses the analogy of a zoom lens on a camera to identify a focus for research. By zooming in on one topic, you come progressively closer and are able to see in greater detail. By zooming out, you gain more breadth. In research, you apply the same concept as in photography. Taking the broad area of interest, you zoom in on a more manageable aspect of it. In the broad topic area, is there something missing from existing studies? With regard to the broad topic, is there some particular aspect that you are particularly concerned about? Eventually, you will be able to identify a number of researchable topics in your chosen area.

For instance, the broad area of social media and young people could be refined to a study of how social media are used by young people to construct personal identities and the implications for communicators, or how social media facilitate viral marketing among young people, and so on. Eventually, you will zoom back out again in order to set your research into its broader setting, associating the topic with relevant literature, relating it to previous empirical studies and to communication or media theories.

What you are trying to do at this early stage is to come up with a topic that is researchable and manageable, and for which you can go on to develop a single, overarching research question that will guide the research. Qualitative research usually starts out with a *how* or a *what* question. Although *why* questions are sometimes found in qualitative studies, they are more likely to occur in quantitative studies because the quantitative studies are more interested in studying cause and effect (however, this is not necessarily excluded in qualitative research).

Qualitative research seeks to identify how people interact with their world (what they do), and how they experience and understand their world. So, for instance, if you were to conduct a qualitative investigation on the topic of employer branding, you might ask the question: 'What relational or reputational factors influence employer attractiveness to potential recruits?' Further sub-questions would emerge once you got into the process of reading the literature and commencing the fieldwork.

**Example 2.6: Start generally then focus down**

- General area of interest: vigilante marketing.
- Research topic: consumers use of vigilante marketing to build brand commitment.
- Central research question: how do consumers use vigilante marketing to self-create and disseminate advertising artefacts that build commitment to a brand and brand community?
- Aim: to investigate how consumers in a specific brand community use vigilante marketing techniques to self-generate brand-centred communications in order to build both brand and community commitment.

(Adapted from Muñiz and Schau, 2007)

Unlike quantitative research, where a research plan and objectives are strictly defined from the outset, qualitative research usually evolves during the research process. This is because the rich data that are collected in qualitative research provide an opportunity to change focus as guided by the ongoing analysis. Such changes of direction do not 'come out of the blue but reflect the subtle interplay between theory, concepts and data' (Silverman, 2010: 86). We discuss this again later in the chapter (p. 27) but, in the meantime, we return to the subject of the initial selection of the topic and the central research question.

In qualitative research, topics are selected either because they are a problem for which you seek an answer, or because they are a mystery that you wish to solve.

### *An interesting problem or issue*

When the central focus of research is a communication-related problem or issue, the study typically aims to assess the nature of the problem or issue in order to find an answer, resolution or response. The problem/issue might be a situation, a communications practice, people involved in communicating, a context or any aspect of communications that you find intrinsically interesting.

Having identified an interesting topic – perhaps from your own job-related experience or from reading the scholarly or professional literature – you need to establish that it is a worthwhile topic to study. Creswell (2007: 102) suggests doing this by asking, ‘Why is this study needed?’ because this will start you thinking about the ‘source’ of the problem or issue, the literature that relates to the topic and therefore the reasons why the topic is feasible for research. For example, the rationale for the study of a particular issue might be to fill a void in the existing literature, to establish a new line of thinking, to raise awareness of what has been forgotten and overlooked, to assess an issue with an understudied group or population, and ultimately to improve practice.

**Example 2.7: Starting out with a problem**

In Germany, 58 per cent of public relations positions are held by women. As in many other countries, public relations has become a feminized profession, although there is discrimination in relation to hierarchical position, salaries and PR roles. Two German academics, Romy Fröhlich and Sonja Peters, were concerned about the discrimination and asked the question: ‘Why are there such large differences between male and female professional status and representation in public relations?’ (2007: 230). This led them to undertake a study of women’s careers in PR, focusing on gender stereotypes in organizations. They interviewed female PR experts working in German agencies, asking them to discuss ‘their experiences throughout their whole careers, starting from education all the way through to different occupations, roles and experiences’ (p. 239). (See also Example 14.2.)

### *A mystery*

Taking a slightly different approach, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) point to the work of Asplund (1970), who suggested that because the research process is all about solving a mystery it can be compared to a detective novel. Two central components are involved: formulating the mystery and then solving it. To get started, the researcher asks: ‘What *puzzle* or *mystery* am I trying to solve?’ Mason (2002: 18) suggests that there are four kinds of puzzle:

- How or why does X or Y develop?
- How does X or Y work?
- What can we learn from comparing X and Y?
- What causes X and what influence does X have on Y?

Therefore, if your interest is in corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the mining and minerals sector, you might be interested in one of the following questions:

- How or why do mining companies build relationships with their local communities?
- With reference to a particular mining company, how does corporate rhetoric about social responsibility align with profit-making goals?

- When comparing the corporate websites of mining companies in South Africa with Australia, how do they articulate their CSR aspirations?
- Which communications activity by activist groups has been most influential in shifting government's stance away from or towards the mining companies?

Having decided on a central research question, this can be restated as the aim of your research (see Example 2.6).

**Example 2.8: The student voice**

> I had been curious about young people and news for many years. Throughout my studies I also became aware of the patronizing and unfair portrayal of young people through mainstream media outlets. It was also through the horror of the Cronulla race riots that I formed a belief that a news programme to better inform young people was desperately needed. So I decided to do research on youth and broadcast media.
>
> Developing a research question was incredibly hard. While I was 100 per cent sure of my research area it seemed virtually impossible at the beginning to find a specific 'do-able' niche. Even with a few months to go, my research question isn't concrete! I eventually came up with a research question when my supervisor asked me simple questions like 'What do you want to come of this?' or 'What do you want in your professional life and how can this research help you?' The first five months of the year were spent with a research question I was unhappy about. I think I felt I had to create a complex and extremely academic-sounding research question. I wish I had created sub-questions. I didn't formally do this and looking back it would have helped sort my data out immensely.
>
> (Elysha Hickey, undergraduate student)

In quantitative research, researchers go on to develop a set of objectives or hypotheses which determine in advance a tightly structured line of enquiry. Hypotheses are like a set of predictions about what you expect to find in the collected data. They act, therefore, as a 'recipe' or formula for how the study should be conducted. In contrast, qualitative research is more adaptable, unfolding as it goes along. It is not uncommon for qualitative researchers to spend some time in fieldwork before deciding what aspects of their topic it is important to investigate in depth. This is because qualitative researchers are primarily interested in understanding communication from the perspective of their informants. Initially at least, they usually work inductively, trying to describe their participants' experiences or generating grounded theories from their data. This is in contrast with much quantitative research, which, on the whole, deductively tests hypotheses with the collected data. We discuss the inductive process further in Chapter 18.

However, just because qualitative research is flexible, there is no excuse not to come up with a clear sense of purpose from the outset, argues Silverman (2010). In making this statement, he ignores a key principle of grounded theory (a qualitative approach which we discuss in Chapter 8) which requires you to begin *without* a hypothesis (although you do have 'hunches'). The idea in grounded theory is that your research focus develops from the data you collect. In this way you generate ideas and theory that are directly relevant to the context you are studying. In general, however, it is worth developing a central research question or research aim from the outset because this guides everything you do.

Over the course of the research process, your central research question leads you towards the literature that is relevant for your project. As you read, subsequent research questions take shape. These, in turn, indicate the type of data you need to gather, and the most appropriate means of collecting and analysing them. Your central research question, therefore, focuses your whole study. Eventually, you link the results of your analysis back to your main question, providing an answer and also, hopefully, developing some theoretical principles from the study. Remember though that although your main focus may stay the same, in qualitative research the subsidiary research questions might change over the course of collecting and analysing the data as this type of research is not rigid or set in stone; instead it is flexible and relatively adaptable.

**Example 2.9: The student voice**

> I fell in to the trap initially of thinking too big. I wanted to find out about communication behaviour in a division of Virgin Media, the company I worked for, so I first thought I would have to compare this division with the rest of the business. It took me a while to realize that this wasn't necessarily the case and so my research question needed refinement to fit with the reduced scope of the research. A smaller scope meant I could concentrate on one area, which meant I was more focused.
>
> (Stuart Mills, successful masters student)

## Originality and feasibility

There is little point in undertaking a qualitative research project unless your research can be shown to be original and feasible. If it is not original, then knowledge will not advance. If it is not feasible, then it is unlikely that the research methods will produce findings that solve the research problem or mystery; nor will they improve practice. The characteristics of originality and feasibility are now outlined.

### *Originality*

Although research should make an original contribution to the body of knowledge, in reality it is very difficult to be completely original. Many students go round in circles trying to think of a research topic that no one has ever researched before: one that is truly ‘fresh’, ‘novel’, ‘inventive’, ‘creative’ and all the other adjectives with which *Cassell’s English Dictionary* describes originality.

In reality, even if dozens of others have investigated the same topic, each study could still be original because it might conform to any one of the characteristics listed on p. 29. What researchers usually understand by ‘original’ is research that simply aims to add to already existing knowledge in order to help further understanding about managed communication.

**Example 2.10: The student voice**

> Initially, I constantly felt like I had to produce some amazing piece of research that would be judged by anyone and everyone in the world of communication – as if I had to come up with the cure for cancer – and have a load of research to back it all up! I understand now that I just have to show that I understand what a good researcher is, how to conduct good research and that my research can be trusted. With hindsight, I’d now say just to relax – bite off something ‘do-able’ and demonstrate you get the world of research.
>
> (Elysha Hickey, undergraduate student)

From the wealth of previous studies in public relations and marketing communications, it is possible that someone has already conducted an investigation in your area of interest. If this is the case, don’t think that this means you can’t do research on the same topic because it won’t be original. There’s no reason why you couldn’t follow the lines of the previous study in its entirety because it’s probable that your study would differ by being conducted in a different country or time period. Alternatively, if time and resources prevent this, use the previous research to guide your research approach. An earlier work, for instance, may lend support for your choice of research methods. On the other hand, if you consider that it is defective in its sample, method, analysis or interpretation, you could offer your adapted methodology as an attempt to redress the limitations of the previous investigation. Other research on the same topic encourages you to reflect on your own ideas in an informed way. Following others, therefore, is not rote imitation but should involve creatively challenging a previously conducted study (Locke *et al.*, 2007).

Obviously, the extent of ‘originality’ required for a research project will differ between undergraduate and postgraduate levels. MPhil and PhD theses are required to make a significant, original contribution. Whichever level you are working at, your study should aim to fulfill the criteria for originality by:

- discovering new insights; and/or
- providing evidence of independent, critical thought.

(Silverman, 2010)

Building on the ideas of Phillips and Pugh (2005), we suggest that original research can be characterized in three ways:

- it is a novel development of an existing idea or issue;
- it is a novel application because it cross-fertilizes concepts, techniques or methodologies in new ways;
- it is a novel interpretation of previous work or ideas.

### *Originality: novel developments*

Studies of this nature accomplish one or more of the following:

- They set down a major piece of new information in writing for the first time: it is unlikely that at undergraduate or masters level your study would be characterized by this type of originality, although it is possible in doctoral research. A published example is the work of Juan-Carlos Molleda and Marilyn Roberts (2008). While many studies have focused on either the global branding or nation-building outcomes of strategic communications campaigns, Molleda and Roberts sought evidence of how *both* of these strands might intersect and interplay within a single communication campaign. They examined a Colombian coffee communication strategy which – within an environment of decades of violence and the displacement of rural populations – managed to achieve a national unity and identity within Colombia, as well as a restored image globally for Colombia as a top coffee-producing country. The study illustrated how the local and global can be coordinated in an integrative fashion within a communication strategy, and provided evidence of the interdependence of domestic and global market spaces.
- They continue someone else's idea or develop further their methodology: see Example 2.2 for an illustration of this type of originality.
- They bring new evidence to bear on an old issue: previous writing about press releases has tended to focus on the release itself, such as the elements that make it effective, or the purposes of its use, or how the media have adopted or edited the promotional aspects of releases. Kim Sleurs and Geert Jacobs (2005) chose to concentrate instead on the processes through which press releases are produced. They carried out an ethnographic study of the in-house PR department of a major Belgian bank, spending six weeks observing how press releases were created. Their evidence drew attention to many of the practical as well as political concerns that influence the production and dissemination of press releases.
- They carry out empirical work that has not been done before: Damion Waymer and Lan Ni (2009) argued that although employee relations is an important element in the public relations repertoire, it is often understudied and

undervalued. They hypothesized that employees at the overseas subsidiaries of multinational companies were 'disempowered' publics, experiencing a power imbalance between (1) themselves and their employers and (2) their local branch (sometimes in a developing country) and the powerful international headquarters. The researchers interviewed Chinese employees employed by multinational corporations operating in China, and critically analysed what they and their public relations managers had to say about internal communication and work relationships. Waymer and Ni concluded that the power imbalance between employees and organizations can be overcome to some extent if internal communication practitioners work together with human resources professionals to develop strategies to empower employees and address their work–life concerns.

### *Originality: novel applications*

Studies of this nature achieve one or more of the following:

- They apply a concept developed from research in one country or culture to research in another country or culture: a number of studies have examined the role of advertising likeability and its role in the advertising process, indicating that there is a relationship between the extent to which consumers like an advertisement and its effectiveness. However, most studies focused on American advertisements in America. Therefore, Kim Shyam-Fam and David Waller (2006) conducted a study that was original because it extended beyond national boundaries, presenting an inter-country comparison of the likeability of advertising messages in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Jakarta, Bangkok and Mumbai. They found that culture plays a significant role in advertising likeability.
- They apply techniques, concepts or methodologies normally associated with one discipline to another: the work of the prominent social thinker Pierre Bourdieu has until recently been ignored in the public relations literature, yet his ideas hold great potential for insight into the relational dynamics of public relations and its social influence. Lee Edwards (2009) spent three months in the corporate affairs team of a British transport company and then applied Bourdieu's concepts of 'capital' and 'symbolic power' to an analysis of her data. She found that ' Bourdieu's framework connects individual practice with the social effects of public relations and gives practitioners and academics a new starting point for understanding the nature of power in public relations practice' (p. 251).

### *Originality: novel interpretations*

Studies of this nature achieve one or more of the following:

- They make a synthesis that has not been made before: Example 2.7 presents an example of this type of originality. The authors Romy Fröhlich and Sonja

Peters wrote that 'this article is as much a report on new results of a single national study as it is a synthesis of related research beyond national boundaries' (2007: 230). This was because they synthesized literature from feminist theory and gender stereotypes with the literature on organizational culture and structure in order to help them identify whether the organizational context was an important factor in discrimination against women in PR. They also added literature about research into the careers of female, North American public relations practitioners. These three areas informed their own investigation, the first of its type to be carried out in Germany.

- They use already known material but with a new interpretation: there are various ways of undertaking a secondary analysis of other researchers' material. You might, for example, read published reports or documents in the light of a new perspective or a different research question from that engaged in the first enquiries. Or you might reuse an existing dataset (such as all the transcripts (if you are able to access the archives) from another researcher's project) and derive interpretations, conclusions or knowledge additional to or different from those presented in the first report.
- They allow the author's authentic voice and perspective to emerge: Katsutoshi Fushimi speaks both Japanese and English fluently, is a native of Japan, has lived in the United States for some time and is an expert judoist (McAlexander *et al.*, 2000). His personal judo interests and his academic field, the sociology of sport, enabled him to offer a novel interpretation of how the symbols of a subculture of consumption (judo) are transferred from their original host culture (Japan) into a very different host culture (North America). In planning your own research and writing, you should reflect upon who you are as an individual and how that will distinguish your access, analysis and interpretation from those of anyone else working on the same topic. Articulate this in your writing. This is discussed again in Chapter 19.

### *Feasibility*

You will need to ensure that you have chosen a topic which is achievable within the constraints of time, resources and other commitments, such as a full-time job (if you are studying part time). In addition, you should take account of your own technical and research-related abilities. For example, if you are not a speedy and proficient typist, you might wish to reconsider your decision to conduct Internet-based interviews in real time because online participants expect immediate responses; rather than hanging around waiting for you to ponderously type out your questions and comments, they may just log off.

**Helpful hint**

Make a list and check your research is feasible at each point:

- time;
- resources;
- your research skills and technical abilities;
- other commitments;
- access.

Most qualitative research methods require you to have excellent interpersonal communication skills. If the thought of entering a large organization in order to conduct depth interviews with senior and junior employees fills you with dread, it might be worth considering a topic that does not require close interactions with unfamiliar informants but which lends itself to less personal methods. Listening skills, too, are of major importance if you wish to really explore the insider's perspective.

What is the duration of your research period and can your proposed topic be completed within this time? A key skill is the ability to pick a topic that can be achieved within the research period. It is unlikely, for instance, that a longitudinal study of the development of a communications campaign could be completed within the one semester that is usually available for research in a taught postgraduate programme. Remember to allow enough time to read the literature, design the research, collect the data, analyse the results and complete the writing of your report.

The issue of time relates not only to the duration of research, but also to the management of time on a day-to-day basis. What else will you be involved with while undertaking research? Qualitative research methods can be very time consuming. Before finalizing your research topic, it is worth considering how to juggle any other activities you are committed to, such as a part-time job, holidays or attendance at lectures and seminars. Choose a topic that will fit into the time available but ensure that it is not so superficial that it is not sustainable over the time allocated to your course.

**Example 2.11: The student voice**

> My topic was the uses of new communication technology in corporate issues and crisis communication. Looking back, I would have liked to place the focus just on the use of social media in issues management rather than including crisis communication also. It became evident during my research that this was the way social media were being used by organizations at the time and new opportunities to take that further

were apparent. Although looking at the next step (crisis communication through social media) was interesting, it was maybe a bit too ambitious for the timeframe and resources available in an undergraduate honours thesis. The problem with this is that I couldn't have known the result of the research without first undertaking the research. I guess this is one of the problems with undergraduate study – it's a much shorter timeframe than higher-level study and thus major decisions (such as your topic area and research question) need to be made before comprehensive research has been undertaken. My advice to current students would be to remember that topics can change as a result of research and not to be afraid to modify your topic during the writing process if it becomes evident that this is appropriate.

(Lauren Magid, undergraduate student)

What is the cost involved in carrying out your proposed research, and can you afford it? Not only are travel costs to the offices of informants often very expensive, but the cost of recording and transcribing interviews can be prohibitive. For interviews and focus groups, you will need an audio-recorder, microphone and possibly a transcribing machine if you are using cassettes.

Are you sure that you can gain access to your sample? The prospect of conducting an in-depth exploration of how promotional campaigns are devised in a major London agency may be exciting and original. But your study will not be feasible unless you can be assured of good access to the company and its employees. Ensure, therefore, that you can gain entry to an organization before you decide to make it the focus of your research. Chapter 4 sets out more on gaining access to the field.

## Personal value of the research topic

When deciding upon a topic to study, it is worth noting that, aside from its educational value, the right choice of research project can be useful in terms of enhancing your career. If you choose a topic that is aligned to your career aims, your project will enable you to develop a specialist understanding of a particular field. That knowledge is likely to be attractive to future employers. For instance, say you want eventually to work in the IT sector; as a topic of study, you might decide to explore the implications of digital technology on the practice of communications planning within the IT sector. This would allow you to develop your thinking about two key areas: the IT sector and the impact of new media on how managed communications are planned and implemented. A further benefit of research to your career is through the contacts you make when carrying out interviews or observations. It is not uncommon for research students to end up with jobs in the companies where their fieldwork took place.

**Example 2.12: The student voice**

> Apart from the sense of achievement it ultimately brought me to complete the research, I would say that I have learned a lot about not only the subject I chose but the organization I work in (which was the focus of my research and where I collected my data). Both of these things have already started to help me in my current role, so all those hours spent hunched over a laptop on a train writing my dissertation while I commuted to work may just have been worth it! I have shared the results of my research internally and have received some brilliant feedback from senior managers. I now hope they take some of the results on board and are mindful of them when considering their strategies.
>
> (Stuart Mills, successful masters student)

> When I complete the research, I will have a pilot broadcast programme made based on my findings and ideas. The pilot will be presented to various media outlets. I plan on sending the conclusion to the journalists that let me interview them. I'm hoping a job will come out of this.
>
> (Elysha Hickey, undergraduate student)

### *Relating to your supervisor*

Previously, we noted briefly the contribution that the research supervisor can make to your decision-making about a research topic. In this section, we consider the role of the supervisor and the importance of this relationship through the course of your research project.

Supervisors are not there to tell you what to do. Their role is to guide and advise rather than direct (unless you have acted contrary to ethical and research guidelines). This means that, in most cases, you are expected to work with a measure of independence. However, both you and your supervisor have a common aim, that is, to achieve a study of a high standard which will be completed on time. To accomplish the goal, both of you should be committed to the contract of respectively doing and supporting your research.

Your relationship will only be effective if you are able to trust each other. As a researcher, you have a duty to the public relations and marketing communications discipline to report data truthfully, accurately and as completely as possible. This applies not only to the content of the dissertation, but also to conversations within the student–supervisor relationship. The ethical rules of fidelity and veracity are very important in establishing a trusting relationship. In this context, truth telling is essential. There is an obvious duty for both researcher and supervisor to recognize the need to share all aspects of the study phases, be they positive or negative.

We would argue that supervision is an essential component of research work and a very important aspect of establishing rigour and trustworthiness in your study. The supervisor who is best able to provide a positive learning structure is flexible and approachable, draws out your ideas and creates an open learning climate where you feel confident enough to challenge and pursue new avenues. Even if you lack this type of supervisor, you can still go on learning. Supervision is based on a framework of ground rules and a process of negotiation (Deuchar, 2008). This means that you and your supervisor need to come to an agreement about the following areas:

- *The staff/student relationship*: knowing your supervisor's views on how the supervisory relationship will work helps you to adapt to his or her expectations.
- *The routine aspects of the relationship*: it is useful to agree upon the frequency of contact with your supervisor. This varies according to your needs and the stage in the research process. At the beginning, when you are working up your ideas, you may need to meet on a weekly basis. However, this schedule can be revised as the work progresses. It is most unwise to allow regular contact to break down because regular meetings help to motivate you and keep you focused. There should be a systematic and structured programme of work which forms the basis for the student–supervisor relationship, but the instigation for both the programme and for contacting supervisors has to come from you.
- *The agenda for each supervisory meeting*: by putting any questions or problems down on paper in advance of meetings, you are forced to define and confront any areas of your work about which you may feel uneasy. This in itself is a useful exercise. However, the list also helps to set the agenda for the meeting, saving precious time for both you and your supervisor.
- *The outcome of each meeting:* it is up to you to take the responsibility for documenting the deliberations, decisions and action taken with your supervisor. At each supervision meeting, something positive should have been achieved such as feedback on your initial ideas, questions answered, or suggestions and ideas to follow. Often it is difficult to remember all the points discussed. Notes taken during the meeting and summarized afterwards help to clarify the next stage of your progress.
- *The nature and timing of written material to be submitted*: find out if your supervisor requires you to submit a monthly progress report. The discipline of recording your progress succinctly and relating it to your aims and research plan is an excellent preparation for the writing-up phase of your study.

It is often difficult to make a start on writing, particularly when a great deal of data have been collected that may initially seem overwhelming. Indeed, many students delay writing up in the belief that much of the research is 'in their head'. In our experience this is a fallacy, and it is essential to start writing early. Indeed, supervisors *expect* students to start writing from an early stage. Your supervisor will ask for chapters on background, literature review and methodology, depending on the type of research (see Chapter 3 and also the chapters in Part II). This ensures that you not only understand the process but also produce some ideas which generate fresh motivation and interest, even though sections of the writing might have to be changed at a later stage. In this way, you become immersed in the methodology, and some of the problems and pitfalls of the research become obvious. This allows you to resolve them at an early stage.

It is essential, therefore, that you agree a timetable for the submission of your draft chapters. Supervisors are busy people, involved in other activities such as teaching, academic management, research and writing for publication, and often do not have particularly flexible schedules. Therefore, it is a good idea to agree mutually convenient dates for when you expect to be able to submit your written work, and have it returned to you with constructive comments.

**Example 2.13: The student voice**

> My current supervisor is great. Sessions are always a good balance of lighthearted chat and serious dissertation discussion. I feel well supported and that I can call in or email any queries whenever I want. It really helps when my supervisor offers me personal experiences of carrying out his research – it helps to know that my experiences aren't unusual. He's incredibly patient and is always really positive – this is great as I often come into meetings pretty negative.
>
> (Elysha Hickey, current undergraduate candidate)

> Because I was working full time when writing my dissertation, the contact I had with my tutor was isolated to email and phone. On the face of it that might sound limiting, but it really worked for me and, I believe, my tutor too. I had already been taught by my dissertation tutor in the previous semester, so she was a familiar face (or should that be voice?) when we spoke. We related well, she would give me guidance and ask questions of my research all the time, which I found helped to keep me grounded and with a clear set of objectives to achieve. Apart from my literature review, she was the only 'academic' voice speaking to me through the whole process and as such I really valued her input. She helped me shape my thinking, especially around my methodology and findings analysis.
>
> (Stuart Mills, successful masters student)

> I thought it was good having my supervisor setting me deadlines to keep me progressing. That's stressful but you need that stress to keep you writing. I think having regular meetings certainly helps – that was really important for me. Often it was just a short conversation. . .and sometimes it was bouncing ideas around.
>
> In lots of ways my supervisor was very good because of being so particular about helping me to write academically – and also just being around. I found the process of research challenging and felt frustrated at learning how to write as an academic after many years working in industry and writing in other formats – I found that hard and your ego

takes a beating – but certainly it was worthwhile having someone to read and comment and be quite particular about it.

(Catherine Archer, successful masters student)

I didn't manage my supervisors very well, I feel, and as a result I feel very disillusioned with the process, although I can still see the light and shade, I think. Basically, I found supervisors who were willing to supervise *their* dissertation topics, not mine, and who were not content until I had skewed my subject material so much that it fitted their prejudices. I'm not alone in that, I'm sure. The good news is that the result will, I hope, be far better than I could have managed on my own, without supervision – and for that I have to thank them for their work, but I feel I am still working very hard to try and overcome the deficient and damaging process. By deficient, I mean that my supervisor would routinely take three months to respond to a draft, and would then frequently only have looked at the first two or three pages. He would then suggest that I included such and such – often it was included, but later in the draft, to which his stock response was: 'I think that needs to come earlier in the chapter/study.' By damaging, I mean that I don't feel that I even want to be identified as the author of my own work any more – it is so far from what I hoped for.

(Anonymous, current PhD student)

I've done three dissertations now and I've never really felt like I had a lot of supervision. For my masters my supervisor introduced me to 'sense-making' literature early on and that was about all I needed. It worked for me, I liked it and it gave me a great frame for my research journey. For my doctorate, I wasn't attracted to the literature my supervisor suggested. But what I got this time was good access, quick turnaround and lots of encouragement. He was a sounding board who gave me a lot of confidence. We had a good professional relationship, but we certainly didn't see the world the same way.

(Peter Simmons, successful DComm candidate)

Unfortunately, supervisors are not always gentle and diplomatic in their comments and criticism. Some students are easily hurt by these, but their advice is best taken without seeing it as a personal attack, and instead as an academic argument. In any case, the relationship you hold with your supervisor develops over time, as you each learn about the other's character and interests, and subsequently negotiate the relationship. Ideally, mutual respect should develop. Cryer (2006) stresses that, as a research student, it is in your own interest to develop and nurture this relationship. She points out that there are two aspects to the relationship. One is professional and the other is interpersonal. The latter involves treating your supervisor 'as a human being, who has strengths and weaknesses, personal satisfactions and disappointment, good days and bad days, just like everyone else'

(p. 59). If you are interested in reading more deeply on this topic, we recommend that you refer to Cryer (2006) and Phillips and Pugh (2005).

As supervisors ourselves, we like to encourage our students not to be diffident about 'managing' the student–supervisor relationship. We, like most supervisors, welcome our students taking the initiative in this respect; indeed, this encourages us to respond more effectively and enthusiastically in our supervision.

## Summary

- The process of doing research begins when you decide upon a broad area that interests you. Ideas emerge from your reading, your experiences, or from conversations and conferences.
- Your general ideas need to be honed down into a specific topic so that your research is manageable. Do this by formulating a central research question about a problem or mystery that you would like to solve in your broad area of interest.
- The central research question drives the type of research that needs to be done in order to provide an answer.
- A good research topic is original. Originality means that research is: (1) a novel development of an existing idea or issue; or (2) a novel application of current concepts, techniques or methodologies; or (3) a novel interpretation of previous work or ideas.
- A good research topic is feasible. Feasibility concerns whether or not your project is achievable and manageable, taking into consideration such constraints as time and resources.
- Supervision is an essential component of research work and a means of establishing rigour in research.
- Ideally, the student–supervisor relationship is based on trust and mutual respect.

Considerations such as these will influence your choice of topic. The next stage in the research process is to review the literature and write your research proposal. This we discuss in Chapter 3.

# 3 Reviewing the literature and writing the research proposal

A literature review for a qualitative research project is an ongoing synthesis, critical analysis or evaluation of relevant texts – both current and seminal – that relate to your research question or topic. On the basis of your reading and reviewing of the literature, you develop a coherent argument for the importance and contribution of your own study; therefore, the literature review is an important component of your research, which you start writing even before submitting your research proposal. The literature review in qualitative research is not completed at an early stage but continues to be updated through the entire period of your data collection, analysis and writing up of the final document.

In this chapter, we outline:

- the reasons for and purpose of the literature review;
- the location and retrieval of useful articles, and reading strategies;
- the process of reviewing and critically appraising the literature;
- recording and referencing;
- planning and writing a research proposal.

## Why carry out a literature review?

The literature review forms the foundation of your research project. A primary purpose is to establish a rationale for your study and show why your research question is important. This means that you need to tell the reader about the current state of knowledge in the field, pointing out where existing knowledge is incomplete or inadequate and how your research might either fill the gap or offer an alternative perspective that will improve understanding of your topic. This ensures that you are not covering ground which has been previously covered. As Hart puts it, the literature review differentiates ‘what has been done from what needs to be done’ (1998: 27).

Hart outlines other major purposes of the literature review, and we suggest you might consider using his outline as a checklist to help you decide what to include in your own literature review and how to structure it:

- identify and examine the work of the main writers and researchers and their perspectives on your topic area;

- locate your research in its historical or cultural context;
- establish a new perspective on the topic;
- relate theoretical concepts and ideas to professional practice;
- acquire and develop the language and terminology linked to the topic;
- trace, describe and critique the main methodologies and research procedures used by other researchers in relation to the topic.

Most importantly, you need to show the significance or importance of your research question and relate it to its context, signalling at the same time why the study needs to be done. Take a look at Example 3.1, where the author articulates why and how the study is important. The example might give you ideas for how your own work might lead to useful theoretical insights and/or greater understanding about an aspect of public relations and marketing communications, and also how your research might make a practical contribution to the profession.

**Example 3.1: Indicating why the study is significant**

Although lobbying has been the topic of much research in the political science field, it has been largely ignored by public relations scholars. In the introduction to an article about his investigation into health care lobbyists, Kurt Wise argued that the growth of North American expenditure on health care and the increasing number of interest groups operating in this arena point to the importance of the role of the lobbyist in managing strategic relationships between their organizations and members of government. He highlighted why his study is important in the following paragraph:

> Public relations professionals working as lobbyists for interest groups help shape their organization's identity in an increasingly crowded political environment. Yet we know little about the relationships between lobbyists and those working on governmental positions on Capitol Hill. This study examined health care lobbyists' perceptions regarding their relationships with members of Congress, Congressional staff, federal bureaucrats, and other lobbyists. The study adds to the limited body of knowledge concerning lobbying in public relations. The investigation is the first to examine lobbying from a relational perspective and helps to build the growing body of literature on a relatively young theory in public relations: relationship management. For public relations students pursuing a career in the lobbying arena, the findings of this study provide important knowledge about how to successfully manage organization–public relationships when they enter lobbying careers. In addition, this study makes a contribution to the political science literature concerning the question of how interest groups build identities in Washington.
>
> (Wise, 2007: 358–59)

Note how the author highlights three areas where the study will make a contribution; it will:

- extend theoretical ideas in the public relations field about relationship management;
- practically aid public relations students when they start lobbying careers;
- develop knowledge in the political science field about interest group activities.

Familiarity with the literature prevents you from repeating the flaws and weaknesses of other research studies and prevents you from ‘reinventing the wheel’. As you review the literature over the course of your research, you should examine the arguments of other writers and researchers which confirm, challenge or contradict your ideas on the topic. Consider these conflicts and discuss them. This enables you to develop a debate which, in turn, becomes the structure for your eventual written review of the literature. Don’t be tempted just to describe the work of other researchers – you need to evaluate it as well.

Often the literature review starts even before you have selected a research topic because you may need to do the reading in order to identify an area that you are keen to research. In all cases, the literature review continues throughout the whole period of your research. Undertaking qualitative research entails a continuous interplay between reading and reviewing the literature, collecting the data, analysing the data, and writing the final research report. Your review of the literature does not stop until you have put the final full stop on your written report or dissertation.

## Reading strategies

How do you know where to begin reading for a literature review? Your supervisor may have given you an indication of a book or an article that you could start with. This reading might lead you to the works of related writers. Alternatively, you may decide to follow up some of the references in the bibliography of an article you discovered in your previous studies. A search through the indices of abstracts can point you also to interesting research. However, it’s best to begin with a systematic search of the online databases and relevant websites, perhaps using keywords or the names of particular authors. We cover this in more detail on the next page. Once you have identified key texts, bear in mind that if these are not available electronically or stocked in your local library it may take time for them to be ordered and arrive. Allow plenty of time for this.

There are a number of strategies for reading. It is useful to start by previewing: this involves skimming and sampling. *Skimming* entails quickly ‘skipping’ through the text, leaving out chunks that do not seem relevant initially. *Sampling* involves reading the first and last paragraphs of a chapter or article and the first and last sentences of each paragraph. Previewing is a way of gaining an overall sense of the text as a preliminary to reading more intensively. It helps you to distinguish major concepts from those of little importance to your particular study. Through further reading, you can go on to look at how these concepts have been defined and used by other researchers and writers.

Once you have an overview of the text, you can read more purposefully. One way of doing this is to read slowly and thoroughly, with specific questions in mind, especially those concerning what is being argued by an author and whether or not that argument is sound. Crème and Lea (2008) suggest asking some of the following questions:

- What is the author trying to communicate?
- What is the central idea of the published research?
- What evidence does the author use to support the argument?
- What research methods does the author carry out?
- Does the argument seem logical?
- How does the material relate to other sources on the topic?
- How can I link this with ideas I already have on this subject?

Be discriminating in your reading. It is not necessary to read (and write about) every text that might have a tentative connection to your topic. Choose those that have a strong link to your research question. Remember to summarize and make notes on each text that you read.

## Retrieval strategies

When you start reading, it is probable that you will review many articles that, with hindsight, are not relevant to your study. These will have to be discarded as not everything goes into a literature review. Selecting appropriate literature is part of the research process. By reading extensively around the topic, you immerse yourself in the area and begin to identify the seminal 'landmark studies' as well as the up-to-date literature. Both primary and secondary sources are important at this stage, primary sources being researchers' own work and reports on their studies, secondary sources those by writers who describe and interpret others' research, often from the perspective of their own research interest.

For example, a researcher interested in studying conflict resolution between promotions agencies and their clients might draw on some of the same literature as another investigator interested in crisis communications. Each will interpret the work of authors according to what is relevant for their distinct research goals. Therefore, when you are reading for your project, it is important to return to primary sources as they are more reliable.

In the fields of public relations and marketing communications, there is an extensive range of academic literature such as e-journals and e-books, plus professional journals and newspaper archives which are available to view or download from electronic databases or sites which act as aggregators of a range of electronic databases. Some databases provide only abstracts, which help you ascertain whether an article will be relevant to your topic, while others incorporate hundreds of full-text e-journals. We urge you to seek support from your librarian on how to identify and locate those that are relevant to your topic through the use of keywords, authors' names or journal titles. To access the databases that your institution subscribes to, you need a user name and password, which are usually available from your institution's library.

The sites and databases which are likely to be the most useful for retrieving articles relevant to public relations and marketing communications are:

- Business Source Premier;
- Communication Abstracts;
- Emerald;
- Factiva;
- Informaworld;
- PsycINFO (Psychological Abstracts);
- ProQuest;
- Science Direct;
- Sage Online;
- Scopus;
- Wiley Interscience;
- World Advertising Research Centre (WARC).

No one site offers access to every single publication; each provides only a sub-set of the universe of articles and e-books. Therefore, you will need to trawl and check across more than one of these sites or databases, following links to find abstracts or full-text articles. However, some sites are so extensive that their coverage includes literally thousands of journals. Factiva, for example, offers more than 7,000 news and business publications plus company information. Business Source Premier (free access to which is available in many public libraries) covers over 2,000 journals in marketing and management as well as market research and industry reports, and company profiles.

Most of these sites offer RSS feeds or email alerts which keep you up to date with the latest articles as soon as they are published online.

An alternative to the databases is the speedy and very user-friendly Google Scholar (www.scholar.google.com). This enables you to identify a list of articles published by a single author, or search for article titles that are relevant to keywords. Once you have found interesting articles, you need to return to the full-text databases subscribed to by your institution's library in order to view or download the complete articles. A word of caution: Google Scholar is sometimes not as up to date as the databases available through your library.

Because of the wealth of information available, it's easy to become overwhelmed when making your initial search. Therefore, a key decision concerns which few keywords you should select that will be relevant to and revealing of your research topic. For example, if you were to search the communication database Communication Abstracts using 'communication' as a keyword, your results would probably include the entire database! In this case, words such as 'communication' would be described as having excessive recall because they find too many articles for them to be useful.

**Helpful hint: strategies for coping with excessive recall**

The term *humour* (or the American spelling *humor*) can have excessive recall in some business and marketing databases. There are some tactics you can use to get around this. Search for the word *humour* as follows:

- in a specific field, e.g. use the drop-down box in your database to indicate that you want to search only in the 'Title' field, or 'Abstract' field;
- as a synonym, e.g. input different words that are associated with humour such as *joke*, *comedy*, *wit*, *irony*, *satire*, *parody*;
- as part of a phrase, e.g. *advertising humour*, *humorous publicity*.

Take care when searching for information on the Internet. Internet search engines allow you to search very quickly, but they do not evaluate sites, merely find them. Anyone can post reports and documents on websites, so you need to examine the sites critically before using their material. Bryman (2008: 97–98) counsels that you should confine your literature search to websites that you know are reliable, which you can confirm by asking the following:

- Who is the author of the site and what is their motive for publishing?
- Where is the site located? The URL gives clues. Is it an academic site (.ac or .edu) or a government site (.gov), a non-commercial organization (.org) or a commercial one (.com or .co)?
- How recently was the site updated?

When you have found material which interests you, it is essential to record and store it accurately. We discuss how to do this using personal bibliographic software in the next section.

## Recording and referencing

A bibliographic reference is a set of data or elements describing a document, or part of a document. It is sufficiently precise and detailed to enable a potential reader to identify and locate the document. When you are reviewing the literature, it is easy to lose and mislay references over the course of time. Therefore, from the start, set up a system for systematically recording all of your reference material.

For each text you read, you will need to note the following:

- author's surname and initials (all surnames and initials if there are several authors);
- date of publication;
- title of article/book/chapter (the edition of the book);
- unabbreviated journal title, volume, issue number and page numbers;

- full book title, chapter title, author(s) for chapters in an edited book;
- location and name of publisher;
- the number of the page (p.) or pages (pp.) from which you took direct quotations;
- the library or other source from which the book was obtained (so that you can retrieve it at a later date).

As you read, record your references in any way that suits you best. Some researchers develop a card system, others a computer file; or you can use bibliographic software such as Endnote (www.endnote.com), ProCite (www.procite.com) or the free, more simplified package Biblioscape (www.biblioscape.com/biblioexpress.htm). Against each reference, record a summary of the published study, the methods used and any quotations that you find useful (don't forget the page numbers for these). You might wish to note your responses to Crème and Lea's questions on p. 42.

Most of us learn to our cost that we have not recorded references adequately and must search for them at a later stage. This sometimes means re-reading a whole book. Therefore, keep thorough records and don't be caught out in this way.

In the text of your proposal, and later in the body of your research report, you will need to cite the bibliographical references of all documents you have used or to which you have referred. It is very important to be consistent and accurate when citing references because the references may need to be traced at a later date by someone else who reads your work.

### Helpful hint

References need to be cited in two different places: first, at the point at which a document is referred to in the text of your proposal or subsequent written report; second, in a list at the end of the work. The latter is referred to as a reference list or a bibliography.

Check with your institution for the system of referencing that they follow and then conform to that in all your writing. Many universities follow the Harvard System of referencing, as we have done in this book. For a useful online guide to how one university uses this, both for citing within a text and also in the bibliography at the end of a report, go to the British Open University's site: http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/referencing.php.

In your proof reading, check that you have been consistent with the dates in the work and those in the references. Also make sure that the edition of a particular book you have quoted from is the latest.

## Reviewing and critically appraising the literature

When you have carried out a search for the literature, you start to evaluate each research paper, book or article that seems important and related to your research. This means systematically appraising the work that you find. You will be able to identify not only the gaps in knowledge but also the potential links to your own study.

### *The preliminary literature review*

The first stage of reviewing the literature is known as the preliminary review, which is presented within your research proposal (see pp. 51–53 for how to write the proposal). The main purpose of the preliminary review is to demonstrate the gap in knowledge that you intend to fill. Golden-Biddle and Locke (2007: 41–42) suggest that this might be by identifying that:

- the existing literature is incomplete;
- the literature has overlooked alternative ways of looking at a phenomenon;
- the extant literature is wrong, misguided or incorrect;
- existing knowledge could be represented and organized differently (such as by putting together work that is considered unrelated).

At this stage, you discuss literature which is *generally* relevant rather than that which is specific and detailed (Punch, 2006). This is because you need to present background or contextual information about your topic in order to get a general feel of the field and to show in your proposal how you have located your research within the relevant body of literature (see Example 3.2 for an illustration).

**Example 3.2: Locating research within the wider body of relevant literature**

The term ‘dominant coalition’ is often used within public relations scholarship to indicate the groups of decision-makers who hold formal, senior positions of authority in an organization. Shannon Bowen carried out a study of the process through which public relations practitioners gained access to and were included in this powerful group of individuals, and the barriers to entry.

In situating her study within the wider body of scholarship on the topic, she indicated where further research was needed and therefore why her research was worth doing:

> Scholarly literature in public relations emphasizes gaining membership in the dominant coalition in order to advise on the issues impacting its reputation and credibility (Dozier & Grunig, 1992). Although scholars

> have discussed the topic frequently, we have gained little idea about the varied routes communication professionals used to gain dominant coalition access and inclusion. Berger (2007) argues: 'Acquiring greater power and professional legitimacy remain central issues in the field, and knowing how best to do so continues to be frustratingly elusive' (p. 229). This research examines methods of dominant coalition access and membership.
>
> (Bowen, 2009: 418)

Don't worry if you can't find a great deal of literature that directly relates to your topic area. If you are convinced that you have conducted an extensive trawl of the public relations and marketing communications texts, and have also considered the literature in related disciplines (such as management, sociology, psychology, organization studies, or other fields which might have a possible connection to your topic) but still haven't discovered much published research on your topic, then maybe there simply isn't any! Qualitative research, because of its exploratory nature, is demonstrably most useful when there has been little written about the topic area.

Once your proposal has been approved, you can move onto the next stage, which is the main literature review. Here you become much more involved with literature that is specific and centrally relevant, discussing in depth the ideas and key debates concerning your topic.

### *The main literature review*

Whether writing a literature review for the preliminary or main phase, your work is unlikely to be as extensive initially as that for a quantitative project. This is because you are less interested in accumulating knowledge about every aspect of your topic than you would be if you were a quantitative investigator. Instead, before your data collection stage commences you are seeking to gain an initial impression and critical overview of the topic area, including the methods adopted by other researchers. As your data collection and analysis progress, you develop the review, introducing new or extended ideas or aspects that are relevant to your emerging findings.

Note that although the literature provides guidance for your research, you should resist being impelled in a certain direction just because everyone else has followed that route. Don't forget that your own data should decide the direction and design of your study; they have priority over the work of others.

Major tenets in relation to the literature review are:

- *The main literature should be reasonably comprehensive but cannot be all-inclusive*. After you have searched through the relevant literature and summarized the main ideas from the studies, you need to show how this work relates to your own research. Ensure that you critically appraise the work that you find by considering the strengths and weaknesses of the research that has been done prior to your own; examine the findings and consider how previous researchers and writers arrived at them. Also take a careful look at the appropriateness of the methodology and procedures for answering the author's research question. Not all of the material you identify will be relevant to the literature review. If you end up with an unmanageable number of concepts or studies in the literature, your research topic may be too broad and will have to be refined. It is important, therefore, for the literature to be representative rather than all-inclusive.

- *The literature review should be up to date.* Ensure that you stay current and on top of the literature, reading the professional and academic journals as they are published. Don't forget to carry out regular electronic searches, and sign up for e-journal alerts that automatically notify you of forthcoming issues and articles.
- *The literature should include the main classical and foundational work.* By considering the classic or seminal texts that underpin current thinking, you are able to position your study within its historical context. In some cases, you may wish to build upon the ideas of the main theorists, or indicate how their research is directly connected to your topic.
- *The review must be methodical, purposeful and focused* on your research question throughout your reading and critical evaluation of the literature.

As your research proceeds, you are likely to uncover new areas which will necessitate further literature searches. In addition, new research and concepts will be introduced into the academic arena through the publications of other researchers; this applies especially if you are carrying out lengthy postgraduate work. Many novice researchers find staying abreast of the literature an overwhelming task at this stage. However, if you update the literature review as you go along, your own theories and ideas will become more focused and linked in various ways to the work of those who have undertaken and published research before you.

### *Synthesizing and writing the review*

Once you have identified major debates, key analytical concepts or theories and issues in the literature, you need to synthesize these. This means combining the separate sections of the literature in order to generate an overall picture of the available literature, to identify major themes, and to locate your own study in its cultural and historical context. At the same time, you continue to rewrite, revise and revisit, focusing on certain issues that you find important for your own study.

A common problem for novice researchers is writing the literature review as an uncritical list of previous publications. Your discussion should offer a critical, logically structured discussion, as illustrated in Example 3.3.

**Example 3.3: Developing an argument and rationale for research**

In order to carry out a qualitative study of crisis communication practices within the coal industry, Barbara Miller and Suzanne Horsley began by reviewing and writing about the literature on crisis management and then on the coal industry, including issues and examples associated with mining disasters. They also sought out theories that would help them to understand the behaviours exhibited by the coal industry as it dealt with crises. They subsequently wrote about sense-making theory and the concepts of high reliability organizations, which they argued provided them with a framework for analysing their primary data.

The following traces the structure of their literature review, which they developed over 12 paragraphs, each paragraph synthesizing the ideas of other writers and researchers:

- Definitions of ‘crisis’ and ‘crisis management’. Views on what is involved in managing crises.
- The coal industry as a crisis-prone industry. Types of crises in the coal industry, with examples from the literature. Industry regulations to enforce safety – but there are problems in implementing these.
- The theoretical concept of the ‘high reliability organization’ (HRO), definition, characteristics and its applicability to the coal industry. Examples of how the HRO concept has been applied to other sectors.
- How crises in the risk-related coal industry differ from crises in other sectors, i.e. the industry has a less than favourable image and has extensive media and government scrutiny.
- Sense-making theory together with HRO concepts is potentially useful in aiding understanding about how the coal industry behaves in a crisis.
- Definition of sense making in relation to risk. Stages in the theory, i.e. the process of how sense making or learning occurs.
- The value of using both sense making and HRO as key concepts to inform the primary research, i.e. together they show how members of an industry or sector learn about how best to ‘recognize future danger cues and respond more effectively to crises that arise’ (Miller and Horsley, 2009: 302).

Having presented a review of the literature, the authors go on to write:

> The purpose of this study is to provide an exploratory examination of the status of crisis management within a risk-related industry, a context in which crisis management/communication may be viewed as an opportunity to improve existing negative perceptions or generate more favorable attitudes among community stakeholders. Focusing on the coal industry in particular, this study explores the following research questions:
>
> RQ1: What is the general status of crisis management in the coal industry?

> RQ2: How does the coal industry handle crisis communication with key publics?
>
> RQ3: Due to the volatile nature of the coal industry, what special concerns does the industry face regarding crises?
>
> (Miller and Horsley, 2009: 302–03).

Note how the authors develop an argument, clustering topics together for discussion, moving through the different topic areas in a logical fashion, then culminating with the research aim and research questions. Later in the article, the authors draw on these ideas from the literature review to help them interpret their data.

By this time, it is probable that you will have begun to see how the literature review acts as a foundation for your investigation because it will have pinpointed important concepts, questions or issues that you need to pursue through your primary research. Also, it will have highlighted the methods that other scholars have used to conduct similar studies. Eventually, the link between your findings and the research literature will become crucial at the analysis stage because other researchers' findings may confirm or contradict your own data and your initial interpretation of them. Throughout the process of analysis, then, you engage in a continuous debate with the ideas and findings in the work of other researchers. As you do this, you go back to the literature review and continue to revise the ideas and debates.

The final update of the literature review takes place when you write your research report. It includes the introduction of any new texts which may have been published since you began your study. Occasionally you might find right at the end of your study that another researcher has carried out a similar project. You will then have to show how your research differs and attempt to critique the other author's work without prejudice.

In summary, carrying out a literature review is a necessary research skill which, when done well, demonstrates that you:

- know about your topic and related areas;
- have understood theoretical and methodological issues related to your study;
- know how to acknowledge and integrate the work of others without plagiarizing their ideas;
- are able to modify and adapt your own study in the light of what you have read.

## Problems in the literature review

There are a range of pitfalls in reviewing the literature, which include:

- including everything that you have ever read on the topic;
- choosing unsuitable search terms when trawling the databases;
- failing to link the literature to your own research;
- not identifying the relevant sources;
- overly relying on secondary sources (this is a common mistake that new researchers make);
- uncritically accepting other people's research;
- not reporting alternative or contrary occurrences in the literature;
- failing to record the exact references when searching and evaluating the databases (again, a beginner's mistake).

If you manage to avoid these pitfalls, you will arrive at a sensible and focused literature review that acts as a foundation, but not a constraint, to your empirical research, allowing it to remain flexible in its direction and conception.

## Writing the proposal

Whether you are designing a piece of research which aims to obtain funding from an external research council or you are a research student planning your dissertation, you will be expected to write a proposal. This acts as a plan of action, as well as a means of communicating your intentions to those who either allocate research funds or give consent for you to go ahead with your research. Two comprehensive guides to writing proposals are Punch (2006) and Locke *et al.* (2007). We draw on these as we offer our own thoughts on developing an effective proposal.

The proposal sets out the exact nature of the project, and how it is to be investigated. It justifies your research and gives an overview of the reasons for it.

### *The preliminary literature review within the proposal*

We have already mentioned that your initial reading and reviewing are carried out in preparation for the preliminary review within the research proposal. Its job is to locate your investigation within the tradition of research in public relations and marketing communications in order to provide an early indication of the significance of your study. More importantly, it provides a clear rationale for why your research is original and why you should undertake it. (See Examples 3.1 and 3.2.)

At the end of the initial review, you should feel familiar with the existing literature which relates to your own research topic. The reader of your research proposal should be left in no doubt that your proposed study is appropriate to meet the research aim or to provide an answer to your main research question.

### Persuading the reader

When writing your proposal, it is helpful to imagine that you are a consultant pitching for a piece of new business through the medium of the research proposal; you will need to demonstrate to your readers your competence to undertake such a piece of work. Do this by clearly articulating what it is that you want to find out, why it is worth doing, how you intend to do it and the broader context in which your research will take place. Even if your research is intended to be of the emergent kind (where questions evolve through a cyclical process of fieldwork, reading and analysis rather than being pre-planned), you still need to demonstrate that you are able to take a thorough, disciplined approach to research.

Working up a proposal to a minimum of 3,000 words (or whatever length your institution requires) can take about one month for an undergraduate proposal or up to twelve months for a PhD proposal. Whether you are writing a proposal to be read by a potential supervisor, members of a proposal review committee or a funding body, your proposal should contain the elements shown in Table 3.1. Because qualitative research is flexible, the following outline is indicative only, as you may choose to structure your proposal differently, depending on the aims of your research.

Readers of proposals will be concerned to make judgements about, first, the overall viability of the proposed study as a research project; second, your ability to carry out the research; third, technical issues such as the appropriateness of the design, or quality issues concerning data collection and analysis (Punch, 2006). Readers will be seeking answers to the following key questions:

> - Is the proposed research feasible and 'do-able'?
> - Is the research worth doing?
> - Can the candidate do it?
> - If it is done, will it produce a successful dissertation at the degree level involved?
>
> (Punch, 2006: 11)

Make sure that you have provided your readers with sufficient information to address these issues.

*Table 3.1* Indicative outline for a research proposal

| | |
|---|---|
| *Working title* | – Provide a title (and subtitle) that describes the depth and breadth of the topic and indicates the methodology to be used. |
| *Background and focus* | – State the focus of the research, the background and context of the research, the scope and the main question(s) to be investigated.<br>– In some cases, it may be appropriate to refer to professional journals in order to highlight a problem or key issue confronting the public relations or marketing communications industry.<br>– Outlining the professional context in this way helps to position your work in its business or social context.<br>– Some academic work on the topic area should be briefly introduced here in order to present a rationale for your study (i.e. is there a |

*Table 3.1* Continued

| | |
|---|---|
| | particular gap in knowledge that your study will address?). You will develop this aspect more comprehensively in the literature review section.<br>– In this section of the proposal, you should state your research aim or main question. |
| *Literature review* | – What is the significance of the project to our knowledge of public relations and marketing communication, i.e. why does the problem or question need to be studied (and why now)?<br>– Use references to explain how the study relates to, builds on or differs from previous work in managed communication.<br>– Introduce key concepts, theories and research approaches that relate to your research question.<br>– Indicate the key debates in the field, continuously relating your discussion to the research problem or issue.<br>– State how this review of the literature has shaped and contributed to the project's evolution.<br>– If relevant, explain the proposed practical value of the research.<br>– In some cases, you will be ready to identify further research questions at this point. These should be clear, researchable and related to each other. |
| *Proposed methodology* | – Discuss the methodological approach you intend to take and provide a rationale for it. Provide a concise justification for your qualitative research approach, or combination approach, presenting references to support your case (see Part II of this book).<br>– Discuss how entry and exit to the field will be accomplished (see Chapter 4 of this book).<br>– Describe what data will be collected and how, and why you have selected specific methods (see Part III of this book).<br>– Indicate how people will be approached for information, how observation visits will be scheduled, the social contexts of observing and interviewing, the use of audio-visual equipment and so on.<br>– Note your intended sample and rationale (see Chapter 13 of this book).<br>– Outline how you propose to analyse your data and how your interpretation will relate back to the initial questions posed (see Chapter 18 of this book). |
| *Quality issues* | – Identify how you will ensure the quality of your work (see Chapter 5 of this book). |
| *Ethical issues* | – Explain how issues of access, informed consent, privacy and other ethical issues will be dealt with (see Chapter 4 of this book). |
| *Potential problems* | – Indicate any possible difficulties you foresee and how you will endeavour to overcome these. |
| *Timings* | – Outline a provisional work schedule of the tasks that you need to complete and when. |
| *Resources* | – List the resources you are likely to need, such as equipment and costs. |
| *References/ appendices* | – List all texts cited in your proposal.<br>– Follow this with any appendices. |

## Issues of quality and ethics

Even at the earliest stages of your research, you need to be able to show that you have taken heed of the quality benchmarks which enable others to evaluate it. We discuss how qualitative research can be judged in Chapter 5 by reference to notions of reliability and validity, or authenticity and trustworthiness. Ensure that you are thoroughly conversant with these terms, and can demonstrate in your proposal how your project conforms to quality criteria.

With regard to ethical considerations, there are three key issues, all concerning the protection of people involved as participants in your study, which need to be addressed in your proposal. These involve issues of access, informed consent and privacy. They should be considered within the design of any research project. Turn to Chapter 4 to read about ethics and how it relates to this stage of your research project.

## Summary

- In its final form, the literature review contextualizes your research, establishes a rationale and demonstrates why your research question is important.
- Reviewing the literature is a continuous process that begins when you prepare your research proposal and finishes when you complete the research report.
- There are different reading strategies, ranging from a quick overview to more purposeful, intensive reading where you critically engage with the literature.
- It is important to systematically record all your reference material as you go along.
- References are cited in the text and also in the bibliography at the end. The Harvard System of referencing is commonly used.
- The research proposal is a plan of action as well as a persuasive means of communicating your intention to carry out research that is significant, and which conforms to quality criteria and ethical principles.

# 4 Ethical issues and access to participants

High standards of ethics in research are essential in any research project and are the subject of this chapter. The chapter encourages you to consider how you might plan and carry out your study and distribute your results with integrity, honesty and a concern for the wellbeing of participants in your research.

The chapter deals with:

- strategies for gaining access to participants, research settings and resources – it notes the difficulty of recruiting informants and negotiating with gatekeepers;
- basic ethical principles and conventions related to:
  - the right to free and informed choice;
  - protection from harm to individuals and equipment;
  - privacy: anonymity and confidentiality;
  - autonomy: voluntary informed consent;
  - honesty: omission, interpretation and plagiarism;
- ethical issues concerning Internet-based research.

## Introduction

While all researchers need to adhere to ethical principles, qualitative enquiry has its own dilemmas. When collecting data through human interaction, it is important to pay close attention to ethical issues because there are inherent challenges related to the inductive and holistic nature of qualitative research, and the fact that it involves trust-based relationships between researcher and participants. Your obligation towards your participants concerns the need to interact with them in a humane, non-exploitative way.

Although university review boards and human research ethics committees can give you guidelines on how to conduct ethical research, their initial approval of your work does not automatically ensure that you will act ethically. It depends instead on your personal values. Christians (2007) stresses the importance of morality in ‘everyday life’. In asserting that humans are ‘cultural beings’ (p. 437) with beliefs and values that inform how they relate to each other, he argues that ethical research is an outworking of an individual’s moral stance. His statement also alludes to the contextualized nature of research, i.e. there may be differences between your norms and expectations about what it means to do research and those of the cultural community that you are exploring. For example, some organizations or countries may be more concerned than others with the principle of privacy. You need to be sensitive to cultural differences in order to grant and preserve the dignity of your research participants.

**Key point**

Your research conduct will be guided by your own ethical values as well as your sensitivity to the cultural context in which your research takes place. Also, professional and institutional frameworks are likely to frame the ethical decisions you make.

In qualitative research, it is unlikely that you will be able to predict in advance all of the ethical decisions you will be faced with in the course of carrying out your research. For example, it is not always possible for you to fully inform participants at the start about the potential consequences of the research, or even the particular areas you intend to study, because changes occur as your research unfolds. This applies especially if you are using new communication technologies and the Internet to gather data because in a networked environment online participants (including involved researchers) dynamically interact to both consume and modify information in a continuously changing manner (Burbules, 2009).

Among ethical considerations are those concerning the intrusive nature of research and the welfare of participants. Unless you have acted honestly and in a trustworthy manner, your research will be unethical. Furthermore, unless you have addressed ethical issues explicitly in your research report, your project will lack professionalism. Ethical issues must be carefully thought through in detail, wherever possible in advance of your fieldwork. Talk initially with your supervisor or research colleagues. Then clearly outline the potential issues first in your research proposal (as well as in your ethics approval application, if that applies in your institution) and later in the methodology section of your report or dissertation.

**Example 4.1: Some ethical dilemmas**

- You are carrying out a series of interviews with public relations consultants. You were given some information in a previous interview which, if released into the public arena, could seriously damage the reputation of your next interviewee. Should you tell her about it in the course of your interview? Should you include the information in your published research report?

- Your research is in a sensitive area. You are unlikely to get access if you state your real purpose. Do you hide the goals of your research from informants and tell them you are studying something else?
- You are likely to have difficulty gaining access for research if your potential informants realize they will be involved in a student project. Do you send an introductory letter on university letterhead, leaving out some of the details of your project, in the hope that they will think this is a university-funded project?
- You are in the middle of an interview when your interviewee interrupts the conversation to take a telephone call. He presumes you have turned off your tape recorder and goes on to discuss some highly sensitive information which would be useful for your research. Do you turn off the tape? Do you use the information?
- You have been granted access to shadow a public affairs director as she carries out her normal work routines. She goes to lunch and you are left alone in the office. There are confidential documents lying on her desk which would usefully inform your research. Should you read them? Should you photocopy them while she is out?
- You are studying young people's attitudes to brands. A tobacco company offers you £30,000 to sponsor your research. Do you take it?

How you answer the last question will depend on your own stance towards both smoking and the activities of tobacco companies. The answer to all the other questions is 'No'. Don't even consider it! The rest of the chapter explains why.

Researchers often believe that it is sufficient to deal with ethical considerations at the planning stage only of their work. However, ethical problems occur right through the research process. As your research progresses, you will need to keep detailed records about ethical dilemmas that confront you, reflecting on the choices you made and why. Unless you have explained in your writing the steps you took to deal with these your work is inadequate. Even when you start to disseminate your research in articles or conference papers, you need to keep ethical issues in mind, such as ensuring that the participants or organizations in your study cannot be identified if they have requested anonymity, or ensuring that you accurately give credit to those whose work you have cited. It is important, therefore, that ethical issues are not merely understood and taken into account but also made explicit in the research report, dissertation or thesis.

**Example 4.2: Making ethical issues explicit in a proposal for online research**

For his doctoral research, Nicholas Hookway chose a methodology consisting of two stages of investigation. The first involved the examination of online diaries or blogs. The second involved face-to-face interviews with bloggers. In his research proposal, he discussed potential ethical issues, including:

> There is a potential risk to the researcher in relation to conducting face-to-face interviews. . .Though meeting respondents off the Internet poses the same level of risk as other offline recruitment strategies, precautions will be taken to ensure the safety of the researcher. This will involve conducting the interviews at a neutral location, preferably in a public space such as a University Campus. Further, though the interviews will be conducted in private, efforts will be made to have people in close proximity to the interview setting.
>
> (Hookway, 2005: 10)

(See also Example 4.4.)

In the area of ethics, guidelines and rules exist which should not be transgressed. Some of the standards are set by professional bodies such as the Market Research Society, the research funding councils (e.g. the Australian Research Council or the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK), or sociological, psychological or communications associations in various countries. Others are established by universities themselves.

Some ethical principles are simple and clear, for instance obvious infringements of ethical guidelines such as plagiarism or manufacturing the data. Others, however, are unusual or unique and cannot be solved by reference to established texts or sets of guidelines (see Examples 4.3 and 4.5). In such cases, you may be tempted to ‘bend the rules’ in order to gather valuable evidence. Indeed, some well-known researchers have succumbed to this temptation. There is never any excuse for unethical behaviour in research. It is unacceptable and unprofessional.

**Example 4.3: An unforeseeable ethical dilemma and the researcher’s ethical obligations**

Imagine this scenario. You are undertaking research for your masters project, examining the involvement of PR executives in their companies’ corporate social responsibility programmes. You are interviewing Jessica, a PR executive in her early thirties. The interview is progressing well. After an hour, Jessica suggests a pause for coffee and, while you are standing in the office kitchen, you enquire about how she enjoys working in the company. After a few minutes silence, you notice tears welling up in Jessica's eyes. She tells you that she isn't coping – not because she doesn't have the ability and qualifications – it's just that she feels totally overwhelmed all the time because she is a single mother, has a chronically sick child at home, no family support, financial problems and has just been visited by the bailiffs. She is really concerned that she may lose her job and feels so depressed that she is tempted just to take an overdose.

How as a researcher should you respond to such a disclosure? Should you get involved or just let the disclosure pass? Should you turn off the recorder or keep it running? Should you abandon the interview or try to return to it? Should you offer to discuss the situation or offer to help? If so, what words would you say and what tone of voice would you use? Should you breach Jessica's confidentiality to prevent her possibly harming herself?

(Adapted from Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 261, 264)

There will always be tensions and dilemmas when you carry out qualitative fieldwork. The neglect of ethical questions could result in:

- harm to participants;
- damage to the reputation of the department, university or organization in which you are registered;
- conflicts with funding agencies and grant-holding bodies;
- denial of access to organizations and participating institutions, both to you and to future researchers;
- problems for your supervisor;
- litigation;
- non-completion of the research.

**Helpful hint**

Imagine yourself or a colleague as the participant. Address your interviewees in the way that you would like to be treated.

In the following sections, we discuss some of the ethical issues you will encounter in your research.

## Access to participants, settings and resources

### *Recruiting participants*

Gaining access to informants, settings and materials for research is one of the first steps in the research process and ethically can be the most problematic in qualitative research. People can be vulnerable, they have rights that must be protected, settings may be dangerous or difficult to access and materials may be confidential. In all of these instances, it is crucial that you carry out your research with integrity, honesty and with a concern for the welfare of participants.

When seeking to gain access, you must ensure that:

- participation is voluntary, i.e. people do not feel coerced into taking part but do so willingly;
- people in the setting (such as a geographical area, an organization or a particular context) are not inconvenienced or harmed (emotionally, psychologically, physically or reputationally);
- resources that you use are freely committed, such as confidential company documents or personal diaries that you read – be aware that access to certain materials and their use in research may have harmful consequences, such as the release of information that is valuable to competitors, or the public exposure of private issues.

Before starting your research, take the following steps:

1. Gain access to the setting.
2. Obtain permission from gatekeepers – those who are able to give permission for the research to be carried out (e.g. account directors, marketing or corporate communications directors, leaders of organizations or human resource directors).
3. Ask participants for permission to undertake the research and explain how you will protect them.
4. Explain early and clearly the type of project in which they will be involved.

Gaining access means gaining permission to enter the setting, set up and obtain samples, interview or observe participants, and read formal documents relevant to your research. The readers of your final report need to know how you gained access and how you dealt with ethical issues. You might ask your supervisor to advise and support you in obtaining access to gatekeepers and participants and in gaining permission from ethics and other organizational committees, if this is necessary. Formal permission is important in any research and protects all sides, researcher, participants, supervisors and the university in which you are enrolled or the organization commissioning your research.

Access is sought in various ways. Some researchers pin up a notice on a public board in the organization in which they wish to carry out their research or put an advertisement in the local newspaper asking for volunteers to participate. Others advertise within weblogs or online community forums. Where you advertise will depend on your research sample. For example, if you were seeking the views of film-goers about cinema advertising, a good place to advertise would be on a noticeboard in the local cinema or in a newspaper advertisement positioned next to the film guide. It is important to advertise in a public space where the advertisement can be seen easily; it should be readable and interesting, with inclusion criteria clearly stated. Remember that you may have to obtain the permission of gatekeepers to advertise (such as the cinema manager). If you are a student, your supervisor's signature on a letter of introduction may help in your application for access.

**Example 4.4: Electronic invitations to take part in research**

> **Marketing Technology and Marketers. . .An Invitation to Participate in a New Book**. . .How can you be a part of helping marketers to better leverage technology and, thus, to take the 'connectedness' of their marketing organizations to the next level?

Blogger Adam Needles posed this question on his blog in order to recruit marketers to his research project. He targets his blog at marketers interested in how to 'effectively "propel" brands in the marketplace and how to measure and validate success and failure' (Needles, 2009).

> **A Pesky Blog Sociologist**. How do you go about making moral choices in your everyday life? Is this something you have written about in your blog? If so, I would love to have a read as part of my PhD research in Sociology.

Nicholas Hookway placed this advertisement on Australian LiveJournal communities, a site for online diaries with a sizeable share of the blog market in Australia. He considered it the best place to find suitable participants (bloggers) for his research (Hookway, 2008).

Participation in research by individuals or groups should be entirely voluntary; participants must not be pressurized. Talk or write to people, tell them about your project, perhaps set up a research home page with information about your project, ask them if they wish to take part. Try someone else if they don't.

### *Dealing with gatekeepers*

Participants often have to be approached through the mediation of 'gatekeepers', that is, people who have the power to grant or withhold access. They control information and grant formal or informal (sometimes verbal) entry to the setting and participants; they may also impose certain conditions for access, such as the requirement to read your report prior to publication. It will be up to you to convince them of the relevance of your research and the benefit of their involvement. Gatekeepers may hold official positions, such as the corporate communications manager of an organization or the partner of an advertising agency, or they may have an unofficial gatekeeping role, such as those persons with the informal power and influence to grant and deny access or information. Secretaries and personal assistants are often powerful, but unrecognized, gatekeepers in organizations.

Gatekeepers may be found in any hierarchical level of an organization. There is no point in seeking access only from management if you are interested in undertaking an ethnographic study of internal communication which requires you to explore the whole organization. Say you wished to investigate an organization's communication networks and the managing director had guaranteed you access. Without your realizing it, there may be deep rifts in the organization between management and other stakeholders. Your project, therefore, could come to a standstill if the workforce, customers or clients refused to take part. Therefore, it is wise to ask not only the person directly in charge but also others elsewhere in the organization who are likely to hold the power to start or stop your research.

**Example 4.5: Gaining access through an intermediary**

When British researcher Carrie Hodges went to Mexico to carry out a study of the occupational culture of PR, she initially had great difficulty finding practitioners who were willing to be interviewed. However, through a gatekeeper (the president of the Mexican Academy of Public Relations), she eventually gained access to 33 interviewees. Initially, Carrie was concerned that her participants might interpret the president's personal influence as a subtle form of coercion and therefore they might feel obliged to hide their real feelings in order to present her with a rosy view of their occupation. She discovered, however, that in Mexico it is quite usual culturally to do business or join new friendship groups via intermediaries who are able to provide access to useful social networks (Daymon and Hodges, 2009).

In Internet-based research, gatekeepers may be the owners of newsgroups or electronic discussion lists that you want to join. Once you have been granted general consent from the owners, they then will inform members that they are implicitly consenting by choosing to take part in the online conversation.

### *Negotiating access*

Gatekeepers may deny access for a variety of reasons:

- *As a researcher, you are seen as unsuitable*: depending on the organization, you may be considered an unsuitable researcher because of your gender, youth, appearance or behaviour. However, just because you don't 'fit in' to the culture of an organization does not mean that you are untrustworthy or unable to cope with the study. Therefore, friends or acquaintances who are already involved in your chosen location may sometimes be able to persuade those in power who doubt your credibility. A letter from your research supervisor also helps.

- *It is feared that your presence might disturb the setting*: in some settings, relationships and dynamics can be subtly altered by the presence of someone new. Imagine a meeting called to resolve a conflict: levels of concentration and trust would be threatened by an 'outside' researcher sitting in with a notebook or an audio-recorder.
- *There is suspicion and fear of potential criticism*: research findings may not be favourable to an organization and could damage its public image. In this case, you would need to consider phrasing your critical discussion diplomatically without damaging your own integrity. Remember that even if you do not publish a paper from your research, in general your research report will be publicly accessible.
- *You are investigating sensitive issues*: these may involve commercial confidentiality or might be of a more personal nature where participants, researchers or even society as a whole could be harmed if results are published (Lee, 1993).
- *Potential participants in the research may be embarrassed, fearful or too vulnerable.*
- *Gatekeepers may not know about qualitative research methods and see them as 'unscientific' because surveys and numbers are not involved*: according to the culture of many companies, numbers have high validity and research which does not produce statistics is deemed to have little value.
- *Economic issues*: the research may take up too much time for the organization involved.

For these reasons, access should be negotiated with a great deal of diplomacy, honesty and tact. Ideally, you should expect to articulate the purpose of your research and the methodology in order to explain your project. However, the inductive nature of qualitative research often makes this difficult as initially you may have only a general idea of the area of research and it is unlikely that you will know where interviews and observations will guide you, or which concepts you need to follow up.

For example, you may be interested in studying how integrated marketing communications are managed in a large multinational organization but you don't yet have a central research question. It is not until several weeks of conducting unstructured interviews at different sites that you discover there are major tensions caused by differences in cultural expectations. Therefore, you decide to focus your research on how national cultures affect the extent to which marketing communications are integrated.

**Helpful hint**

In some cases, it is not possible to provide full and frank details about the research purpose and direction prior to the commencement of your research. However, you should fully inform participants about your developing focus as the research progresses, and also after the research is completed.

Another reason why full explanation of your purpose may be problematic is if participants know exactly what you were seeking to investigate they may be directed towards certain issues raised by you, rather than allowing their own ideas and perceptions to emerge. They may become unnaturally sensitive or responsive to material that they might otherwise view only casually or indifferently (Deacon *et al.*, 2007). In some observation studies, participants might even modify their behaviour if they are aware of your primary focus. This would invalidate the data.

A solution offered by the British Psychological Society (BPS) is to withhold some of the details of your project. Is this deception? Some would argue, ‘Yes’. Others contend that as long as participants are given detailed information in a briefing *after* completion of the data collection such a tactic is ethical. The British Psychological Society suggest that the withholding of some details is ethical as long as there is a distinction between this and ‘deliberately falsely informing the participants of the purpose of the research, especially if the information given implie[s] a more benign topic of study than [is] in fact the case’ (British Psychological Society, 2009: 1). The protection of the dignity of participants is paramount, however, and therefore the BPS go on to state that the withholding of information is inappropriate if, when the deception is eventually revealed, it is likely to lead to ‘discomfort, anger or objections’. Therefore, the withholding of information or deception is unacceptable if participants show unease once debriefed. (See Example 16.2.)

**Key point**

Most gatekeepers will only grant access if they are assured that there are no risks to themselves, their organization, their customers or their clients.

Sometimes you may be asked to give details of how your research will be disseminated, and ethics review committees often enquire about this. Participants may be concerned about repercussions to their reputation if they think they could be identified in your publications. To some extent, future problems can be avoided if you are able to negotiate this before research starts. However, if you intend to publish articles where the company and informants cannot be identified (because you have changed some details and used pseudonyms), you can feel confident about progressing in this direction without informing the research organization.

If you are carrying out sponsored research where you have financial and social support from the organization where your research takes place, there is a danger that gatekeepers and other participants will have their own agenda and may attempt to manipulate the research – intentionally or unintentionally. For example, institutional objectives may take precedence over individual research interests because of the prioritizing of resources, such as the costs of staff time. If you are influenced by these expectations, your direction and interpretation of the data will be affected. Resistance can be difficult because of the power that gatekeepers hold to facilitate or prevent the progress of your investigation. Unfortunately, there is no ideal solution to this problem.

## Ethical principles and conventions

A number of basic ethical principles provide benchmarks against which to judge your study as you move through the stages of planning, implementation and outcome. These concern the right of free and informed choice, protection from harm to individuals and equipment, and principles of privacy, autonomy and honesty. If you choose not to follow these ethical guidelines or adopt inappropriate procedures, you are likely to affect your future or ongoing employment in a negative way.

### *The right of free and informed choice*

People whom you ask to participate in a study have the right to give or withhold their cooperation. They can do this at any time, either at the outset or during the course of research. In online research, participants may not offer a reason for withdrawing; they may simply disappear, leaving you wondering if the reason was due to unclear communication or faulty technology. An ethical dilemma then is whether or not to try and find the participant when this might be construed by them as an unwelcome intrusion. In accepting the principle of free and informed choice, you recognize that your need to collect data is always subordinate to a person's right to decide whether to provide it or not.

### *Protection from harm*

#### *Protecting participants from setbacks*

No emotional, physical or reputational harm should come to the people you study, either in the course of conducting your research or in its outcome. Guillemin and Gillam define harm as 'a setback to a person's interests [which includes] any aspect of a person's life that that person regards as important' (2004: 278). For instance, in certain circumstances in-depth interviews may carry emotional risks for participants because they can be problematic, stressful and taxing. The onus is on you to be aware of this, to ensure that your research procedures are just and fair to the individuals who take part, and that you care for their wellbeing. This extends to the way in which you treat people involved in your study. It is tempting to slip into a mode of seeing informants as sources of data or research chattels (Locke *et al.*, 2007) rather than as interesting human beings. Violating their person through disrespect in this way may scar them for a long time, and cause them to see future research in a cynical or negative light.

### *Protecting 'extended participants'*

Concerns about the safety and wellbeing of participants should also extend beyond the immediate to encompass others in the participants' social networks or organizations. Gatekeepers and those who provide access or resources for the study should be considered, as well as those 'whose lives and livelihoods – even if they never have direct contact with us or our projects – are dependent on and powerfully affected by the relations, settings, and institutions we study and who cannot detach themselves from those processes without significant effort, cost, or risk' (Nespor and Groenke, 2009: 1000).

### *Special protection*

In some instances, you may be collecting data from people who cannot take complete responsibility for their own decisions, such as children or consumers with learning difficulties. They need special protection.

Also, for your own protection, make sure that you are aware of health and safety issues. You are responsible for protecting not only informants (and your own health) but also any equipment which you use or come into contact with.

**Example 4.6: Undertaking sensitive research**

In an investigation into early teen lifestyles and responses to public relations messages about smoking, doctoral student Greg Ryan conducted one-to-one interviews with 35 people between the ages of 10 and 14. He ensured that he had the consent of the individuals and their parents, as well as their school teachers. He held the interviews in classrooms where the doors were left open or in open plan areas. This helped his participants to feel more comfortable and secure.

### *Online ethics*

Some of the risks involved in Internet research relate to the public–private nature of electronic communications. Online research carries the potential for public exposure of participants, especially when personal or sensitive information is involved or when reports or messages are distributed that are commercially confidential. Researchers do not have the same extent of control or intervention as they do in face-to-face group discussions, and therefore potentially harmful contributions to online focus groups may be read and sent elsewhere before you even get to read them. In the same way, if participants' email addresses become known to one another they could be used for purposes unconnected with the study without the consent of participants. Your ethical role is to emphasize the dangers inherent in online research before participants give their consent to take part (Mann and Stewart, 2000).

### *Disseminating results*

Whether your research is online or face-to-face, it is worth remembering that eventually your study will end up in the public domain (for example, your dissertation may sit on the library shelf for some years or be downloadable from an electronic database), and others who evaluate or review such research studies will assume its integrity. As long as you are careful not to expose informants to unnecessary risks, to respect the privacy of participants' thoughts and actions, and value the cooperation that has been extended to you, you will have demonstrated your concern for the protection of the people involved in your study.

## ***Privacy: anonymity and confidentiality***

Privacy and protection from harm are closely related ethical principles because if you betray participants' rights of privacy you are failing to protect them from harm. Rights of privacy are neglected if you publish research findings which present confidential information or if you expose confidences which can be traced back to participants. Your responsibility is to ensure anonymity and confidentiality for organizations and individuals. This applies to all participants whether they are consumers or citizens, clients, managers, academics or your peers.

### *Maintaining anonymity*

Maintaining anonymity means that you do not divulge the identity of research participants to others. This includes not identifying the institution or location in which the research takes place when you are writing up the research report or dissertation. If you are using email or online conferencing for research, it may mean not identifying real names, user names, domain names, signatures and even ISPs. If, on the other hand, you wish to identify individuals or organizations, it is necessary to obtain permission first. This is sometimes granted to you prior to the data collection. It is good practice, however, to reconfirm this if you are writing for publication.

Anonymity is maintained through:

- the use of pseudonyms;
- a change of the names of location and organization;
- a change of minor detail in the description of participants, if necessary;

- a change of demographic factors that are unimportant to the study (this should only be done if demographic factors are not important to the focus of the study);
- the protection of data by applying labels with letters or numbers, not names;
- secure storage of tapes, lists, scripts, transcripts, etc.

### *Pseudonyms and labels*

To guarantee anonymity, give participants and settings (including Internet lists and blogs) pseudonyms, and only you or the members of your research team should be able to match these with the real names. Provide labels for tapes, notes, transcripts or participant lists and store these securely. For example, you might label interviews according to the order in which they were conducted, matching tapes and transcripts with the same label. When writing up your findings, identify any quotations according to the interview code and refrain from disclosing too many details about informants so that they cannot be identified.

### *Anonymity online*

If you are using weblogs as a source of data, there is a tension about whether to preserve anonymity or credit bloggers for their work (Hookway, 2008). Bloggers are authors and therefore have the moral right to be credited for their ideas. On the other hand, you also have a duty to protect their identity if they are writing for a private audience (such as when passwords are needed for access). In his doctoral research, Hookway (2008: 106) resolved the problem by changing the blog username and disguising any potentially identifiable information in blog quotations. His tactic aligned with guidelines from the Australian Copyright Act, which states that in some conditions (such as academic research where the blogger is not being disadvantaged) non-attribution is reasonable.

**Example 4.7: Anonymizing informants and their responses**

The following are examples of two different ways of anonymizing informants. The first provides a letter and numbers instead of a name, the second a pseudonym.

> A former factory worker explained that no official statement had been made about the company's closure: 'The first we heard was when the local radio announced that 5,000 jobs were to go. We received no communication from management' (A1.3).
>
> **Label:** interview A, page 1, line 3
>
> A former factory worker explained that no official statement had been made about the company's closure: 'The first we heard was when the

local radio announced that 5,000 jobs were to go. We received no communication from management' (Joe, assembly line operator, Luton site, 1.3).

**Pseudonym and changed details:** pseudonym, only general role provided but no specific details given of job title or department, page 1, line 3.

### *Confidentiality*

Confidentiality is different from anonymity. It means that you do not disclose issues or ideas that participants wish to keep confidential. This refers not only to how you eventually use the data, such as in the writing of your research report, but also to how you conduct yourself in interviews. Many informants share confidential information that could jeopardize their careers or even the future of their organization. It is vital that you honour their trust in you and do not release this information to other members of the organization. It is sometimes tempting when interviewing to let something slip, especially if you are keen to gain the confidences of subsequent interviewees.

### *Confidentiality and disclosure*

The issue of confidentiality also becomes important with respect to data from confidential documents such as work records, client contracts, letters of complaint or statements made about powerful people in organizations. In the latter case, remember to keep the identities of people strictly confidential. There must be no chance that they can be recognized.

Be aware that ethical principles and rules are implicit in the research itself, for instance carrying out the research or presenting participants' viewpoints without fraud or distortion. The research should be used only for the purpose which you have presented to participants, and you should only disclose that which participating individuals permit you to share publicly.

## ***Autonomy: informed consent***

One of the most important issues related to the principle of autonomy is that of voluntary informed consent. This is an explicit agreement between the researcher and research participants whereby participants agree to take part in the research project and allow data to be collected for use by the researcher. Their permission is based on an understanding of what the research is about and the potential risks or benefits to them.

### *Negotiating consent as circumstances change*

Traditionally, informed consent has meant a one-off event prior to the start of research (when information is given by the researcher and consent received from participants). However, researchers have now recognized that informed consent should be an ongoing and open-ended process that is continually open to revision. The revision or updating of informed consent is particularly important in action research because this is a cyclical process involving ongoing dialogue among participants and researchers (see Chapter 12).

**Key point**

Informed consent should be an ongoing and open-ended process that is continually open to revision. As circumstances change, or as informants' knowledge develops within the course of an interview or over a longer period, you need to negotiate a renewal of consent for participants to continue to take part and allow you to use the data which you collect. In some circumstances, verbal permission may be sufficient.

### *Negotiating consent as research develops*

The requirement to gain informed consent as an ongoing process also acknowledges the difficulty of establishing a clear direction at the start of research. As we discussed earlier, your research develops from the interpretations of participants and therefore often you cannot describe the path of research in detail before it commences. In this case, you seek to gain consent at the beginning of research (based on a general aim) and then also at the end when you are able to provide full details about the aims and direction of the research.

### *Written or verbal consent*

When gaining initial consent from potential participants, it is usually best to have a written consent form which includes some basic components, as set out in the Key point on page 71. However, the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK notes that in some participatory research, notably ethnographic research, '[h]ighly formalised or bureaucratic ways of securing consent should be avoided in favour of fostering relationships in which ongoing ethical regard for participants is to be sustained' (2005: 24). This acknowledges that it is not always possible to give written information and gain written consent because of the spontaneous interviews and interactions that often arise serendipitously in ethnographic research. Furthermore, in some situations it is inappropriate to ask for written consent if participants are illiterate or – in cross-cultural research – if there is a cultural preference for oral rather than written agreements. Therefore, if you are interviewing there may be occasions when you have to gain consent verbally (although in some situations, after gaining verbal consent you may need to follow this up later with written confirmation).

**Key point**

The basic components of informed consent are:

- name, credentials and contact address;
- identity of your sponsor or funding agency, if there is one;
- research strategies and aims;
- expected duration of the individual's participation and/or the researcher's presence in the setting;
- potential risks and benefits to the organization or individuals;
- promise of anonymity and confidentiality, and steps through which these will be ensured;
- assurance that participation is voluntary and that participants can withdraw at any time from the research process;
- a promise to answer any questions that participants have about the research;
- reassurance that the research will not adversely affect the people involved or the organization where they work;
- details of how the data will be disposed of at the end of the study;
- description of how the findings will be disseminated at the end of the study;
- your institution's ethics approval number (if applicable).

### *Providing information*

When seeking informed consent, it is usual to give your name, credentials and university or funding body so that participants know that they are dealing with a bona fide researcher. The reason for providing an address is so that participants can contact you if they experience difficulties during the research or want to withdraw. Most individuals will want to know why they specifically have been selected and will expect an honest answer. By setting out the research strategies, aims, potential risks and benefits, you can go some way to answering this. Remember to express the information in the consent form in ordinary language without jargon (this applies especially to the presentation of your aims and research procedures).

For example, go to PhD candidate Nicholas Hookway's webpage at the University of Tasmania (http://www.utas.edu.au/sociology/students/hookway/) to see his invitation to bloggers to be interviewed, details of his research project and purpose, and a downloadable consent form for participants to sign to indicate their agreement and post back to the researcher. A research home page such as this makes your project more transparent and accessible.

### *Autonomy: debriefing*

Over the course of carrying out your investigation, you will become aware that research relationships do not end on completion of the study. Debriefing gives participants a chance to interact further with you, to ask questions and to hear your explanations. This relates to the principle of autonomy. Debriefing gives you the opportunity to discuss more fully the potential use of the study and share the knowledge that you have gained from your research. If you have been conducting research in an organization, it may be appropriate to offer a workshop or presentation to interested members about the outcomes and implications of your findings. For reasons of time, money and sometimes confidentiality, it is not always advisable to promise all participants a copy of your completed report. However, a copy of the transcript, abstract or brief discussion in a letter of thanks is usually appreciated by those who have given their time to reveal details about themselves and their experiences.

### *Honesty: omission, interpretation, plagiarism*

#### *Witholding information*

We have already touched on the need for honesty, together with a willingness not to mislead. We have noted how, in some cases, it is problematic if you divulge full information about the research purpose and procedures because, amongst other things, people might modify their behaviour or psychological processes if they know the true nature of your research. Therefore there are grounds occasionally for withholding some information as long as you reveal it at a later time, perhaps in a debriefing session. However, the omission of information should not be undertaken lightly and you need to consider carefully if this ploy is necessary and ethical. There is never any justification for deception, and the giving out of false information about the nature of the study or the risks of participation is not an option open to you.

#### *Fabrication*

Honesty in research extends to how you collect and interpret the data. It would be easy to manufacture a quotation that supports your working hypothesis, or to ignore data which are disconfirmatory. Similarly, it would not be difficult to fabricate observations that didn't take place or take a quotation out of context and use it inappropriately. But these would be lies! It may be tempting to do this if deadlines are tight and financial resources make it difficult to travel to meet participants. Nevertheless, it is not worth it in the long run as deception can rebound on both the researcher and also the academic institution or the organization which sponsors your research. Resist the temptation, therefore, allow yourself to live with a clear conscience and be congratulated on joining the ranks of ethical scholars.

In online research, there is some debate regarding whether or not the principle of honesty is infringed if you choose to assume a false identity in order to gain more 'useful' data, particularly if the area is sensitive. If your intention is to mislead others in order to manipulate the content of discussion, then the practice is unethical. If informants find out, it is unlikely that they will consider this acceptable behaviour; indeed many would denounce it as a violation of their personal worlds.

**Key point**

If you use the words, ideas, phrases or ways of thinking of others and do not credit them, you are acting dishonestly, or *plagiarizing*.

### *Plagiarism*

Plagiarism guarantees that any academic work will fail when it is assessed; it may even result in dismissal. Plagiarism, according to Locke *et al.*, includes 'failure to use quotation marks where they belong, omitting citations that credit material found in someone else's work, carelessness in preparing the list of references, and failure to obtain permission for the use of figures, tables, or even illustrations from another document – whether published or not' (2007: 34). Consider your own work and how you would feel if you read about your words and ideas in the text of another researcher without seeing any reference to you. Use that as a motivation to cite others in your own work.

However, the issue of plagiarism is complicated where the Internet is involved. No formal procedures have yet been established for crediting the source of information gleaned from computer-mediated communications. Arguably, there is a distinction between email, 'closed' chat rooms or blogs intended only for private viewing (private or semi-private sources) and open access fora such as newsgroups, bulletin boards and blogs located in the public domain. Citations should be provided for the former as long as consent for use has been obtained, otherwise pseudonyms are acceptable. For material in open access fora, some form of authorship needs to be cited, such as name, note or number, although, because these data are in the public domain, it is not necessary to seek permission for their use (although note the discussion on blogs in the earlier section on 'Anonymity', p. 68).

## ***Honesty: covert research***

An area of controversy about honesty and deception concerns covert and overt research methods. Some argue that the use of deception in covert participant observation studies is justified because it allows researchers to acquire knowledge about people, events and places that would not otherwise be accessible or obtainable. We believe that covert research should not be attempted by undergraduates or MPhil and PhD students but only by very experienced researchers.

**Example 4.8: An unethical, covert research project**

Employed as a company secretary in a small family business, and also studying as a student on a professional doctoral programme, Kevin Eales decided to undertake action research for his doctorate, using covert participant observation to study the people with whom he worked. He received ethics clearance from his university. Being an 'insider' enabled him to see at firsthand how the bitter hostilities of staff and employers were played out and to understand strategies used to cope in an environment of dispute. The research, therefore, had the potential to make a useful contribution to the company and to the development of theory. However, after he had completed his study, his reflections caused him to feel great discomfort and disloyalty. He realized that by covertly observing and then writing about the human interactions, he had invaded the privacy of people in his company and had not respected their rights. Bravely, he and a colleague with a similar experience in a different setting, published their joint concerns about covert observation in a paper on research ethics (Oliver and Eales, 2008). (See also Example 16.2.)

Electronic communication makes it easy to conduct covert research because it is possible to subscribe to and lurk on a mailing list while concealing your identity. It is also possible to participate in online discussions under a pseudonym and with a completely different identity. However, there is a fine line between the benefits of knowledge acquired through covert means and potential harm, and therefore you need to evaluate the consequences for participants, your profession and yourself if you are intending to undertake research of this nature (Cieurzo and Keitel, 1999).

### *Honesty: presenting the research, ownership of research and public access*

#### *Disseminating your results*

Once your research is finished, it is usual to share your ideas and findings with others through published articles, industry reports or working reports and papers held in university libraries. Even your original dissertation or thesis will enter the public domain when it is read by tutors, your colleagues and other interested readers who may find it on library shelves or electronic databases. The reports where you present what you have heard and seen in your research carry as much ethical responsibility for authenticity and transparency as did the process of collecting the data. Although you may have taken great care to be ethically concerned in developing and implementing your methodology, you can still end up misusing, miscommunicating and misrepresenting the data or disseminating it poorly and inappropriately so that it results in misperceptions by your readers (Newton, 2009). Comments by interviewees, for example, can be taken out of context in order to emphasize a specific point. ‘The parts a researcher selects and how she puts the parts together can vary to the extent that the meaning derived from the research can vary’ (Newton, 2009: 365) and therefore it is essential that you take great care to offer the reader an ethical account that is an appropriate representation of your data in their context.

### *Presenting visual data*

We have written a lot about written text. However, much marketing communications research involves the use of images, such as photographs, videos or films. If you have chosen to explore visual materials, then you have a responsibility for those whose images have been captured and used in your work. There are a range of legal issues to be concerned about. Photography without the consent of the participant could be seen as harassment. Researcher-generated photographs, films and videos where individuals can be fully recognized need permission from participants. People may ask to have their images obscured – especially where you have taken photos or videos as part of a project involving observation. Visual data are much more difficult to anonymize than other types of data. As we noted in the previous paragraph, your published research should align with the principle of honesty in that you should always ethically edit, interpret and contextualize the visual data.

### *Ownership of sponsored research*

If your research is sponsored by an agency, be aware of the potential conflicts that may arise concerning ownership of data, i.e. copyright. Most universities insist that ownership of data is in their hands, although there are some prior-negotiated exceptions. Generally, universities retain the right to economically exploit the work of student researchers unless a specific contract has been negotiated with a commercial firm. Funding agencies often impose conditions about the economic exploitation of the research. To prevent conflict, it is wise to negotiate questions of ownership before the start of your research.

### *Storage and protection*

Although your findings are in the public domain, your raw data remain protected from disclosure, unless, of course, your participants and their organizations have given permission for identification. Protection means ensuring that tapes, notes and transcripts are stored securely, names are not disclosed and participants’ identities are disguised. Take care that unauthorized access to sensitive electronic data does not occur. Use a sound password and also keep a backup of your data in a secure place. When data are shared with others, whether funding agencies or gatekeepers, take care to delete all identifiers. It is up to you to decide what information to make public. If there is any doubt or ambiguity, your decision will rest upon participants’ wishes, as expressed when giving their written or oral consent.

## Summary

- The development of trust-based human relationships is a core aspect of ethical research in public relations and marketing communications.
- The foundation of how you conduct research is your personal ethical values. These inform the extent to which you respect the privacy, confidentiality, autonomy and wellbeing of your research participants.
- Ethical decisions inform what you study, how you collect the data, interpret and represent knowledge, and then how you disseminate that knowledge.
- Ethical problems and dilemmas are inherent in any qualitative research that you undertake. They need to be reflected upon continuously.
- They should be articulated and addressed in the planning, processing and outcome stages of research.
- In the initial stages of research, ethical problems and dilemmas relate to how you recruit participants, deal with gatekeepers and negotiate access.
- In many cases, the negotiation of informed consent is an ongoing process.
- Internet-based research carries inherent ethical challenges related to the public–private nature of electronic communications.

# 5 Ensuring the quality of research

Readers of your work will judge it by its quality and integrity, which is indicated by the extent to which it conforms to relevant criteria for evaluating quality. However, there are different perspectives and some disagreement about how best to define and assess the quality and trustworthiness of qualitative research. Arguably, relying on standards used to evaluate quantitative research is inappropriate.

This chapter focuses on:

- different perspectives on quality characterized by:
  - traditional criteria such as validity (and reliability);
  - the alternative – and now more accepted – set of criteria related to authenticity and trustworthiness;
  - intuitive criteria or the rejection of the application of any criteria at all;
- ways to ensure that the research is trustworthy, regardless of the quality criteria applied.

## Introduction

How can you demonstrate that your research can be trusted, that you have the interests of your participants at heart, that you have carried out your investigation with a sensitivity to the politics and cultural nuances of the topic and setting, and that you have conducted your research ethically? Ethical issues are dealt with in Chapter 4, where we highlight the importance of acting with integrity and writing about how you dealt with ethical issues. This is one part of how you persuade readers of the trustworthiness of your research.

However, other considerations which need to be addressed in both the research proposal and in your final report concern your competence as a researcher, as measured against quality benchmarks or criteria. Unfortunately, there is a lack of consensus about how to define and address the notion of quality. Researchers across the different academic disciplines take various positions on quality; these are encapsulated within three perspectives:

1 *The traditional*: both qualitative and quantitative research should be judged by the same standards and criteria, generally those of validity and reliability.

2 *The alternative*: researchers should apply (different) criteria which are appropriate to qualitative research, and use alternative terms such as trustworthiness and authenticity.
3 *The radical*: each research project should be a discrete investigation, judged not against the criteria of others but according to what is most appropriate intrinsically, intuitively or within the research community in which it is situated.

We now discuss each of these, suggesting that the (second) alternative approach is most relevant and useful for contemporary qualitative researchers, especially those new to research.

## Traditional criteria of reliability and validity

Conventionally, researchers have referred to notions of validity and reliability to demonstrate the goodness or quality of their studies. However, these are complex terms, derived from quantitative research (and a positivist paradigm). When used in qualitative research, the meanings and connotations of the terms differ from quantitative research.

### Key point

Whatever labels you give to the criteria for quality – or whatever words you use to show how you ensure your research is trustworthy and credible – be consistent in your use of the terms, and systematic in the way you demonstrate how the appropriate criteria have been applied to your research. This means selecting one of the quality perspectives and working within it.

Kvale and Brinkman (2009), Maxwell (2005) and Silverman (2010) are among the leading research scholars who promote the use of validity and reliability within a qualitative framework. They argue that these offer the most effective means of evaluating the quality of research, and that researchers have a general understanding of these terms even though they are used differently in qualitative and quantitative research.

### *Reliability in qualitative research*

In quantitative research, reliability is the extent to which a research instrument such as a questionnaire, when used more than once, will reproduce the same results or answer. In other words, it confirms that the findings are replicable. In qualitative research, however, the idea of replicability and reliability is rarely used because of the subjective nature of qualitative research. The researcher him- or herself is the research tool, the research is context specific and therefore the research would be difficult to replicate. Although your study could be repeated by other researchers, they would be unlikely to achieve the same results, even in similar circumstances and conditions. This is because your own characteristics and background influence what you see and how you arrive at your conclusions. Other researchers have different emphases and foci even if they adopt the same methods and select a similar sample and topic area.

One way to overcome the problem of reliability is the generation of an audit trail, a log or detailed record of the sequential steps taken in the process of the research (see p. 93). In qualitative research the concept of validity is more salient than reliability.

### *Validity in qualitative research*

In all research, validity is about the soundness and rigour of the study. Validity in quantitative research means that a test measures what it is supposed to measure and that the study accurately assesses the phenomenon that the researcher intends to assess. In qualitative research, however, the concept of validity does not deal with measurement and is understood differently. There are many types of validity but we will discuss those that are important for your qualitative research project. We deal with three aspects of validity in this section: internal validity, generalizability (external validity) and the terms relevance, plausibility and credibility.

*Internal validity* is the extent to which the findings and the research account accurately reflect the social world of those participating in the study and also the phenomenon which you are investigating. The reader needs to have confidence that this is so. To an extent, you can establish this by showing your findings to participants and asking for their comments (see the section on 'Member checking', pp. 89–90). This enables you to compare your interpretation with the perceptions of the people involved and note whether or not they are compatible. Only the participants themselves can judge this internal validity.

*External validity*, or generalizability, is the most contentious concept linked to validity in qualitative research. Despite this, many funding agencies and research committees rely on this as a standard for assessing the quality of your work.

**Example 5.1: Demonstrating the external validity of findings from a study of two countries' PR strategies**

Informing the citizens of Europe about the work of the European Union (EU) in order to encourage their support and trust in EU institutions is an important communication activity undertaken by the EU and its member states. Chiara Valentini investigated the information and communication policies and strategies of the EU by undertaking a content analysis of EU documents. She then focused her attention more closely on two member states: Italy (a founding member state) and Finland (a recent member). She interviewed Italian and Finnish PR officers about how EU campaigns were implemented and received by publics in their countries.

Her interviews confirmed some key themes which she had identified earlier in her analysis of the European policy documents. One theme related to the European Union policy of preparing communication actions at the European level and then trying to make them fit into a local perspective. In Finland, practices in news reporting differ considerably from those in Italy and therefore she concluded that the EU policy would be very difficult to implement effectively across all 27 member states, each with different cultures, media systems and levels of activism, etc. ‘Applying a common communication strategy in all the member states may save some costs and be more practical to implement, but it does not consider the differences between Europeans in perceiving EU messages’ (Valentini, 2008: 238).

Although Valentini examined strategies in only two of the EU’s 27 member states, her findings are generalizable beyond Italy and Finland to the other member states because she compared the data from the two cases with the evidence she culled from EU policy documents, thereby illustrating and confirming themes and issues that relate to *all* member states.

Generalizability exists when your findings and conclusions are applicable to other contexts, settings or a larger research population. The term has its origin in quantitative research, with its random statistical sampling procedures and search for law-like patterns. However, this type of generalizability is difficult to achieve in qualitative research, where there is no search for law-like generalities as each study has specificity and uniqueness. This is because the interpretive worldview prefers to focus on specific instances or cases that are not necessarily representative of other cases or populations. Thus qualitative researchers often make statements which are context specific.

Nevertheless, context-specific findings, whilst not necessarily generalizable – because no universal laws or general theories have been established – may still have some external validity if they are shown to be typical of other settings.

### *Generalizability of methods*

It is worth considering that while the findings of your study may not be generalizable, the procedures you employ might be.

### *Rules, models or propositions with applicability*

You may have formulated some rules or propositions for specific circumstances which might relate to other, similar circumstances, persons, settings and times (Mayring, 2007). For example, imagine that through your research you have constructed a model of how social media are used by public service organizations in France. In your conclusions, it would not be unreasonable to indicate that elements of the model might *tend* to operate in a similar way in public service organizations in one of France's neighbouring European countries, but that researchers in future would need to test this through further research.

### *Non-typicality*

Because sampling is purposeful or theoretical in qualitative research rather than being based on a statistically representative sample, the concept of generalizability is likely to be irrelevant if only a single case (especially if you have selected an atypical one) or a unique phenomenon is examined. Yet your study may still be successful if it highlights specific, non-typical features that can be related and compared to those of other, more typical cases. You would do this in the analysis or conclusions sections of your research report, after you have presented your discussion of the data.

#### Example 5.2: Generalizing from a non-typical case study

Although the Apple Newton brand is no longer advertised, an electronic community site exists for people who love the brand. The site is unique in that people are involved and committed without the mediation of advertisers. Through netnographic research into the community, Albert Muñiz and Hope Schau illustrate an extreme case of consumer meaning creation where consumers are actively sole-authoring the meanings related to a brand through the production of stories, images and videos. Their research of an atypical situation has external validity because it confirms and extends the findings of other more typical studies which point to the prevalence of consumer involvement through new media in independently taking partial control of the brand to create idiosyncratic meanings beyond those suggested by the marketer (Muñiz and Schau, 2007). (See also Example 9.1.)

### *Typicality*

On the other hand, the findings from your study might have some typicality in that your literature search shows that other researchers have come to similar conclusions when dealing with similar topics under similar conditions and with a similar sample.

### *Investigating more than one context*

Another way of enhancing the generalizability of your research would be to carry out your investigations in a variety of similar settings, thus enabling you to make claims about the validity of your conclusions for contexts wider than one particular context (see Example 5.1).

### *Theory-based generalization*

Despite the problems with generalizability in qualitative research, many researchers do attempt to achieve some measure of it because they recognize the desirability of being able to apply their theoretical ideas to a wider context. Morse (1994), for example, claims that theory is able to contribute to the 'greater body of knowledge' when it is 'recontextualized' into a variety of settings. This type of generalization, which she calls 'theory-based generalization', involves being able to transfer theoretical concepts found in one situation to other settings and conditions. If the theory developed from the original data analysis can be verified in other sites and situations, the theoretical ideas are generalizable or transferable (transferability is discussed on p. 85).

**Example 5.3: Theory-based generalization**

The work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has been drawn on by researchers across a range of disciplines to bring insights into how professional practices reflect the power relationships within societies and organizations. Following a three-month ethnographic study of the corporate affairs department of a transport company, Lee Edwards applied Bourdieu's ideas as a theoretical lens to show the link between the individual practice of public relations and its wider social effects. She claimed that her research offered 'a new starting point for understanding the nature of power in public relations practice' (2009: 251). Despite the fact that she examined one organization only, she was able to generalize her findings to the wider public relations profession because of her recontextualization of Bourdieu's theory, which has been extensively tested and applied over time in other contexts. (See also Example 19.9.)

In order for your own work to have external validity through 'theory-based generalization', ensure that you have related the findings of your study to the literature in order to arrive at your own theoretical propositions or concepts. This enables the readers of your study to make connections to their own settings when they read your findings. It also allows you or other researchers to verify your theoretical ideas in other sites and situations, using either qualitative or quantitative research.

### *Objectivity–subjectivity*

The notion of validity, especially in quantitative research, is generally linked to a concern with objectivity. Objectivity means that the human element and biases are supposedly removed, including eradication of any influence on the data by researchers' own value systems. Thus the research is supposedly more valid and accurate. However, no research is wholly value neutral or objective. Qualitative researchers stress that their research is not about measurable facts but is instead affected by human beings and is therefore subjective by nature. In this type of enquiry your own subjectivity is likely to be a valuable resource which enhances rather than distorts the credibility of your study. This is because aspects of you – such as your values, background, expertise, theoretical and research preferences, and the extent of your emotional engagement with your participants – act as a filter through which you perceive the research topic and the data. While you should capitalize on this subjectivity, you do also need to show how you have reflected upon it by acknowledging your location and standpoint in the research so that readers can take this into account when making their own interpretations of your evidence and conclusions. (See the sections on reflexivity in Chapter 19 and elsewhere.)

**Example 5.4: The subjective nature of research**

If you were interested in studying whether a 'glass ceiling' existed for women in advertising, consider how your results and conclusions might be affected if you approached interviewees in a company through the equal opportunities committee, the male managing director, the personnel manager, the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising or a professional association for women in advertising.

A variety of politics and values are involved depending on the route you choose. Your initial contacts would affect your access to the participants in your research, they may influence what you can write up or publish, and indeed, your participants may themselves be influenced by their perception of you as a researcher because of the person through whom you gained access.

The fact that you may be a woman of about the same age as those you are interviewing could also lead you to engage differently as a researcher with your participants than if you were a much younger or older male researcher.

Further, the extent to which you may have been involved previously as a PR practitioner yourself could lead you to overlook or highlight certain aspects in your interviewing that might differ from those focused on by a researcher with no work experience in PR.

### *Relevance, plausibility and credibility*

According to Hammersley (1998), a further aspect of validity is *relevance*, another criterion necessary for judging the quality of qualitative research. Relevance means that any research study must be meaningful and useful for those who undertake it and who read it, indeed for those to whom it is addressed. From a traditional or conventional perspective, this criterion has salience for evaluating qualitative research in public relations and marketing communications because it suggests that any study you undertake should provide some sort of solution to problems faced by practitioners in the field. Action research is usually highly relevant because the researcher is almost always very involved in the setting, such as working as a marketing manager, while collaborating with executives and staff to identify problems and devise and implement promotional strategies. When such work is *not* relevant is if the researcher has interpreted the evidence from his or her own perspective only – or the perspective of an organizational elite – rather than actively engaging with the perspectives of collaborators.

However, not all researchers would agree that investigations should be carried out to help sort out industry issues. Sometimes there is merit in undertaking research just to find out how something works, or because you want to solve a mystery rather than a problem, or to highlight something that is overlooked or hidden in conventional research (one of the aims of critical scholars, for example). (Note that Chapter 2 offers some reasons for carrying out research.)

*Plausibility* means that the claim you might make about the findings is plausible. You can achieve *credibility* through providing credible or convincing evidence for the claims you make. Research that is plausible and credible, however, is insufficient in itself to fulfil the criteria of validity as it needs to meet validity criteria as well (as in the previous section, pp. 79–83).

Although you can never be fully certain that you have eliminated all threats to validity, having an awareness of them helps you to produce a valid piece of research. After the next section we offer some strategies for you to follow in order to ensure that your research is both reliable and valid.

## An alternative perspective: trustworthiness and authenticity

The alternative and now more preferred criteria for demonstrating and judging quality in qualitative research are those of trustworthiness and authenticity. Guided by an interpretive paradigm, these criteria are based on the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985). The concept of authenticity, which includes fairness, the sharing of knowledge and action, has not yet become as widely known and debated as the concept of trustworthiness, which has taken a central place in qualitative research, especially in the USA (Morse *et al.*, 2002).

According to this perspective, the goodness or integrity of research is characterized by trustworthiness and authenticity, which are central to the whole research process. Trustworthiness and authenticity are shown by researchers' careful documentation of the process of research and the decisions made along the way.

### *Authenticity*

A study is authentic when the strategies you have used are appropriate for the 'true' reporting of participants' ideas, when the study is fair, and when it helps participants and similar groups to understand their world and improve it. Authenticity is usually evident in participatory research when researchers and members of a team or organization cooperate to build together strategies to bring about social change. (See the section on 'Action research' in Chapter 12, pp. 179–205.)

### *Trustworthiness*

The criteria for evaluating trustworthiness are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

*Credibility* rather than internal validity should be the aim of qualitative researchers, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985). Your study is credible if readers recognize in the findings the meaning that the research has for them in their own social context.

At the proposal stage, you can indicate in two ways how you will endeavour to make your study credible. First, set out the various research methods you intend to use and how each method will complement the others. Second, indicate how you will undertake a 'member check' (on pp. 89 and 92 we set out details on triangulation and member checks).

*Transferability* replaces the notion of external validity, and is close to the idea of theory-based generalizability. Many qualitative studies involve very small samples or single case studies and it is your role to help the reader transfer the specific knowledge gained from the research findings of your single study to other settings and situations with which they are familiar, or to make connections between the two. One way to do this is to provide a narrative that is sufficiently descriptive ('thick' description) to enable readers to make their own informed judgements about how your story might link with their experiences – and therefore draw their own conclusions.

Another way of demonstrating transferability is when you show how any principles or models that have emerged from your study might be applicable elsewhere, based on comparing your findings with your reading of previous investigations. For example, if you explored the techniques of how a particular multinational organization managed its corporate reputation, your findings would be specific to that setting (i.e. to the organization and its global context). You would need to tell your readers how your research results on the topic of reputation management in one company compared with those of previously published studies on reputation management. You would then indicate how the knowledge gained from your study might be transferable to other similar settings, i.e. multinational organizations. The beginning of this process of transferability is at the proposal stage where you outline the characteristics of your focal setting (such as a company, or media system, or societal culture, etc.) and indicate how you will select your sample (we discuss sampling in depth in Chapter 13).

**Helpful hint**

Ensure at the proposal stage that you have chosen a topic that can be related to a wider context and to the academic literature. This provides a basis for the transferability of your findings.

When you are able to discuss how your investigation is positioned within the realm of pertinent industry, professional or scholarly issues or concerns, the salience of your work is demonstrated. This helps you, later, to show how the findings from your narrower study relate – or are transferable – to other similar settings.

*Dependability* means that the study is carried out in a stable and consistent manner. If the findings of your study are to be dependable, they must be consistent and accurate. This means that readers will be able to evaluate the adequacy of the analysis through following your decision-making processes. The context of your research must also be described in detail. One of the ways of achieving dependability is by demonstrating an audit trail, a technique which we describe later in the chapter (see p. 93).

*Confirmability* is more suited to qualitative research than the conventional criteria of neutrality or objectivity. Your research is judged by the way in which the findings and conclusions achieve the aim of the study and are not the result of your prior assumptions and preconceptions. Therefore, for your study to be confirmable, you need to be able to show how the data are linked to their sources so that a reader can establish that the conclusions and interpretations arise directly from them. You might demonstrate the procedures which give evidence and confirmation of the concepts and findings of the research. Again, auditing or a 'decision trail' is pertinent because they require you to be reflective and to provide a self-critical account of how the research was done. To indicate at the proposal stage how confirmability will be demonstrated in your research, it is sufficient to outline the early intentions of your study, that is, your proposed research, your expectations and a recognition of the need for you to be reflexive throughout.

## The radical perspective: criteriology are intuitive, negotiated or rejected

At the beginning of the chapter, we mentioned a third position held by some researchers. It is not appropriate for you to take this stance towards dealing with quality issues if you are a novice researcher but nevertheless it is perhaps interesting to know about it because it highlights the disagreements and uncertainties related to quality criteria. Within this perspective is the view that each research project is a discrete investigation, and therefore should not be judged against universal benchmarks but evaluated instead on its intrinsic merit, relative to the aims and methodology of the study.

Another view aligned with this suggests that the criteria for good research are negotiated within a community of researchers or a discipline. As such the notion of what is trustworthy, useful, and 'what has meaning for action and further steps, at a certain time and under certain conditions. . .[is] constantly reworked and open to transformation' (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006: 22). Some would argue that this is based on an entirely relativist position.

To some extent, these views are confirmed and illustrated in a benchmarking report for one of the leading academic research funders in the UK, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (Cassell *et al.*, 2005). The report presents the findings of research involving a range of research experts about how qualitative management research is evaluated in practice, rather than in theory. It appears that much assessment by researchers and reviewers is done intuitively rather than through the application of known and agreed-upon criteria. Judgements appear to be made according to the beliefs and commitment of individual researchers, relying on aspects to do with the nature and conduct of the research project itself. For example, the report found that when researchers are very experienced, they may compile their own contingent list of criteria which they adapt according to the different philosophical approaches in which each project is grounded. However, it does appear that there is some agreement between researchers and reviewers in the UK on criteria which can provide a general indication that quality has been achieved. These relate to the extent to which the research:

- makes a contribution;
- reflects some technical expertise;
- includes an element of reflexivity;
- and is well-presented.

(Cassell *et al.*, 2005: 50)

While experienced researchers may get away with relying on their own, intuitive standards to address the integrity and credibility of their investigations and subsequent reports, we offer the warning that unless you explicitly evaluate your work against known quality criteria, it is possible that your research may be assigned to the bin of 'anecdotalism' by reviewers or examiners.

## Practical strategies for ensuring the quality of your research

There are a number of ways in which you can check and demonstrate the quality of your research. Whether you choose to apply the criteria that are clustered within the reliability and validity position, or the trustworthiness and authenticity position, the following strategies will be helpful. Once again, we emphasize that not all of these are accepted by all qualitative researchers. It depends on your preference, research orientation and research aims as to which of these you apply:

- engaging with the setting;
- member checking;
- peer debriefing;
- demonstrating an audit trail;
- thick description;
- searching for negative cases and alternative explanations;
- triangulation.

### *Engaging with the setting*

Your study will be more likely to be valid or trustworthy if you have been engaged in the setting for a lengthy period of time, such as in longitudinal research. This may be the result of choosing an ethnographic research design (see Chapter 9) or because you wish to trace a social process over the course of its development (such as the way in which an advertising campaign is created and executed). Participant observation in particular needs long immersion in the research setting. 'Prolonged engagement' and 'persistent observation' mean that you are exposed over a long period to the culture and setting in which the research takes place (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2006), usually resulting in your acquiring a deep understanding of the issues there. Such involvement gives you time to check and recheck the quality of the observations and interpretations you have made, enabling you to distinguish the important issues from trivialities.

**Example 5.5: Prolonged engagement in the research setting through longitudinal research**

From the early 1990s through to the end of that decade, the Danish audio-video producer Bang & Olufsen experienced recurrent competitive threats and environmental changes, leading the company to reconsider its corporate identity. During this period, researchers Davide Ravasi and Majken Schultz tracked the company's strategic evolution as well as the revision of its identity in response to perceived external threats. The researchers carried out interviews with organizational members, took part in company seminars both as participant-observers and key speakers, held informal conversations with managers, and had access to internal and external communication tools and archival materials. Thus they were deeply embedded over a long period in Bang & Olufsen.

Initially, they began their investigations separately, although with the same general interest. They then integrated their findings and worked collaboratively. They wrote that '[w]e believe that the peculiar structure of our study actually reinforced the validity of our explanatory framework' (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006: 440) because they were able to bring two different and separate perspectives to the interpretation of the data. (See also Example 7.3.)

Some of the benefits of prolonged engagement in the setting are:

- you gain a good understanding of the context and are more likely to present a convincing account of participants' perspectives;
- participants learn to trust you and are more likely to tell the truth;
- over a prolonged period, you are more likely to examine and reflect on your own assumptions and the role they play in how you relate to the data.

Longitudinal research, with its extended periods of engagement in the field, therefore goes some way to eliminating bias in research.

### *Member checking*

A member check (Lincoln and Guba 1985) or member validation is when you check your understanding of the data with the people you study, by summarizing, repeating or paraphrasing their words and asking about their veracity and interpretation. It provides feedback to participants, enables you to check their reaction to the data and findings, and helps you to gauge their response to your interpretation of the data.

The specific purposes of member checking are:

- to find out whether you are presenting the reality of the participants in a way that is credible to them;
- to provide opportunities for them to correct errors which they might have made in their discussions with you;
- to assess your understanding and interpretation of the data;
- to challenge your ideas;
- to gather further data through participants' responses to your interpretations.

Feedback from others ensures the trustworthiness (validity) of your research, helping you avoid misinterpreting or misunderstanding the words or actions of participants. By carrying out a member check, it is more likely that you will present their point of view. To an extent, this acts to empower your participants because you are giving them a form of control over their words, and thus some control in the study itself.

In Table 5.2, we set out the different ways of carrying out member checks, with their associated difficulties. With each technique outlined, you request that participants in your study comment back to you.

Alvesson (1994) used the second technique identified in Table 5.2, that is, he presented participants with a summary following his study of a Swedish advertising agency. He wrote: 'Towards the end of the empirical research process, we confronted respondents with observations and statements from previous interviews and asked them for comments' (p. 541). If you are an undergraduate or masters student, you also may find this technique useful. However, should you choose to follow the third strategy and provide your informants with rough drafts of your writing to examine, don't be too disappointed if you don't receive much feedback. Sometimes participants either are satisfied that your interpretation adequately conveys their experiences and therefore they don't bother to comment further, or may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with an academic style of writing. Members – participants – might also forget what they have said, have changed their minds or be highly critical of your interpretation, so a member check alone is not proof of the trustworthiness of a study.

*Table 5.2* Techniques for carrying out a member check

| *Technique* | *Problems* | *Comments* |
|---|---|---|
| 1 Present participants with a transcript of their interview or fieldnotes on your observations. | – Time consuming.<br>– Participants do not see your interpretation of the data. | – The procedure is an acceptable one but too time consuming for undergraduates. |
| 2 Present participants with a summary of their interview and your observations, plus your interpretation of their words and actions. | – Time consuming.<br>– Requires you to write summaries and accounts specifically for the purpose of member checking. | – Useful for confirming ideas and meaning of your account.<br>– Participants can suggest adaptations of your interpretation.<br>– Their comments can clarify, trigger or extend your ideas which can be fed back into your final report. |
| 3 Present a copy of the final report or substantial sections of it to participants. | – Lengthy process.<br>– Demands time commitment from participants.<br>– Value of feedback on academic reports depends on participants' familiarity with this style of presentation. | – Has potential to be very valuable as it allows participants to read the study in its entirety and comment.<br>– A risk that some organizations may withdraw funding or support if they consider your conclusions to be unfavourable. |

Indeed, some researchers (for instance phenomenologists) think that the member check is neither necessary nor appropriate, the role of the researcher in phenomenology being not only to present the world of participants but more importantly to transform the data onto a more abstract level. This same line of argument could be said to apply more generally to other qualitative approaches where the 'etic' view of the researcher is required to offer the perspectives of participants, but also to develop these further and more conceptually (Bryman, 2008).

### *Searching for negative cases and alternative explanations*

The trustworthiness of your study is enhanced when you identify and analyse any discrepant data or 'negative cases'. We deal with this further in Chapter 18. Briefly, however, when you find data which are inconsistent with what you have already discovered or which are contrary to your own view of reality, don't ignore them. Instead, allow them to challenge your ideas and then offer an alternative explanation for the evidence you have collected. In some cases, 'negative cases' or disconfirmatory examples will cause you to revise your working propositions and reconsider your theoretical framework. By indicating in your final report that you have considered dissenting voices, your study will be seen to be more plausible.

Searching for negative cases and alternative explanations always presents challenges. It is not easy to become aware of discrepant data and negative or alternative cases. On the other hand, at some stage you will have exhausted the alternative possibilities, and that's when your search should come to a halt.

### *Peer debriefing or peer review*

Sometimes it may be useful to employ the strategy of 'peer debriefing'. This involves colleagues re-analysing your raw data and discussing any concerns you might have about their interpretation. You might also give your peers a draft copy of your report to read at the end of your research. Make sure, though, that you select colleagues who have a good understanding of qualitative research. The benefits of peer debriefing are:

- peers may detect bias or inappropriate subjectivity;
- peers might provide alternative explanations to your own;
- peers may warn against inappropriate attempts to produce interpretations that are not substantiated by the data;
- peers keep you 'honest' about the meanings and interpretations you assign to participants' statements.

(Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2006)

**Example 5.6: Peer debriefing**

As their investigation at Bang & Olufsen progressed (see Example 5.5), Davide Ravasi and Majken Schultz developed abstract concepts and a provisional theory concerning corporate threats to image and identity. They submitted their tentative framework to academic colleagues involved in similar research, receiving from them comments which led them to examine alternative explanations for the evidence which they had not considered previously. This helped them to refine their provisional interpretations (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006: 440).

### *Triangulation*

A combination of more than one perspective is often used to corroborate the data because, traditionally, it is claimed that this strategy provides a more 'complete' picture. Denzin (2009) writes that triangulation comes in different forms, which he defines as follows:

- *Data triangulation*, where you use multiple data sources, such as collecting data from different groups, settings or at different times. The study in Examples 5.5 and 5.6 is based on data collected over a long period; the researchers entered the research organizations on many different occasions. In Example 5.1, the researchers carried out a case study of PR strategies in two European countries but related their findings to the wider setting of European Union member states by comparing the findings from the cases with findings from their reading of European Union documents.
- *Investigator triangulation*, when you are involved with more than one expert researcher in the same study. This is illustrated in Examples 5.5 and 5.6, where two researchers on separate projects ended up collaborating on one study.
- *Theoretical triangulation*, when you employ several possible theoretical interpretations of the study, developing and testing competing propositions against each other. One of our own studies (Daymon, 2000) follows this strategy because three competing theoretical and epistemological perspectives were used to analyse the same phenomena.
- *Methodological triangulation*, when you use two or more methods in the same study, such as observations, interviews, documents and questionnaires. See Examples 5.5 and 5.6.

The latter strategy is most often used in small-scale research. If your findings are based on one method, you might consider confirming them by using another method. It is not usually necessary – though it is occasionally desirable – to use quantitative methods to confirm qualitative findings, that is, ‘between-method’ triangulation. Instead it is more common to stay within the same, qualitative methodology; this is called ‘within-method’ triangulation.

For example, in ethnographic research, triangulation is often used by researchers to check their observations against answers to interview questions. This helps them to ascertain that they are clear about what they have seen. In documentary research, everything needs to be checked from more than one angle, which includes using an array of texts collected at a variety of times, in different locations and from different authors or participants. This is important because nothing can be taken for granted. A document may not be what it appears to be, an archive may have been collected for motives that you do not understand, and a context may be crucial in determining the nature of a document or the way in which people express themselves. For example, when conducting communication research in Vietnam, Napier *et al.* (2004) faced the problem that many secondary sources were notoriously unreliable and often biased. Additionally, therefore, they had to draw on a wide range of publications, including international ones, which offered different views of the same situation which they then had to reconcile in order to build a consistent case.

**Key point**
Merely mixing methods is insufficient for triangulation and does not automatically demonstrate validity. Triangulation only takes place when the same phenomenon has been examined in different ways or from different perspectives.

In some research approaches, such as discourse analysis, it is inappropriate to employ triangulation because what you are concerned about is not an 'accurate' or comprehensive account, but the various culturally defined stories and narratives that individuals use to describe, for instance, an advertising practice or consumer experiences.

### *The audit trail*

All research should have an audit trail by which others are able, to some extent at least, to follow the process of the research so that they can evaluate it. The audit trail is the detailed record of the decisions made before and during the research and a description of the research process. It means that you have to keep the documentation, such as raw data, fieldnotes, data collection and analysis procedures, so that you can give evidence from them when necessary.

It is worth reminding yourself, even at the earliest stages of designing your research, that it is a good idea to compile a running record of all your activities in your research diary. The audit trail begins at the proposal stage of your research where you highlight any explicit decisions you have already taken about the theoretical, methodological and analytical choices of your study. As you begin to collect data, make a note of extended transcripts, extensive fieldnotes (including how and in what context these were recorded), notes of reflexive and analytical thoughts, as well as a research database. These all contribute to the dependability of your research.

### *Thick description*

When you provide a 'thick description', this helps to establish the quality of your research and is linked to the audit trail. A term coined originally by the philosopher Ryle and borrowed by Geertz (1973), it means not only a detailed description of the context, people and process of the research, but also the meaning and intentions of the participants. The reader of your study should be able to feel, hear and see exactly what it is like to be in the setting you are describing. You can see that close engagement with the research setting and participants is necessary.

### *Reflexivity*

The process of critically reflecting on your own role and assumptions is one that is ongoing through all the stages of data collection, analysis, interpretation and writing up your research report. It's where you as a writer come together with the text, and where you 'turn back' on yourself. Because you are the main tool of qualitative research, you need to reflect on the actions, feelings and conflicts that you experience during the research.

Reflexivity also requires you to take stock of your relationships with participants and examine your reactions to their accounts and actions. If you adopt a self-critical stance to (1) your research, (2) your research relationships, (3) your personal assumptions and preconceptions, and (4) your own role in research, the study will become more reliable and valid, in other words more trustworthy and authentic. Many researchers add a reflective or reflexivity chapter to their study as their own critical stance is of such major importance. However, do avoid excessive 'navel gazing'; some qualitative researchers forget that it isn't a study about them – although they play a part in it – but about the participants.

**Example 5.7: Reflections on using blogs as a research tool**

During the course of his doctoral research, Nicholas Hookway wrote the following reflective note:

> I made the decision to treat blogs as 'public' and therefore academic fair game. While there was good 'intellectual' justification for this – blogs are publicly accessible and defined as such by users – there was a degree of moral ambiguity involved in adopting this position. It has to be admitted that convenience was a factor and often, I wondered how I would feel if I saw my own blog unacknowledged in some PhD researcher's thesis. So I took a stance, but it was a stance wrapped in uncertainty. Perhaps unlike qualitative researchers worn in the grooves of the ethically familiar, there was no textbook prescription for 'what to do' in the online world of blogs.
>
> (Nicholas Hookway, personal correspondence, 2009)

(See also Example 4.2.)

## Concluding notes

Silverman (2006) and others complain about the 'anecdotalism' of much qualitative research. To avoid this accusation, you must be rigorous in your procedures, showing how your research can be trusted. This requires your work to reflect appropriately the perceptions, thoughts and emotions of participants, and to extend these through your own plausible and credible interpretation. Note that neither validity nor trustworthiness is an easily understood concept, and simple criteriology

– the application of a set of criteria to qualitative research to evaluate its quality – is not unproblematic.

## Summary

- The benchmarks against which the quality of your research is judged relate to either reliability and validity, or trustworthiness and authenticity.
- Certain strategies exist which enable you to ensure that your research is trustworthy, such as engagement in the setting, member checking, peer debriefing, demonstrating an audit trail, providing ‘thick’ description, seeking out negative cases and alternative explanations, triangulating the data and being reflexive.
- The application of complex concepts and the building of a criteriology to assess qualitative research is difficult. It is best to choose a single established perspective – traditional or alternative – and then consistently address the set of criteria articulated within this framework.

# Part II

# Selecting the research approach

# 6 Choosing between different types of research

This chapter serves as an introduction and foundation to the chapters in Part II, which outline the major and also the nascent, but potentially important, qualitative research approaches in public relations and marketing communications.

Before you make decisions about which research approach to follow, it is worth considering some of the fundamental assumptions and beliefs which undergird all research, and also some of the principles on which qualitative research is founded, because these influence which methods, data and evidence you will consider it appropriate to study, and how you will interpret them. Crucially, it is your philosophical orientation towards research which generates the particular form of knowledge (or research conclusions) in your research project, rather than the research techniques you use.

In this chapter, we discuss:

- the underlying assumptions and worldviews of different research paradigms;
- how these lead to different ways of doing research and generating different forms of knowledge;
- how to decide which specific approach will best suit your qualitative research;
- generic qualitative research which is not associated with any particular ontology, epistemology or methodological approach.

## Introduction

Each investigation into public relations and marketing communications is shaped by the researcher's often implicit understanding of the world and how communication should be studied. This ideological perspective – or philosophical stance – is usually associated with a particular research paradigm which has fundamental assumptions about what communication is and how best to research it. The different, competing research paradigms have arisen because in the past and still today researchers have disagreed about the nature of the social world, including communication, and how it can be understood. Research studies, therefore, can be grouped according to researchers' different ways of thinking about communication and social reality, together with their divergent versions of knowing that world through different types of research.

There are three aspects associated with knowing, in other words with a research paradigm. These come from the philosophy of science and are:

- ontology;
- epistemology;
- methodology.

*Ontology* means the study of being and involves ideas related to human existence, the nature of being and social reality. The fundamental questions in the field of ontology (which includes human beings as well as material matter) are 'What can be said to exist?' and 'What is existence?' Ontology influences the epistemology and methodology of a research study.

*Epistemology* is the philosophical study or theory of knowledge and determines what counts for valid knowledge. The key questions in the field of epistemology are 'What is knowledge, and how is it acquired?' or, put another way, 'How do I know the world?' It also asks, 'What is the relationship between the enquirer and the known?'

*Methodology* refers to the ways in which knowledge is acquired, including the ideas that govern the principles, rules and procedures of a particular field of study or discipline such as public relations. The key question here is 'How do we know?' 'Methodology' is sometimes confused with 'method' but they are not synonymous. Research *methods* are the step-by-step techniques that researchers adopt in a systematic process. They can be employed within any paradigm because they are common to almost all epistemologies and methodologies. While methods are the procedures and tools for doing the research, methodology refers to the principles, concepts and theories that underpin these methods. Perhaps one way to distinguish them is to think about 'methods' as PR tactics and 'methodologies' as PR campaigns which include a range of tactics (methods) in order to achieve PR (research) goals.

**Key point**

The methodology and methods for a research study usually depend on the nature and type of the research question as well as the researcher's own ontological assumptions and epistemological stance.

Before examining qualitative methodologies further, we move on to consider two philosophical paradigms which guide most of the studies undertaken in the disciplines of public relations and marketing communications. We also note some emerging ways of thinking.

## Positivism and interpretivism

Let's step back a moment and think about how research itself is usually informed by the way people view the world, and the purpose of the research. Do we see the world as something that is out there to be discovered, or is it something that is perceived in a certain way because of our beliefs, values, cultural backgrounds, experiences and so on? Research in public relations and marketing communications tends to be informed by several distinct ways of viewing the world, and this shapes what we want to investigate, how we do research and the type of knowledge that is gained in research.

Several sets of assumptions underlie social research; in their most basic form they describe the dichotomy between the *positivist* and the *interpretivist* (interpretive) paradigms (Bryman, 2008) but critical theory has also influenced research, particularly in qualitative enquiry.

Researchers speak of paradigms, a term developed by Thomas Kuhn (1962), the historian of science, who discussed science in terms of 'paradigm shifts'. He argued that science does not proceed in a linear way but undergoes a series of crises which challenge the old, generating the new. One type of thinking about science, with its own presuppositions, is eventually replaced by another set of assumptions becoming as important or even taking precedence over the traditional model or set of beliefs. Kuhn (1962: 175) defines a paradigm as an entire 'constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and so on, shared by the members of a given community'. Kuhn was a physicist, but his ideas were taken on by social scientists.

In the nineteenth century the underlying philosophy, methodology and methods of natural science became the model for social science research such as psychology and sociology, and this model (or paradigm) has dominated for decades in many modern disciplines such as business, health, education, and also public relations and marketing communications research, as we discuss next.

### *Positivism*

Positivism is an approach to science which is rooted in the ontological belief that an objective reality exists. Social reality is believed, like the material world, to exist independently of the perceptions of the individual. In other words, the world is external to the researcher and is something 'out there' waiting to be discovered, with the researcher's 'discovery' of that reality directly reflecting it. The aim of research which is grounded in a positivist epistemology is to uncover universal laws and give an objective picture of the world. This is because knowledge is thought to consist of law-like generalities and rules that exist in the social world, just as they do in the natural world. Researchers, therefore, seek universal patterns and regularities in an attempt to explain communicative behaviour, because this, they believe, will enable them subsequently to predict it. Positivists take the laws, rules and theories that exist and apply them to a number of phenomena, people and settings. They stipulate that the findings of their research should be generalizable to other settings and situations. Research of this nature which seeks law-like regularities and generalizations is called ‘nomothetic’ (from the Greek ‘*nomos*’ – law). Research which is underpinned by positivist thinking demands that researchers be objective in their approach to the phenomena and the people they study, and be value neutral, that is, that they don’t let their own values intrude into the research.

**Key point**

The terms qualitative and quantitative are not equivalent to positivist or interpretive but often are based on the *assumptions* of positivism or interpretivism.

### *Interpretivism*

Interpretivism emerged as a radically different paradigm which aimed to establish a distinct approach to the world and to knowledge by differentiating the social sciences from the natural sciences. Interpretivists express an ontological belief in the existence of multiple realities and truths which are open to change because the social world, not having a separate existence from the individual, is socially constructed. It is the manner in which the investigator interprets the social world that determines social reality because investigators and research participants are involved in constructing social reality. Interpretivism is also interested in both the unique and the individual. This is known as an idiographic approach (from the Greek ‘*idios*’ – self), which contrasts with the interest in generalizing by research which is nomothetic.

Thinking from an interpretive epistemology starts with the individual, the setting and the phenomenon under investigation as a unique entity. The social world is context bound; human ‘actors’ interpret and actively shape their environment, influenced by their social and historical location. Reality is constructed by human beings in interaction with each other and the meanings that they give to their own and others’ actions. Interpretivists do not seek to predict behaviour or affirm laws that govern communication relationships. Instead they attempt to uncover the meanings by which people understand their own experiences, behaviours and communication. In effect, interpretive researchers prioritize understanding over scientific explanation. The notion that research can and should be ‘objective’ is considered illusionary by interpretive researchers, who regard themselves as a subjective, research tool, ‘disturbing’ not only the research setting through their presence and communication interactions, but also through introducing their own interests, biases and preferences into their construction of the research question itself.

### *Critical research*

A type of enquiry which is growing in influence in public relations and marketing communications is that which is known as critical-interpretive research. Grounded in critical social theory and based on an interpretive paradigm, it takes account of power and inequalities in society, being rooted in Marxist and neo-Marxist thought, and includes the ideas of Habermas. It assumes that reality is determined by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender values and inequalities. It aims to illuminate these – together with the implications that professional communication practices have for maintaining or reinforcing power imbalances – in order to achieve some sort of empowerment and emancipation of those whose voices may not be heard. Critical theorists seek to reveal hidden agendas, including those whose interests are served by the research project as well as 'the social conditions, ideologies and communicative processes operating behind the back' of research participants (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009: 165). They do this by, for example, posing research questions that challenge common sense or conventional norms such as asking certain elite groups questions that they may be reluctant to have answered but which might be crucial from the perspective of some disadvantaged communities (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009).

While discussing critical research, we briefly note an influential new position in philosophy and the social sciences known as *critical realism*, which is associated with the work of Bhaskar (1989) and Archer (2003). To date, its application in public relations and marketing communications is rare, although it is increasingly popular in management and media studies. Supporters agree with interpretive scholars that society comprises thinking and feeling human beings who socially construct their realities. However, along with positivists, they claim that there is an observable external world that is independent of human consciousness (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). In research, they aim to shed light on the interplay between two core elements of social life, namely agency (people's actions, including communication) and social and cultural structures (broader historical and contemporary formations) which envelop and shape people's options for action.

Critical research of all types employs many of the qualitative research methodologies found in the following chapters of this book and notably has influenced critical ethnography and critical discourse analysis. Methodologically, its central concern is with the interpretation of data complemented by observations and interpretations of the surrounding historical and societal context.

(If you are interested in the more philosophical and theoretical bases of qualitative research, you may wish to read Willis (2007).)

## The influence of paradigmatic thinking on methodology and method

Although the above positions and ways of thinking about the social world cannot be translated directly into particular research methods, certain of their tenets and principles are often adhered to by qualitative or quantitative researchers. Investigators generally follow the path that fits their worldview and the ontological and epistemological assumptions linked to it.

Researchers in the *positivist* tradition often (though not always) use a deductive approach. This means that they start with a general theory or hypothesis, which they then test through searching for empirical evidence that either confirms or falsifies it. They develop a framework for the research that is static and firm from the start, and they keep to their original intentions, in order to get an accurate outcome for their research. For example, many public relations studies which seek to test Grunig's notions of excellent communication (e.g. Grunig, 1992) follow a positivist epistemology. Starting with his conceptual framework, they test its applicability in different contexts in search of universal best practices for public relations, such as the investigation in Slovenia by Grunig *et al.* (1998).

Studies of this nature often (but not always) use quantitative methods, stressing numerical measurement, statistical analysis and the search for cause and effect. Researchers control the theoretical framework and the sampling frames, and standardize research interviews and observations. This means that their framework is well established before the research begins. Researchers use questionnaires, or standardized interviews where the interview schedule of questions is set up before the research. They endeavour to ask each respondent the same questions in the same sequence. Furthermore, the size and nature of the (random) sample is established at the beginning of the project and rarely changes during the study. The size of the sample is usually large. When assessing the quality of research, positivist researchers draw on the criteria of reliability and validity (see Chapter 5).

Researchers working within the *interpretive* paradigm focus on meaning, not measurement, and therefore usually choose to employ qualitative methods. Gaining understanding of a phenomenon is a process which can never be complete, hence the outcome of research is always provisional; it might change with time and place. Researchers generally begin with inductive reasoning and take a particularistic approach, going from the particular – individual instances, incidents or the unique – to the general. Hence they do not start with hypotheses or theories but develop these over the course of doing research.

Interpretivist researchers maintain that they cannot be value neutral or wholly objective, and therefore their own experience can be used as a resource. Because there is no preconceived framework before research begins, the research is processual, with interviewers using a flexible interview guide rather than a pre-formed schedule of questions. In-depth interviews are non-standardized and the participant has some control (see Chapter 14). The sample is generally small but generates rich data (see Chapter 13). The relationship between researcher and participant is close, ideally based on a position of equality as human beings. When determining the quality of their work, interpretive researchers draw on the criteria of authenticity and trustworthiness (see Chapter 5).

In a study of corporate communication in a major industrial conglomerate based in Germany, Huebner *et al.* (2008) employed an interpretivist epistemology, underpinned by a social constructivist ontology. They employed this type of research because they argued that it would best enable them to explore an under-researched and under-theorized area of corporate communication, that is, how managed communication is involved in socially constructing meaning in an organization. Their methodological approach was a combination of ethnography, case study and discourse analysis. Their qualitative data sources were the company's corporate communication materials, naturally occurring talk, and interviews with strategy and communication managers.

Because researchers who undertake primary research from a *critical position* are interested in social criticism and transformation, it is not uncommon for their investigations to progress from the micro-level (with data collected on how people interact communicatively within a specific context) to the macro, where researchers seek to identify the broad social and cultural structures which influence communication. To do this convincingly may demand a mixed methods approach (see Chapter 20) and a requirement to draw on insights and theories from across a whole range of disciplines.

## The qualitative research methodology

While the roots of qualitative research are grounded in an interpretive worldview (which is the favoured orientation of this book), qualitative research, nevertheless, can be described also as 'multi-paradigmatic' in focus (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), because qualitative methods are capable of being employed usefully within all paradigms, such as positivism as well as interpretivism. Research methods such as interviews and observations, for example, are not constrained to any one methodology but can be common to all. Similarly, qualitative practitioners are sensitive to the value of a multi-methods approach (see Chapter 20), whereby, in the same research project, they might employ techniques and methodological approaches associated with more than one philosophical paradigm.

What is important, then, is ensuring that research is always problem or question driven rather than methods driven. This means that, despite the flexibility and dense insights into communication that qualitative research is able to provide, it will not always be the most effective approach for researching some topics; that will depend on what you are aiming to find out. Whether the type of research design you opt for comprises qualitative methods only, or quantitative, or a mix of both should be driven by your research question. In your own research project, while you might make your choice between qualitative and quantitative research on practical grounds such as your own inclinations, skills, worldview, or the dominant paradigm of the discipline or institution you are working within, remember that your main concern always should be the appropriateness of the methodology and methods to the research aims you wish to achieve. Indeed, if you are set on doing a qualitative study and the research question does not fit with this, you need to find a topic or phenomenon that is better suited to a qualitative approach.

In Chapter 1, we presented an overview of qualitative methods, discussing them in relation to quantitative techniques. It would be simplistic to argue that qualitative research explores emotions, experiences and the personal perspectives of participants, while quantitative research examines facts and numerical trends. Quantitative techniques also can provide the means to investigate attitudes and feelings, and there is no reason why qualitative research cannot deal with the perception of facts and things.

However, the value of qualitative research lies in its ability to *engage with* – often over a period of time – and also to reveal in depth the human dimensions and communicative interactions related to strategic, professional and managed communication. The disciplines of public relations and marketing communications as well as the qualitative orientation are all concerned with processes related to the intentional co-construction of meaning through communicative relationships. Qualitative research is able to do this through its commitment to an interpretive understanding of human, organizational and societal communication and experiences. It does this also through researchers' close engagement with the voices and perspectives of human beings in their social contexts at every point and level of the communication process, including: the persuasive strategies of managers toward employees; the advocacy of activist groups towards elite coalitions; interactions between stakeholders and corporate communicators seeking to co-construct meaning; the hidden voices of silent minorities ignored in political discourses; the spontaneous decision-making activities of individuals in organizations; the creative relationships that consumers hold with brands; interpersonal negotiations between media relations practitioners and journalists; and the collaborative engagement between research participants and qualitative investigators when immersed in the field of research.

In making decisions about the type of research that will best fit with your own philosophical orientation as well as the aims of your research project, the questions you need to ask before starting your investigation are the following:

1 What do I believe is the nature of the social world I wish to study (*related to ontology*)?
2 What is the type of knowledge I seek to find through my research (*related to epistemology*)?
3 What is the vocabulary of my research (*related to ontology and epistemology*)?
4 What are the procedures and strategies to adopt that fit with the above ontological and epistemological answers (*related to methodology*)?
5 How do I establish a relationship between myself and the participants (*related to methodology*)?

## Choosing between qualitative approaches

Now that you've chosen what you want to study, and you've thought about the fact that research needs to be rigorous and relevant (and to conform to quality criteria, as set out in Chapter 5), how do you go about selecting a specific approach to qualitative enquiry? Do you just launch into doing interviews, observations and investigating other data sources or should you think first about the overall design of the project and the theory that informs your choices?

Once you have decided that your research question or problem needs a qualitative approach, you then need to select a methodology that is best suited for your particular study. The different approaches are presented in Chapters 7–12. The question about which specific approach to take is the one most frequently asked, especially by novice researchers, because they are confronted with so many choices.

### *The commonalities of approaches*

There are certain traits and tenets which all qualitative approaches share:

- Qualitative researchers usually initially take an *inductive* approach to their data, meaning that they do not wish to test a hypothesis; that is, they don't work from a rigid framework or predetermined theories but start out with an open mind. This means that they have flexibility throughout.
- They take into account *the context* of the research study, that is, the social-cultural, historical/temporal and physical location and the conditions in which it occurs; thus knowledge is context bound and provisional, not absolute.
- The sample is generally small and the study *small scale*.
- Researchers are aware of their own part in the research process and *reflect self-critically* on their role as a research tool. This is known as being *reflexive*.
- All qualitative research discussion includes a *dialogue of findings with the relevant literature* in the field.
- Much qualitative research focuses on the way individuals and groups make sense of both their world and the phenomenon to be studied.

There are some differences between approaches, however. Although the process, procedures and methods of many, if not all, qualitative approaches are similar, they do not all have the same underlying theoretical basis or framework, and some use different data collection or analysis procedures from others. In effect, however, interviews, observations, document analysis and focus groups are common to most of the methodological approaches set out below because these are merely techniques for gathering data in order to achieve the purposes of the different methodologies.

### *Making decisions*

The case study methodology, grounded theory, discourse analysis and ethnography are all employed in both public relations and marketing communications, as is historical research. Some qualitative researchers integrate two or three approaches, such as the case study approach with ethnography and grounded theory. But if you are a novice or inexperienced researcher, it is not advisable to combine methodologies in this way. In any case, choosing a distinct approach with its own base and vocabulary will give coherence to your study. Generic research occasionally borrows features from a range of specific approaches (see p. 112). All research, of course, has to be rigorous and the writing clear.

Regardless of the methodological approach you adopt, it should be internally coherent and consistent with its underlying philosophical basis or paradigm. You also need to take account of the group, culture or context you wish to research because accessibility issues and also the focal group's or culture's preference for particular communication channels can influence your methodological choices. For example, it may not be possible to conduct an ethnographic study using participant observation of a community that is widely dispersed. Instead, with their permission, you might opt to analyse of all their email correspondence, in this case choosing to employ both case study and discourse analysis approaches.

**Key point**

The specific qualitative research approach you select depends on the topic and focus of the enquiry, the aims of the enquiry, the intentions, philosophical orientation and research competence of the researcher, and available resources such as time and finances.

The following description of individual, qualitative approaches will be short at this point as we cover each approach in detail in the following chapters of this book. However, you might find an overview and summary useful to help you choose between them. All of these approaches are interpretive or descriptive. All have in common a worldview which is broadly rooted in the interpretive/descriptive paradigm and all share perspectives such as person-centredness and attention to the context in which the research occurs (Holloway and Todres, 2003).

### *Case study (Chapter 7)*

This approach is suitable if you wish to investigate in depth a particular case or cases which can be clearly identified as a bounded system. For example, Gaither and Curtin (2008) investigated how a Danish company responded communicatively to an international crisis that threatened the existence of the company. The boundaries of this case related to time, location and organization. Case studies are valuable if you want to capture the complexity of a phenomenon, including its intricacies and its context. For research of this nature, you always collect data from multiple sources, which are usually interviews, observations and documents, and you always write a detailed description of the case. If you examine more than one case, you might think of comparing these cases. Case study research is useful in evaluation studies.

### *Grounded theory (Chapter 8)*

The goal of grounded theory is the development of theory. Many people use the term inappropriately to describe what is, in effect, an inductive process of gathering and analysing data. It is important to note that the distinctions of grounded theory are, first, specific cyclical and interactive techniques of data collection and analysis and, second, and most importantly, the development of theory that emerges from the data. Zhang and Swartz (2009) selected grounded theory as an approach to aid their exploration of the work of an Internet-based news service run by a non-governmental organization (NGO) involved in international communications activism. The theory they developed related to the values and effectiveness of NGO media diplomacy, an under-researched area.

A grounded theory research design very much evolves and is not established from the very beginning (even more than other qualitative approaches). Grounded theory is most often used in studies where little is known about the phenomenon to be studied; it is discovery oriented and examines under-theorized topics or areas. Note that in grounded theory data collection and analysis interact with each other, so as soon as you have some incoming data you start the analysis. The preferred data sources are observation and interviews, but researchers also employ other types of data collection methods.

### *Ethnography (Chapter 9)*

This is the study of a culture, subculture or group such as the marketing profession, or an organization, or a particular society. For example, Muñiz and Schau (2007) examined an Internet-based brand community. They observed all the interactions taking place on the brand's site, noting how brand fans created their own advertisements, distributed them online and acted as self-appointed promoters of the brand.

In an ethnographic investigation, which is usually small scale for professional communication research, it is important to study the social setting with all its cultural diversity. This includes shared norms, behaviours and the way in which people learn these. The account or report which you eventually produce is called an ethnography, which is the portrait of a culture (Angrosino, 2007). You obtain your data through observing, interviewing and collecting and analysing documents, both written and visual, including photographs and videos, often from multi-media sources.

### *Discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis (Chapter 10)*

In discourse analysis, your focus is mainly on the way people interact through language, creating meaning in their social worlds. You explore this by listening to them, analysing language and paying particular attention to text in its varied forms. For example, Motion and Weaver (2005) explored the language and ideology of a New Zealand advocacy campaign conducted by an organization lobbying in favour of genetic modification (GM) engineering. They analysed advertorials associated with the campaign and noted how these were designed to instil fear in the New Zealand public about the difficulties the country would face if GM crops were prohibited. They also informed their research with some of the wider cultural and political debates circulating in New Zealand at the time of the campaign.

Some branches of discourse analysis examine ways of talking as well as the ordering and sequencing of this talk. The interest here is in how participants draw on 'interpretive repertoires' as lenses through which to see their world and make sense of their experiences. The version of discourse analysis known as critical discourse analysis (the type employed by Motion and Weaver) is politically motivated, interested in exposing power, agency and ideology. It is influenced by critical theory.

### *Phenomenology (Chapter 11)*

You choose phenomenology if you want to focus on deep emotions and the meaning of people's experiences. Phenomenologists explore the lifeworld of participants, and the way in which they experience phenomena. The outcome of a phenomenology is an in-depth description of these experiences. As a phenomenological researcher, you rely on a very small sample – sometimes only one or two individuals – and use mainly interviews as data sources. A key feature of phenomenology is the way in which researchers endeavour to bracket their own assumptions before delving into the lifeworlds of their participants; that is, they examine their own beliefs and values, and then attempt to set these aside in order to better understand the world from the perspective of informants.

Grant and O'Donohoe (2007) carried out phenomenological research into young people's relationships with their mobile phones. They gave adolescents a disposable camera, requiring them to take photos of a week in their lives and then, in interviews, to discuss the meaning of the images. The data provided the researchers with insights into the meanings held by young people about their social connections, new media communities, brand relationships and marketing communications.

### *Historical research (Chapter 12)*

If you are interested in imaginatively reconstructing the role of communication and the lives of people in other times and contexts, or if you are interested in tracing how ideas and theories related to public relations or marketing communications have developed over time, then historical research is likely to be the appropriate methodology for you. Heath and Waymer (2009) explored historical, organized activism by collecting evidence about the nineteenth-century North American abolition movement, whose campaigning tactics they likened to contemporary PR techniques, such as events management, media relations, lobbying, fundraising and personal promotions. An historical methodology usually analyses written and/or visual documents, many of which may be contained in a variety of public and private archives. Oral histories involve the spoken memories and personal commentaries available from key witnesses through recorded interviews.

### *Action research (Chapter 12)*

This type of research aims to bring about change in professional practice and is often carried out by students who are studying part time while also working in public relations or marketing communications. Essentially, researchers plan an intervention in their workplace, such as creating a plan for change communications, then they implement and evaluate this. Often, by synthesizing the literature with their evaluations, they go on to create a further cycle of planning, change and evaluation. The aim is to develop best practice as well as contribute to new knowledge about professional communication.

**Key point**

Whichever qualitative approach you adopt, stay faithful to its underlying philosophy and principles, to its main focus and its purpose.

In spite of similarities, each of these approaches has its own underlying ideas on which it is based and within which its quality is evaluated. Within any approach, you need to make your epistemological, methodological and theoretical foundations explicit.

Occasionally you may find that you need to employ two qualitative approaches in one study, as researchers previously mentioned have done. Sometimes elements of a specific approach may be purloined for application to another type of research, such as the concept of theoretical sampling (often used in ethnography), or the notion that data collection and analysis 'interact' (as the term is used in many approaches but not in phenomenology), or even the concept of saturation (when no new information of relevance to your study is found in the data). Applying elements across different approaches in this way is legitimate as long as you explain the origins and details of these concepts. If you are an inexperienced researcher, we would advise you to use a single approach unless you have selected a case study which is an umbrella approach that can encompass a number of different approaches such as ethnographic and historical research.

## Epistemological standpoint research

Any project may be guided by the theoretical and ideological proclivity of the researcher – for instance, it might be carried out from a critical or feminist standpoint which informs the research. Indeed this standpoint can be based on theories of gender, sexuality, ethnicity or other critical theoretical preferences. This type of enquiry emphasizes particular ways of thinking about research questions and topics. Researchers focus on power, control and emancipation, and examine how some people's ideas are privileged over others. Standpoint research has its roots in specific ethical and political perspectives.

For example, Pompper (2005) has argued articulately for public relations researchers to work from the standpoint of Critical Race Theory in order to overcome the limited research attention that has been devoted to race, ethnicity and culture. Application of this theoretical stance, she posits, will lead to an expansion in understanding of the complex, multiple realities of public relations, and to a new type of knowledge that will challenge the conventional. In effect, she seeks to be ‘avowedly political with an activist agenda’ (Pompper, 2005: 145) in order to stimulate social change.

## Generic qualitative research

Some researchers do not employ a specific qualitative approach but instead use a generic one. Caelli *et al.* (2003: 4) define this as ‘research which is not guided by an explicit set of philosophical assumptions’; nor is it rooted in any specific methodology. While generic research might be criticized by experts or seen as a less academic and non-purist way of researching, there are a number of pragmatic reasons why you might decide upon this option, including the fact that you might be:

- a novice researcher (such as an undergraduate) whose research has to be conducted within a short timeframe;
- a researcher who wishes to carry out an exploratory study which forms the basis for further quantitative work, such as questionnaires;
- a researcher who decides that because the project needs depth as well as breadth follows up a quantitative research project with in-depth interviews;
- someone who formally adopts a mixed methods approach rather than just adding qualitative research to enhance a quantitative project (see Chapter 20).

Generic qualitative research results in qualitative description which shows how participants understand and make sense of their experiences. The advantage of this type of research (as well as its weakness) is its lack of methodolatry; that is, researchers are not obsessed by method, or overly concerned about it, but use procedures and strategies of data collection unencumbered by deep philosophical issues. The findings and evidence from these are the main focus of their account. Generic research, like all other types, needs to be rigorous and reflexive. It too needs to include an audit trail – showing details of how research was carried out – and should demonstrate how the findings emerged from the data. (For an overview of how to analyse and interpret data from a generic approach, see Chapter 18.)

## Summary

- The three aspects from the philosophy of science which are associated with knowing are ontology, epistemology and methodology.
- There are several major paradigms for research, each based in a different worldview.
- The main paradigms which inform research in public relations and marketing communications are those of positivism and interpretivism. Critical-interpretive research, associated with critical theory, is also influential.
- The choice of research paradigm and subsequent research methodology is based on the research orientation of the researcher, the research question, the

resources available and sometimes also the dominant paradigm associated with the relevant discipline or institution to which the research belongs.
- Although commonalities exist among qualitative approaches, each has its own focus, purpose, language and philosophical roots.
- Some researchers use generic qualitative research for pragmatic reasons.

# 7 Case studies

Case study enquiry is associated with an intensive investigation of a specific phenomenon in its natural context. The approach usually incorporates other methodological approaches and theories within its design. Therefore, this chapter needs to be read alongside other chapters in Part II. The chapter outlines:

- key characteristics of case study enquiry;
- types of case studies;
- how to make sampling choices based on the research focus and the setting;
- the contentious topic of generalizing from case studies;
- criteria for interpreting and evaluating case studies.

## Introduction

With the exception of some investigations across many sites, much qualitative enquiry is considered to be a form of case study research. Indeed the meaning of the term has overlapped substantially with that of others, notably with ethnography. However, we argue that case studies differ from other qualitative approaches because of their specific, in-depth focus on a phenomenon in its naturalistic setting as an object of interest in its own right. Whereas the purpose of ethnographic research is to study how a culture works (such as how an online brand community creates and disseminates advertisements – Example 9.1), case study research is more interested in examining an issue, event, process or problem within a particular context. The distinguishing feature of case study research is its holistic explanation of how multiple aspects, influences, processes and relationships 'fit together' within each case. Each case may be studied as a brief snapshot (i.e. over a short period of days or weeks) or longitudinally over months or even years.

Because case study research is not a method but a broad methodological approach or research design, a good way to think about it is as an umbrella under which can fit other approaches (such as grounded theory, ethnography and discourse analysis) depending on the aim of your research. Within its embrace, a case study also encompasses multiple methods (interviews, observations, document analysis, focus groups and so on). Perhaps confusingly, the outcome of the process of case study research is known as a case study.

**Key point**

Case study research involves intensive and holistic examination – using multiple sources of evidence (which may be qualitative and quantitative) – of a single phenomenon (such as an issue, a campaign, an event or even an organization) within its social context, which is bounded by time and place. Often a case study is associated with a location, a set of people such as a social or professional group, an organization or a community.

The aim of case study research is to increase knowledge about contemporary (and sometimes historical) communication events and processes in their context. Questions about how and why things occur in a particular situation or 'What is going on here?' are your primary concern when you opt for this type of research. In effect, you are aiming to bring to life the nuances of professional communication by describing a chunk of 'reality'. You do this by:

- undertaking a detailed analysis of a case, i.e. a particular phenomenon in its setting;
- trying to understand it from the point of view of the people involved;
- noting the many different influences on, and aspects of, communication relationships and experiences that occur within the case;
- drawing attention to how those factors relate to each other;
- often also noting the broader social forces and regimes of power in which the case is embedded.

(Piekkari *et al.*, 2009)

Case study enquiry enables you to collect 'rich', detailed information across a wide range of dimensions about one particular case or a small number of cases. A strength of the case study approach is its ability to incorporate a variety of different types of data gathered using multiple data collection methods. A sound case study, therefore, highlights the numerous factors governing public relations and marketing communications in a particular context, portraying as appropriate something of their uniqueness or typicality while also – but not always – attempting to offer insights that have wider relevance.

## The background

Case study research has a long and prominent history in sociology and anthropology. Classic studies such as those of Goffman (1961) about life in a mental institution, Whyte (1943) about street corner gangs, Jaques (1951) about factory work, and Kanter (1977) about hierarchy and bureaucracy in a large corporation have contributed to informing our understandings about the social and working lives of people in everyday or unusual locations.

In sociology, anthropology and increasingly in the disciplines of management and organization studies, a central role in research is often accorded to case studies. Here the case is allowed to stand on its own in order to generate theory, to enable findings from other studies to be confirmed, to achieve insights into and perspectives about territory that is previously uncharted or not well documented, or to test theory (for example to test the applicability of a particular theory in different contexts). Piekkari *et al.* (2009) suggest that cases that are particularly well suited to theory testing are those that are 'most likely' and 'least likely' to confirm or disconfirm a theory, as well as negative or deviant cases (see Chapter 5) which can offer a challenge to established theory. For example, in public relations research Gaither and Curtin (2008), whose work is outlined in Example 7.1, justified their application of a single case study approach on the grounds that the complexity of the case and its global setting offered them a site for testing out the value of a specific model of international public relations.

**Example 7.1: A single case study used to test a theoretical model**

When a Danish newspaper published cartoons of the prophet Muhammad in 2005, there was a backlash in the Middle East against Danish companies operating in the region. The Danish company Arla Foods was forced to shut down production in Saudi Arabia because of a boycott of its products. Kenn Gaither and Patricia Curtin used Arla Foods and its communication responses to the event as a case study to test 'the circuit of culture', a conceptual model intended to provide 'guidance to practitioners negotiating issues of identity in an increasingly globalized world' (2008: 120).

*Aims of the study*
To determine the value of the model for examining and explaining international public relations, and to extend theory in the discipline.

*Research design*
A single, holistic case study using critical discourse analysis, with the focus on how Arla Foods responded to a crisis event.

*Rationale for selection of this case*
Instrumental (see 'Sampling' section on pp. 121–122).

*Data collection*
Discourse analysis of the company's website, international media sources and blogs, corporate news releases and the company's annual report.

*Timeframe*
2005–06, the period when the event occurred and Arla Foods responded.

*Findings*

The researchers noted that prior to the crisis Arla had always branded its products as Danish, cashing in on the national reputation for quality. This backfired when the national brand suffered, leading to a collapse of Arla's corporate identity. Arla's strategic response of 'identity distancing' meant that it leaned on long-standing Middle Eastern partners to try to regain a positive consumer image. Gaither and Curtin recommended that, as an organization operating multinationally, it needed to forge a new identity that was more pluralistic, 'retaining a Danish core, yet allowing for local appropriations' (p. 129). By drawing on wider literature on organizational identities and social change, the authors were able to show how their study extended knowledge about international public relations. They also reflected on the value and limitations of their model as a wide lens 'through which to observe and grasp the complexities of international practice' (p. 132).

Despite some interesting and novel case studies such as those by Gaither and Curtin (as outlined in Example 7.1) and others, on the whole public relations and marketing communications research has been less keen to offer a primary or central role to case studies, or to apply the approach rigorously and innovatively. Traditionally, these disciplines have relied on the 'case study' (often in large numbers) to illustrate an example of something else, or to provide a pilot study for a wider, quantitative research project. More innovative, in-depth approaches have been overlooked, on the whole, and therefore we would argue that the potential of the case study for providing insights into managed communication topics has not been fully exploited. Indeed, in an article entitled 'Methodological Failure', in which he bemoans the 'disappointing record' of case research in public relations, Cutler (2004) points to the substantial contribution that case research *could* make to studies across cultures, nations and over time if such case studies were more carefully conceived and executed.

To some extent, this 'methodological failure' is explained by the preference of many public relations and marketing communications researchers for quantitative survey research. It also comes down to the fact that the term 'case study' is not used consistently; nor is it restricted to the research context. In public relations consultancies and advertising agencies, for example, 'case studies' are compiled to illustrate good practice, such as award-winning campaigns, and used for promotional or competitive purposes (see Pieczka, 2007) to generate new business. In education, 'case studies' act as a teaching tool to stimulate discussion, debate and practical solutions. Used in this way, they are examples of professional practices within industry or professional contexts. Finally, we note that we ourselves, like other researchers, are inconsistent in our utilization of the term, applying it not only to a research approach, process and product of research, but also to examples of discrepant data, e.g. 'negative cases' (see Chapter 5).

## The nature of case study research

When the term case study is applied to a research approach, it describes the following distinguishing characteristics:

- deep, narrow exploration;
- focus on real events in real or retrospective time, or both;
- bounded in place and time;
- either a snapshot, or a longitudinal study of events with a past and a present;
- multiple sources of information and multiple viewpoints;
- detailed and descriptive;
- holistic view, exploring relationships and connections;
- focus on the taken-for-granted as well as the significant and unusual;
- useful for theory-building or theory testing;
- extendability: the extent to which the case resonates with readers so that they are able to extend their understanding of their own experience.

Each of these characteristics is discussed as we move through subsequent sections.

A strength of case study research is that it is able to produce and incorporate multiple sources of evidence. One reason for this is that different theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches can be encompassed within it. For example, Gaither and Curtin (2008) (see Example 7.1) drew on case study and discourse analysis approaches to examine crisis communications and corporate identity. In a doctoral investigation into health promotion and social change, Al Saqer (2007) collected case study data from interviews, focus groups, media reports, advertisements and observations. She analysed these using discourse analysis, content analysis, semiotic analysis and thematic coding (see Example 17.5). Depending on the circumstances, the needs of your research topic and the particular situation, you might decide to apply both quantitative and qualitative methods. For example, a case study by Ragas and Roberts (2009) into corporate social responsibility employed a mixed methods strategy, with evidence from interviews, an online survey and text analysis of a corporate website. However, even if you opt to concentrate on a qualitative approach only, it is still good practice to draw on multiple sources of information, such as observations, interviews, documents and audio-visual materials. This evidence should reflect your intimate knowledge of the case, allowing you to build multiple viewpoints and perspectives into the case.

## Designing case study research

The design of your study, then, involves making decisions about your overall research orientation – whether or not to incorporate another research approach and which methods to use – as well as whether to select a single or multiple case study methodology. In most cases, you decide in advance what the case is and where its boundaries lie. An alternative, contemporary strategy is to allow these decisions to co-evolve over the course of your study (Piekkari *et al.*, 2009), which the intrinsic flexibility of case research allows you to do. However, do ensure you are very clear at the outset about what phenomenon you are investigating, otherwise it is fairly easy to become disoriented about where the scope of your investigation lies as the research progresses.

How do you know how many cases to study? That depends on your research question. The fewer cases you study, the greater amount of information you are able to collect across a wide range of features and influences within the context in which your phenomenon is rooted.

### *The single case study*

A single case study design offers you the opportunity to undertake a deep (but narrow) exploration of a particular phenomenon. Your interest, therefore, is on small numbers which are investigated in-depth at a single point in time or over a longer period. For example, if your research focus called for a study of how communication campaigns are planned and implemented by a large company, you might analyse all internal and external communications in all departments on all sites over the course of a year (this would be a *holistic analysis* of the entire case – Yin, 2009).

Uncovering processes over time in this way is a strength of case study research:

> The particular significance of the extended case study is that since it traces the events in which the same set of main actors in the case study are involved over a relatively long period, the processual aspect is given particular emphasis. The extended case study enables the analyst to trace how events chain on to one another and how therefore events are necessarily linked to one another through time.
>
> (Mitchell, 1983 cited by Small, 2009: 22)

On the other hand, you might concentrate instead on a single aspect of the case, such as communication planning in one department only. This would be an *embedded unit of analysis* (Yin, 2009). You would then compare your findings with those for the organization as a whole.

### *The collective or multiple case study*

The use of two or more case studies allows you to identify distinctive features by exploring similarities and contrasts between cases. It also enables you to generalize to some extent to a wider universe. It is not usual for researchers to choose more than four cases because the larger the number, the more the benefits of the case study approach will be diminished. When researching multiple cases, typically you would give a detailed description of each case, then identify themes within the case, and follow this by conducting a thematic analysis across the cases. You would then provide an interpretation, together with ‘the lessons learned’ from the cases. However, the more cases studied, the greater the lack of depth in any single case, and the more the overall analysis will be diluted (Creswell, 2007).

**Example 7.2: Using a multiple case study to explore the creative development of a corporate brand**

Shaun Powell and Chris Dodd conducted a study which sought to examine managerial communications relating to corporate branding in the context of London's creative sector.

*Research aim*
To explore how creative employees might be encouraged or motivated through communication to align with a leader's creative vision in relation to the management and development of a corporate brand for a creative small or medium-sized enterprise (SME).

*Research design*
Three case studies, analysed inductively and comparatively using a form of discourse analysis.

*Rationale for selection of cases*
Instrumental based on the intention to develop theory in relation to the creative, SME sector. The organizations were chosen because their primary source of income was via mainly original creative ideas; the product of their endeavours was intangible, symbolic and creative; and they were known as leaders in their respective creative industries. The organizations were designers, corporate branders and architects.

*Data collection methods*
Three phases over seven months of interviews and follow-up interviews with organization members and clients, and observations.

*Findings*
The researchers drew on previously published studies on creativity and branding to inform their results, arguing that 'the majority of the existing organisational and corporate branding literature is less relevant within the context of creative SMEs, than it may be for larger or other less creative forms of organisations' (Powell and Dodd, 2007: 408). From their insights on the three cases, they were able to draw attention to some of the subtle complexities of branding by SMEs in the creative sector, and highlighted potential barriers to creating an effective brand. Also, they presented communication and managerial recommendations to creative SME owners and managers.

### *Sampling*

Having decided to concentrate on a single or a multiple case study design, you now need to make choices about which case or cases to select. The process of sampling for case study research occurs on two levels: the case itself and the informants or participants. We consider how to select participants in Chapter 13;

in this section we discuss specifically how to make choices concerning the case itself.

### *Reasons of intrinsic interest*

It is not uncommon to select a case for primarily practical reasons. If you are confident about what you wish to study, you might select a case because it is the most convenient or accessible setting for exploring your research topic. Convenience is likely to be a crucial factor if you are a student, because faced with alternatives which are equally suitable it is not unreasonable for you to select the one that requires the least travel, the least expense and which has the easiest access. However, don't use these criteria on their own to justify your selection; they should be subordinate to the other criteria, as outlined in the next paragraph.

The fact that a case has intrinsic value – it is interesting in itself – is also a logic for selection. Stake emphasizes that choice of an intrinsic case study is undertaken not because the case represents other cases or because it illustrates a particular trait or problem, but because, 'in all its particularity *and* ordinariness [author's italics], the case itself is of interest' (2005: 445).

**Key point**

You should always provide a rationale for your sampling strategy. Based on the ideas of Stake (2005), the logic for selection is because a case is *intrinsically interesting*, or because one or more cases are *instrumentally useful* in being able to illustrate practical or theoretical features of value to your study, or provide a site for theory testing.

### *Instrumental reasons*

Your search for an appropriate case may be driven less by the accessibility or interest of the setting than by your determination to find a context which illustrates some practical or theoretical feature or process about which you are concerned, or which provides a site for theory testing. Your aim is to use the case to facilitate your understanding of something else, and therefore your choice is theoretically guided and your rationale is instrumental. Stake (2005) notes that sometimes cases can be labelled both intrinsic and instrumental.

Guided by an instrumental logic, you might select a case because it allows you to focus on problematic situations from a particular theoretical framework. Your aim would be to identify factors that cause problems in managed communication in order to offer practical solutions. However, while there is merit in learning about the difficulties involved in managing communication strategies and activities, you risk seeing only half the picture if you fail to attend to situations where communication has been organized effectively and managed successfully.

The rationale for selection of a ‘revelatory’ case (Yin, 2009) is because the research focus within the case is unique, or because this is the first time that a case of this nature has been studied. A potential problem, however, is that, over time, the case may not turn out as you thought at the outset of your research.

The focus of some case studies is on significant or unusual events which challenge or support current thinking about managed communication. An extreme case is one that is in contrast to the norm. For example, working within an integrated marketing communications conceptual framework, you might choose to study a communications campaign that has an exceptionally large budget (which encourages the extensive use of all types of communications methods). Your choice would be justified on the basis that the case enables you to uncover how the different communications tools complement each other.

Arguably, however, case studies should also focus on the routine, the taken-for-granted, the everyday goings-on of those involved in sending and receiving managed communication. Analysing how and what things become ordinary or generally accepted can make a significant contribution, for example, to your understanding of why consumers in a particular region stay loyal to a specific brand; or why some consultancies employ sophisticated research techniques to aid the design and evaluation of communication programmes, while others plan campaigns intuitively. This type of study is likely to be a combination of both intrinsic and instrumental case.

If your focus is on extending theory, then you would look for a case that is able to act as a test-site for theory, as in Example 7.1. When considering a test-site for theory, don’t necessarily select a case on the grounds that it is likely to support your argument. Deliberately seeking out a deviant case can offer you the opportunity to undertake a crucial test of and perhaps challenge to theory.

A focus on the need to generalize elsewhere is the logic behind the selection of a typical case. Because it is similar in key aspects to others that you might choose, its findings can be generalized to others in the same class or universe.

If you decide you need to compare and contrast findings across more than one case study, then the logic behind your choices will be instrumental because you believe that different cases, whether similar or dissimilar, will provide you with greater insights and therefore better understanding – and perhaps better theorizing (Stake, 2005).

### *Noting the boundaries of place and time*

Case studies are bounded or fairly self-contained, and therefore when you have selected your case or cases you need to be able to identify, and write about, the relevant boundaries of time and place. Imagine the case as a picnic basket where everything inside the basket is the subject of your investigation and everything outside is excluded. It is important, therefore, to outline carefully the boundaries of your case (i.e. the shape of the picnic basket) in order to show where your research begins and ends. Boundaries concern both place and time.

### *Place*

If the case is a company, you need to describe the organization. Depending on the focus of your research, you might choose to define its *social boundaries*. These include staff membership or the organization's formal structure, both of which define the organization as a distinct entity. You might also outline *physical boundaries* such as a specific site or building. This allows you to concentrate your research efforts on the activities, processes and relationships that take place within those physical boundaries. On the other hand, if the case is a specific event such as a major promotional activity along the lines of a sponsored exhibition, you might identify the client and consultancies involved in the event and note its target audiences.

However, while these boundaries are practical, they are also artificial; organizational membership changes, temporary and contract employees and also clients are only partially attached to organizations, and many communication activities take place outside your identified social and physical boundaries (a communications campaign might be devised by a freelance publicist over the table at a dinner party hosted by the client!). There is a danger, then, in treating your case like a sealed unit, impervious to the influence of outside factors. These might include:

- events which happen to participants when they are away from the defined setting;
- outside factors which temporarily intrude on your zone of research (for example, the study of employee attitudes to a company's management communication activities would need you take into account any repercussions if the company changed its consultancy);
- wide, dynamic networks of social relationships which may influence the views and active involvements of participants within your case.

**Helpful hint**

Be aware of external factors which might have an impact on your case, such as events, social networks, political and cultural forces occurring outside the boundaries of your case but which may involve and influence the people associated with the phenomenon under investigation.

### *Time*

Case studies should have a clear beginning and end. Note the period during which your study takes place. Is your investigation a snapshot of either an event or an issue at one brief moment in time? Or is it perhaps a longitudinal study of a situation that has developed over time, where you examine the series of occurrences that have led up to and resulted from a specific incident? If the latter, you need to justify why the case started and ended when it did. A longitudinal approach is more common in case study research because the nature of the case study allows you to pay attention not only to outcomes but also to the process through which things occur. This focus is one of the greatest advantages of a case study.

### *Generalization*

We covered generalization in Chapter 5, but because the topic is contentious with regard to case studies we refer to it again in this context.

Traditionally, social scientists' preoccupation with generalization as an essential aspect of research has led to some criticism of case studies for their limited generalizability. Equally, there is considerable debate concerning the inapplicability of the concept of generalizability to case study research (e.g. various chapters in Gomm *et al.*, 2000).

Endeavouring to transfer ideas into a broader realm is not always the concern of case study researchers because, as Stake writes: 'Damage occurs when the commitment to generalize or to theorize runs so strong that the researcher's attention is drawn away from features important for understanding the case itself' (2005: 448). Instead, case researchers may be more interested in focusing only on the arena of the case itself in order to provide a 'thick' description of the complex processes and influences within a particular context. The ability to offer a rich portrait in this manner is a major advantage of case study research. Readers of your study should be made to feel as if they have been there with you in your research, seen what you have seen and concluded what you have concluded (Geertz, 1988). When a case has this quality it has extendability.

Therefore, although your findings may not be universal to all other cases, some conclusions may resonate with readers in such a way that they can apply your findings to other situations with which they are familiar. Flyvbjerg refers to this as 'the force of example' (2006: 228), which he considers is underestimated as a source of social scientific knowledge because of the overemphasis that researchers place on generalization. Just because knowledge cannot be formally generalized, he states, it 'does not mean that it cannot enter into the collective process of knowledge accumulation' (p. 227) in public relations and marketing communications. Indeed, following his classic case study of managerial work, which continues to influence management thought some thirty years later, the renowned management scholar Mintzberg wrote: 'What, for example, is wrong with a sample size of one? Why should researchers have to apologize for them? Should Piaget [an influential philosopher-psychologist] apologize for studying his own children, a physicist for splitting only one atom?' (1979: 583). He makes the point that in many instances only one case is sufficient to achieve your research aims and to contribute new knowledge.

However, a danger is that, whilst a case may be interesting in itself, few relevant insights are likely to emerge if the reader is unable to transfer these to another setting. On the whole, then, it is desirable to aim for some generalization of case study findings in order to show their more general relevance.

Yet the quantitative notion of *generalizing to a universe of similar contexts* (or cases) is inappropriate for qualitative case study research because qualitative case studies are not statistically selected to represent a larger population. For instance, you might choose to study a Formula One sponsorship campaign because it is essentially interesting and enables you to assess how sponsorship models operate in the dynamic context of international motor racing. You would be unlikely to choose it on the basis that it represents all types of sports sponsorship campaigns. Because public relations and marketing communications processes and relationships are an intrinsic aspect of specific situations, such as the organizations where they occur, treating a case study as a sample of one and then trying to generalize to other situations would tear the case's findings out of the particular real-life context which gives them their meaning. However, if your contextual description is rich (or 'thick') and your analytical language comprehensive enough to enable both you and your readers to understand the various processes and interactions involved in Formula One sponsorship, it might be possible to generalize to the extent of stating that other Formula One campaigns might 'tend' to operate in similar ways under similar circumstances.

**Key point**

The concern by social scientists with the notion of generalization has implications for case selection. The study of a single case is an appropriate and sufficient research design if the case draws sufficiently on other similar work which allows connections and contrasts to be made. However, if you wish to transfer your findings beyond a single case study, you could choose to:

- use theory-based generalization (see p. 126);
- extend the research methods used (e.g. conduct a wider survey);
- add a second or more cases to the study in order to offer a comparison;
- conduct a case-within-a-case, to enable you to compare your main case with a case embedded within it (such as a department within your case study organization) or with a case at a more macro-level (such as the sector or region in which your organization operates).

Seale (1999) suggests that qualitative researchers cannot possibly study every context to which readers might wish to generalize results. However, if you are able to provide sufficient 'thick' description when writing up your cases, readers, like travellers returning home, will use their human judgement to establish whether the conditions they have encountered 'abroad' (i.e. in the case study) have any relevance to their present circumstances. The onus, then, is on the reader rather than on you as a researcher to assess how far the findings might transfer into their own context. Your responsibility is to provide sufficient information to allow the reader to make an informed judgement.

### *Generalizing to a theory*

*Theory-based generalization* is a more accepted rationale for generalizing from qualitative case studies. We discussed this in Chapter 5. The idea here is for case studies to be used to uncover patterns and linkages to theory in order to generalize to theoretical propositions or concepts. Theoretical concepts from one setting can then be verified in other sites and situations, using either qualitative or quantitative research. For instance, an investigation of the experiences of marketers in the Formula One case study mentioned earlier might lead you to conclude that current prescriptive models of sponsorship are inadequate for this type of context. In suggesting a revised model of how sponsorship operates, you might then test this through further research on sponsorship campaigns in other sectors, such as the arts or the media, or in other types of sport, such as Olympic swimming or marathon running.

Theoretical generalization, however, concerns not only ‘generalizing to a theory’, but also *generating theory*. When you combine a case study approach with a grounded theory approach, new theoretical concepts and categories are likely to be found. However, you should always consider theories generated from single cases to be fallible propositions that may be modified in the light of further experience (Seale, 1999). Therefore, you need to establish the relevance of your newly generated theoretical propositions through subsequent research. This requires you to include within the text of your case study your recommendations for further research.

## ***Analysing case studies***

As with all qualitative research, it is important to ensure that your data collection and analysis are closely interwoven throughout the life of your research, that is, collection and analysis should occur iteratively. The method you choose for analysing and interpreting your raw data will depend on which, if any, other research approach you have used in conjunction with the case study. For example, if you incorporated grounded theory, discourse analysis or ethnographic approaches into your case, then you will follow the analytical techniques associated with those approaches (as outlined within each relevant chapter in Part II). Otherwise, your analysis will proceed according to generic techniques as outlined in Chapter 18.

However, whichever analytical techniques you choose, in case study research the first stage should be to construct a detailed description of the case itself, together with its setting. This helps you (and eventually your reader) to work out how everything fits together. One way to do this is to start with a story told in chronological order, where you indicate the order in which events occurred, highlighting the people involved, the communications practices that occurred at different points in time, as well as the various locations where events or processes took place. From this point, you would then proceed in the usual way of coding, categorizing and seeking broad, common themes according to your supplementary research approach (for more on this, turn to any of the chapters in Part II, or to Chapter 18).

### Example 7.3: presenting a chronology of identity and change

In a longitudinal case study conducted both in real time and historically by Davide Ravasi and Majken Schultz, the researchers identified three temporal periods when environmental changes had an impact on the identity of Bang & Olufsen, a Danish producer of audio-video systems. They named the stages as follows:

- 1972: seven corporate identity components;
- 1993: break point;
- 1998: B&O united.

The researchers then used this typology to structure their analytical thinking, noting how the organization responded differently at each point in time. In an article, they subsequently presented their results chronologically through a narrative about how the basis of the company's identity shifted according to competitive threats at each point in time (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). (See also Examples 5.5 and 8.1.)

If your research design includes multiple case studies you will be searching each case for themes or dimensions that straddle across the others. What you are aiming to do is to put these themes into groups or clusters of themes so that you can compare similarities and differences among the cases. Having identified some overarching themes, you might think about devising a matrix to help you re-read each case in order to identify how the theme is illustrated within the individual cases.

For example, in the study on corporate branding in the creative sector carried out by Powell and Dodd (see Example 7.2), the researchers identified the notion of 'reputation impact', whereby creative employees were attracted to companies that were highly reputable and visible, because of the perceived reputation rub-off for the employees' personal identity and image (2007: 404). Smaller, less well-known creative organizations had greater difficulty in retaining employees. However, although this was a theme across their three case studies (and was reinforced through the literature), the researchers also found that there were different orientations towards this aspect, because for some employees 'reputation impact' was less important than being allowed more 'creative space' to do their own thing. These employees were happy to stay in small, less visible organizations which afforded fewer constraints on their work. In interpreting these and other findings, Powell and Dodd suggested that further research is needed to investigate the 'prestigious reputation' effect versus greater 'creative freedom' in relation to their impact on the corporate brand.

Once you have settled on your main themes and noted how they cross-cut through your multiple cases, you then need to highlight the meanings of your data, not only the local meanings that relate to each case setting, but also relating your research to wider contexts (including the literature) as well as readers' consequential meanings. This is how you interpret your multiple case study research.

## Criteria for interpreting and evaluating case studies

In addition to the criteria for judging the quality of research which we discussed in Chapter 5, there are several other considerations which relate to case studies.

Case studies need to offer a comprehensive account. This does not necessarily mean that you have identified all the possible influences and aspects of the case but that you have taken into account the historicity of the case, paid attention to the nuances of the observed phenomenon and called attention to the different perspectives on your interpretation, such as highlighting 'negative' cases and their alternative explanations, or allowing hidden 'voices' within a case study to be heard in your report. Furthermore, by employing a strategy of triangulation (see Chapter 5) you can corroborate evidence from different sources in order to reveal different meanings and perspectives concerning a particular idea or theme.

The triangulation of ideas is useful in helping you achieve a measure of validity, comprehensiveness and also interconnectivity (Chen and Pearce, 1995). When the interconnectedness of various aspects and influences in a case study are discerned and articulated, the complex nature of managed communication is illuminated.

The case should aim to provide probable and plausible interpretations within the context of your enquiry. The reader should be able to judge that the interpretation provided is likely and reasonable in both the situation and period in which the study took place.

Because case studies usually aim to capture features of contemporary events and situations, you can never have the 'final say' on your topic of interest. Your interpretations will only ever be provisional and fairly incomplete, constructed from your own particular stance which takes into account certain things and not others at the point in time at which you carried out your research. Your case study, therefore, should highlight its open-endedness in order to generate a forum for further dialogue (Chen and Pearce, 1995).

As in all qualitative research, it is important for the reader to understand your position and any biases or assumptions that may impact the enquiry. You need, therefore, to comment on relevant past experiences or orientations that are likely to have shaped your interpretation and approach to the study. For instance, a case study focusing on corporate social responsibility in a pharmaceutical company is likely to achieve different insights when conducted by a student without work experience and by a researcher with previous PR experience in the pharmaceutical industry.

## Limitations and problems in case study research

In some cases, the boundaries of a case are difficult to define, such as who is involved with the phenomenon under investigation and who is not, or when a case study begins and ends. This poses difficulties for deciding what aspects and sources of data to include.

Because case studies require you to undertake intensive examination often over a long period, negotiating access to settings may be problematic. Companies are often unwilling to allow researchers entry on the grounds that confidential information may leak into the public arena.

Case studies are sometimes accused of being too descriptive. However, in some instances description is your intention: for example if you wish to develop understanding of how a theory works in practice in a particular setting, or if you are attempting to illustrate a case that is unique. Nevertheless, be sensitive to accusations of this nature because they relate to the credibility of generalizability, a realm where case studies historically have been criticized. By ensuring that your report is explicit about connections with and contrasts to other similar work, you can show how your findings apply beyond the boundaries of your case focus.

## Summary

- Case studies are able to incorporate different theoretical and methodological frameworks.
- Case study enquiry facilitates the collection of detailed evidence across a wide range of aspects of a single case or a small number of cases.
- Sampling is purposeful, based on the setting or the research focus.
- Case studies are bounded by time and place. These should be made explicit in the case study report.
- When analysing the data, it is usual to begin with a detailed description of the case in its setting. This is sometimes presented as a chronological narrative.
- The generalizability of case studies is the subject of much debate. Generalizing to a universe is inappropriate for case study research. Generalizing to theoretical concepts or propositions is more acceptable.

# 8 Grounded theory

Grounded theory is a research approach in which the researcher develops a theory that is grounded in the data. It shares some procedures and strategies with ethnography, phenomenology and discourse analysis. Although a research approach in its own right, it also can be used in combination with other approaches, such as case studies.

The chapter notes that:

- grounded theory is both a set of research procedures and the theory that develops from that research;
- theory is generated or modified from the data rather than from pre-existing theoretical frameworks;
- procedures and specific techniques are carried out systematically in a step-by-step fashion;
- the approach is built upon specific procedures and techniques, including 'constant comparison' between data and emergent theory, 'theoretical sampling', and progressive focusing;
- it is a particularly suitable approach for public relations and marketing communications research because it allows practice-based theories to be built that extend or modify existing theory.

## Introduction

Grounded theory is an open, reflexive form of research where data collection, analysis, the development of theoretical concepts and the literature review occur in a cyclical and interactive process. While these features apply to some of the other qualitative research orientations, grounded theory has three distinguishing features:

- *Researchers follow systematic, analytical procedures*: grounded theory is more structured in its process of data collection and analysis than other forms of qualitative research, even though their strategies are similar (such as analysis of interview transcripts, observations and written documents).
- *Researchers do not aim merely to describe but also to conceptualize and explain*: the purpose of grounded theory is to generate and develop theory.

Without doing this, researchers may have done research in the grounded theory style but will not have employed grounded theory *per se*.
- *Researchers carry out theoretical sampling* where decisions about the data to be collected are determined by the concepts they discover, both in the early stages and then later as the theory is in the process of being constructed. Hence data are collected, analysed, and theory is developed in parallel and interactively through a process of ‘constant comparison’.

Researchers attempt to enter the research process without prior assumptions. This means eschewing pre-existing theories and a detailed literature review in order to concentrate on discovery and emergent knowledge. Grounded theory studies, therefore, are based on the premise that the strategies and products of research are shaped from the data rather than from any preconceived theoretical frameworks and hypotheses that you might bring to the research. This does not mean that you should endeavour to empty your mind of any prior knowledge or experience of the topic (as if this were even possible!), or that you should not have a general idea of your area of study. It also does not mean that you should ignore the literature altogether. Rather, Glaser and Strauss (1967), the originators of this type of research, were concerned that you should not be forced into a particular direction, or to rely on prior assumptions or hypotheses. Certainly, you should draw on the literature to inform your study, but it is probable that you will do this in a detailed and dialogic fashion *in parallel* with your analysis of data and your writing up of the findings.

**Key point**

Many studies claim to have followed the grounded theory approach because they have carried out an inductive process of primary data collection and analysis. However, unless they have both conformed to the operational practices of grounded theory (especially in relation to ‘constant comparison’ and ‘theoretical sampling’) and also constructed theory that is grounded in the data, their claims are likely to be unfounded.

A grounded theory approach enables you to undertake processual research, that is, research that develops in context and over time. It allows you examine how participants create meaning through social interactions in specific contexts. For example, grounded theory studies have the potential to offer original insights into how phenomena occur, such as how a particular advertising campaign in your country is created, or how internal change is effectively communicated over time in your university, or how trends in social media might align with positive or negative impacts on a company’s reputation, and so on. As a researcher employing this approach you will need to be sensitive to the context of your research, as this will enable you to notice and uncover important, emerging concepts.

Usually, the aim of grounded theory is to build new theory, although it is also used to modify or extend existing theories, as Example 8.1 indicates.

### Example 8.1: Using a grounded theory approach to extend theory about organizational identity

Published texts on how environmental threats affect organizational identities, images and cultures offered interesting ideas but were unsupported by sound primary evidence, according to Davide Ravasi and Majken Schultz. They sought to elaborate on the nascent theoretical ideas in the literature by using a grounded theory approach for a longitudinal study of Bang & Olufsen, the Danish producer of audio-visual equipment. Data sources included interviews, analysis of house magazines, company reports and documents, company archives and participant observation of corporate workshops on identity development.

The researchers followed a step-by-step procedure. They:

- compared terms used by both the company and individual research participants with ideas from the academic research;
- constructed categories and themes to explain what they were observing and hearing about in Bang & Olufsen;
- continued to collect the data at the same time as linking emerging concepts to construct a theoretical framework that offered a general explanation of the dynamics of identity, image and culture during environmental threats;
- returned to check their original insights in the notes (memos) they had made in the first rounds of reading the data;
- in each of the above stages, compared each researcher’s different data sets and analyses; also compared data that had been collected in different time periods; and compared each data set with their developing theory, i.e. the concepts and relationships identified as emerging from all the different comparisons;
- asked informants and other academic experts for comments to help refine initial interpretations;
- finally, compared their findings with other studies on the topic, discovering some similarities as well as differences; throughout the research, the researchers continuously interwove the process of collecting data with the process of developing theory by ‘constant comparison’.

(Ravasi and Schultz, 2006)

Typically in a grounded theory approach, you start with an area of interest and go straight into collecting the data. Obviously, you need to know the strategies and procedures of grounded theory first, otherwise you will miss some of its major tenets, such as interaction between data collection and theory, progressive focusing and theoretical sampling, as illustrated in Example 8.1.

At the same time as you analyse and reflect on the data, you are also exploring the literature. This allows you to make comparisons and contrasts between the concepts emerging from the data, the scholarship and the work of other researchers. As you collect new data and integrate new concepts, your grounded theory is modified and reformulated. Research of this nature allows you to make shifts of emphasis early in the research process so that the data gathered reflect 'what is actually occurring in the field rather than speculation about what cannot or should have been observed' (Glaser, 1978: 38). Later in this chapter (pp. 134–142) we set out the procedures for following this research process.

Grounded theory is useful in situations where little is known about a particular topic or phenomenon, or where a new approach is needed to garner novel insights in familiar settings. Although it can be applied to any area of study, it is especially suitable when the purpose of research is to discover the processes, constructs and theories used by those who produce and consume communication.

## The background

Grounded theory was initially developed in the 1960s by the sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, whose seminal work *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* was published in 1967. Later their ideas diverged. Strauss was keen to prescribe procedures for following the approach, while Glaser resisted any modification of the original idea. Two versions of grounded theory therefore emerged, Glaserian and Straussian, to which a third has recently been added by Charmaz (2006; Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). Based on social constructivism, Charmaz's ideas are becoming accepted increasingly by the community of qualitative researchers, who appreciate its flexible nature. In management and communication-related research, the Straussian approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1998; Corbin and Strauss, 2008) seems to be more popular, although both forms have continued to evolve over the years as other researchers have worked within the grounded theory orientation. A recent development has been to combine grounded theory with discourse analysis, as evidenced in the management research of Clarke (2005). (For a discussion of discourse analysis, turn to Chapter 10.)

### Key point

Like other types of qualitative research, grounded theory is developmental and therefore flexible. Whichever type of grounded theory you choose for your project, make sure that you are familiar with the approach as a whole, including how it differs from other versions of grounded theory.

The disciplinary tradition that informs grounded theory is sociology, particularly the symbolic interactionist school of thought. The theoretical and methodological presuppositions of symbolic interaction about the nature of the world and the way it can be studied are reflected in the research practices of grounded theory and its product (Locke, 2001). Symbolic interactionism focuses on interaction between human beings. It attempts to understand how individuals interpret one another's behaviour and language, how people give meaning to their own actions and thoughts (by communicating) and how they reorganize them when interacting and negotiating with others. Researchers try to observe and understand the point of view of participants about themselves and their worlds in order to uncover the dynamic properties of interaction.

## The process of developing grounded theory

To apply this approach successfully, Glaser and Strauss (1967) contend that you need to be flexible, approach the study with an open mind and make no assumptions before the research starts. By choosing to follow a grounded theory approach, you opt to operate as an interpreter of the data, not just a reporter or describer of a situation. This means that you continually search for relationships between concepts in order to generate patterns and links, from which you go on to develop theories or, at least, theoretical ideas.

Usually you start without a hypothesis or theory, your work developing both inductively and deductively. This is because during the course of analysis provisional hypotheses – or early hunches – or propositions arise (they are sometimes called 'working hypotheses'), which you check out against further incoming data.

For example, after reading interview transcripts about stakeholder collaboration in Jamaican anti-poverty projects, Glen Bowen (2008) realized that his informants considered that people needed to play a greater role in bettering their community. This initial 'hunch' about collective responsibility was strengthened when he found further supporting evidence. Eventually, he knitted 'the hunch' together with other themes and working hypotheses. These acted as 'building blocks of theory, interweav[ing] to tell a story about human behavior' (p. 7). In this way, he built a theory about people's commitment to act together.

During your process of investigation, you develop 'theoretical sensitivity', gaining insight into and awareness of relevant and significant ideas while collecting and analysing the data. Your sensitivity is built up over time in two major ways: first, by acquiring more information through reading; and, second, by increasing your knowledge through your experiences. The literature linked to your study sensitizes you in the sense that documents, other research studies or autobiographies highlight relevant and significant elements in the data and stimulate your thinking. Your professional and personal experiences also enhance your awareness – although having an open mind in the first place is a major criterion for examining the data.

During the course of managing your data, you will find that theoretical sensitivity gradually develops as you think about the emerging ideas and ask further questions. These ideas are provisional until you have examined them many times. They must always be related and linked back to the data. Grounded theory develops through this constant comparison of data and ideas in an orderly and systematic way.

**Key point**

Distinctive features of grounded theory include working hypotheses, theoretical sampling, memoing, theoretical sensitivity, and constant comparison.

### *Data collection*

Traditionally, data collection is based on observed events. Therefore, it is usual to collect your data from observations in the field (including participant observation), diaries and other documents such as letters or even newspaper reports (which you supplement with literature searches). It is common practice also to include interviews, even though these are based on participants' accounts of events rather than your own observations and experiences. Use of the interview method is justified on the basis that grounded theory is concerned to capture tacit knowledge which is gained from the reflexive accounts of relevant interviewees (Partington, 2000).

From the moment you commence your research, your data collection and data analysis go hand in hand. Analysis starts as soon as you take the first few steps in data collection. As you collect data from your initial interviews or observations, you use cues from the first emerging ideas to develop the next set of interviews and observations. Similarly, the gathering of your data does not finish until the end of the research process because ideas, concepts and new questions continually arise which guide you to new data sources. In this way, the collection of your data becomes more focused and specific as the research process proceeds.

### *Memoing*

From the beginning of data collection, throughout the course of your project, you should be writing memos to yourself about your observations and interviews. There will be certain occurrences in the setting, or ideas which you get from speaking to participants, which seem vitally important or highly interesting at the time. Don't lose track of these thoughts – write them down as soon as you can. Later, they will serve as a reminder of events, actions and interactions that trigger your reflective thinking.

It is also useful to write memos that comment on and explain the analytical codes and categories that you derive from analysing the data. These memos help you trace patterns in the data and your emerging themes. They make a valuable contribution to your analysis, by forming the basis of your written theory. Using one of the analytical software packages such as NVivo allows you to create live links to specific documents, media reports and other relevant evidence to support your written ideas.

### *Theoretical sampling*

In grounded theory, 'theoretical sampling' is used. This type of sampling is guided by ideas which have significance for the emerging theory. One of the main differences between this and other types of sampling is 'time and continuance'. Unlike other types of sampling which are planned beforehand and where a sampling frame exists from the very beginning of a study, theoretical sampling continues throughout the process of the research. (Note that theoretical sampling, though originating in grounded theory, is also often used in other types of qualitative analysis.)

At the start of the project, you make sampling decisions for the initial stage only. Choose the setting or phenomenon you wish to study, and select particular individuals or groups of people who are able to give you information on the topic under investigation. Once the research has started and you have analysed the initial data, you will discover new concepts (more on this in the next section, on 'Coding and analysing the data'). These inform your choices about the events and people you next select in order to gain further illumination on the research topic. Then you can set out to sample different situations, settings or individuals and focus on new ideas to extend the emerging theories.

Theoretical sampling continues until the point of saturation, when no new information of relevance to your study is found in the data. Just because a concept is mentioned frequently in interviews or because the same ideas arise repeatedly it does not mean that saturation has taken place. It occurs only when you are convinced that your theory is able to fully explain variations in the data. Saturation is achieved at a different stage in each research project and cannot be predicted.

For example, through qualitative research Gebhardt *et al.* (2006) developed a theoretical model to explain how companies create a market orientation. They wrote: 'We concluded our fieldwork when we achieved theoretical model saturation, a point at which additional fieldwork appeared unlikely to change our model significantly' (p. 41).

### *Coding and analysing the data*

Coding is nascent theory (Charmaz, 2006); once you have begun to code the data, you have begun to develop theory. From the first interview and observation to the last, you should be continuously analysing the data. Analysis initially consists of coding and categorizing. Coding allows you to transform your data and reduce them in order to build categories; as major categories emerge, your theory evolves.

**Key point**

Coding in grounded theory is the process by which concepts or themes are identified and named during the analysis, i.e. the data are coded into categories.

Throughout the study, you need to be comparing each section of the data with every other section as you search for similarities, differences and connections. Don't forget to include in this procedure the themes and categories which you identify in the literature as you continue to read throughout the course of data collection and analysis. Code and categorize all the primary and secondary data. This will lead you to form key concepts and constructs. Your aim is to search for major themes which link ideas to find a storyline for the study. This whole process is called 'constant comparison'.

There are three steps in the coding process. These concern:

- open coding (dissecting the data into discrete fragments);
- axial coding (making links between codes and grouping conceptually similar data to form categories);
- selective coding (selecting a core category and relating it to other categories).

*Open coding* is the process of breaking down and conceptualizing the data. It starts as soon as you receive the data and examine them. Each separate idea in the data is given a label. Similar ideas are named with the same label.

The words and phrases used by participants themselves to describe a phenomenon are called '*in vivo* codes'. These give life and interest to your study and are immediately recognizable to participants as reflecting their reality. Although *in vivo* codes are used occasionally, most often researchers develop their own codes – always being mindful, of course, that these reflect the experience and perspectives of participants.

When you analyse your data such as interview transcripts or fieldnotes, code them line by line or paragraph by paragraph, basing the codes directly on what you are reading in the data in order to allow them to speak for themselves. This avoids any preconceived ideas entering into your analysis. Your initial codes will probably be provisional because you are likely to modify these over the period of analysis.

**Example 8.2: *In vivo* and open coding**

While researching community-based anti-poverty projects in Jamaica, Glenn Bowen identified numerous *in vivo* codes based on phrases used by interviewees. They included:

| In vivo *code* | *Open code* |
|---|---|
| 'The majority would gain from the project' | Benefit |
| 'Everyone has to be involved if we are to achieve our aims and objectives' | Involvement |
| 'We asked everyone to pitch in' | Request |

(G. Bowen, 2008: 314)

Note that *in vivo* codes are specific and may be in the language of informants. Open codes are more concise and descriptive.

At the beginning, there will be many labels. However, after coding the data and pulling the codes together into groups with similar characteristics you will end up with a set of categories. Although categories tend to be more abstract than initial codes they still have to reflect social reality, so they must be grounded in the data. Keep referring back to the data to check that they are found there. Whenever you identify a category, you also need to be able to articulate its main features or aspects (properties).

At this point you go on to *axial coding*, where you reassemble the data that you previously broke down when you carried out open coding. (Note that axial coding does not take place in Glaserian grounded theory.) By reviewing and re-sorting your common themes, you group categories together in a new form in order to build major categories, which you then label. Occasionally you might use labels that others have already discovered and written about in the literature.

### Example 8.3: Axial coding

Glenn Bowen's further analysis of the data collected from research in Jamaica (see Example 8.2) led to his clustering – or axial coding – a large number of open codes into larger categories, axial codes, including:

| *Open codes* | *Axial code* |
|---|---|
| Selfishness | Focusing on the Common Good |
| Benefit | |
| Community | |

(G. Bowen, 2008: 314)

Although there is no initial hypothesis in grounded theory, during the course of the research you generate working hypotheses or propositions. These are your first hunches about what the data mean and need to be checked out throughout the course of the research. Don't overlook deviant or negative cases which do not support a particular proposition (these are explained in Chapter 18). Whenever you find such exceptions, modify the hypothesis or find reasons why it is not applicable in this particular instance.

The process of coding and categorizing only stops when:

- you find nothing new about a category of relevance for the developing theory even though you have attempted to search for new ideas;
- you have described the category with all its properties, variations and processes;
- you have established links or relationships between categories.

The third step is *selective coding*, which involves coding for the main phenomenon, the core category. In grounded theory, the major category links all others and is called the core category or core variable. Like a thread, the category weaves through the others, integrating them and providing the storyline. The relating of all categories to a core is called selective coding. This means that you uncover the essence of the study and integrate all the elements of the emergent theory. Included in the core category are the ideas that are most significant to participants.

**Example 8.4: Selective coding**

As Glenn Bowen progressed in his analysis of anti-poverty projects (see Examples 8.2 and 8.3) he used selective coding to subsume three axial codes he had previously identified:

| *Axial codes* | *Selective code* |
|---|---|
| Focusing on the Common Good | Motivating and Mobilizing |
| Emphasizing Collective Responsibility | |
| Seeking Stakeholder Support | |

This one core category included all the earlier *in vivo*, open and axial codes. The notion of motivating and mobilizing was a central characteristic of Bowen's grounded theory of stakeholder collaboration.

(G. Bowen, 2008: 314)

Coding and categorizing involve constant comparison. This enables you to clarify the relationships between the different aspects of the theory. Once you have analysed your initial interviews by developing codes and concepts, you start making comparisons between the concepts and subcategories. You then group them into major categories and label them. As you gather, code and categorize new data, you constantly compare the new categories with those you have already established. Thus, incoming data are checked for their 'fit' with existing categories. Each incident of a category is compared with every other incident for similarities and differences. The comparison also involves the literature linked to the study. Constant comparison is useful for finding the properties and dimensions of categories. It assists in looking at concepts critically as each concept is illuminated by the new, incoming data.

A point to note is that not all your categories will be relevant or robust enough to fit into your developing theoretical framework. If your study is highly complex, there may be too many categories to deal with adequately in the final written report. Once you have made a commitment to a particular focus in your study, 'some conceptual categories [will] end up being immaterial to the analytic framework and research story. Consequently, towards the end of analysis, as [you] work to integrate and delimit [your] theory and its constituent categories, [you] will be able to identify those immaterial categories and drop them from the framework' (Locke, 2001: 53).

### *Using computer programs to aid analysis*

In most instances these days, researchers prefer to use one of the software packages available for assisting qualitative data analysis. Packages such as NVivo, ATLAS.Ti5 and MZXqda2 enable you to search for text and thematically code chunks of data (and to identify gaps in coding which can bring attention to salient but less voiced viewpoints). The packages also allow you to test relationships between concepts, themes and issues in order to develop broader or higher-order categories. Relationships between categories become more visible when you introduce hyperlinks and text formatting, and thus you will be able to view the data as no longer static but dynamic (Bringer *et al.*, 2006). A further advantage of these computer programs is that because they have features designed to assist with record keeping, they can double as an audit trail, useful for demonstrating the rigour and quality of your research. (Chapter 5 deals further with audit trails.)

**Helpful hint**

Not everyone agrees that analytical software programs offer the best solution for theory-building in grounded theory. You need to do what best suits your particular project, taking account of your own proficiency with computers and software packages.

In many cases in our own research, we have found we can work more intuitively and in a more nuanced fashion by coding and categorizing within Word documents on our computer, and then creating and saving new files and folders for each of our subcategories and categories. This is a much slower process, however, than using the software packages.

Some researchers prefer to manually write up coded information onto cards, which are colour coded and then stacked into emerging categories. This allows you to draw comparisons and contrasts by simply looking at the different colours of the cards. At the selective coding stage, coloured cards enable you to study the data on the cards line by line, marking words and phrases that are particularly relevant for strengthening and refining the emerging interpretation. Even those who are proficient at using computer software find that from time to time they need to carry out their analytical thinking away from the computer because of limitations on the size of the computer screen. This may involve activities such as drawing diagrams by hand, handwriting memos and mapping conceptual relationships on a whiteboard (e.g. Bringer *et al.*, 2006). A roll of plain wallpaper, unfurled on the floor of your study, can offer a great space for drawing a complex map of all your conceptual relationships!

### *Generating theory*

Theorizing takes place through all the steps outlined in the previous sections, i.e. by oscillating between coding, writing memos, identifying relationships between the emergent concepts, writing working hypotheses and then converging on a tentative, coherent framework or model. To be credible the theory must have 'explanatory power', with linkages between categories, and specificity. Categories are connected with each other and tightly linked to the data.

### Example 8.5: Generating theory about media diplomacy in the Internet age

The use of media by NGOs for the purposes of public diplomacy is an under-researched area and there are few theories available to inform understanding about the effectiveness of such operations. Therefore, Juyan Zhang and Brecken Chinn Swartz selected grounded theory as an approach to aid their exploration of the key values that guide the work of an Internet-based news service run by an NGO involved in international communications activism.

Collecting data, analysing and theorizing occurred iteratively, with simultaneous movement between each step listed below.

Their research involved the following steps:

- semi-structured in-depth telephone interviews were conducted with some staff members;
- an open-ended questionnaire was sent by email to other staff members;
- interviews were transcribed and compiled with email answers;
- irrelevant or contextual evidence was identified;
- each meaningful unit of text was identified and recorded (open coding);
- these were compared, categorized and coded into conceptual categories (axial coding);
- conceptual categories were grouped into broader, core categories (selective coding);
- these were assigned into 'category themes';
- a hypothetical model was then established to describe non-governmental actors' public diplomacy-oriented international news services.

The substantive theory which they constructed was published as a diagrammatic model, which they called 'NGO media diplomacy: values, effectiveness and factors affecting effectiveness'. This described the core operating values of the news service together with factors that influenced its effectiveness. Key values included independence from government, journalistic objectivity and balance, and reader education. Perceived factors that affected the effectiveness of the NGO's Internet communications included the use of local journalists and editors as decision-makers, the extent of censorship by governments in the regions where they broadcast, the vision of the NGO leaders and the dialogic approach of the news service.

The authors admit that the study was limited by not including audience perceptions of the effectiveness of the news service, but time and budgets had prevented them doing this. Nevertheless, the grounded theory they constructed makes a novel and useful contribution to an under-researched area (Zhang and Swartz, 2009).

In constructing theory, your role is not only to describe static situations but to take account of communication processes in the setting you are studying, noting that these are specific to the setting. Remember that you are aiming to create theory that is grounded in a particular context, not a social vacuum, as Zhang and Swartz illustrated in Example 8.5.

Two types of theory are produced: substantive and formal theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

*Substantive theory* emerges from a study of a concrete social situation such as media relations, customer relationship management, corporate social responsibility, professional practice, gender relations, leadership communications or social media communications. It can also emerge from a study of one particular context such as a marketing department or an advertising agency or a community event. Because substantive theory represents a close connection to empirical reality, it is very useful for researchers in the professional or business arena. Substantive theory has specificity: it applies to the setting or situation studied and hence is limited.

*Formal theory* is developed from substantive theory. It is generated from many different situations and settings, is conceptual and has higher generality. Because it holds true not just for the setting of the specific study but also for other settings and situations, it is said to have general applicability. Examples of formal theories are systems theory, organizational culture theory and network theory. Because much grounded theory is specific to its set of circumstances in a specific context, it is rarely abstract and general enough to be applied to a wider context. However, in some research a grounded theory may offer a particular example or case study of a wider phenomenon. Or it may present a context-specific explication of a more general theory. In these cases, the grounded theory that has been constructed will travel beyond the ambit of its setting and offer insights into wider realms.

As an example, the idea that there are stages through which public relations executives proceed when they enter a particular new employing organization and become accustomed to its norms and practices is *substantive theory*. This becomes *formal theory* when it is linked to the existence of a 'status passage', which can be applied to many situations where people pass through stages.

In a small student project, it would be difficult to produce a formal theory with wide applications. However, substantive theories can also be important and may have some general implications.

### *Additional sources of data*

Both primary and secondary data are used to generate grounded theory. Secondary sources include company and industry documents (both text and visual) and the professional or academic literature. (To find out more about documents as data sources, turn to Chapter 17.) As you discover categories, you should trawl the literature to confirm or refute these. You are seeking to discover what other researchers have found, and whether there are any links to existing theories. Although you may have undertaken an initial literature review to demonstrate that there is a gap in knowledge and therefore a reason to undertake your research, the rest of the literature becomes integrated into the final write-up of your study.

On some occasions, researchers draw upon personal or occupational experiences as sources of data. Locke (2001) provides an example of this with regard to research on the topic of new employees and their mentoring experiences. She suggests that researchers could recall 'all their own newcomer experiences in different kinds of organization and use them in a comparative way to think about what their data might mean. Parallel personal experiences, thus, may be a source of theoretical insight' (p. 90). Depending, then, on your research topic, it may be appropriate for you to introduce an autobiographical account of your experiences with public relations, the media, advertising and so on.

We have already mentioned analytic memos (see p. 135). Because they are the thoughts and ideas that occur to you as you observe and interview participants, they provide a valuable source of data and the theoretical substance for your final, written report.

How do you know when to stop collecting data and finish generating new concepts and categories? When any new data provide no new information, you have reached 'theoretical saturation'. This means that you have arrived at the point where any subsequent data fit into the categories you have already identified. In effect, this occurs when there are no indications of the need for you to provide further categories or refine those you already have. In this case, you have reached the limits of your data collection and analysis.

## Limitations and problems in grounded theory-building

The process of grounded theory-building has been accused of being bewilderingly complex. Many find it difficult to follow in practice except in 'a loose, non-rigid, non-specifiable fashion' (Partington, 2000: 95). One problem is linked to theoretical sampling. Often researchers use sampling procedures which they decide on before they start collecting the data, forgetting that 'sampling in grounded theory proceeds on theoretical grounds' (Corbin and Strauss, 1990: 8). Theoretical sampling is necessary because of the inductive–deductive nature of the research. This is linked to the emerging theories which you are trying to advance through theoretical sampling.

Many researchers produce good categories and interesting narratives but often neglect underlying social processes, or they fail to develop abstract concepts. The aim of grounded theory is expressly to develop new theory or modify existing theory. This means providing explanation and conceptualization, not mere description. It is not enough to describe the perspectives of participants to develop a 'grounded' theory. You need to move on to the next stage, where you advance concepts.

Locke (2001) draws attention to the inherent tension in grounded theory between the need for you to hold in abeyance your existing theoretical orientations and presuppositions – so they do not influence your interpretation of the data – and the need for you to be theoretically sensitive in order to compose categories and a theoretical scheme. Being sensitive means being theoretically aware. But it is difficult for researchers to acquire this awareness without drawing on the knowledge they already have from their life experiences, their disciplinary training and their possible commitment to a particular school of thought. These aspects orient you towards particular aspects of your research, such as phenomena that others overlook because their different interests cause them to focus on different features. The need to stimulate insights from contradictory sources – outside as well as inside the field – is one of the greatest difficulties of following a grounded theory approach. It is likely to be only by trial and error that you find a way to deal with this in your own work.

Although the grounded theory approach is particularly appropriate for research in public relations and marketing communications, there are few examples where this methodology has been applied successfully. Certainly most of the methodology sections of studies in the PR journals which claim to have applied the approach fail adequately to articulate the systematic steps through which the authors developed theory. In many cases, theory has not been developed and there is no evidence of how coding actually occurred. It seems likely that in these cases the term 'grounded theory' has been inappropriately purloined to describe what is primarily research of an inductive nature.

However, it is understandable that the difficulty of operationalizing a grounded theory approach leads many researchers to follow a simplified version of its principles and procedures. For instance, the various stages in coding and categorizing may be condensed, or the sample may be selected in advance of data collection, or the development of a conceptual framework may precede data collection. If such research has developed theoretical concepts that are grounded in the data, it can be said to have employed a grounded theory *style* and, despite neglecting a full-blown grounded theory approach, such research may still hold value for knowledge in the fields of public relations and marketing communications.

## Summary

- Grounded theory is an under-utilized but potentially important research approach for public relations and marketing communications. It holds great potential for tracing communication processes in their context.
- It begins without hypothesis and allows both the data and theoretical sampling to guide the choice of conceptual framework and the emerging theory.
- Researchers follow a systematic, structured process of data collection and analysis.
- There is a constant comparison of joint data coding and analysis.
- Two types of theory are produced: substantive theory emerges from a study of a particular context; formal theory is more abstract and has higher generality.
- Analytical software packages can be valuable in aiding theorizing in grounded theory.
- Grounded theory is a complex and difficult approach and many who claim to have employed it have done so incorrectly, taking merely an inductive route to analysis instead.

# 9 Ethnography

As a research approach, ethnography may be used on its own or combined with other orientations, although its key distinction is that it always requires researchers to be immersed for long periods in the 'field' or research setting in order to study a culture from the perspective of its members.

The chapter highlights that:

- ethnography refers not only to the process of doing research but also to the end product, the written account of that research;
- ethnography entails researchers immersing themselves in the natural setting and cultural life of a group, organization or community for an extended period of fieldwork;
- it aims to understand the cultural world of participants in the study, and the symbolic role of communications;
- online ethnographic research is known as 'netnography' or 'virtual ethnography'.

## Introduction

The word *ethnography*, which is derived from Greek, means a description of a people or, literally, 'the writing of culture' (Atkinson, 1992). However, in contemporary research usage there is a lack of consensus over its definition. Sometimes it is used (inappropriately) as an umbrella term for many types of qualitative research, but here we are using its original, specific meaning as a method rooted in the social anthropological tradition, concerned with how social realities are seen from the perspective of those who live and work in them.

Ethnography requires researchers to carry out longitudinal research with the aim of achieving an analytical description of a culture or subculture, such as an online brand community of consumers; a society or nation; a local, global or transnational community; a profession such as journalism or public relations; an organization such as an established company or an informal, grassroots activist group.

Ethnography relies upon researchers immersing themselves in a group or community for an extended period of fieldwork, using the knowledge that cultural members share with them to account for the observed processes and patterns of human activity (Van Maanen, 1979). Researchers observe and ask questions about the manner in which people in particular social settings interact, collaborate and communicate – including with the researcher – in regular ways.

### Key point

Ethnography is both a research methodology and the product of that research, that is, a written description of a culture which is based on the findings of fieldwork. Ethnographic research may be both qualitative and quantitative, but in public relations, marketing communications and other people-focused disciplines it is usually qualitative.

Ethnography is an appropriate research tool for researchers seeking an in-depth understanding of the practices and professions of public relations and marketing communications, as well as the entirety of the experiences that consumers and other stakeholders have with, say, a brand or corporate identity and related communications. This is because ethnographic researchers study the lived experiences of participants in the study, seeking to see the world as they do.

Research of this nature in marketing is ‘conspicuous by its lack of frequency’ in the top marketing journals (Lee and Broderick, 2007), although it is well established as a methodology for studying consumers and consumption (Mariampolski, 2006). Indeed, the ethnography of consumption in the last few years has become a major qualitative research strategy. The approach is able to highlight not only how consumers purchase and use products, but also to reveal the whole of a consumer’s experience with a product – such as the attitudinal, emotional and behavioural aspects of their brand and advertising related behaviour – and how this integrates into consumers’ wider social and cultural experiences (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003).

Its use in public relations is tentative, its application primarily confined to cross- or inter-cultural studies (e.g. Daymon and Hodges, 2009; Sriramesh, 1996), with the occasional study of a community group (e.g. Palenchar, 2008) or communication practices within an organization (Edwards, 2009; Ortiz and Ford, 2009; Sleurs and Jacobs, 2005). Critical scholar L’Etang (2006) laments the failure by public relations researchers to engage more readily with ethnographic research, indicating that because ethnography has been employed rarely as a research tool there is relatively little understanding of public relations practitioners as an occupational group.

### Example 9.1: A netnographic study of consumers as online brand advertisers

How consumers create and disseminate online content was the research topic of Albert Muñiz and Hope Jensen Schau (2007). They wanted to find out the ways in which brand fans create their own advertisements, distribute them online and act as self-appointed promoters of the brand. They studied an Internet-based community that focused on Apple Newton, a brand that, together with its advertising, was discontinued in 1998. On the unique community site, the researchers examined how consumers build commitment to both the brand and the community in the absence of corporate advertising and promotion. They also saw how consumer-created advertising artefacts were created and the meanings the brand community attached to them.

The methodology included participant observation, non-participant observation and interviews. The researchers observed the community site and forums over six years, reading the messages that members posted to one another, analysing the user-created web pages, and taking part in discussions. They conducted interviews with community members, recruiting participants via a research web page which they announced in postings to the community forums. Interviews were face-to-face, by telephone and by email. In this way, the researchers carried out an ongoing dialogue with members of the community.

Both researchers made extensive use of fieldnotes to record their observations. One of the authors joined the community, which he stated provided him with both a unique perspective and empathy with its members. His membership also lent credibility to his communication with members.

The data revealed how consumers not only construct meanings for a brand, but sole-author those meanings through 'vigilante marketing'. They are capable of creating promotional content that may rival that of advertising professionals. The evidence has implications for the definition and practice of advertising because it indicates that a nascent shift in control is taking place away from advertisers towards consumers whose new power base resides in their ability to generate their own forms of promotional content.

Muñiz and Schau's research offers evidence that 'the institution of advertising is imperiled' (2007: 46). Therefore they urge future advertisers to consider giving consumers the tools and encouragement to create their own advertising for the brand. (See also Example 5.2.)

## The background

Gobo (2008) suggests that, in some form or other, ethnography as a method has been around for at least a century, although others argue it may be older.

Modern ethnography has its roots in social anthropology, emerging in the 1920s and 1930s when famous anthropologists such as Malinowski (1922) and Mead (1935) explored a variety of non-Western cultures while searching for cultural patterns and rules. When cultures became more linked with each other, and Western anthropologists could no longer find homogeneous, isolated cultures abroad, they turned to researching their own cultures, acting as 'cultural strangers', that is, trying to see them through the eyes of an outsider in order to bring a new perspective to that which was already familiar. Sociologists, too, adopted ethnographic methods, immersing themselves in the culture or subculture in which they took an interest. The Chicago School of sociology had an influence on later ethnographic methods through its members' studies of marginal cultures and 'socially strange' subcultures such as the slums, ghettos and gangs of the city.

Today it is not uncommon for anthropologists and sociologists to conduct research into their own cultures and communities. This enables them to present new perspectives on once-familiar settings, the process forcing them to examine their own cultural assumptions.

## The nature of ethnography

Ethnographic investigators of public relations and marketing communications attempt through their research to gain as complete an understanding as possible of the cultural meanings and social formations (and their inter-relationships) of a group, such as an organization, profession, community or society. Through their writing, they then create a picture of the distinctive reality of the group under investigation.

Research interest has tended to centre on consumer relationships with brands, the communication conventions of organizations, and the working lives and practices of communicators in different countries. Other areas for potentially interesting ethnographic work – where the researcher is directly involved 'in the field' as an observer – might focus on social transformation as it relates to political or health communications; pressure group relationships with governments or corporations; youth culture, media messages and consumption; also ethnographic research from the standpoint of theories of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and other critical perspectives.

A further, developing application of ethnographic research is the investigation of virtual communities, such as those that emerge via the Internet. The study of Internet behaviour is known as 'virtual ethnography' (Hine, 2000) or 'netnography' (Kozinets, 2006), and is exemplified in Example 9.1.

Ethnography has several traits in common with other qualitative approaches, such as data collection through observation, interviews and documents. Participants in an ethnographic study are called informants or key informants. The concepts of fieldwork, 'thick description', emic/etic dimensions and the researcher as 'insider' have their roots in ethnographic research, although they are now used in many forms of qualitative enquiry. We discuss these concepts throughout the chapter.

### *A focus on culture*

Ethnography differs from other qualitative approaches by its emphasis on culture. Culture refers to the way of life of a community or group and the signs of culture, such as language, behaviours (including communication activities) and artefacts (such as documents, architecture, technologies), which are considered to be symbolic of the beliefs and norms held tacitly. Symbols are learned and transmitted to others in a culture, with members recognizing and understanding their meanings. It is important to note that cultures are rarely cohesive. Although some beliefs and values are shared within societal or organizational cultures, there are usually differences and conflicts present at the same time, indicating the presence of subcultures. Such differences in beliefs and values influence people's actions and communication.

Consider, for example, the notion of 'youth culture', which actually comprises multiple, diverse and often overlapping cultural groupings or subcultures based on, for example, consumption patterns, brand affiliations, age, gender, work or educational attachments, and so on. On a different level, within a large public relations consultancy the organizational culture might encompass a variety of subcultures based on the imperatives of different client teams, professional or educational affiliations, or factors such as gender, expertise, seniority and race.

Your responsibility as an ethnographer is to describe, analyse and interpret the different social realities of cultural members and the communication activities that occur in the group you study. Change and conflict as cultural processes are particularly important to note in research because these highlight not only the existence of subcultures, but also the processes through which cultural members co-construct meanings and therefore shape culture.

### *Types of ethnography*

Researchers distinguish between several types of ethnography, some of which overlap. Which type you choose depends on the phenomenon or people you wish to study:

- descriptive or conventional ethnography;
- critical ethnography;
- autoethnography.

Descriptive ethnography focuses on the description of cultures or groups and aims to uncover patterns and typologies. It is used in most ethnographic studies. Critical ethnography has its basis in critical theory and has a political focus as it is concerned with power and hidden agendas in society or organizations (see Thomas, 1993; Madison, 2005). Although it also centres on description, its ultimate aim is to generate change in the setting it investigates or transformation in the reader or researcher. There are few studies of this type in marketing communications or public relations, although there are plenty in education and health research.

The third type of ethnography, autoethnography, implies that you centre your studies on your own self and behaviour, your thoughts and feelings, rather than focusing exclusively on others. We explain this in an extended section on pp. 150–152 because, although this is still a somewhat controversial and nascent approach, it is beginning to be published more frequently in the journals of other disciplines, and we note its potential significance for public relations and marketing communications research.

### *Autoethnography*

The aim of autoethnographic research is to carry out a cultural analysis that is rooted in personal experience, which it does by 'peeling back multiple layers of consciousness, thoughts, feelings and beliefs' (Boyle and Parry, 2007: 186). Although not a mainstream methodological approach, it is becoming more accepted (although still viewed suspiciously) in the fields of new media, journalism, organization studies and communication because it offers a way of uncovering that which previously has been taken for granted, hidden, taboo or 'otherwise shrouded in secrecy' (Bochner and Ellis, 2006: 119).

Where it is likely to be useful in public relations and marketing communications is where those currently employed in the professions seek to scrutinize and explain the centrality of their current and historical personal experiences and identities in relation to cultural and political contexts.

See Example 9.2, where a public relations practitioner reflects on his experiences. The approach is also likely to be useful for exploring the nature of stakeholder identities, racial and gender issues in communication, how communication is accomplished in organizations, the experiences of people working in communications agencies, and so on.

#### Example 9.2: Notes on doing autoethnography

Paul Elmer writes of how he came to take an autoethnographic approach in his doctoral research:

> I set out to research the social construction of public relations. The main problem I faced was that my research setting was UK public relations, specifically government public relations where I had worked – not an uncommon problem for PR researchers, since many of the academics and postgraduate students around the world come to the subject with at least some knowledge and experience of the industry and many of them return to the scene of the crime in order to make some sense of it through their own research.
>
> I went about my business, which began as depth interviews but rapidly (within the first interview) developed to a more ethnographic approach – it was simply that I felt I needed to get photos of the offices, the people, and take copious field notes to capture – well, at that stage I didn't know what exactly it was that I was trying to capture, apart from a vague feeling that the interview alone was not quite all of it. It was only on reflection, the first few interviews in the bag, and as I began to transcribe and order my work a little more, that I felt I needed to account for the way my own occupational experience and life history had framed the study – its choice of participants, the object of interest, the creation of data. How did I know what I knew about what I was looking at? That took me

into a world of autoethnography, which is not so much a research method but an approach to producing text (although Chang, 2008, suggests that it may be used as a method).

I have found the approach very useful in several ways. It helps provide an account of the role of the researcher in the text, the study, the creation of data and – probably most usefully – in the interpretation of data. In interpretation it is easier for me to say how I know what something means, and why I made of it what I did. It makes it easier to bring in data created from my own memories of practice in order to make sense of the material, too, although of course that is not without its own problems, all of which need to be admitted and hedged around with the usual methodological caveats.

My study leaned towards using my life as the starting point for investigating social phenomena as a way of accessing and making sense of a social group. This is chiefly because I am submitting the study for a PhD award in a sociology department, and that is the approach that fitted best with the department's discipline, culture and practices. I would have loved to take a more imaginative approach, and in the future I plan to.

(Paul Elmer, doctoral candidate, personal correspondence, 2009)

The data sources for an autoethnography are your own diaries and journal entries, where you record your thoughts, emotions, observations, personal stories and vignettes. By reflecting on your personal experiences in order to make sense of them, you endeavour to use these as insights into a particular culture or discipline, such as the profession of public relations. In this way you hope to extend understanding of your focal culture. Ideally, you are hoping that your research will spark conversations that will challenge readers to think differently about what may have been overlooked previously in culture, thus inducing personal, relational or cultural change (Tillmann, 2009a).

Tillmann (2009b) writes of her own experiences of bulimia, illustrating how this condition affected her communicative relationships. Thus she confronts readers of her story with the personal and cultural significance of such illnesses in society today.

### Key point

An autoethnographic approach is highly personalized. It differs from traditional ethnography as it foregrounds the researcher's own subjectivity rather than backgrounding it. It seeks to use the researcher's experiences to gain insights into a wider cultural setting.

The suspicion and controversy that are often associated with autoethnography relate to its reliance on personal subjectivities, anathema to those following traditional research approaches. We argue that for postmodern marketing communications and public relations research this is its strength, as, unlike most other methodological approaches, it will not erase the intrinsic connections that exist between emotion and managed communication.

## Some key ideas in ethnography

### *'Thick description'*

This is a concept used by the anthropologist Geertz (1973), who borrowed it from the philosopher Ryle. It is description that makes explicit the detailed patterns of cultural and social relationships and puts them in context. Ethnography is both descriptive and contextual as it cannot be separated from the time and location in which the research takes place. It is rooted in the meaning that members of a culture themselves have within the cultural context at a particular point in time.

Thick description must be theoretical and analytical in the sense that researchers concern themselves with the abstract and general patterns and traits of social life in a culture. Denzin (2009) suggests that thick description aims to give readers a sense of the emotions, thoughts and perceptions that informants experience. Thick description can be contrasted with 'thin description', which is superficial and does not explore the underlying meanings of the participants within the culture.

**Example 9.3: A 'thick description' of corporate communication**

Lorelei Ortiz and Julie Ford spent seven months inside American West airlines examining how managers were trained to have a role in an anti-union communications campaign whose aim was to prevent unionization of the airline. The researchers analysed internal documents, including emails, policy and training manuals about communications strategies. They also sat in on conference calls where airline executives convened to prepare for, discuss and examine the company's communications campaign and related issues.

They created 'thick description' of the airline culture. They drew attention to the meanings that managers held about the negative effects of unionization. They revealed how the company employed these understandings as part of its training program, teaching managers how to convince employees of the benefits of not joining the union. The researchers structured their findings according to headings which included the following aspects of 'thick description':

- placing American West managers in a prominent proactive role;
- clarifying 'misinformation' about what the union can and cannot do for employees;

- projecting corporate optimism as a strategy for communication;
- teaching managers to play defence;
- destroying the ethos of Teamsters Union.

The study highlighted some of the challenges that organizations face when threatened by unionization, and how communication is used to confront those challenges (Ortiz and Ford, 2009).

### *The emic–etic dimension*

Ethnographers use the perspectives of informants but also construct their own conceptual framework. Harris (1976) calls these the emic and etic perspectives. The emic view is the insiders' account of their own world, which helps you gain an understanding of their perspective. You come to this with an open mind to avoid preconceptions. Informants are allowed to speak for themselves as they are 'experts' on their own thoughts and feelings.

Etic meanings are interpretations and scientific accounts by the researcher based on that which is directly observable. Emic and etic perspectives are linked and demonstrate the relationship between the insider and outsider view. As a researcher, you translate the insights and words of the participants into the language of the disciplines of public relations and marketing communications, moving back and forth from the informants' meanings to interpretation – an iterative process – but always seeking a balance between these two types of understandings.

## Carrying out ethnographic research

### *Selecting the sample*

As in other types of qualitative research, ethnographers generally use purposive sampling that is criterion based (see also Chapter 13, on sampling). This means adopting certain criteria to choose a specific group and setting to be studied. The criteria for sampling must be justified in the study and made explicit.

**Example 9.4: Criteria for selecting two communities**

In a study of how community residents perceive and construct their awareness and understanding of both risks and industry-initiated risk communication, Michael Palenchar lived for several months in two communities. These were both situated in an area with the largest concentration of petrochemical plants in the USA, and ranked among the most polluted in terms of air quality.

His choice of community was based on how they contrasted according to the following criteria:

- the amount and duration of the communities' emergency preparation;
- industry risk communication efforts;
- proximity/size/type of industrial community;
- apparent community interest level in plant operations;
- community outreach status;
- effectiveness of the local emergency planning committees;
- economic or social importance of the industry to the community.

(Palenchar, 2008)

Having decided upon and accessed your group, next you need to choose a sample of key informants, ensuring that they are suitably representative of the group and therefore able to provide you with specific, detailed information about the setting and the people within it. Key informants hold 'expert' knowledge about the history and culture of a group, about interaction processes in it and cultural rules, rituals and language. They become active collaborators in the research rather than passive 'respondents' and, because you are participating in the culture yourself, your relationship and the majority of your interactions with them are likely to be informal and often spontaneous. Some researchers, such as Palenchar (2008), choose to complement their informal observations and conversations with focus groups and planned interviews.

Time and context also need to be considered in relation to sampling. Arrange to observe the group or community at different times of the day and different days of the week, otherwise your findings will not be valid. Imagine, for example, if you observed a public relations consultancy only on Monday mornings between 9 a.m. and 10 a.m. It is probable that you would sit in on their regular weekly planning meeting and discover interesting data about this particular activity. Your findings, however, would only be able to draw inferences about behaviour that was unique to one morning in the overall week.

### *Collecting the data through fieldwork: participant observation and interviewing*

The term fieldwork is used by ethnographers to describe data collection outside laboratories and 'in the field', that is, the research setting. Your physical presence in the field is essential in ethnography, with participant observation and interviewing enabling you to gain 'firsthand experience' of the group, organization or online community you are studying. You observe your informants and talk to them over prolonged periods of time. For example, Muñiz and Schau (see Example 9.1) were involved with an online community for six years, taking part in online forums, observing member messages and also interviewing informants. Involvement in the setting is necessary for a number of reasons, two of the most important being that:

- informants become used to you and therefore behave naturally;
- as an 'insider', you become familiar with the setting and participants, and are better able to grasp cultural meanings.

In fieldwork, you aim to examine patterns and routines in a culture which are familiar and recognizable to people engaged in that community. There are several steps in fieldwork. In the first stage, you observe and study the culture in which you are interested, writing notes on your observations. The second stage overlaps with the first because this is when you carry out informal and formal interviews. The third stage is when you realize that saturation has occurred, with no more new information emerging. This is when you start the process of disengaging from the field.

Developments in new media and micro-technology have enhanced the researcher's ability to do observational research. Starr and Fernandez (2007), for example, gave their informants a camera the size of a postage stamp, which could be attached to a hat or spectacles. This enabled them to record episodes from their lives without the presence of the researchers, revealing how they experienced their own worlds. There are further interesting possibilities for ethnographic observation, whether as a participation or non-participant observer, which the Internet has enabled. The most basic type of observation can be done on a listserv discussion list or chat room or even in a 3D world such as Second Life.

**Key point**

Observing online is 'like sitting on a street corner and watching people interact' (Gaiser and Schreiner, 2009), although, of course, in this case you can be present without anyone being aware of your presence. This is known as 'lurking', which some consider to be unethical and which is discussed in Chapter 4, on ethics in relation to online research.

Gaining access to settings for research is often problematic, especially as you expect to spend some time *in situ* either in the physical setting or in a virtual community (see Chapter 4, on accessing the field). Of course your observation period probably will be more fleeting than that of anthropologists of earlier times, who often spent years with a culture. However, shorter periods can still reveal fascinating insights. Kim Sleurs (Sleurs and Jacobs, 2005) spent six weeks in the PR department of a major Belgian bank, observing all the activities that went on, including how press releases were compiled and distributed. She discovered that the process of producing news for the media was not straightforward as it was always foregrounded by the political concerns of the organization.

As a participant observer, you are interested in watching participants' actions and the ways in which they interact with each other. Don't overlook regular, mundane activities as well as critical events; the former are just as important as the more unusual. It can be valuable to examine special events and crises, the physical (or virtual, electronic) site itself and the use of space and time. Remember also that the changes that occur over time in the setting should not be overlooked.

As well as observing people in order to collect data, Huby *et al.* (2007) suggest that examining written texts is also appropriate for ethnographic investigation. These include not only formal but also informal sources such as letters, emails, contributions to electronic forums and other forms of writing by the people in a group or connected with those you are studying. When you are already part of the setting, such materials are often readily accessible to you for research, either because of the trust relationships you have established or because they may be materials you are dealing with yourself on a day-to-day basis.

**Example 9.5: Using multiple data sources in an ethnographic study**

A team of North American researchers examined from start to finish the processes through which meaning is both created and utilized by consumers of the American Girl brand. The brand encompasses books, dolls, doll clothing and accessories, as well as immersive retail and catalogue environments.

*Location and period of study*
Researchers spent more than three years inside, outside and around Chicago's American Girl Place and the living spaces of Chicago-area brand devotees, in the New York flagship store and the living spaces of brand devotees. In pairs or alone, they shared the store environment and the children's play spaces with girls, their mothers and grandmothers.

*Data collection*
Participant observation, ethnographic interviews, photography, videography:

- *Key informants*: young doll owners, mothers and grandmothers.
- *Interviews*: formal interviews with key informants; discussions with girls in restaurants after their visits to the theatre to view the American Girl play; interviews with the store's marketing director; informal discussions with sales assistants; families encountered on buses and trains were intercepted and interviewed on the spot, in their hotel rooms or at the store. Informed consent was always gained.
- *Observations*: of the doll owners' collections at home, demonstrations of doll play; unobtrusive, in-store observation of the activities of doll shoppers, taking tea in the store café.
- *Reading*: media stories about American Girl, and historical narratives about the dolls that accompany the sale of dolls.

- *Participant observations*: shopping with young doll owners, eating and discussing with key informants in restaurants; immersion in American Girl stores.

(Diamond *et al.*, 2009)

(See also Example 16.7.)

Your observations become the basis for in-depth interviews, which you carry out both during and after the first stage of observation. Draw on your observations and your reading to start focusing on particular issues that most interest you and which are important for your research agenda. For more on observations, turn to Chapter 16. If you have given some of your informants a video camera or digital recorder to diarize their experiences, you may wish to use these materials to stimulate your interview discussions. A discussion of visual materials as projective techniques can be found in Chapter 17.

Some of your interviews are likely to be formal and semi-structured, but probably you will also ask ad hoc questions for clarification and have informal conversations with members. When interviewing, ask your key informants and other members of the culture to explain what you have seen and are puzzled by. Informants then might share their interpretations of events, rules and values with you.

Spradley (1979) advises ethnographers to elicit the 'tacit' knowledge of participants, that is, the knowledge they have but of which they are unaware because it is held unconsciously. This is difficult to do in conventional qualitative research but possible in ethnographic studies because of the time you spend in the field, developing and strengthening a bond between you and your key informants. They have access to areas which you cannot reach in time and location, and are often open to sharing their knowledge with you once your relationship has been built. Therefore, through informal conversations and interviews you learn about the tacit beliefs and values as well as the customs and conduct of the group. Often you might uncover a divergence between words and actions ('words and deeds') – what people do might not match what they say (Deutscher, 1970). If any conflicts exist, you must explore and interpret these.

Decisions about what and how much to include in your study are informed by your research agenda and the emerging data. You will eventually translate and transform your observations and participants' accounts into more abstract and theoretical concepts just as you would in other types of qualitative research.

**Key point**

Theory emerges from the *reflexive* nature of the ethnographic experience. As a researcher, you are a part of the world that you are studying and you are affected by it. The combination of your ‘outsider’s’ perspective with the ‘insider’ perspectives of your informants provides deeper insights – and leads to the development of theoretical concepts – than are possible solely from participants or from you alone.

Carrying out member checks with key informants is a way of validating your understanding of the community which you study. This means returning a summary of their interviews and asking them to check your interpretation (see Chapter 5 on ensuring the quality of your research). Using an electronic form of member checking, Muñiz and Schau (2007) placed their interpretations on their research page, inviting members of a virtual community to comment on them.

Fetterman (2010) warns researchers to be aware of the prior assumptions of key informants. Some who are highly knowledgeable might try to impose their own ideas on the study and on you as a researcher. Therefore, it is necessary to compare the narratives they articulate with the reality that you observe. There might be the added danger that key informants might only tell you what they think you wish to hear for political or professional reasons. However, the lengthy contact between you and the informants through your prolonged engagement in the setting help to overcome this.

### *The ethnographic record: field and analytic notes*

From the beginning of your research, you need to record what goes on ‘in the field’. This includes making notes of early impressions as well as detailed descriptions of events and behaviour. As a qualitative researcher, you work reflexively, examining your own presence within the research project (see Chapters 5, 18 and 19 for more on reflexivity related to the quality of your research).

There are four different types of fieldnotes in ethnography, according to Spradley (1979), all of which should be written as you go along:

- the condensed account;
- the expanded account;
- the fieldwork journal;
- analysis and interpretation notes.

Condensed accounts are summary descriptions made in the field, while expanded accounts are written up later, with the detail filled in and the short notes extended. In the field journal you need to be reflexive, noting your own assumptions and reactions, as well as the problems which you encounter. You can also use tapes, films or photos, flowcharts and diagrams in your fieldnotes or field diary.

Fieldwork proceeds in stages. Initially you gain an overview of the site, later focusing on issues that seem important to you. Finally, your writing becomes detailed analysis and interpretation.

**Example 9.6: Fieldnotes while attending a public relations conference**

As part of an ethnographic study of public relations practitioners, researcher Caroline Hodges made this condensed account of her observations of a conference she attended in Mexico:

> XXV CONFIARP Conference ‘Relaciones Públicas, Punto de Reencuentro de América Latina’, 17, 18, 19 and 20th November 2004.
>
> *Hosted by RELAPO (Association of Public Relations Practitioners of the West Coast), Hotel Plaza Diana, Guadalajara, Jalisco, México.*
>
> Thursday 18th November 2004 09:00 hrs. Sesión Inaugural
>
> Flags representing all nations of Latin America were evident on the stage. Members of the organising committee had paraded in from the back of the auditorium and key members were now sitting as a panel on the stage in front of big screen displaying ‘XXV CONFIARP Conference ‘Relaciones Públicas, Punto de Reencuentro de América Latina’.

I chose a seat towards the end of the row on the right about half-way back. Main auditorium about 3/4s full. I sat with a (female) PR Mexican practitioner I had met the day before and 3 practitioners (2 female, 1 male) who were visiting from Nicaragua.

Inaugural speech delivered by Carlos Brambilla Navarro (President, RELAPO) stood at the podium on the main stage to the left. . .

Summary of speech:

One of the tasks identified was ‘to dignify a profession’ whose roots could be traced back to the earliest stages of humanity. . .Remembered great ‘respect’ that ancient Mexicans had for tradition. RELAPO uses the term ‘*Huehuetlatolli*’ to describe their approach to public relations. ‘*Huehuetlatolli’* has its roots in the Aztec language. . .The term refers to the figure in Aztec society whose responsibility it was to pass on ethical values and wisdom to the public.

(Caroline Hodges, personal correspondence, 2009)

### *Analysing ethnographic data*

There are a number of ways in which qualitative ethnographic data can be analysed (see, for instance, Gobo, 2008; LeCompte and Schensul, 1999; Angrosino, 2007; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). There are also early foundational books, such as those of Spradley (1979) and Agar (1980), which include analytic procedures. Some of the steps in analysis which we refer to below are expanded upon in Chapter 18.

As in grounded theory, ethnographic analysis is an interactive process of bringing order to disorderly data because, simultaneous with your observing and interviewing, you are also attempting to make sense of the data and to write about them. This involves making inferences and giving an explanation for the communication phenomena you are exploring.

Your early interpretations are recorded in fieldnotes which become extended as your ideas develop. Interpretation involves theorizing and explaining by linking emerging ideas derived from your analysis to established theories by comparing and contrasting others' work with your own. Eventually your research story is put together through a synthesis of your descriptions, analyses and interpretations. It should form a coherent storyline. We explain briefly how to do this next.

**Key point**

It is important that the analysis accurately reflects the data. Whatever you find, you need to return to the data themselves in order to see whether there is a fit between them and the analytic categories and themes that you develop.

Start with a description of the data. Select specific situations that you observe (and perhaps extend through interviews). Initially you will observe and describe everything, but as your appreciation of the cultural setting develops you will find yourself focusing on just that which is relevant to your own research. Some events and interactions can be disregarded in favour of others depending on how appropriate they are to your research focus. As you progress in writing and analysing, the description will turn into a story of the culture, and the reader should get a sense of the setting or a feel for it and understand what is going on there.

The process of analysis involves the following steps:

- examine in detail ideas about the culture which your data generate: who says what? Who does what? Etc.
- organize and order the data;
- break the material into manageable chunks (sentences, groups of words, paragraphs) and label these;
- group similar codes and commonalities together and label these into larger, more embracing categories;
- compare and contrast the categories, stating their dimensions and looking for conditions under which certain communication activities take place;
- search for links between the categories which you label as major categories or themes;
- introduce ideas from relevant literature, connecting with other researchers' work;
- identify patterns in the themes and typologies;
- interpret the meaning of the findings.

Note that there is overlap between these activities; they are not simple and orderly. You collect data and try to make sense of what you observed and heard and then collect new data on the basis of your analysis and interpretation. Throughout the process of interpretation, you are giving tentative explanations about the phenomena under investigation. Interpretation involves some speculating, theorizing and explaining, although everything must be directly grounded in the data. Interpretation links the emerging ideas derived from the analysis to established theories through comparing and contrasting the work of others with your own.

**Example 9.7: Analysing data about an online community**

With reference to the study of vigilante marketing in Example 9.1, Albert Muñiz and Hope Jensen Schau described how they analysed their data from participant observation, observation and interviews as follows:

> Analysis and interpretation of the data. . .was an iterative process of interpreting, deriving new questions, searching for and collecting new data, rejecting, confirming, and refining our emerging interpretations until they stood the weight of data. We relied on Wolcott's (1994) ethnographic conventions in this endeavour, moving continuously among our focal artefacts [the consumer-generated materials], interview transcripts, and field notes.
>
> We worked iteratively through the data to identify recurring themes and motifs to produce a thick description of Newton brand community culture. In addition, we created an interpretation of Newton brand community culture by making inferences from the data while relying on the literature on brand community as a guide (Creswell 1998).
>
> As our thinking progressed, we downloaded additional threads from the [online] forums and conducted additional interviews to look for counterexamples to challenge our interpretations.
>
> Member checks were also conducted. On multiple occasions, we have placed our interpretations on our research page and invited members to comment on them. These comments suggested that our emerging interpretations were on the right track toward emic validity. After many iterations, we believe we achieved sufficient interpretive convergence.
>
> (Muñiz and Schau, 2007: 38).

(See also Examples 2.5 and 5.2.)

## Writing the report

Although ethnographies are written in various styles and formats, if you are an undergraduate student it is more appropriate to adopt a fairly conventional approach to writing the research report, as outlined in Chapter 19.

**Helpful hint**
Illustrate your narrative with excerpts from your interviews, from naturally occurring conversations that were observed and recorded, and from your fieldnotes. Use these to represent a distillation of your wider base of data.

We have already referred to the ethnography as a picture or a story of the communicative actions, interactions and events within a cultural group. Van Maanen (1988) refers to ethnography as a ‘tale’, and differentiates between three main types:

- the realist tale;
- the confessional tale;
- the impressionist tale.

Van Maanen’s ideas are summarized in Holloway (1997) as follows. Traditionally, *the realist tale* excluded the ethnographer from the text in order to provide a sense of neutrality and objectivity to the story. Therefore, it was written in the third person. It focused on the mundane details of everyday life, the ordinary ways of life and routines of the informants, and generated the ‘native’s’ point of view. It lacked reflexivity (see Chapters 5, 18 and 19) and relied upon only the author’s interpretation of the phenomena under investigation. However, in recent years realist tales have become more personalized, and if you were to write in this style today you would be expected to be self-reflexive and probably write in the first person using ‘I’. Sriramesh’s (1996) account of ethnographic research in southern Indian organizations is a traditional realist tale because it is written with no acknowledgement of the presence of the researcher and nor is there any attempt at self-reflection. The account by Diamond *et al.* (2009) in Example 9.5 takes a more contemporary approach because the researchers are introduced into the text and there is some reflexivity. In some universities where positivist research is predominant, students are given no option but to write their ethnographic accounts as realist tales. Similarly, the conventions of certain journals prevent authors from writing in any other style than the realist.

*Confessional tales* have become more popular over the last two decades. If you were to follow this style, you would use very personal language to describe in detail the techniques and strategies that you carried out in the field. You would articulate what you have done in order to demonstrate the adequacy of your work. You would tell how you gained the knowledge presented in the ethnography, demonstrating the ‘respectability’ and disciplined nature of your fieldwork. Your confessions would show awareness of your own stance and biases. It is probable that the writing of your tale would have been stimulated by a surprise or shock that you experienced in the fieldwork or through mistakes you made that caused problematic situations. These you would discuss in detail. Examples of confessional tales are presented by Shaffir and Stebbin (1991). To some extent, the description by Elmer in Example 9.2 reads as a confessional tale.

According to Van Maanen, *impressionist tales* are creative, artistic and contextual. Your aim in writing an ethnography of this nature is to present the culture under study in a creative and imaginative way. It is probable that, as the fieldworker and author, you would give yourself a place in this story. You would give names and personalities to the people in your impressionist tale, and describe their actions. You would attempt to draw your readers into the story by developing a storyline which enables them to learn about the culture gradually. Hackley's (2000) ethnographic study of the discourse of an advertising agency follows the style of an impressionist tale. Van Maanen claims that some of the best ethnographies are written in this way because they are read like a work of fiction with a strong and lively storyline.

## Problems in ethnographic research

Ethnography is a demanding methodology which requires a commitment of time to participant observation. It can be stressful as, despite your best attempts to immerse yourself into a group, it is possible that you may never completely succeed and will always be viewed as someone on the margins of the culture. This is likely to be compounded by having to manage the role of researcher while simultaneously attempting to 'fit in'.

A potential problem exists if you wish to examine your own cultural group because to do this successfully means becoming a 'cultural stranger'. This is difficult as it entails questioning the assumptions of a culture that is already familiar to you, and whose rules and norms you have internalized. Take advice from peers and continue to remind yourself that your role is to carry out research with an open mind as though you do not have prior knowledge of the culture you are studying.

Researchers often make statements, based on fieldwork in one group, that seem to be applicable to a whole range of similar situations. However, an ethnography – like other qualitative research – cannot simply be generalized. Findings from one subculture or one setting are not automatically applicable to other settings, although certain concepts or propositions may tend to be transferable (see Chapter 5 for more on generalizability).

Finally, new researchers are often too descriptive and present raw data without analysis and interpretation. If you are a novice researcher, take care to show in your report how you have analysed the data and made the linkages between your categories and themes, and be careful with how you present your interpretation, which must be grounded in the data.

## Summary

- Ethnographic research is the study of the way of life (the culture) of a group, community or organization. It relies on extended periods of fieldwork.
- It is both a research methodology (which uses participant observation, interviews and documents, including electronic resources) and the product of

that research, that is, a written description of a culture, including the communication activities and events that occur within it.
- One of the major characteristics of ethnography is ‘thick’ description which is both analytical and theoretical.
- Theory emerges from a combination of emic (‘insider’) and etic (‘outsider’) perspectives.
- Chapter 16, on observation, should be read in conjunction with this chapter.

# 10 Discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is a cross-disciplinary research approach which focuses on the analysis of talk and text. The notion of 'text' embraces written, spoken and non-verbal language, as well as other forms of presentation sourced in interviews, documents, and visual images such as films, photos and advertisements.

This chapter notes that:

- discourse analysts are interested in the communication processes through which meanings are created and expressed, and how these shape our sense of social reality;
- discourse analysis acknowledges that language is organized and used interactively to construct different versions of events and activities;
- it integrates the wider context into the process of analysis as it subscribes to the view that social, cultural, political and economic contexts both influence and are shaped by discourse;
- the version of discourse analysis known as critical discourse analysis is politically motivated, interested in exposing power, agency and ideology.

## Introduction

Discourse analysis has become increasingly popular in the last few years as a means of providing critical insights into the potentially powerful role of public relations and marketing communications as influencers of social action and change through the use of discursive strategies. Discourse analysis is a set of broad methodological principles which are applied to both naturally occurring and contrived forms of talk and texts, including spoken, written, visual, symbolic and non-verbal language. It is not a clear-cut approach to qualitative research but most researchers agree that the key focus is on the production of social life through language and social practice. This includes, for example, how individual identities, organizations, industries, communities and social contexts are created and maintained through discourse.

If you were to use discourse analysis in public relations research, you might study, for example, the rhetoric of a government, such as the way in which it has sought to gain support for cuts in social services by addressing its citizens in their role as taxpayers rather than as consumers of those social services. You would be interested in illuminating the implied meanings and tacit coding in public language use in all its various forms of communication. Your main sources of data might be websites, written documents, the televised speeches and broadcast interviews of politicians, or political advertisements.

For research in marketing communications, you might conduct a study that focuses on investigating the stories that companies employ to justify their ethical (or unethical) behaviours towards consumers. In research of this nature, you would note that companies' perspectives shape not only the words they use and the subsequent actions they take, but also the narratives they employ to persuade others of their point of view or the way they see the world.

**Key point**

A discourse is a way of talking or writing about something to make it meaningful. It is underpinned by assumptions about what we know to be 'true' with regard to how we conduct ourselves, what and how we communicate, and what we understand. Although language is a major feature of discourse, a discourse is more than language because it constitutes, or produces, a particular view of social reality.

## The background

Developed since the 1970s, discourse analysis has its roots in linguistics, psychology, cultural studies and sociology. As a field of study, it comprises diverse perspectives and approaches, two of which we discuss in this chapter.

The first, informed by psychology and sociology, was initially based on the work of Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Gilbert and Mulkay (1984). They see the speaker as an active agent, with language used as a tool to give meanings to experiences. The second has its roots in critical theory. Wodak (2001) and Fairclough (2004 and earlier editions) were early proponents of this approach. While critical discourse analysts use the same techniques as the first version of discourse analysis, they give their attention to the impact of ideology, seeking to uncover how power relations are reproduced through everyday talk and social practice. A number of critical scholars frame their analyses in the ideas of the philosopher Foucault (more on this on pp. 168–170).

## The nature of discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is mainly concerned with text and talk in the processes of interaction among people and also people and organizations. It aims to show how concepts are constructed in communication.

Think, for instance, how companies or the media take a particular stance towards an issue and present it to their stakeholders or audiences, and how this issue is then perceived and understood by people. At first glance, it may appear that the documents that you read or view – together with the oral communication with which you are involved on a day-to-day basis – all have a clear purpose and are relatively unambiguous. Consider the texts – or documents – that you may have come across, such as emails, newspaper articles, websites, marketing strategy documents, internal reports and other official documents of organizations, speeches in the public domain by corporate spokespeople or politicians, or speeches by private individuals which you've heard on the radio or TV, press releases, advertisements, letters, government reports, and don't forget the naturally occurring talk that you hear every day. While they may seem straightforward on the surface, each text will have drawn to some extent on historically derived expectations and discourses that have reproduced the power of certain groups to influence meanings and therefore to shape knowledge. If you carefully examine the words chosen in, say, a speech or a report, noting the metaphors introduced, and how the report or speech is structured and focused, then it is likely that you will be able to identify particular discourses that support and justify often unrecognized interests and positions. These discourses present a particular version of social reality as natural and given. Often that reality is the one constructed by an organization which it endeavours to promote to its various stakeholders through its corporate and marketing communications.

In general, then, analysts of discourse appreciate that 'social texts [that is, discourse] do not merely *reflect* or mirror objects, events and categories pre-existing in the social and natural world, rather, they actively *construct* a version of those things. They do not just describe things; they *do* things. And being active, they have social and political implications' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 6).

**Key point**

Discourse analysis appreciates that language, or discourse, is not simply a device for producing and transmitting meaning. It is a strategy which people use purposefully to try to create a particular effect.

Discourse analysis has similarities with conversation and narrative analysis but is more flexible because there is less of an emphasis on naturally occurring talk. Although there is some relation to studies of rhetoric in public relations and marketing, the connection between language and its context is more overt in discourse analysis.

Researchers who follow this approach are preoccupied with the idea that discourse occurs within a social context, which both influences and is influenced by discourse. Therefore, in their research they examine three key aspects, and the relationships between them:

- the form and content of the language in use;
- the ways in which people use language in order to communicate ideas and beliefs;

- institutional and organizational factors, as well as wider political, social, cultural or economic contexts surrounding the discourse under investigation and how these might shape the discourse, and also be changed to some extent by it.

Discourse analysis is based on certain assumptions about the social world. While most other qualitative approaches are concerned with an understanding of the meanings which people attribute to their experience, discourse analysis examines the process through which meanings are generated and maintained. Discourse analysis, therefore, moves beyond textual examination to explore *how* language is used, *why*, *when* and by *whom*.

The uncovering of metaphors in language is an important aspect of research into the 'how' of language use. A metaphor is a word or image that stands for something else. The metaphors that are accepted in everyday language tend to both guide and reveal our thinking. For example, textbooks commonly refer to communication 'channels' and to the 'sending' and 'receiving' of information. Yet clearly communication is not a solid pipeline down which we post packages of information. In using the metaphor of a channel, we are encouraged to see communication as something linear, and therefore dismiss alternative ideas such as communication as polymorphic, complex or multiplicitous. Many discourse analysts, therefore, employ metaphors as a foundation for enquiry into, *inter alia*, how meanings are encapsulated in discursive practices.

## Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis mainly focuses on the notions of power and ideology, examining how 'discursive practices. . .can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities through the ways in which they represent things and position people' (Fairclough and Wodak, 2004: 357).

Its main proponent in the UK is Fairclough (e.g. 2010), who centres his work on language as a tool for communication in social life, mainly looking at issues such as social change, politics (especially in political speeches) and globalization. Another important scholar is van Dijk (2008), who is concerned, *inter alia*, with the ways in which media and political elites control access to public discourse.

### Example 10.1: A critical discourse analysis from a Foucauldian perspective

Judy Motion and Kay Weaver (2005) explored the language and ideology of a New Zealand advocacy campaign conducted by the Life Sciences Network (LSN), an organization lobbying in favour of genetic modification engineering. The aim of the campaign was ostensibly to educate the public, media and political groups about biotechnology as central to New Zealand's economic wellbeing.

*Methods*
The researchers analysed campaign texts: advertorials and websites of Life Sciences Network. In presenting their findings, Motion and Weaver introduced quotations throughout their article, culling these from their analysis of advertorials and websites produced by LSN.

*Results*
The discourses of LSN promoted the safety of GM products – and LSN discursively constructed the anti-GM position as having no basis in reality. The advertorials introduced the claims of scientific 'experts' about the unscientific 'horror stories being promoted by certain, anti-GE factions' (p. 60), which they claimed were putting New Zealand's future prosperity at risk, thus hindering open, honest debate. For example, the Network sought to develop fear in the New Zealand public by pointing out some of the difficulties the country would face if GM crops were prohibited:

> Residents in a GM-free zone would no longer have access to medicines that were genetically modified or produced by genetically modified organisms. . .Would these residents be forced to move house to another local body or would the authorities turn a blind eye to doctors who smuggled supplies in to the zone and administered them to residents after hours? (Life Sciences Network, 2002, p. 9)
>
> (Motion and Weaver, 2005: 62)

Motion and Weaver related their findings to the wider political and socio-cultural context, including the New Zealand government's vision for the country's future development, and environmental and political debates related to the forthcoming New Zealand general election. They showed how LSN set out to normalize GM, communicating the LSN stance as the 'truth'. In this way, LSN discursively reconstructed the opposing anti-GM position in the minds of the New Zealand public, while aligning the pro-GM position with the interests of the New Zealand way of life.

The work of critical discourse analysts focuses on notions of power and inequality, including how these are socially constructed and maintained. Acknowledging that power relations and ideologies are reflected in discourses, researchers have traditionally been concerned to examine how social inequalities related to gender, race and politics have been reproduced in text and talk. Hackley's investigations in advertising and marketing management (e.g. 2003a, 2003b) point to the way in which critical discourse analysis can be valuable in unravelling how particular ways of seeing the world become accepted and normalized, including how people and organizations shape discourses and their interpretation.

According to Haig (2004), questions that critical discourse analysts ask are:

- What is the relationship between texts, their producers and consumers, and the social environment in which text production and consumption occur?
- What other (i.e. better) ways could such communication interactions be organized?
- What ideologies are 'lurking between the lines on the page and within the social structures in which interactions take place' (p. 137)?
- How is power deployed through relationships and what is its effect?

One can distinguish between Foucauldian and non-Foucauldian discourse analysis. Foucault (1926–84), the French philosopher, described the links of language with particular disciplines and institutions. He saw discourses as bodies of knowledge which exist in disciplines, such as the professions, and institutions such as business organizations or political establishments (Holloway, 2008); there is professional discourse, political discourse, business discourse and, as Hackley (2003a) illustrated, a marketing discourse. Indeed, Foucault, a Marxist, claims that discourse reproduces institutions because discourses are communications imbued with ideologies which affect and influence social life, including the reinforcement of social inequalities.

Foucault was not concerned with micro-analysis in individual interaction. His ideas are mainly philosophical and do not focus on method. Foucauldian discourse analysis, therefore, takes a broad theoretical perspective, aiming to promote change and expose power relationships.

## Collecting the data

It is not uncommon to combine discourse analysis with other interpretive approaches and methods because this allows you to better unravel the dynamic relationships among discourse, social practices and their local settings. For example, Cook *et al.* (2009) carried out individual and group interviews in the course of investigating the promotional discourse of organic food campaigners in Britain. Basing their analysis on an examination of transcripts and documents, they found that 'the language used tends to be poetic, vague, dialogic, narrative, and emotive, with an emphasis upon bucolic imagery and consumer self-interest' (p. 151).

Depending on your research question, your data might include fieldnotes from periods of informal observation, transcripts from conducting interviews and focus groups, emails and notes from telephone conversations. It is likely that these would be added to an analysis of some or all of the usual texts analysed in discourse analysis studies such as corporate documents, agency briefing notes, media releases and reports, websites and visual images, etc.

**Example 10.2: Types of texts collected in recent discourse analysis studies**

*Kristin Demetrious (2008)*
Research focus: ethical issues related to the communicative interactions between Australian corporate organizations and the grassroots activist groups opposing their activities. Texts analysed: newspaper and radio transcripts, websites, letters and campaign documents.

*Lionel Sitz (2008)*
Research focus: how consumers identify with and make sense of shopping experiences. Texts analysed: interview transcripts.

*Karina Peñaloza de Brooks and Damion Waymer (2009)*
Research focus: how organizations align their messages with wider public discourses in order to effectively manage issues. Texts analysed: press releases, media stories, advertisements, and websites.

*Chris Hackley (2003a)*
Research focus: how authors of marketing textbooks deploy ideological rhetoric to produce a sense of unity, consensus and authority in their writing. Texts analysed: marketing management textbooks.

As a discourse analyst, what interests you most is language and its use rather than the individuals themselves who generate the various forms of communication. Therefore, the success of your study is not dependent on sample size. Even a few documents or transcripts are likely to reveal a large number of linguistic patterns. Indeed, some classic studies have concentrated on a *single* text, but this is rare. In the investigation by Motion and Weaver (2005) of a New Zealand advocacy campaign (Example 10.1), they analysed only three documents: two newspaper advertorials and a corporate information sheet. Because the organization they were investigating emphasized these as fundamental to their communication strategy, the authors considered these texts sufficiently representative of the corporate discourses they wished to study. They also drew, however, on wider literature to help them position their findings within the political, historical and social discourses of New Zealand.

When making decisions about your sample size, be guided by your research question and also by the data that are accessible. In some cases, it may not be possible to get hold of certain material because it no longer exists or because it is confidential. For more on the data collection techniques of interviewing and using documents, turn to Chapters 14 and 17.

**Key point**
The goal of interviewing in discourse analysis differs from that in other methodological approaches because you are seeking to find out how communication is constructed, what it achieves and who or what is influential in the process.

In discourse analysis, you approach interviews as 'conversational encounters' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) where you encourage participants to talk in the natural, everyday language that they would use outside the interview situation. This means taking an active and interventionist role as an interviewer, rather than being passive and neutral. Potter and Wetherell suggest that one way to do this is to encourage participants to discuss issues from a number of different angles.

For example, if an issue was equal opportunities in the advertising industry, you might raise this in relation to (1) the depiction of women in television advertising, (2) graduate recruitment and (3) promotion within agencies. By looking at the same issue in a variety of contexts, participants are more likely to involve themselves in the conversation and put forward less contrived responses. A further strategy is to pose follow-up questions to participants' responses which require them to consider alternative or problematic views or facts. Techniques such as these result in more informal conversational exchanges which are better able to reveal the way language is structured and constructed.

However, the ability to successfully conduct interviews of this type is a skill that takes time to develop. This is because there are two competing aspects involved in interviewing for discourse analysis. On the one hand, you need to systematically cover the same range of topics with all participants and, on the other hand, you need to allow your interviews to remain open-ended enough to engage people fully and naturally in conversation. The first is achievable if you use a detailed interview guide with the same questions, probes and follow-up questions to all participants. The second will occur only if you have excellent interpersonal communication skills.

### *Analysing the data*

Although there are no set procedures for conducting discourse analysis, there are some common techniques. These include focusing on whole segments of language, identifying 'interpretative repertoires', being sensitive to the way arguments are constructed and paying attention to the context.

#### *Read and re-read the transcripts or explore other sources of discourse*

'Reading' includes listening to tapes and looking at documents or pictures. Initially you might do this without any analysis but major ideas will become obvious to you during this reading.

### *Focus on and label extended segments of language*

Usually when undertaking qualitative data analysis, you are concerned to find key words, themes, issues and patterns in your data-texts. In discourse analysis, however, you are less interested in individual words and phrases than in whole chunks of text because you want to explore accounts and language structures.

Some discourse analysts advocate coding texts by highlighting important elements or all material that seems relevant. Willig (2008: 165) states that ‘discourse analysis proceeds on the basis of interaction with the text’. You focus on how the text is constructed and what its intended purpose is (i.e. its ‘function’), paying attention to style, terminology, figures of speech which participants use and also how these are derived from one or more key metaphors. In an early text (1987), Potter and Wetherell called these ‘interpretative repertoires’ (another word for discourses). As frameworks, they guide and influence writers or speakers to construct versions of actions, cognitive processes and other phenomena. As resources, they are available to people in various settings to achieve communication, in particular at a micro-level in interaction with others. Discourse analysis is concerned with the ways people choose from a number of repertoires to achieve this communication. To identify interpretative repertoires in communication, look for regularities and variabilities in the language used. Having found them, select a label for them, as appropriate.

#### **Example 10.3: The process of analysing the speeches of American senators**

Concerned with crisis communication management, Damion Waymer and Robert Heath studied the effects of Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana and drew on the speeches of two American senators (Mary Landrieu and Barrack Obama) whose discourses the researchers considered represented the feelings and opinions of many Katrina sufferers. The researchers’ analysis indicated a number of themes or ‘interpretative repertoires’ which were driven by the metaphor of security. One of these – woven through the speeches – was ‘We failed our citizens so badly’.

Waymer and Heath illustrate that, first, the senators’ speeches pointed to the American government’s failure to manage a natural disaster (the crisis). For example:

> For the past week, the people of Southeast Louisiana and the Gulf Coast have suffered in a desperate and unprecedented way, waiting for the Administration to employ the full resources of the United States government – resources which, for whatever reason, have yet to arrive.
> (2007: 98)

> I see no evidence of active malice, but I see a continuation of passive indifference on the part of our government.
> (2007: 98)

Next, emphasizing the metaphor of security, Obama's rhetoric linked the lack of citizen safety during a natural disaster (Hurricane Katrina) to the country's wider political and social agenda about national security and terrorism. By showing the interconnectedness of the failings and threats of the Katrina crisis with those of 9/11, Obama raised the serious question of how to prevent such a failure from ever occurring again (p. 99).

Waymer and Heath's analysis shows that the two senators used their positions in the Senate as a platform to publicize both their stance and the predicament of Katrina sufferers. The researchers illustrated how in the senators' discourses they positioned events surrounding the natural disaster in terms of the government's unfulfilled national security promise. This led to their success in gaining more financial and political support for their positions and Katrina sufferers.

### *Contextualize the texts*

The important notion of intertextuality highlights the existence of discourse beyond the micro-context of the word usage on which you are concentrating your immediate research attention. This notion encourages you to pay attention to the social and historical contexts in which discourse is embedded.

Once you have uncovered and labelled the interpretive repertoires in your texts, your analysis will not stop here because texts (in their broadest sense, including images) must be examined within context: who produced this text, what institution was involved, why was the text generated? The extract in Example 10.3 from the work of Waymer and Heath (2007) illustrates how the two speakers transcended the local discourse of Hurricane Katrina to tap into wider public sentiments by appealing to the national concern for security. In effect, the American senators used discourse as a device to construct their version of the world. In the course of your own research, you may uncover examples of other discourses which are intended to shape how others view events, issues, circumstances and organizations.

A further example of paying attention to context is that if you were interested in the power relations between clients and communications consultants you might concentrate on particular settings where the discourses are informed by the speakers' expertise, seniority or gender. This might be, for example, a client meeting, a hosted luncheon, an industry awards ceremony or even a telephone conversation between client and consultant.

In a Venezuelan case study, the interest of Peñaloza de Brooks and Waymer (2009) centred on the powerful role of communication as a resource to manage corporate issues and legitimate the stance of a particular organization. The researchers first studied corporate texts, then widened their focus to examine Venezuela's social and political context. They searched a wide range of electronic sources of 'other public actors involved in the [situation]. . .to establish the context surrounding the organization's discourse' (p. 34). Their discursive analysis indicated that the process of public discourse through which organizations seek to gain legitimacy for their operations is inherently complex and if organizations are to be effective in their discourses they need to engage fully with social issues (i.e. the organization's context) in both altruistic and strategic terms.

### *Be sensitive to the ways in which discourses are constructed*

When you pay attention to rhetorical detail, you identify descriptive sequences and the ways in which they have been assembled. This indicates the thinking and values behind what people are saying or writing, and highlights how arguments and perspectives are constructed. For example, Sitz (2008) investigated consumers' shopping experiences, finding that the meanings they attributed to shopping constantly changed, as in this example:

> *Informant*: I simply love this store [an urban supermarket]. It offers me a nice spot to shop, always. . .When I come here, I know I will have a good time. . . [20 minutes later]
>
> *Researcher*: You said earlier that you usually feel good while shopping here. And still, you just told me you didn't like the way the products are set in this store.
>
> *Informant*: Now that you ask. . .Yes, I see. . .The way I look at it now is different I think. See, the fact is that I feel good but I don't know exactly why. [silence] Well I know why: the people I meet here are very nice and I don't always feel good. The point is that I usually like the store, but sometimes I'm fed up with it. Well not with the store itself, with what it represents: shopping, daily chores . . .Sometimes, I just need to get away from all this, to get lost in an usual store, more decorated, or a very simple store like Liddle [*sic*] or so.
>
> (Sitz, 2008: 184)

Sitz explains that by scrutinizing transcripts and other texts, researchers are able to detect patterns within language. Such discoveries lead to understanding of the causes of those patterns, such as in Sitz's own discourse analysis study, which exposed the contradictions and tensions of how people make sense of their shopping experiences. In this way, the dynamic process through which people construct a particular viewpoint is revealed.

When giving attention as a critical discourse analyst to how discourses are constructed, it is important to consider the notion of hegemony. This refers to the way in which particular discourses come to dominate in, say, a society, organization, profession or community, and how powerful groups (such as the media or certain corporations) use language strategically to legitimate their positions and actions in order to influence social change. Your interest then is in investigating how and why some meanings become common parlance or taken for granted and why others become marginalized.

**Example 10.4: Stages in the process of carrying out a critical discourse analysis**

Following the publication by a Danish newspaper of cartoons of the prophet Muhammad, Danish food company Arla Foods saw its rapid growth in the Middle East halt and sales plummet in the region. Kenn Gaither and Patricia Curtin studied the company's international crisis communications by applying critical discourse analysis. Their methodology consisted of five stages:

- *Stage 1*: determining of the social problem and how it was manifested, i.e. through media and company textual representations.
- *Stage 2*: examining the context of the issue and the circumstances guiding production.
- *Stage 3*: identifying questions of ideology and how the issue contributed to the larger social order.
- *Stage 4*: determining how to resolve obstacles to issue resolution and what oppositional readings emerged.
- *Stage 5*: reflecting and determining how the results could be used to affect social change.

(Gaither and Curtin, 2008: 122)

(See also Example 7.1.)

For detailed illustrations of how data are analysed using discourse analysis, see Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) and Potter and Wetherell (1987, 1994).

## Validity in discourse analysis

Because discourses are reflexively related to situations that make them meaningful, they do not as such reflect 'reality', but rather the meanings as constructed by people in a particular context (Gee and Green, 1998). It is important, therefore, for the discourse analyst to show that the findings are not just his or her opinion but are grounded in the data. Gee and Green (1998) argue that validity for discourse analysis is based on three elements:

- *Convergence*: the more the same data yields similar results from the use of different methods, or from multiple analysis, the more the study can be considered valid.
- *Agreement*: this is when both 'native' speakers of the social languages in the data and other discourse analysts (i.e. insiders and outsiders) agree that the analysis reflects how such social languages actually can function in the settings under interrogation.
- *Coverage*: a study is valid 'when the analysis can be applied to related sorts of data. This includes being able to make sense of what has come before and

> after the situation being analysed and being able to predict the sorts of things that might happen in related sorts of situations' (p. 159).

To ensure that your marketing communications or public relations study constitutes these three elements, it would be insufficient for you to concentrate on analysing, say, written text only. Instead, you would need to apply other methods (such as interviews and observations) in order to introduce other forms of text, or you would need to undertake a member check (see Chapters 5 and 18), or you would need to re-analyse the data after the first round of analysis. In addition, in order to contextualize the analysis, you would need to draw connections between the historical and current settings and the wider social context in which the data is situated by, for example, examining media archives or other documents in the public domain.

## The value of discourse analysis

In undertaking an investigation of public relations or marketing communications, the value to you of a discourse analysis methodological approach is that:

- it presents you with a window, through discursive analytical techniques, into the processes of how another world is constructed, such as that which involves, for example, activist communication in relation to issues of global consumption;
- it offers a new form of analysis for the many novel, contemporary topics you may wish to research (Phillips and Hardy, 2002), such as themes of globalization, corporate social responsibility, ethics and online activism where, one could argue, you and other researchers may be constrained by having to rely on more traditional research approaches; discourse analysis allows you to examine both the social construction of these themes and their boundaries.
- it holds great potential to illuminate the social and political implications of public relations and marketing communications practices; this is because it facilitates theorizing about how these forms of purposeful communications shape and challenge the thinking of stakeholders, and how they influence both social and political change through the deployment of strategic discursive strategies (Motion and Weaver, 2005).

## Limitations and problems in discourse analysis

Although a strength of discourse analysis is its tight, micro-focus on what is being studied, a tendency in some studies is to consider that the chosen sample of discourse is sufficient unto itself. This fails to take account of the wider social, cultural and historical context in which the sample is situated. To overcome this problem, it is sometimes useful to accompany discourse analysis with a complementary methodological approach in order to gain an alternative perspective on the same topic. In a discourse analysis study of the construction of global youth consumption, for example, Kjeldgaard and Askegaard (2006) conducted interviews alongside studying participant diaries and photographs taken by participants of their daily activities. The interviews and photos sensitized them to subtleties that would not have been immediately obvious in an analysis of language only. This understanding informed their interpretation of the discourse.

Most discourse analysis studies are based on a social constructionist premise which assumes that communication creates reality, that is, we literally manufacture our reality into existence through discourse. However, Reed (1998) is among those who criticize such a view, claiming that this 'non-realist' stance overlooks pre-existing material and social objects or mechanisms which exist and act independently of language. These influence when and how discourse occurs and should not be ignored in research, he writes. While not all researchers go along with his thinking, his comments do draw attention to the different theoretical positions that are held within the same methodological approach.

The accusation could be levied that critical discourse analysis concentrates too much on texts which the analyst finds objectionable. Martin studied excerpts from the autobiography of Nelson Mandela and the music of U2, claiming that if researchers are serious about using discourse analysis to enact social change they should broaden their coverage to include discourse that 'inspires, encourages, heartens; discourse we like, that cheers us along. We need, in other words, more positive discourse analysis (PDA?) alongside our critique; and this means dealing with texts we admire, alongside those we dislike and try to expose' (Martin 1999: 52).

Considerable expertise is needed to conduct interviews for discourse analysis research because it is necessary to adhere to a detailed interview guide while simultaneously being actively involved in a 'natural' conversation.

Discourse analysis is an often difficult and time-consuming method of analysis because you need to engage in a critical reading of texts. This means that you should take sufficient time out to stand back from the text and question the assumptions that you are making. Further, at the same time as you distance yourself from the text, you need also to reflect on how your own work is likely to be ideologically biased, informed by the social, economic and political context in which you yourself research and write (see 'Reflexivity' in Chapters 5, 18 and 19).

## Summary

- Discourse analysis entails the study of the form and content of language, the ways it is used to construct and communicate ideas and beliefs, and the political and socio-cultural contexts surrounding the discourse.
- The approach is cross-disciplinary, with researchers holding different theoretical positions and different usages of the main terms. Critical discourse analysis, usually associated with the ideas of Foucault, aims to promote change and expose power relationships.
- The sample size is usually small.
- The research focus is on whole chunks of text, in order to identify 'interpretive repertoires' which are the frameworks of beliefs that guide speakers and writers.

- Validity is an important quality criterion in discourse analysis.
- Discourse analysis may be accompanied by a complementary methodological approach which enables you to gain an alternative perspective on the same topic, to better examine relationships between the data, to contextualize your research and to ensure validity.

# 11 Phenomenology

Phenomenological research is undertaken occasionally in marketing communications and rarely in public relations, despite its potential utility.

This chapter aims to discuss:

- the characteristics of phenomenology;
- different perspectives on the approach;
- how the approach addresses data collection and analysis;
- its use in the fields of public relations and market communications.

## Introduction

Some writers imply that all qualitative research is – at least in a general way – phenomenological (e.g. Maykut and Morehouse, 1994; Merriam, 2009) as it is rooted in the 'lived experience' of participants and focuses on phenomena of experience that are unique to an individual as well as those which are shared with others on the basis of common humanity. However, in this book we refer to phenomenology in its specific sense, that is, as one of a number of distinct methodological approaches to carrying out qualitative research (alongside other approaches such as ethnography, discourse analysis, grounded theory and case studies).

Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a methodological approach, with its origins in nineteenth-century philosophy and psychology. As a philosophy, it is one of the primary intellectual traditions which have influenced qualitative research. As a methodological approach, it has been embraced by researchers from a range of disciplines and social science areas who draw on its philosophical strands. It is a difficult and complex way of carrying out research, and we would not recommend it to novice researchers.

**Key point**

Phenomenology is the study of phenomena, the examination of things according to the lived experiences (and consciousness) of individuals. Phenomenological researchers are interested in how participants make sense of the world around them. They describe the 'essential structures' of experience and what these mean for participants.

Phenomenology helps you to understand the life experiences – 'the lifeworld' – of other people. It does more than enable you to see things from the perspective of participants; it offers a way of understanding the sense-making framework that each individual has developed over time. This is the means by which individuals make something meaningful, such as a new event, experience or tangible object. Meaning or a sense-making framework often emerges through communication with others. It shapes how individuals respond to events and experiences.

Whereas other qualitative research approaches also attempt to see things through the eyes of the people they study, phenomenology goes further because it provides a means for you to set aside your own preconceived ideas about an event or an experience in order to understand it from the world in which research participants exist; in this way, you can illuminate human thinking and behaviour from the inside.

Although phenomenology has been popular in health care and educational enquiry for a number of decades, it is applied less frequently to research in marketing communications and public relations. Studies utilizing this approach have been mainly limited to investigations of consumers and how their life experiences have influenced their understandings and experiences of brands and advertisements. Yet phenomenology has the potential to be a valuable research tool for investigating a wide range of topics such as how different stakeholders perceive the communication activities of organizations, how the cultural expectations of publics shape the images they hold of companies, how clients understand and experience the consultancy–client relationship, how male executives respond to female leaders, how employees experience particular episodes of internal communication activity, and so on.

### Example 11.1: Applying a phenomenological approach to a study of internal communications

Liz Yeomans examined the feelings and perceptions related to the everyday lives of members of a British health care trust undergoing change. She was interested in understanding what the experiences of communication and learning meant from the perspective of organizational members.

Her research enabled her to describe the meanings and discourses which members employed to construct their social worlds, and therefore to present insights about the relationship between internal communication and organizational learning during change. From comparing her findings with the literature, she concluded that meanings are negotiated differently by different occupational groups according to their discrete sense-making frames of reference (Yeomans, 2008).

Below we offer a brief overview of some of phenomenology's philosophical roots together with an outline of the process of data collection and analysis. This differs slightly from other forms of qualitative analysis. If you are interested in following this approach, you need a solid grounding in the philosophical foundations of phenomenology, and therefore we suggest that you read more extensively, starting with texts such as Creswell (2007) and Giorgi (2009).

## The background

The phenomenological methodological approach, while based in philosophy, emerged like other qualitative approaches as an alternative response to the prevailing positivist perspective of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

### *Lifeworlds and sense making*

Phenomenology has its roots in the European philosophy of Husserl (1859–1938) and Heidegger (1889–1976) and in the sociology of Alfred Schutz (1899–1959). Husserl posited that each of us, as individuals, exists in a unique lifeworld, or *Lebenswelt*, that is made up of objects, people, actions and institutions. This lifeworld is each person's subjective experience of their everyday life, that is, it is their social reality, and this determines the meanings they attribute to their actions and the actions of others. Husserl was interested in how our lifeworlds get to be the way they are or, in other words, how they become natural and taken for granted. In order to find out the essence of things – or the fundamental principles of sense making in everyday life – he argued that researchers, or phenomenologists, should attempt to understand phenomena, such as experiences or events, in ways that differ from the usual. This strategy means making strange something that seems normal and natural so that its essential features can be characterized. Husserl suggested this might be done by viewing a phenomenon from an angle that is unusual or outside the norm. In effect, he was trying to get to the nub or the 'essence' of a phenomenon. Subsequent phenomenologists called this 'the central meaning' of an experience or the 'invariant structure'.

### *Intersubjectivity*

A major concept arising from Husserl's work is that of 'intersubjectivity', which means that individuals do not exist independently of others but live in a shared world. This means that we can experience the world from another's point of view. However, a problem associated with this that Husserl never solved was how this process actually occurs. If an individual's lifeworld is particular to each individual, how can people share its meaning? How can there be so much continuity of meaning in people's actions?

Schutz attempted to address similar ideas, though his view differed from that of Husserl. He too discussed the subjective basis of action and the notion of intersubjectivity, claiming that each person is a unique human being with a specific history who, nevertheless, shares this humanity with others and therefore is linked to the world. Schutz claimed that individuals unquestioningly accept that others share the same perspectives about the essential features of our everyday world. Therefore, in communicating with others, we operate on the notion that we can see the world from another's point of view if we change places with them (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002).

Schutz argued that in every situation we apply a 'stock of knowledge' that helps us make sense of the phenomena we encounter. This knowledge consists of the facts, beliefs, biases, desires and rules we have learned from personal experience as well as from the more general knowledge available to us in the world in which we exist. The first kind of knowledge is personal and unique to us through the encounters we have with others. The second kind is more widely available to all members of a culture, such as knowledge that is transmitted through cultural norms, myths and stories, and common sense. Schutz noted that we organize our 'worlds' by using this knowledge to classify others and events according to what we perceive to be their typical traits. This notion of 'typification' can be seen in the way in which publicists might classify the practices of others within the same industry as professional or non-professional.

Social interaction proceeds on the basis of typifications such as this. Intersubjectivity, therefore, is enacted in the kinds of relationships we enter into with others. Each of us defines ourself through our negotiated relationships and we actively construct numerous lifeworlds that overlap with one another.

### *Hermeneutical, interpretive phenomenology*

So far, we have described the descriptive, empirical branch of phenomenology, which is the one usually appropriated in marketing communications and public relations enquiry. Another strand is called hermeneutics, which has its basis in the ideas of Heidegger and is concerned with the interpretation of texts, noting how they are informed by their past, present and future contexts. For a useful description and comparison of the descriptive, empirical and hermeneutic branches, we suggest you peruse the paper by Ehrich (2005).

## The process of doing phenomenological research

At the core of phenomenological study is the notion of the lifeworld, the recognition that the reality of each individual is different and individual actions can only be understood through understanding the lifeworld of individuals and also their shared perspectives. Therefore, it is your task as a researcher to access people's 'common-sense thinking' in order to interpret their motives, actions and their social world from their point of view.

Although phenomenology employs no one particular method, there are a number of features that are common to phenomenological studies. These include articulating the underlying philosophical basis, bracketing assumptions, focusing on a main phenomenon, working with small samples and applying thematic phenomenological data analysis. We discuss these in turn.

### *Articulating the philosophical basis of the study*

Phenomenological studies begin with a discussion of the philosophy underpinning the research. This is important because of the variety of philosophical strands of phenomenology, which include social phenomenology (which focuses on social acts and group experiences), transcendental (descriptive) phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology, where you interpret texts according to the cultural, situational and historical context in which phenomena occur.

### *Bracketing assumptions*

Because you are aiming to look at phenomena in a fresh way, it is essential to state and reflect on your own assumptions regarding the phenomena you are investigating and then 'bracket' them – or put them aside – so that any preconceptions you may hold do not get in the way of your understanding of the experiences of your participants. For example, if you were exploring the structure of the successful consultant–client relationship from the point of view of clients, you would need to reflect on and articulate your own ideas, prejudices and prior conceptions about the topic, based perhaps on previous reading or experiences. Once you have reflected on this, you should suspend your assumptions so that you can confront the topic on its own terms, that is, by seeing it through the eyes of client participants in your study and how they experienced the phenomenon under study.

#### Example 11.2: Bracketing assumptions

In the study described in Example 11.1 about internal communication and organizational learning, Liz Yeomans interviewed seven key members of a health care trust and, mindful of the phenomenological prerequisite to put aside any biases or preconceptions about the topic, she did the following:

> Not only did I have to set aside pre-judgments about the people I met, but also my own concepts of 'good' or 'poor' communication; and concepts of 'right' or 'wrong' learning. I had to learn not to stick to my own themes if people felt uncomfortable discussing them. I had to learn to probe when people invited me to probe (e.g. when showing frustration about something) and to hold back from guiding people to give what they perceived to be the 'right' answer.
>
> (Yeomans, 2008: 278)

### *Focusing on a main phenomenon*

Phenomenological research is concerned with the experiences of people concerning a particular phenomenon. Once you have identified a phenomenon that you wish to investigate, you develop research questions which explore its meaning for your participants. The main phenomenon in Examples 11.1 and 11.2 is the relationship between internal communication and organizational learning.

### *Working with small samples*

Although written accounts of participants' experiences are used as data sources, typically data are derived from long interviews with individuals who have experience and in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon under study. For example, in the study outlined in Examples 11.1 and 11.2 it would not have been appropriate for the researcher to have interviewed clients of the health care trust because they were not the target audiences for internal communication and learning strategies. Sampling is similar in phenomenology to sampling in other approaches to qualitative research (see Chapter 13). However, because of the depth of research interviews and the extensive analytical process that is required, the sample is generally very small, often no more than 10 (Creswell, 2007).

Note that when conducting interviews you are trying to go beyond superficial appearances. Therefore, you should closely observe the language, facial expressions and gestures of participants so that you can better understand their accounts when you come to analyse them.

### *Applying thematic data analysis*

The eventual goal of phenomenological data analysis is to present an exhaustive, analytic description of the phenomenon under study; it should reflect the rich, 'lived' experience of the participants. The description may be in the form of an extended paragraph which indicates the meanings of the phenomenological experience (such as how clients interpret their interactions with consultants) and reveals the essence of the phenomenon (such as the nature of the successful consultant–client relationship). In order to arrive at such a description, there are various practical strategies which you might choose to follow, one of which is detailed in the next paragraphs. However, remember that the phenomenological approach to research is flexible and not prescriptive.

A popular and clear procedure for thematic analysis is that offered by Colaizzi (1978), who recommends that you follow seven stages. In common with the phenomenological tradition generally, his procedure is distinguished from other forms of qualitative analysis in that the analysis does not interact with the data collection. This means that you analyse each interview (or written text) separately, presenting individual descriptions before combining your analysis into a composite description. At the end, you should be able to provide your reader with a sense of the whole, that is, the *essence* of the phenomenon.

Colaizzi's suggested stages are:

1 When you have interviewed participants, listened to their narratives (in transcripts and/or written accounts) and familiarized yourself with their words, try to become aware of the feelings and the meanings inherent in the narratives in order to obtain a 'sense of the whole'.

2 Now return to each of your participants' narratives and focus only on the phrases and sentences that directly pertain to the phenomenon under study. Scrutinize every piece of the data for statements that you consider are significant to the phenomenon, isolate these 'significant statements' from the rest and list them all.

For example, significant statements that might emerge from a study about the successful consultant–client relationship from the perspective of clients might include the following:

(a) 'they listen to our point of view';
(b) 'they understand our business goals';
(c) 'they give us feedback all the time';
(d) 'they produce campaigns that work', and so on.

3 The next stage is called 'formulating meanings'. Here you take each significant statement, try to uncover its meaning and make sense of it in the participant's own terms. What you are trying to do is to spell out the meaning of each significant statement according to its original context. This helps to bring out meanings that initially may be hidden. For example, following the previous list of statements, the attached meanings might be:

(a) the consultant really tries to listen to what the client has to say, and values his or her opinion;
(b) the consultant does not just pay lip-service to the client, but is knowledgeable about the business, its direction, focus and markets;
(c) once the consultant has been briefed, he or she doesn't ignore the client but constantly keeps him or her in touch with progress;
(d) the consultant delivers campaigns that produce the desired results.

4 Repeat this process for each interview or written account and then organize all the different meanings into clusters of themes. Themes related to the above might be:

- Consultant Empathy (comprises meanings (a) and (b) in the previous section)
- Constant Communication (comprises meanings (a) and (c) in the previous section), and so on.

5 Then provide a detailed analytic description of participants' feelings and perspectives contained in the themes. Colaizzi calls this step 'exhaustive description'. This is where you integrate all the clusters of themes into one account that articulates participants' views of the phenomenon.

6 At this point, you attempt to formulate an exhaustive description of the whole phenomenon under investigation and identify its fundamental structure, or essence, that is, the nature of the successful consultant–client relationship.

7 The last step is the 'member check' (see also Chapter 5), in which you take your findings back to participants, asking them if your description validates their original experiences. Hycner (1985) advises you to do more than this. He suggests that you show participants a summary of each interview with the themes that you have found highlighted. This enables you to modify your ideas or add new ones. (As a brief aside, we note that purist phenomenologists dismiss this final step on the basis that their intention is to move beyond the thoughts of participants into a more theoretical realm.)

### *Hermeneutical analysis*

If you are following the hermeneutic branch of phenomenology, your analytical process differs from that outlined earlier. Instead, you are involved in analysing your data iteratively, moving back and forth between parts of the text and the whole. This is because you are interested in interpreting the language of participants, their emotions and perceptions of their experiences, relative to the context in which they occur. The method is culturally and historically informed, which means that you need to take account of the cultural, situational and historical location in which the phenomenon under investigation is positioned.

**Example 11.3: Analysing data about young people's brand relationships**

Claiming that previous studies of mobile phone consumption had failed to acknowledge the wider socio-cultural context of consumption practices, Ian Grant and Stephanie O'Donohoe carried out phenomenological research to redress this oversight. They examined young people's relationships with their mobile phones in the context of their everyday lives beyond school hours. They gave adolescents a disposable camera, requiring them to take photos of a week in their lives and then, in interviews, to discuss the meaning of the images.

The researchers analysed their data using phenomenological interpretation whereby in the first stage they sought an understanding of each transcript, identifying broad themes emerging out the transcripts of the discussions. They also identified patterns of beliefs linking people and cultural settings together. In the second stage, they related patterns of commonality between the different transcripts and sought different interpretations of similar phenomena.

The data provided the researchers with insights into the meanings held by young people about their social connections, new media communities, brand relationships and marketing communications (Grant and O'Donohoe, 2007).

In summary, if you wish to carry out phenomenological research you need to go beyond the surface to see the essential nature of things. Take nothing at face value but look at everything from the perspectives of other people. This means developing empathy by immersing yourself in the situation in the same way as participants themselves. Focus in on those essential features of the phenomenon that remain constant, reducing it to its 'essence' by getting rid of non-essential elements that are dependent on environment or circumstance. By stripping away the everyday, and going to the very foundations of things, you arrive at a recognition of the essence, or the 'real' 'intended' meaning, of the phenomenon under investigation. It is important that the participants in your study have a personal and intimate experience of the phenomenon under investigation.

In your subsequent research report, you should provide an accurate, clear and articulate description of an experience so that the reader has a clear sense of how the participants in your study experienced the phenomenon.

## Limitations and problems in phenomenological research

Unless you have a sound understanding of the philosophy of phenomenology, you will find it difficult to successfully apply this research approach. Many marketing communications studies carelessly fling the word phenomenology into their methodology discussions without a real awareness of its depth, subtlety or methodological requirements.

Finding people who have experienced the phenomenon you wish to investigate and who are willing to spend time in extended discussions about it may be problematic.

The process of bringing your preconceptions out into the open and then bracketing them may not always be successful. Two questions to ask yourself as you go along are: ‘ Do my descriptions truly reflect participants’ actual experiences?’ and ‘Have I unconsciously influenced these descriptions with my own ideas, biases and preconceptions?’

## Summary

- Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a distinct methodological approach. This chapter discusses the latter.
- The aim of phenomenological research is to make sense of a phenomenon according to participants’ own terms, identifying the essence or ‘real’ meaning of the phenomenon under investigation.
- At the core of phenomenology is the notion of ‘lifeworld’, which is the world that people experience together. Individual actions can only be explained by understanding individual lifeworlds and shared perspectives.
- Researchers endeavour to consciously suspend, or bracket, their own assumptions in order to experience the phenomenon under study in its truest form.
- Sample sizes are usually small.
- A strand of phenomenology is hermeneutics, which is concerned with the interpretation of texts, including how they are informed by their past, present and future contexts.

# 12 Additional approaches: historical research and action research

Historical research and action research are two entirely separate and distinct research approaches. Research employing either of the two is still embryonic in public relations and marketing communications when compared with the more established forms such as case studies and discourse analysis.

Historical research is an important but relatively under-developed approach to studying public relations and marketing communications. Action research is a common methodology employed by managers and consultants involved in research for professional doctorates, although it is rarely published in journals outside those dedicated to action research. We discuss the two approaches briefly here in order to offer some guidance and relevant references.

This chapter aims to discuss (separately):

- the characteristics of historical research and action research;
- different perspectives on the approaches;
- how they address data collection and analysis;
- their use in the fields of public relations and market communications.

## Historical research

### *Introduction*

Historical research in public relations and marketing communications often employs mixed methods, although frequently qualitative methods are prominent. We focus here on qualitative historical research as a discrete or complementary approach whereby you either carry out a standalone historical study using historical research techniques to trace the role of communication in past contexts or you complement this with research methods that enable you to compare and contrast the historical study with findings that relate to contemporary events and settings.

History is a discipline within the humanities field, although many historians consider themselves social scientists because they are interested in social lives within historical settings. In employing research techniques from history, historians of public relations and marketing communications often carry out their research in conjunction with a case study approach, collecting data about either an autonomous case or an example of a larger phenomenon. In some instances, the historical case becomes an intricate part of a larger comparative project or is a useful illustration in the development of theory (Moses and Knutsen, 2007).

There are two strands of historical research. If you carry out research which seeks to imaginatively reconstruct the role of communication and the lives of people in other times and contexts you are conducting a public relations or marketing communications history. The focus of your study is on communication activities, issues, causes and the people involved (such as communicators, organizations and stakeholders). Exemplar texts include the histories of British public relations as a professional practice (L'Etang, 2004), postwar public relations and the consultancy Hill and Knowlton (Miller, 1999), North American magazine advertising (Gross and Sheth, 1989) and World War II poster campaigns (Witkowski, 2003).

If you follow the second strand you are involved in producing a history of thought or ideas. Here your interest is in tracing and interpreting ideas, concepts, theories or schools of thought about phenomena. In marketing there are numerous examples of this type of review or anthology, for example *A History of Schools of Marketing Thought* (Shaw and Jones, 2005) and an early history of advocacy advertising by Marchand (1987). Histories of public relations thought are more limited, although recent examples include studies by Podnar and Golob (2009, which is outlined in Example 12.2), and a study of public relations historians and their histories by Pearson (2009). However, the tracing of historical ideas about PR is often found within the literature review sections of published articles.

**Key point**

There are two strands of historical research: *public relations and marketing communications histories*, which are concerned with communication related to activities, issues, causes and the people involved within their wider historical contexts; and *histories of thought or ideas* in public relations and marketing communications, which trace ideas, concepts, theories or schools of thought through time.

A call for papers on the topic of historical research for a special issue of the *Journal of Communication Management* (2008, volume 12, issue 4) noted the wide variety of contexts in which public relations histories can be explored. These are national, regional, cultural, governmental, institutional, organizational and professional. L'Etang (2008) further observes that the historical role of public relations might be studied in relation to broad political, economic, social, diplomatic and international contexts. Within each of these settings, historical research has the potential to offer valuable insights into the inter-relationship of communication and ideas from a range of perspectives, including those of the individual as communication practitioner or stakeholder (through autobiography or biography), or from the perspectives of an organization, industry, institution or society. For example, the life history of an individual (such as an influential lobbyist) cannot be told without constant reference to social or organizational historical change. Therefore, historical research into the work life of an individual practitioner involved in change communications could provide a useful window through which to widen understanding about how transformation occurs in an organization or the wider context of a culture or society.

Where public relations has been remiss is in its reluctance to undertake historical research into minority groups (including publics such as activists) and cultures other than North American (L'Etang, 2008). Historical research in marketing has tended, as in public relations, to overemphasize the corporate; this is at the expense of consumers and not-for-profit groups, whose active role in creating meaning and influencing cultural transformation is overlooked in many historical accounts. An exception is the study of abolition and activism outlined in Example 12.1. Indeed, the ordinary lives of publics in relation to professional communication are extremely thin, their memories and voices often disregarded; in many instances, these have now been lost in the course of time. Scott *et al.* (2006) note also that advertising histories tend to present a gender bias towards men, with women's influential role in advertising agencies overlooked. There is a similar discernible skew in matters of race and class. In all of these areas, then, potentially fruitful opportunities present themselves for historical investigation.

### Example 12.1: A public relations history of activism and anti-slavery

The nineteenth-century North American abolition movement was the focus of an historical study by Robert Heath and Damion Waymer. Although public relations was not a term employed in the era of the anti-slavery activists, the researchers noted that the movement's campaigning tactics could be likened to contemporary PR techniques, such as events management, media relations, lobbying, fundraising and personal promotions. Therefore, they saw this as an opportunity to explore historical organized activism, and to relate the findings to theoretical ideas published previously by the first author.

The book chapter where the authors reported on the study was written as a story encapsulating the mood, characters and events of the period. They wrote about Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* not only publicized the issue of slavery but inspired many to take up the cause of liberty for slaves. They wrote also about another major activist, Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave whose critical intellect and skill as an orator led to multiple invitations around the country to speak in support of abolition. At the core of Heath and Waymer's history is a description of Douglass's influential Fourth of July address, which they deconstruct to show the specific rhetorical techniques he used to challenge the status quo. Through messaging and positioning, Douglass and the anti-slavery movement forced attention to the shortcomings of a hypocritical government, thus mobilizing the population to support abolition.

In concluding, the researchers noted that their findings built upon and advanced theory concerning activist, non-profit public relations typical of social movement activism (Heath and Waymer, 2009).

Drawing on the suggestions of L'Etang (2008), we offer some specific research questions to demonstrate the type of issues which might be addressed in historical research:

- How did public relations emerge in the Asia-Pacific region and why?
- What role did public relations play in the global Free Tibet campaign prior to the Olympic Games? Why and how?
- What has been the relationship between advertising and power in the eastern European states, especially during the communist era?
- Why and how did IBM set up an internal communications function?
- How has the concept of 'public opinion' been employed by public relations and marketing scholars through the twentieth century?
- How and why did the British publicist Max Clifford achieve public notoriety?
- When did product placement on television as a marketing communications strategy emerge? Where and why?

### *The stance of the individual writer*

The collusion of the researcher in the research process is a core aspect of historical research. As in other forms of qualitative, interpretive research, you are not 'an impartial, value-free entity, unproblematically engaging in the research process to produce objective accounts of a reified truth' (Musson, 2004: 35), but instead you bring implicit and explicit theories to the research situation. These might involve 'different philosophies of history, different social, political, and moral philosophies, and even different assumptions about epistemology and ontology' (Pearson, 2009: 93).

Therefore, because your position as a researcher is central to how you carry out, interpret and record historical research, it is important that you explain clearly your basic assumptions and theoretical frameworks. Such reflexivity and transparency not only aid the methodological rigour of your research, but also help your readers to better understand how your thinking has informed the presentation of your historical account (that is, how your preferred theoretical stance and your views concerning the notions of time and change have influenced your choices of data, methods and interpretation). As L'Etang notes:

> Historians have different opinions about the past and the progress and meaning of time, for example, seeing human civilisation as progressive or cyclical; as determined by principles or historical 'laws'; as part of an holistic pattern or system; or as a chapter of situational events or accidents or coincidences.
>
> (L'Etang, 2008: 320)

Similarly, there are differences in how historical researchers view the notion of change: it is continuous and ongoing, or it is caused by something. Therefore, as a historian of public relations and marketing communications you need to be explicit about how your particular take on time and change has influenced your investigation.

**Helpful hint**

Think about your own stance and how you view time and change. Consider also your worldview on communication and its role in relation to your topic of interest. Before starting your research project, write about how your thinking is likely to influence what you consider relevant to your study, how you collect data, how you interpret and use it to support your argument.

L'Etang (2008) points to the necessity of being philosophically reflective about your own worldview, not only in relation to time and change, but also from a theoretical position because 'historical explanations are not neutral and include ideological or moral components' (p. 322). If the lens through which you view the world and your research project is a feminist one, for instance, then what counts as relevant and how you collect and use your data to support a particular argument will be different than for another researcher with a Marxist, postmodern or traditional lens. Consequently, your historical accounts will differ.

Another aspect of your stance to reflect on and discuss is how close you are in time and space to directly witnessing what you are researching and writing about. Did your historical story emerge from your own experiences; in other words, were you an eyewitness? Or is it derived from the words and experiences of your informants themselves (through oral histories, for example)? Or perhaps the story passed through a number of links in a chain of communication first (De Geer *et al.*, 2004), such as through written texts which are interpretations of earlier interpretations. Your relationship as a researcher to the focus of your study needs to be critically scrutinized because of the implications for the quality of your research (see Chapter 5).

## The process of doing historical research

At the core of historical research lies a kind of systematic doubt – known as 'source criticism' – which is trained on the researcher's data sources. The influential historian Leopold von Ranke (1790–1886) taught that history should be written from sources that were located as close as possible to the events being investigated (Moses and Knutsen, 2007: 120); in other words, from original source material such as eyewitness reports, public records and legal documents, diaries, letters, minutes of meetings, original press releases, corporate records and reports, and so on. However, this is not to ignore secondary sources, such as newspaper stories that summarize eyewitness accounts, or reviews of industry reports, because these are useful guides or maps to the overall field, or useful for establishing a theme for your work. However, as a historian, you need to take account of the distance of secondary materials from actual historical events or practices because this is what makes them less trustworthy than original sources.

In effect, if you are undertaking historical research it is incumbent on you to:

- demonstrate the provenance of your written or visual sources;
- enquire about the motives of those who produced the texts;
- interrogate the circumstances in which they were created;
- examine the ways in which they relate to other documents on the same subject.

(Evans, 1997, cited in Moses and Knutsen, 2007: 121)

### *Collecting the data*

Source materials for historical studies are primarily written or visual documents (see Chapter 17 for more on written, visual and multi-media sources), often found in archives such as museum collections of private or personal records, or in government or professional association archives and corporate archives. University libraries also hold raw data and unpublished documents, as well as back copies of journals and newspapers which may be relevant to the history of public relations or marketing communications thought. For example, Witkowski and Jones (2006) point to the thousands of advertisements held in the collection at the John W. Harmann Center for Sales, Advertising, and Marketing History at Duke University. L'Etang (2004) based her historical work on the Chartered Institute of Public Relations' records held at the UK's History of Advertising Trust archive. There are difficulties and limitations associated with archival research, however, some of which are outlined in Chapter 17, others in the final section of this chapter (pp. 196–197).

Another important source of historical data is the spoken memories and personal commentaries available from key witnesses through recorded interviews (the interview method is outlined in Chapter 14). Although oral history participants may suffer from 'informant nostalgia' – the remembering of the past as better than it actually was experienced – or may remember selectively for self-serving purposes, nevertheless interview data as oral history have distinct advantages, as outlined by Witkowski and Jones (2006: 75), in that they enable you to:

- select interviewees so that a range of different voices and perspectives can be represented, including voices not usually heard in official documents such as those of passive or quiescent publics, or ordinary consumers recalling everyday experiences of marketing communications;
- elicit recollections of inner feelings and states of mind that are frequently absent from or disguised by written texts;
- cross-examine informants to reveal sources of bias.

Further, interviews allow you to probe participants for clarification of ideas which you first discover in your document searches.

### *Analysing and writing*

In many ways, the process of analysing the data in historical research is similar to that for qualitative research generally (see Chapter 18), whereby you code and categorize your evidence, searching for broad themes that will link the different ideas found in your multiple sources of data. Alternatively, qualitative content analysis (see Chapter 17) or analytical techniques associated with discourse analysis (see Chapter 10) are commonly employed. As in longitudinal research, your interest is in types of causation or patterns of activities, influences or ideas that occur over periods of time. Having interpreted and synthesized the data, your task then is to create a narrative, or story of the past, that may be linear following a time-line, topical or thematic, geographical or 'sociological, structured around topics such as class or gender, politics or economics, and driven by more critical concerns of power, exploitation and class conflict' (L'Etang, 2008: 324).

#### Example 12.2: Writing a history of the discipline of public relations

Klement Podnar and Ursa Golob wrote about the historical development of public relations from 1937 to 1970 based on their content analysis of selected articles in the journal *Public Opinion Quarterly.* They structured their narrative according to three temporal periods – pre-war(1937–41), war (1941–44), and post-war (after summer 1944) – based on the relevance of these periods to the practice of public relations, with its roots in the progressive pre-war era, changes in the emphasis of the practice during wartime, and then its expansion in the period following the World War II (Podnar and Golob, 2009: 58).

Much historical writing is descriptive, although explanation is also involved. Historical narratives usually give emphasis to characters, settings and events, which include actions taken by the characters as well as happenings, that is, how settings impinge upon characters (Witkowski and Jones, 2006: 76).

There is some debate over the contribution of historical research to developing or appraising theory. Some argue that histories are an end in themselves because they illustrate events that have historical significance which are pertinent to their own time and place and therefore cannot be generalized. However, Scott *et al.* (2006) draw attention to the contentions of those who advocate the value of historical research as a cumulative theory-building strategy, especially in connection with ethnography and other approaches and methods. They provide a number of examples, including the work of Holt (2004), who undertook 'painstaking historical research' (p. 227) across several important historical counterexamples. His findings led him to debunk and destroy the credibility of conventional theories of branding. In similar vein, L'Etang (2008) suggests that histories are able to deliver many alternate voices and perspectives that decry one overall explanation, as Heath and

Waymer (2009) illustrate in Example 12.1 through their historical case study of activist public relations.

Historical research, therefore, is a cumulative process, with each generation building upon and revising previous work (Witkowski and Jones, 2006). As an investigator of public relations and marketing communications, you will find many interesting opportunities to engage in inquiry that contributes an historical explanation of professional communication in a particular time and setting. Do bear in mind, however, that your study will always be tentative and less than final.

### *Limitations*

A major problem evident in some theories and concepts derived from research into an imagined past is the 'error of presentism' (Scott *et al.*, 2006). This is where the assumptions and agendas of the present are projected onto the people and events of the past. Scott *et al.* offer an extended discussion of the problematic implications for marketing research. As way of summarizing their point, we offer a brief scenario: because of your familiarity with new technologies, it is not inconceivable that you might uncritically transfer your assumptions (about how quick and easy it is to gather and disseminate information electronically) onto the experiences of people in historical contexts. If you applied those same assumptions about time and communication channels to your historical research on activists engaged in lobbying for social change (for example how the suffragettes in the early 1900s campaigned for the women's vote in Britain) your findings about activist advocacy could be seriously skewed. The past cannot and should not, therefore, be judged by the standards of the present. It has to be understood on its own terms (Moses and Knutsen, 2007).

Data sources should not be taken at face value, as we pointed out in relation to source criticism earlier (pp. 193–194). Often evidence is incomplete, contradictory or even faked. Oral histories may suffer from selective retention and perceptions. Documents may have been written to embellish the image and reputation of the writer. The quality of historical research, then, is based on what data are available and for this reason it is important to seek multiple sources of evidence.

Much early evidence either has been deleted from archives or was simply never collected in the first place. For example, there are not many archives of the early images of advertising because print technology prior to 1875 was not highly sophisticated and therefore there are few traces left of images before that period. Even posters, magazines and newspapers in the early part of the twentieth century were rarely collected by libraries, so that today many of the materials read by ordinary people are seldom available (Scott *et al.*, 2006).

Other available materials may have suffered from impression management whereby accounts seen as undesirable have been erased or – in the case of promotional documents, annual reports or the minutes of organizational meetings – invisible editors and concealed contributors have been influential in reshaping texts or images for purposes of self-presentation. This can lead, for example, to the obscuring of 'organizational politics or the real role that communications practitioners may have had, or the fact that PR decisions and recommendations may have been ignored or over-ruled' (L'Etang, 2008: 326).

Many official documents were originally created by elite males and therefore under-represent the experiences of stakeholders and publics characterized as lower classes, minorities and women (Scott *et al.*, 2006; Witkowski and Jones, 2006). Where publics are illiterate, there are few written or visual texts available to convey their voices. If it is not possible to use oral history techniques of interviewing, those voices may never be heard in research.

### *Summary of historical research*

- There are two strands of historical research, one that focuses on communication and people within their wider historical contexts and another that is concerned to trace ideas and thought through time.
- Data sources should not be taken at face value but critically scrutinized.
- Source materials are primarily written or visual texts together with oral histories, derived from interviews.
- Histories are often presented as case studies, written descriptively and often engaging with theory. They cumulatively build upon and revise previous histories.
- The stance of the researcher is central to how research is carried out, interpreted and recorded. Therefore, reflexivity is required to aid methodological rigour.

## Action research

### *Introduction*

Action research is an umbrella term for a number of different participatory approaches which involve the researcher as both scholar and facilitator of change. As an action researcher, you work reflectively over time with members of an organization, work group or community to address an issue or problematic situation which is of 'genuine concern' (Eden and Huxham, 1996: 75) to members and about which they reflect and take action based on the research intervention. Commonly, action researchers are members of the organizations they study, involved in creating change communication strategies at the same time as researching them.

A goal of action research, then, is to collaboratively 'produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives' (Reason and Bradbury, 2008: 4) and to stimulate change either within the setting or within those collaborating in the action research (Herr and Anderson, 2005). This involves working with participants as co-researchers in an iterative cycle of mutually identifying problems, diagnosing them, planning communication strategies to deal with the problems, taking action to intervene, evaluating the results of the action, learning from the evaluation and reflection, and then planning subsequent interventions (Cassell and Johnson, 2006).

**Key point**

The emphasis in action research is on studying and stimulating change. In your role as a researcher, you examine change while simultaneously working as a consultant or facilitator, using your research as a methodology for transforming communication among the people in your research setting.

The participatory nature of action research makes it ideal for exploring the dynamics of communication between an organization or community and its stakeholders, especially internal stakeholders or publics. Because researchers are highly involved in studying communication as well as simultaneously participating in it and also creating communication strategies, they are in a strong position to uncover what really goes on rather than merely what participants espouse (Lüscher and Lewis, 2008). However, researchers have different reasons for choosing action research as a methodological approach and these tend to be instrumental (e.g. to improve the communication practices of organizations), theoretical (e.g. to make a contribution to marketing or communication knowledge) and/or emancipatory (e.g. to empower stakeholders or publics who are oppressed in some way).

### Example 12.3: Action research and participatory change communication

Following initial research in Australia, three researchers wrote about the consultative change process they proposed to develop through action research. Ursula Stroh, Matthew Byrne and Jens Grigoleit worked with the New South Wales Road Transport Association (NSWRTA), who were concerned about the transport industry's skills shortages, low knowledge base about health and safety issues, and the industry's poor image and reputation. With the NSWRTA and the transport industry, the researchers aimed to create a participatory change model for the transformation of both knowledge and relationships through action research and bottom-up communication channels. They also aimed 'to contribute to change management theory and relationship building by filling a major gap in the industry concerning change management strategies for blue-collar workers' (Stroh *et al.*, 2007: 535).

At the point of starting the project, the researchers wrote about what they intended to do once the project evolved further. They proposed to do the following:

- carry out pre-study focus groups and interviews with key opinion leaders in the transport industry – these results to feed into a questionnaire;

- conduct a pre-study, online survey of transport companies to determine the current state of affairs in the industry;
- commence participatory action research: focus group interviews to guide research design and methodology; dialogue from and about the groups to create awareness of the project more widely;
- carry out in-depth interviews with opinion leaders and key individuals in the industry to initiate the participatory discussion process; these will determine the issues of concern, and the desired outcomes of the process – researchers to be involved as participants and observers as well as facilitators, linking themes and reflections;
- use other methods, to include weblogs and discourse analysis, in order to produce meaning from the process – the methods selected to be determined by all participants in the research process, and not predetermined by the research team;
- carry out a post-research survey to ascertain whether or what kinds of changes have occurred.

The researchers stated that the most important contribution of the action research process would be that it offered ‘channels and processes that will continue to provide change within the industry long after the chief investigators have completed the formal part of the research study and withdrawn their participation. It thus becomes part of the culture and a way of continuous change management that shape the future of the industry’ (p. 539).

Surprisingly, action research is rarely published in public relations and marketing communications journals, although uniquely the *European Journal of Marketing* devoted a special issue to marketing action research in 2004 (Issue 3/4). Usually articles about action research can be found in textbooks devoted to the topic (e.g. *The Sage Handbook of Action Research*, edited by Reason and Bradbury, 2008) or in the dedicated journals: *Action Research*; *Action Learning: Research and Practice*; or *International Journal of Action Research.*

Perry and Gummesson (2004) outlined some of the reasons why action research may not be employed in marketing as extensively as it might be. They suggested that marketing researchers are ignorant of action research because of the dominance of the positivist survey methodology in business schools. This results in few academic environments where researchers are encouraged to use the approach. Therefore, they claim that using action research may be high risk and hazardous to an academic career. Further, they argue that doing action research could be considered too demanding for researchers for a number of reasons: it requires close involvement in the research setting, such as a corporation; researchers need ‘a secure personality and creativity as well as an initial “pre-understanding” of business practices beyond those provided in marketing textbooks’; researchers need to have a ‘split personality’ in order to be both a research participant and a detached scholar (Perry and Gummesson, 2004: 313).

However, the paucity of publications in the communication arena hides the fact that action research seems to be a popular technique for senior managers undertaking part-time professional doctorates, certainly in the UK and Australia if not elsewhere (see Perry and Zuber-Skerrit, 1994; Zuber-Skerritt and Perry, 2002). This is because of its dual purpose as both a research and a change methodology. This makes it attractive to communications executives studying part time while working, as it enables them to investigate change communication in their employer or work-associated organizations while also being involved in creating change (e.g. Oliver, 2006). Action research is less likely to be used at masters level because, on the whole, it requires considerable time to undertake the longitudinal and cyclical process of designing, implementing and evaluating change communication strategies through action research.

### *The background*

The roots of action research lie in the book *How We Think* (1933) by the American psychologist, philosopher and political activist John Dewey, who called for research that sought out practical solutions to practical problems. Likewise, the social psychologist Kurt Lewin recommended in 1946 that both researchers and participants in research, such as employee stakeholders, should be jointly responsible for developing and evaluating theory in order that such theory would mirror appropriately the knowledge that was created within the collaborative research process. He also advocated using the resulting theory to help improve the social situation of stakeholders. Lewin, therefore, urged the use of collaborative research for its ability to induce behaviour change and thus he was an early proponent of employing research as a methodology for change.

At about the same time as Lewin was writing, the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, with general psychologists as its members, was influential in developing a problem-solving approach for dealing with issues in organizations. This technique, in all but name, involved organizational action research. Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, educationalists adopted and developed further the ideas of action research, applying them within a critical theory framework to press for change in educational settings and society. McTaggart and Kemmis (1982), for example, developed guidelines in an action research planner.

The principles of critical theory continue to influence action research today in education and a range of other disciplines where researchers have a greater consciousness of power relationships. Therefore, they seek to work as co-researchers with participants, so that responsibility for a project is shared equally among people. The emancipation of less powerful groups is often a key driver of this type of action research, which if done in Latin America, for example, might aim to lead to revolutions to liberate the poor (Freire, 1972). Alternatively, when done in business it may be somewhat less sensational but nevertheless could stimulate new ways of thinking that lead to more democratic communication processes in organizations.

### *The nature of action research*

Action research incorporates a number of broad strands, including action learning, participatory action research, action inquiry, appreciative inquiry and the generic term 'action research' which we employ in this chapter. Each strand is subtly different in ideology and procedures, with your assumptions as a researcher influencing each stage of the study, from the methods you choose, who you decide will participate in the study, how you relate to participants and the types of solutions you eventually propose as an outcome of your study (Cassell and Johnson, 2006).

**Key point**

There are a number of different types of action research. What they all have in common are collaboration and co-inquiry among researchers and participants, together with cycles of research, action and reflection in order to effect change.

Despite the different nuances of the action research strands, there are core similarities, which are outlined below.

#### *Collaboration and co-inquiry*

The extent of this varies depending on whether you follow a traditional, managerial route and see yourself as an expert consultant-researcher where the research is under your control, or you take a participatory stance. In the latter, your research is based on reciprocal initiative and control so that all those involved work together as co-researchers and co-participants, mutually sharing in the discovery of knowledge (Ellis and Kiely, 2000). In both strands of action research, however, as a researcher you are involved in carrying out an investigation as well as using that investigation as a means of stimulating change in the research setting. This requires considerable involvement in the field. For example, if you were a member of a workgroup of marketing people grappling with improving your communication processes, you might have to work within the group for as much as six months (as in the Internet marketing project by O'Leary *et al.* (2004)) or longer (as per the action research by Ballantyne (2004) into a bank's customer relationships which continued for five years).

#### *Enabling change through a cyclical enquiry process*

At the heart of all action research within the management environment, including marketing communications and managed public relations, is a spiral of acting and reflecting whereby you as an individual, group or organization reflect collaboratively on issues in practice, including your actions in a problematic situation.

You then learn from your reflections in order to construct potential solutions, thus creating new actions and new knowledge in the form of a pragmatic theory. This involves a dynamic interplay of research, action and evaluation.

It is worth highlighting an important point made by Perry and Gummesson (2004) concerning a specific difference in marketing action research which may also be applicable to public relations. Perry and Gummesson argue that, because of its concern with factors external to the organization such as the marketplace, marketing research needs to be capable of creating practical theories that can be transferred beyond a single situation or organization. This contrasts with action research in other disciplines where researchers are content to create knowledge about change as it relates to a specific context or case. Perry and Gummesson stress that it is marketing's emphasis on the outside world of the marketplace together with the desire to communicate beyond one narrow setting that distinguishes marketing action research. Equally, we contend that this could apply to public relations research because of the importance that public relations places on external as well as internal publics. Example 12.3 indicates how three public relations researchers sought to transfer their results beyond the narrow confines of one particular industry by comparing their findings and practical theories with the literature on change management and relationship-building.

### *The process of doing action research*

When carrying out action research, you are involved in an iterative cycle of the following stages:

- *groundwork*: identifying and diagnosing the problem through research, prioritizing and reflecting on this groundwork;
- *intervention*: planning your change strategies, taking action, intervening and reflecting;
- *evaluation*: evaluating and revising understandings, formulating action-based theories that provide practical solutions, and reflecting on the process;
- *continuing the cycle* of groundwork, planning and intervention, and evaluation.

Each of the stages overlaps with the others as you reflect, learn and revise throughout. The research design is not predetermined; it changes according to the reflections and learning of everyone involved in the project.

#### *Groundwork*

If the project is to be successful, before you start it is important for everyone to agree on the extent of their participation. This ensures that the research question and design can be formulated collaboratively (Berg, 2009). All participants must carefully observe and describe what is happening in the setting. This will entail you organizing and facilitating a number of meetings so that procedures can be discussed. Managers and policy-makers who need to give permission for the project to proceed and for access to all the participants should be included. At this stage, you should identify problem areas that participants want to improve and thoroughly examine the communication practices that seem to need change and intervention. Encourage participants to discuss these identified problems with their colleagues and others interested in the project, including clients, requesting their ideas and confirmation of the areas in need of improvement. It is likely that you will employ a range of methods to ascertain the problems, including observations, interviews, brainstorming and focus group sessions.

**Example 12.4: Methods of intervention in action research**

When the Danish division of the toy manufacturer Lego underwent restructuring, academics Lotte Lüscher and Marianne Lewis were brought in to help managers make sense of the changes. Two of the research interactions they were involved with were 'sparring sessions' and 'review sessions'. The first occurred when groups or individuals tasked the researcher to meet with them in order to pose supportive but challenging questions to help them collaboratively explore and tentatively resolve their issues. In these focus group sessions, members expressed their concerns and sought alternative meanings. Managers then left the sessions to put their new understanding into practice, returning to the subsequent sparring session to reflect on and explore its effectiveness or otherwise. Review sessions allowed the researcher to feed back issues and emerging understandings to the focus group, seeking members' input to enhance future sparring and fuel further collaborative ideas for change (Lüscher and Lewis, 2008: 225–26).

### *Intervention*

Next comes the planning of changes and the action research interventions, such as new communication strategies. This involves you in drawing up a budget, suggesting a timescale and agreeing details of how to implement the action plan (which you prepare in the same way and to a similar template as for a public relations or marketing communications strategy). At all times, your change communication planning and subsequent actions should be purpose driven, that is, to solve the identified problem.

### *Evaluation*

During the intervention stage when you are implementing change through new or improved communication strategies, you are also carrying out an evaluation process, carefully monitoring every step and procedure. This isn't a piece of desk research but involves meeting with others in the setting as well as observing and interviewing. Example 12.4 illustrates this.

As an outcome of this critical assessment, practitioners, together with your input, will be able to reflect on their practices, modifying them, making further interventions and then once again evaluating everything. This spiral of acting, monitoring, reflecting and building pragmatic theories to inform further action continues until participants are satisfied with the improvement which has been made.

Don't forget that action research should be a democratic process, hence the need to ensure that you build in discussions, focus groups and meetings throughout the project. These can serve an additional purpose, not only developing the research but also providing a means of sharing the results of the project (Stringer, 2007). As in other forms of action research, it is essential throughout the action research process to keep good records and make comprehensive progress reports.

### *Limitations and problems in action research*

This form of research is often more consulting work than actual research (Stroh *et al.*, 2007: 540). However, if documentation is done thoroughly, and constant reflection feeds into the development of the implementation procedures, then research can claim to be appropriately rigorous.

Action research is often criticized for not being generalizable. As Perry and Gummesson (2004) have pointed out, it needs to have implications beyond the immediate project. This can be done through the development of theory which can inform other contexts, or if action research is done by consultants, results need to indicate how knowledge gained in one context might subsequently transfer to another.

The complex and democratic nature of action research means that it can be difficult to carry out. Not everybody in your focal organization or community may wish to be involved in a study and therefore it may be difficult for you to recruit participants. While undertaking the research, collaborators may be in conflict with each other. Managers, too, may make objections, especially if the process takes too much time or is expensive.

Further, action research takes time to complete because of its cyclical nature.

Informed consent may be problematic because the stages of the project usually are unknown before you start. Power relationships may also generate inherent problems; researchers from outside the research setting have to negotiate with participants throughout the action research process rather than relying on their expertise to control the interventions and the research progress.

### *Summary of action research*

- The aim of action research is to improve practice and to extend theory.
- Action research is a valuable methodology for creating change while studying it.
- It is mainly of use in a specific context in which a local problem needs a solution or where a situation needs change.

- Action research involves cycles of research and diagnosis, planning, action and interventions, evaluation and reflections.
- Action researchers work collaboratively, involved over extensive periods with participants as co-researchers.
- Action research is cyclical, reflective and dynamic.

# Part III

# Collecting the data

# 13 Sampling

Sampling involves decisions about what data to collect and analyse, and where these can be accessed. Sampling techniques in qualitative research are rarely probabilistic or random as in quantitative research. Instead they are purposeful, a form of strategic sampling based on judgements directly related to the purpose of the research.

This chapter discusses the strategies that are appropriate for sampling in qualitative research and includes:

- the main dimensions on which sampling takes place;
- different types of samples and sizes;
- what to call the people in your study.

## Introduction

It is unlikely that you will be able to collect data from everyone who is connected with your topic of research; time and other resources will prevent this. Also, unless the research 'population' or unit is very small, say a cluster of crises related to a single organization or a small group of people with a particular focus, you won't know enough about the characteristics of the population to be able to say precisely who is included within it. Therefore, you will have to collect evidence from a portion (or a 'sample') of the population in which you are interested. You do this in the expectation that your sample will generate adequate and relevant information, with sufficient quality data to offer new insights into your topic.

**Key point**

The term 'population' refers to a totality of units such as people, organizations, communications departments, brands, media reports or advertisements.

Sampling decisions begin during the early stages of research. These depend on the focus and topic of the research but include:

- *where to sample*: at the broadest level, the setting or site for your study;
- *what to sample*: within the above context, the time period, activities, events, processes or issues;

- *whom or what to sample*: at a micro-level, the group of people or cluster of materials or artefacts.

It is important to make sure that the people and places are available and accessible to you within the period you have set aside to complete your project. To some extent, computer-mediated communications and telephones help to overcome some of the difficulties of sampling across a wide or distant geographical spread because interviews can be conducted online or by phone on a global or regional basis. Similarly, busy people are often willing to be interviewed online but not face-to-face. In this way, the Internet is a useful tool in extending the scope of the sampling unit.

Qualitative researchers use different sampling techniques from the randomly selected and probabilistic sampling which quantitative researchers generally use. They are less rigid and do not establish a strict sampling frame, as in quantitative studies. This is because qualitative sampling develops during the research process as you discover new avenues and clues to follow up.

In your research proposal at the beginning of your study, it is not necessary to specify the exact number of informants in the sample because this will change as your research unfolds and you gather new ideas. However, you are expected to indicate the numbers you intend to involve in your *initial* sample, for example 'the initial sample will include *x* number of informants'. This sampling strategy differs from quantitative research, where the sampling frame is determined from the outset when you confirm the total number of respondents required for your proposed study.

## Sampling parameters and dimensions

There are a number of dimensions on which sampling takes place; the most important of these relate to setting, time and people (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The choices you make regarding these parameters allow you to learn different things about your research topic because each decision leads you to particular sites and people. We suggest that in public relations and marketing communications research there are at least eight dimensions – or characteristics – which operate at three different levels: (1) settings; (2) time, events, activities, issues and processes; and (3) people and materials or artefacts.

The dimensions related to setting refer to the conditions or sites within which the rest of your data are situated. This may involve your selecting a particular organization or societal culture as a case study where you will explore, say, the discourses of activist stakeholders (see Chapter 7 on case studies). Time refers to stages or sequences, or different rhythms of time, or to specific times of the day or in the calendar. The most important sampling unit is people and therefore the sampling dimension related to them is the extent of their experience of the phenomenon under study. The parameter related to concepts refers to the characteristics of the abstract ideas that you have elicited from your reading and data collection (the section on theoretical sampling – pp. 216–217 – expands on this). Whatever the sample, the basis for your sampling decisions must be clearly identified as this enables you to establish the boundaries of your research.

*Table 13.1* Sampling dimensions or parameters

| *Sampling dimensions: aspects or characteristics of the units mentioned below relevant to your topic* | *Examples* |
|---|---|
| *Setting* | – A country or place where advertising practices are distinctive<br>– A public relations consultancy with novel practices<br>– An occupational or corporate culture |
| *Events, activities, processes* | – Communication interactions between managers and staff, or customers<br>– New business pitches<br>– Designing a promotional campaign |
| *Issues* | – Trends in environmental awareness by stakeholders<br>– A potentially emergent crisis |
| *Time* | – Six months before and after the execution of a campaign<br>– Morning and afternoon |
| *People* | – People with certain roles, e.g. clients of advertising agencies, or journalists<br>– People with experience of media relations<br>– People who use social media |
| *Materials and artefacts* | – Media releases and news stories<br>– Corporate reports and documents<br>– Photos, websites, architecture and physical symbols |
| *Concepts* | – Abstract ideas drawn from both your literature review and data collection |

**Example 13.1: Sampling decisions based on different levels of sampling dimensions**

When carrying out her doctoral research into social change in Bahrain and Kuwait, Layla Al Saqer made a number of sampling decisions.

1 *Setting*: two social change projects run by not-for-profit organizations in Kuwait and Bahrain.
2 *People*: those involved in the public communication campaign: communication planners, journalists, audiences, activists.
3 *Materials and time*:
  - news stories about the projects in two newspapers from each country with (a) high circulation, and (b) daily publication;
  - television advertisements from the campaign over a period of four years.

(Al Saqer, 2007)

## Purposeful or purposive sampling

The underlying principle of gaining rich, in-depth information guides the sampling strategies of qualitative researchers. Whom you select for your study, where and when depends on judgements you make which are guided by the purpose of your study. Therefore, the phrase 'purposive' or 'purposeful' sampling is applied.

For example, Pompper (2007) aimed to study gender and ethnicity in public relations organizations because she became aware of a particular group of individuals who are 'outnumbered, underpaid, and under-represented at management levels' (p. 295), i.e. Hispanic women PR practitioners in the United States. She hosted focus groups with 25 Latinas in PR in four American cities, chosen because these cities have the largest Hispanic populations and represent major markets for public relations practice.

Note how the aim of Pompper's study informed the criteria (or factors) she used to make her judgements about whom to select as participants. Many, including Ritchie *et al.* (2003: 107), advocate use of the phrase 'criterion-based' sampling on the grounds that most sampling strategies, even random sampling, are highly purposive. However, most qualitative researchers prefer the term 'purposeful' or 'purposive'.

Your two main questions concern what to sample and how to sample. Decisions involving whom or what to include and to leave out of the study should be based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. The members of the sample generally share certain characteristics and experiences which are important for the development of the study (inclusion criteria) but you might also include some 'deviant cases', for example those whose experiences are very different. Their inclusion may present a challenge to the norm, enabling you to consider alternative explanations for the evidence you have collected. (See also Chapter 5 on quality and Chapter 18 on analysing.)

**Example 13.2: Inclusion criteria in sampling**

A sample of 24 marketing managers who had responsibility for writing marketing plans was interviewed by Barry Ardley (2008) in order to explore the factors that inform managers' approaches to marketing practice, and how these compared with the theory in marketing textbooks.

- *Inclusion criteria*: (a) marketing managers; (b) those with responsibility for writing marketing plans.

Participants may be chosen by you, by your peers on your behalf or self-selected. If you are making the selection, you will find that sometimes it is quite straightforward to identify individuals or groups with special knowledge of a topic, such as in Example 13.2.

Self-selection takes place when people respond either to your direct requests or to the advertisements you have placed seeking informants with insight into a particular situation or those who have particular expertise (for an example of an online recruitment advertisement, see Example 4.4). For example, potential informants could be students on work placement, or managers with particular professional knowledge and experience, or consumers who have been dissatisfied with the after-sales service of a particular product. In this case, you choose your sample from among those who have put themselves forward as wanting to take part in your research on the topic.

Individuals who are willing to talk about their experiences and perceptions are sometimes those who have an uncommon approach to their work. Some have power or status, others are naive, hostile or attention seeking. Some have lost power and become frustrated. It is wise to remember that these are not always the best informants because they may have an axe to grind or hold a mainly negative perception of the organization, issue or brand which you want to discuss. On the other hand, qualitative research is concerned with the subjective experiences of informants and it is often by allowing such voices to be heard that qualitative research findings challenge the status quo and critique the assumptions that are commonly held in public relations and marketing communications.

**Helpful hint**

Remember that your aim isn't to generalize to a population but to gain an understanding about the experiences of specific groups of individuals, or of a particular phenomenon in its setting.

When selecting your sample, ensure that your potential informants are willing to share their experiences with you. The position of some may be jeopardized by uncovering their own practices and ideologies, or the information may be highly sensitive. There may be reluctance, therefore, to share thoughts and feelings. Respect this stance and look elsewhere for other informants, remembering to make your selection on the basis of appropriate criteria, not on the basis of personal liking or because they seem more articulate.

If your study involves online research, there are a number of specific questions which Gaiser and Schreiner (2009) suggest you first ask yourself. Whom do you want in the study and where are you going to find them? What type of online environment will your potential participants typically frequent? How might you best engage with them? And what technologies are they most likely to use? For example, Gaiser and Schreiner indicate that if your goal is to reach 'a young, technology savvied population likely to pursue high-tech jobs' the best place to start pursuing research participants is likely to be game rooms and gaming interactive technologies (p.15). On the other hand, there may be other groups who are less computer literate, and with less ready access to computers, email or real-time chat software. If you are interested in collecting rich, insightful evidence, perhaps you may need to reconsider your data collecting strategies.

### *Sampling types*

There are a number of different types of sample and sampling. An overview of a whole range can be found in Patton (2002) and Marshall and Rossman (2006). The following are the most important and most often used types of sampling, although many sampling types overlap.

- homogeneous sampling;
- heterogeneous sampling;
- total population sampling;
- snowball or chain referral sampling;
- extreme, atypical, typical, unique or critical case sampling;
- convenience or opportunistic sampling;
- theoretical sampling.

A *homogeneous sample* consists of individuals who belong to the same subculture or group and have similar characteristics. Homogeneous sample units are useful when you wish to observe or interview a particular group, for instance specialists in a field or elite group members. The sample may be homogeneous with respect to a certain variable only, for instance occupation, length of experience, type of experience, age or gender. The important variable could be established before the sampling starts. Example 13.3 provides an illustration of this type of sample.

**Example 13.3: A homogeneous sample**

Tara Lantieri and Larry Chiagouris interviewed experts in brand strategy in order to identify trends contributing to consumers' mistrust of brands and the most effective managerial practices to overcome this problem. The 20 interviewees were selected on the basis that they had occupied senior positions in marketing and had at least 15 years experience addressing brand trust issues (Lantieri and Chiagouris, 2009).

A *heterogeneous sample* contains individuals or groups of individuals who differ from each other in a major aspect. For instance, you may wish to compare the perceptions about work experiences of career copywriters with freelance copywriters who work just because they have to earn a living. Men and women, too, form a heterogeneous sample when their gender is of importance to the study. Heterogeneous sampling is also called maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002) because it involves a search for variations in settings and for individuals with widely differing experiences of a particular phenomenon, as illustrated in Example 13.4.

It not only reflects diversity, as Barbour (2008: 53) maintains, but also makes it easier to draw comparisons.

**Example 13.4: A heterogeneous sample**

Many companies in the West source products from Mainland China via Chinese intermediaries based in Hong Kong. In studying how business communication influences these relationships, Michael Trimarchi and Peter Liesch compared the experiences of 18 managers who all had experience of the same phenomenon, i.e. the interactions between China, Hong Kong and the West. They selected Hong Kong Chinese intermediaries, Western buyers and Mainland Chinese sellers (Trimarchi and Liesch, 2006).

A variation of a purposive sample is *snowball or chain referral sampling* (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981), where you find one participant through another. For example, you might ask someone you have just interviewed to suggest another person who has knowledge of a particular area or topic and would be willing to take part in your study. In turn, he or she nominates other individuals for the research. When Lantieri and Chiagouris (2009; see Example 13.3) sought to identify the influences of mistrust towards brands, they recruited an initial sample of senior marketers and then augmented this through snowball sampling whereby the initial participants referred them to additional contacts. Researchers use snowball sampling in studies where they cannot identify useful informants, where informants are not easily accessible or where anonymity is desirable, for instance in studies about sensitive or confidential communication issues.

In a *total population sample* all participants or materials selected come from a particular group. For instance, you might carry out a content analysis of every corporate sustainability report in the European nuclear industry. Because there are few European companies operating in this field, it would be possible for you to collect data from the total population. This type of sampling is often used also when researchers wish to interview or observe professionals with a scarce skill or knowledge; the population is small enough for all to be interviewed.

In *extreme case selection* certain characteristics of the setting or population are identified. Then extremes of these characteristics are sought and arranged on a continuum. The cases that belong at either end of this continuum become the extreme cases, which eventually can be compared with those which are the norm.

**Example 13.5: An extreme case**

The purpose of John Ireland's investigation was to identify the consumption habits of desperately poor consumers, many of whom were illiterate, and the marketing practices of companies selling products to this market. Previous research had mostly focused on examining rural poverty, but Ireland chose, instead, to study the urban poor in Venezuela. He offered a rationale for his sample as follows:

> Almost 40 percent of poor Africans and Asians and more than 75 percent of poor Latin Americans live in cities. Venezuela offers an extreme case in which more than 80 percent of the country's poor lives in unplanned shantytowns called 'barrios'.
>
> (Ireland, 2008: 431)

*Atypical cases* are unusual, different or 'negative' but they may be of significance for the study because they do not fit into a pattern and therefore may serve to disconfirm your working hypotheses. Chapters 5 and 18 have more to say on this. Aligned to atypical cases are *critical cases*, which embody to a magnified or more dramatic extent the issues or challenges found in other cases. You use this type of sampling if you want to examine a case that exemplifies a theoretical or practical issue. For example, if you were interested in studying how companies managed their crisis communications during the recent global recession, you might select a sample of American banks which were hit hardest by the recession.

In *typical case selection* you create a profile of characteristics for an average case and find instances of this. This type of sampling is useful for achieving typicality in a study.

When choosing *unique cases* your focus is on those people (or events, issues or organizations, depending on your research aims) who differ from others by a single characteristic or dimension, such as individuals who share a particular trait or occupation or buying habit but come from a minority community, such as a particular ethnic group.

The term *convenience or opportunistic* sampling is self-explanatory. Here you make the most of opportunities (which sometimes occur unexpectedly) to ask potentially useful informants to take part in your study. This sometimes happens when recruiting people is difficult and only a few informants are available. You might, for instance, meet someone at a party who has previously been inaccessible. Rather than let the opportunity slip by, you ask them there and then if they would allow you to interview them at a later date. Of course, to some extent, much sampling is opportunistic and arranged for the convenience of the researcher.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) advocate *theoretical sampling* as a means of collecting data. Theoretical sampling develops as the study proceeds and cannot be planned beforehand. This is because at the basis of your sample are the concepts and theoretical issues which arise during the course of your research. The theoretical ideas control the collection of data. Therefore, if you are using theoretical sampling it is important to provide a clear justification for why you have included particular sampling units. At the point of data saturation – when no new ideas arise – sampling stops. To find out more on theoretical sampling, refer to Chapter 8 on grounded theory.

To summarize, sampling in qualitative research is:

- *flexible*: sampling develops during the study;
- *sequential*: selection of sampling units is not made before fieldwork begins but develops as discoveries are made;
- *guided by theoretical development*: it becomes progressively more focused;
- *continuous*: it carries on through the study until no new relevant data arise;
- *involved in a search for negative or deviant cases*.

(Kuzel, 1999)

### *Sample size*

The appropriate number of participants chosen for research will depend on the type of research question, the type of qualitative approach used in the study, material and time resources as well as the number of researchers involved in the study. As Silverman, citing Mitchell (1983), states, 'the validity of qualitative analysis depends more on the quality of the analysis than on the size of the sample' (2010: 54).

Although there are no rigid rules or guidelines for sample size, generally qualitative sampling consists of small sampling units studied in depth, with the sample size often extending over the course of the data collection and analysis. When a sample is very heterogeneous it is likely that the sample will need to be larger than if it were homogeneous (Bryman, 2008). Most often, it seems that researchers consider a sample of between 4 and 40 informants suits their purposes.

However, some highly insightful studies have been based on very small samples (especially in phenomenological research) because these have allowed researchers to focus in great depth on a few phenomena, rather than more superficially across a wider range as is common in quantitative studies (note the small sample in Example 13.4). Smaller samples are valuable for the deep, rich data they provide but should not be so small that saturation cannot be achieved. Saturation occurs when no new data emerge that are important for the agenda of the study (or the developing theory – in grounded theory research). In some cases, this occurs fairly early in the study.

From time to time, certain research projects are carried out with large numbers of participants, interviewed usually by a team of researchers. While some qualitative studies with large sample sizes do exist, they are rare and the sample size does not necessarily determine the quality of the study. Personally, we do not see the justification for a very large sample in qualitative research. When students or experienced researchers use large samples, it is usually to appease either funding bodies which are used to large samples or research committees when they do not know much about qualitative research. Wolcott (1994) asserts that the wish for a large sample size is rooted in quantitative research, where there is a need to generalize. He maintains that, rather than enhance qualitative research, a large sample may actually harm it as the research is likely to lack the depth and richness of a smaller sample. Small samples allow you to capture participants' specific responses and individual interpretations. This aspect is often lost when large samples are used.

**Example 13.6: Different sample sizes**

- Consumers' perceptions of mobile advertising were explored by a team of New Zealand and British researchers. A total of nine people (students and professionals) between the ages of 20 and 28 took part in two focus groups. The groups were purposely heterogeneous in order to offer contrasting views: the first group had greater knowledge of mobile commerce technologies and applications than the second (Carroll *et al.*, 2007).
- In seeking to answer the question of why there are such large differences between male and female professional status and representation in public relations, Romy Fröhlich and Sonja Peters interviewed 13 female public relations practitioners in public relations agencies. Because of the high female majority in PR consultancies and a lack of research on women in PR, they decided not to interview men and to focus on women exclusively. They selected women based on (1) age, (2) hierarchical position, (3) marital status and existence of children, (4) tenure, (5) agency size, (6) public relations area of practice (Fröhlich and Peters, 2007).
- Three case study organizations based in London were selected by Shaun Powell and Chris Dodd for an investigation into managing vision and brand in the creative industries. London was chosen as a setting because of the density of creative businesses operating there. The three organizations were selected because, amongst a range of criteria, their primary source of income was based on ideas that were so creative as to distinguish them from competitors. Thirty-six interviews were carried out with a sample of creative people in each organization, the sampling criteria being their role, seniority and time within the organization (Powell and Dodd, 2007).

## What shall we call the people we sample?

It is difficult for researchers to know what term to use for the people they interview and observe, especially as this name makes explicit the stance of the researchers and their relationship to those being studied. Most qualitative researchers favour the terms 'participant' or 'informant'. In surveys – both with structured interviews and written questionnaires – the most frequent term has been 'respondents', and, indeed, many qualitative researchers and research texts still use it (for instance

Miles and Huberman, 1994), but it appears less frequent now in research texts and reports.

Experimental researchers refer to ‘subjects’, a word that suggests passivity in the people we study. We suggest that in quantitative studies this term could be acceptable, but in research with in-depth interviews it is inappropriate. Indeed the American Psychological Association, which often establishes research rules, no longer uses the term ‘subject’. ‘Interviewee’ can be used but some consider the term clumsy or boring.

Anthropologists refer to ‘informants’, those members of a culture or group who voluntarily ‘inform’ the researcher about their world and play an active part in the research, but the term might be seen to have links to the word ‘informant’ as used by the police. Most qualitative researchers prefer the term ‘participant’, which expresses the collaboration between the researcher and the researched and the equality of their relationship. However, this term may be misleading as the researcher, too, is a participant. In the end, you make the decision yourself as to which term suits your research. For our own purposes, we have used several of these terms throughout this text.

## Summary

- There are a variety of sampling types, all purposeful; that is, they are chosen specifically for the study and are criterion based.
- The sample of individuals or cases in qualitative research is generally small, although this is not a rule.
- Sample units consist of people, settings, time, events, activities, processes, issues, materials or concepts (the latter is called theoretical sampling).
- Sampling is not wholly determined prior to the study but proceeds throughout.

# 14 Interviews

In-depth interviews are a major source of data in qualitative research and a way of exploring informant perspectives and perceptions. Qualitative interviewing differs from quantitative interviewing in that it is relatively non-directive and less structured. Although the aim of the research guides the qualitative interview process, at its best interviewing involves participants and interviewers in a form of social interaction through which they collaborate to produce meaningful, situated accounts of participants' experiences.

The chapter addresses issues concerning both face-to-face and online interviewing, and covers the following topics:

- the process of interviewing;
- choosing appropriate types of interviews and questions;
- the interviewer–participant relationship, including building trust and the effect of the interviewer on the interview itself;
- issues specific to online interviewing.

## Introduction

In the field of marketing communications and public relations, qualitative research is often primarily associated with interviewing. There are, however, different understandings about the nature and purpose of the interview. Traditionally, interviews have been appropriated by positivist researchers as a 'talking questionnaire' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) or 'a pipeline for transporting knowledge' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004: 141). In this sense, the interviewer aims to *extract* information from respondents to suit the purposes of the investigation.

However, researchers who take an interpretive or critical stance draw on the notion of interviews as 'conversations with a purpose', a term first applied by Webb and Webb in 1932. Interpretive researchers consider the method to offer a means of collaboratively exploring the meanings, ideas, feelings, intentions of various stakeholders or publics, and of those involved in managing formal communications. They endeavour to encourage interviewees to articulate the topics and experiences that are of personal interest to them, which, of course, can take the interview in surprising directions (although it is guided by the aims and structure of the research project).

Increasingly, there is an awareness of the social complexities of the interview, including the relational dynamics involved between researcher and participant, the context in which the interview occurs and the need to gain the full cooperation of interviewees (Alvesson, 2003). We deal with these and other issues through this chapter. Many novice researchers assume that qualitative research interviews are easy to carry out, but interviewing is a complex process and not as simple as it seems.

**Key point**

Key features of interviews are that they are flexible and allow you to develop an understanding of the perspectives of interviewees.

The value of interviews is that they are very flexible because the answers given by interviewees inform the evolving conversation. As a researcher, you have the freedom to prompt for more information if something interesting or novel emerges because you are not restricted to a pre-planned, rigid list of questions, as with the use of the quantitative questionnaire method. Similarly, because the ideas of interviewees have priority, participants are able to explore their own thoughts more deeply or exert more control over the interview if they prefer. This means they may either react spontaneously and honestly to your questions or they may spend time reflecting on their answers and articulating their ideas slowly. This is particularly evident in email interviewing, where informants will often reflect on and amend what they originally wrote. You can then follow up and clarify the meanings of words and phrases immediately, or you can proceed more slowly in order to allow trust to develop.

Another benefit of interviews is that the data you collect are situated within their own social context. That is, the responses you derive from interviews are the subjective views of your interviewees. Your evidence, therefore, is based on participants' interpretations of their experiences and is expressed in their own words, using the jargon and speech styles that are meaningful to them. This contrasts with quantitative surveys, where responses are treated as if they are independent of the contexts that produce them.

**Example 14.1: The voices of informants**

The following quotations were presented in an article about how personal memories have an important influence on current and future brand preferences. Note how these excerpts from the voices of informants present vivid illustrations of consumers' engagement with brands; in effect, they not only provide evidence to support the authors' argument but also bring to life the concept of brand meaning.

> When I was about four years old, I remember going to the beach in my dad's Toyota truck. The day stood out because it was my birthday, and my dad took off work to bring me to the beach. I can smell and taste the saltwater breeze mixed with the exhaust of this off-road machine, and to this day, I have a fascination with Toyota trucks. Ever since I was brainwashed as a child with this love for Toyota trucks, I have been a definite consumer of this brand name. My personal consumer memory has almost forced me to only want this type of vehicle. Since I have been able to work and drive, I have owned three Toyota trucks.
>
> The first time I really noticed or cared about a car is when I got to go with my Dad to test drive a Trans Am. My family had just seen *Smoky and the Bandit*, and that is the car the hero of the movie, Burt Reynolds, drove to get away from all the bad guys. It was the car to have, and I was really excited.
>
> (Braun-LaTour *et al.*, 2007: 51, 54)

Interviews are an appropriate method to use when you wish to understand the constructs that interviewees use as a basis for their opinions and beliefs about a particular situation, product or issue. Further reasons for their use are summarized by Easterby-Smith *et al.*:

- when the step-by-step logic of a situation is not clear;
- when the subject matter is confidential or commercially sensitive;
- when an interviewee may be reluctant to tell the truth about an issue other than confidentially in a one-to-one situation;
- if the aim of an interview is to develop an understanding of the participant's working 'world' so that you might influence it, as in the case of critical or action research.

(Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008: 144)

A further reason for employing the method is when you are interested in gaining cultural knowledge, for example about the marketplace, because, from a cultural perspective, the interview is not a mirror on an external world or the inner life of a person, but a performance in which interviewer and interviewee produce cultural talk and thus enact cultural meanings (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006).

Different types of interview exist. The one-to-one interview consisting of questions and answers is the most common form. Focus groups, however, are used widely (we discuss this method in Chapter 15). They are groups of people interviewed by one or more researcher. Less common as an interview method is narrative enquiry, where participants' stories or narratives are analysed (Riessman, 2008). Few questions are asked in research of this type, because you are keen to encourage participants to talk at length about the story of their situation or experience. An example might be the narrative of how a publicist was involved in raising international awareness of a particular issue and getting it onto the international news agenda. (Note also Chapter 10, which discusses interviews used within a discourse analysis methodology.)

In qualitative student projects, dissertations and theses, the one-to-one interview is prevalent, either in a single encounter or in several meetings with individual participants. This may be conducted face-to-face, by telephone or video conference, or online using, for example, programs such as Skype which enable text-, audio- or video-based interviews.

Although we focus on one-to-one interviews in this chapter, many of the features of this form are common to other interview types.

## The interview process

Interviews may be formal and pre-planned, or informal, such as spontaneous conversations that occur in the office corridor or at a press conference. Primarily, they aim to develop understanding and collaborative explanation by delving into the past and present experiences of participants in order to discover their feelings, perceptions and thoughts. In qualitative data collection, interviewees' responses to your initial questions determine how the interview develops. You follow up their answers with further questions along the same lines or by branching out tangentially. This means that each interview differs from the next in sequence and wording, although distinct patterns are likely to emerge that are common to all interviews in your research project. In most qualitative research approaches, you go on to discover these patterns when you analyse the data (which you usually do simultaneously with conducting further interviews).

One interview does not always suffice. In qualitative enquiry it is possible to re-examine certain issues in the light of emerging ideas and then conduct follow-up interviews if necessary. Usually undergraduate researchers plan one-off interviews only, although postgraduates often carry out more than one with each participant.

### Key point

Each interview differs from those before and after it because your developing knowledge leads you to concentrate on particular areas, and also because of the interests of participants.

Pilot studies are not always necessary in qualitative enquiry as the research is developmental, but you could try out your interviewing skills on friends and acquaintances to get used to this type of data collection. A practice run is very useful if you want to become more adept with the software needed for online interviews.

Many qualitative research projects start with relatively unstructured interviews in which researchers give minimal guidance to participants. This allows issues pertinent to the situation to be revealed. You can then incorporate these into your questioning in the next stages of interviewing. As interviews proceed, the outcomes guide further interviews, allowing that which is important to participants to emerge throughout the data collection. Although you are aiming to uncover patterns and themes, the unique experience of each individual participant is also important.

## *Types of interview*

A continuum exists of interview types, ranging from the unstructured to the structured interview. Qualitative researchers generally employ the unstructured or semi-structured interview because structured interviews tend to stifle the flexibility that is so valued in qualitative research.

### *Unstructured, non-standardized interviews*

In unstructured interviews, there are no predetermined questions except at the very beginning, when you start with a general question in the broad area of study. An aide-mémoire, an agenda or a list of topics helps you to keep your focus through the course of the interview.

**Example 14.2: An aide-mémoire or general list of topic areas guiding an interview**

When exploring gender and organizational issues with regard to women in public relations in Germany, Romy Fröhlich and Sonja Peters carried out long interviews with female PR experts working in agencies. They used a schedule of general question areas to allow for spontaneity and flexibility in participants' own trains of thought.

The topic areas were related to participants' whole careers:

- general comparison of circumstances in PR agencies and corporations;
- why participants chose the agency sector;
- the general meaning of gender in PR;
- the impact of being a woman on individual professional experiences.

(Fröhlich and Peters, 2007)

Compare this general list with the more detailed interview guide for semi-structured interviewing set out in the Appendix.

Because unstructured interviewing does not follow rigid procedures, interviews of this type are highly flexible, allowing you to follow the interests of informants as they relate to their own thought processes. Your questioning follows no order but takes a sequence that depends on the responses to early questions. Informants are free to answer at length, so that great depth and detail can be obtained. Even though your overall direction and control of the interview are minimal, you still have your own agenda because of the need to achieve your research aim. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind the particular issues you wish to explore and ensure that you cover these during the course of interviewing.

**Key point**

Unstructured interviews generate the richest data and often uncover surprising evidence, but they also have the highest 'dross rate' (the amount of material that is of no particular use for your study), particularly if you are inexperienced at interviewing. They also can be extremely time consuming.

Because unstructured interviewing requires participants to be highly involved, an issue to consider when you are conducting online interviews is how to motivate participants to engage with the conversation and then to continue. Mann and Stewart (2000) suggest that you need to be very clear about the purpose and procedures of your research, outlining these clearly at the start and then offering reminders along the way. If participants understand the goals and motives of your research, they are likely to feel more secure about their interactions with you. When trust and rapport have been established, your study is likely to sustain participants' interest and involvement.

### *Semi-structured interviews*

Semi-structured or focused interviews are often used in qualitative research. The questions are contained in an interview guide (not 'an interview schedule' as in quantitative research!) with a focus on the issues or topic areas to be covered and the lines of enquiry to be followed. The sequencing of questions is not the same for every participant as it depends on the process of each interview and the responses of each individual. The interview guide, however, ensures that you collect similar types of data from all informants. In this way, you save time and the 'dross rate' (the material that is of less relevance to your agenda) is lower than for unstructured interviews. The interview guide allows you to develop questions prior to interviewing and then decide for yourself which issues to pursue. Turn to the Appendix to read an interview guide for a published study on PR practitioners as internal activists (Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002).

**Example 14.3: An interview guide**

The following are some questions which aim to find out about the process of setting up a new, strategic communications consultancy:

- Tell me about how you came up with the idea to start the company?
- Why did you decide to focus on the field of strategic communications rather than integrated marketing communications?

- How did you know how to go about managing a commercial organization?
- What happened when you gained your first client?
- What influenced you to set up in this particular city?
- and so on. . .

Although the interview guide may be quite long and detailed, it need not be followed strictly because your aim is to understand the perspectives of informants and to create collaboratively a meaningful account of the topic area you are interested in researching.

### *Structured or standardized interviews*

Standardized interviews resemble written survey questionnaires and are rarely used by qualitative researchers. Questions are pre-planned and asked of every informant in the same order. Therefore, they tend to direct participants' responses, prohibiting you and your interviewee from exploring together the meaning of the object of enquiry. Although some standardized interviews may contain some open questions, even then they cannot be called qualitative.

However, there are two reasons why qualitative researchers might occasionally use standardized interviews to supplement other methods:

- to elicit socio-demographic and biographical data, i.e. about age, number of purchases, number of clients, length of experience, type of occupation, qualifications, etc.;
- to conform to the demands of research committees, who often ask for a predetermined interview schedule so that they can find out the exact path of the proposed research.

### *Online interviewing*

Online interviews take the form of text-, audio- or video-chats, with some forms of text-based interviewing occurring asynchronously (i.e. not in real time) while other modes occur synchronously (i.e. in real time) using computers and networks with software such as AIM (AOL Instant Messenger), Windows Live Messenger, Apple iChat or Skype.

If you are conducting a one-to-one synchronous interview, both you and your interviewee are online, responding at the same time, either in writing, via audio or face-to-face using video. This means that you can pose a question and the response will be immediate because you have organized in advance for your informant to be at his or her computer at the same time. This method is especially valuable for accessing people in their own environments, such as at home, work or other non-threatening environments, especially minority and professional groups that otherwise would be difficult to contact (Gruber *et al.*, 2008) or those too distant for you to reach for face-to-face interviewing.

**Key point**

Online interviews consist of text-, audio- or video-chats. Text-based interviews may be conducted in real time (synchronous interviews) or non-real time (asynchronous interviews).

Asynchronous communication is when interview chat happens in non-real time, for example in emails. Messages are written and read at different times which may be minutes, hours or days apart. This allows you and your interviewees to choose the times that best suit you for participating in the study. This is beneficial if you are interviewing across worldwide time zones.

When email is used for asynchronous interviews, it is less immediate than real-time chat, but has the advantage of allowing participants to be more thoughtful and reflective because they can take time to respond in a more measured way. James and Busher (2006) invited participants in their email-based study to draft and redraft their responses in order to encourage them to reflect deeply on their answers to questions. One informant subsequently wrote that this had been a challenging and beneficial process of gaining personal insights. James and Busher also found that one of the benefits of email interviewing was that over time participants took greater ownership of the research focus and dialogue, responding in unexpected ways and directions, and according to their own timeframes rather than those of the researchers. This led the researchers to release some of their control of the research agenda in order to pursue these interesting new lines of investigation. Thus there was a shift in power from a researcher-driven focus and schedule to one that was more collaboratively constructed, which, they found, improved the quality of participants' input.

**Helpful hint**

When conducting online research via email, allow plenty of time for participants to respond to your questions. Their answers may be more thoughtful and reflective if you are able to encourage them to spend some time drafting their responses first, rather than firing off a cursory, superficial comment.

While email and other forms of text-based interviewing might be appropriate for contacting and screening potential participants, unless participants have a good level of skills in electronic communication and are confident about chatting freely online, this will not be a suitable research method. Similarly, your own inexperience in setting up and running interviews online could limit the type of data you acquire. And don't overlook your own keyboard skills either; recently participants in an online study complained about overly long synchronous interviewing where the slow typing of the interviewer had resulted in unwelcome, long intervals between questions and answers (Gruber *et al.*, 2008).

### *Types of question*

There are a variety of techniques for asking questions and most interviews make use of a wide range.

*Grand tour* and *mini tour* questions relate to overview or more specific focus, according to Spradley (1979). Grand tour questions are broad. They ask a participant to reconstruct a routine, procedure, activity, event or cycle of activity that took place at a particular time in his or her life. The participant is the tour guide, describing the steps taken and the thoughts or feelings associated with each step (Davis, 1997). Mini tour questions are more specific. The following are examples of grand tour and mini tour questions:

Grand tour questions:

- Can you describe a typical day in the press office?
- Tell me about the events that led to your winning this client account?
- Can you describe your impressions of this brand? Start at the time you first heard about the product and continue through to your trial and then purchase.
- How did your first attempt go at promoting this client – from start to finish?

Mini tour questions:

- Can you describe what happens when you have to get press releases signed off by other members of the organization?
- Can you describe what it is like to use this website?
- What were your expectations in this situation?

Whereas Spradley identifies two core types of questioning, Patton (2002) offers a different set of questions on which the interview might be based. These relate to questions about experience and behaviour; opinions and values; feelings; knowledge; senses (related to experience but more specifically to what has been seen, felt and heard); and, to a lesser extent, background and demographics. For example:

Experience and behaviour questions:

- Could you tell me about your experience of using social media as part of an integrated communications campaign?
- When you saw the oil spill and realized the repercussions for your company's reputation, how long did it take you to activate your crisis communication plan?

Opinions and values questions:

- Why does your organization hold this attitude toward people from diverse backgrounds?

Feeling questions:

- How did you feel when it was announced that you had not succeeded in your pitch for the business?
- What emotions are conjured up when you recall how you handled that difficult media relations campaign?

Knowledge questions:

- How can ethnic communities in this region lobby their MPs for better services?
- Who told you this piece of information?

Sensory questions:

- When you smell the interior of a brand new car, what images are conjured up in your mind?
- What do you see when you look at this billboard?

Background and demographic questions:

- What is your educational background?
- How many staff are there in the communications team?

*Idealization questions*, or what Schatzman and Strauss (1973) call 'posing the ideal', are used when you want to ask participants to speculate about an ideal state of affairs or an ideal product or situation. Once you have obtained a response to a prompt such as 'Describe the ideal type of communications between bosses and employees in your company', you will then go on to ask your informant to compare the ideal with the actual communication relationships. In this case, the gap between the ideal and the actual would provide both an evaluation and a potential direction for future internal communication programmes.

*Contrast questions* aim to reveal differences in attitudes and perceptions by comparing one thing with another. You might, for instance, ask publics: 'Why did you decide to give money to this charity rather than to another?' Or you could ask them to describe the opposites of a corporate brand, for example 'Describe the opposite of what you think about Company *X*', in order to uncover perceptions about a company's brand or its corporate identity.

In *hypothetical-interaction questions* (Spradley 1980), your interviewee has to imagine a situation that is based on actual or plausible relationships and describe how he or she would respond. 'What if. . .?' is often a good question to start with. Davis offers an interesting example of this type of questioning:

> Imagine that the director and creator of Calvin Klein jeans' advertising were sitting across the table from you. Describe how you would feel and what you would be thinking. What types of questions might you ask these people? What would you anticipate their answers to your questions might be?
>
> (Davis, 1997: 204)

Other types of questions are *direct and factual*. These are useful for providing background information or the foundation for more extensive discussion. Examples are:

- What are the major business stories you recall from reading the *Economist* this week?
- What are the most important reasons why you joined this protest demonstration today?

*Structural questions* are similarly straightforward but here you are aiming to understand how people organize their feelings and knowledge within a particular area, for example ‘What are all the different ways that you watch television?’ or ‘What are all the different ways that you used to update interested parties before Twitter and Facebook came along?’ By asking several informants the same question, you begin to build up a picture of certain behaviours and meanings with regard to particular activities, products or services.

**Example 14.4: Asking questions in interviews**

| *What not to do* | *What to do* |
|---|---|
| • No leading questions; | • Guide responses; |
| • No ambiguous questions; | • Phrase questions clearly; |
| • No double questions; | • Ask one question at a time; |
| • No jargon, academic or technical terms. | • Use participants’ language. |

Be aware of practical difficulties in the data collection phase. In qualitative studies questions should be as non-directive as possible but still guide responses towards the topics that interest you as a researcher. Phrase questions clearly because ambiguous questions lead to ambiguous answers. Unless you are using hypothetical-interaction questions where you need to set out an elaborate scenario, double questions (where you ask two questions in the same sentence) are best avoided to prevent confusion. By putting yourself in the shoes of your informants, you are better able to develop meaningful questions that will motivate interesting, relevant responses.

### *Probing, prompting and summarizing*

During interviews, prompts or probing questions help to reduce ambiguity both for yourself and your informants. Probes are useful when you are seeking elaboration, further meaning or reasons. Exploratory questions (or probes) might be:

- What was that experience like for you?
- How did you feel about that?

- Can you tell me more about that?
- Yes, tell me more.
- I see.
- That's interesting, why did you do that?

Such questions follow up on certain points that participants make or words they use. To encourage more talk on a particular point, it is sometimes useful to summarize the last statements of the participant. An example of a summary statement might be:

> You told me earlier that the use of new media is now a major component of the political parties' communication strategies. Could you tell me a bit more about that?

In the above example, participants might be asked to go on to tell a story or describe a critical incident. In this way, they often become more fluent at narrating their experiences about a day, an event, a campaign, an interaction, a lobbying decision, a feeling and so on.

**Helpful hint**

Active listening shows you are paying attention and are interested. It encourages responses from participants.

Non-verbal prompts are also useful in encouraging further responses. Sometimes people are reluctant to make their thoughts public for fear that judgements might be made about them. Therefore, they give monosyllabic answers until they have become used to you and to being interviewed. Active listening, together with a non-judgemental manner, helps to overcome this problem by conveying the idea that you value the information being communicated to you. Your stance, making eye contact and leaning forward all encourage reflection. In fact, it is important to train and use active listening skills such as these because they are a core component of the interviewer's toolkit.

In online interviewing, active listening occurs through phrases such as: 'Yes, I can go along with that' or 'Yes, I quite understand – do go on' or 'I see what you mean – so what else?' or 'That's interesting – tell me more.' Non-verbal actions can be described, such as 'That's funny – I'm laughing' or '-:)' or 'LOL'. The use of capital letters and points of emphasis indicates your involvement or emotions in response to participants' responses. For example, you might state, 'GREAT – original point! Thx for that,' to indicate your enthusiasm about a comment.

In order to round off interviews, we find that a useful question to ask is 'Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?' This sometimes opens up completely new and exciting avenues because by this time interviewees have taken stock of us and assessed whether or not they can trust us. Sometimes our interviews have continued for another half an hour or so after this question as we allow conversations to flow on in a completely unstructured fashion. At other times, interviewees have had nothing else to add and we have reached a natural ending.

Once the audio-recorder is turned off, interviewees sometimes like to know more about the project in more detail. This is a relaxed way to end interviews. Don't forget to send a thank-you letter a few days later.

### *Length and timing of interviews*

The length of an interview depends on the participant's interest and availability, and the topic of the interview. Of course, you should suggest an approximate amount of time – perhaps an hour or an hour and a half – so that participants can plan their day, but many are willing or wish to go beyond this, although do bear in mind that even experienced researchers or willing participants tend to lose concentration after a couple of hours. Other interviews may last only 20 or 30 minutes because of the work pressures of participants. Essentially, you need to use your own judgement about an appropriate length of time to explore your topic, although the wishes of informants will always have priority. Qualitative interviews are always time consuming, however, and, if possible, it is worth allowing plenty of time for interviewing. If it is not possible to accomplish your goals in one interview, you might ask to re-interview on one or more further occasion.

A word of caution about scheduling multiple interviews over the course of a single day; more than two or three a day does not allow you sufficient time to be reflective after each.

### *Recording, transcribing and archiving interview data*

A number of techniques and practical points must be considered so that the data are recorded and stored appropriately. These include:

- audio-recording the interview;
- transcribing the interview;
- note taking during the interview;
- note taking after the interview;
- copying and saving tapes or digital files.

#### *Audio-recording*

Before analysing the data, participants' words must be preserved as accurately as possible; this is best done through an audio-recording, for which you need to ask permission when you set up the interview. This applies to both face-to-face and telephone interviews. Even if consent has been given, it is not uncommon for participants to change their minds at the last minute. In this case, their wishes are paramount.

**Key point**

The principle of respect for autonomy includes choice and free decision-making and therefore must be considered first in terms of consent. This not only applies to the use of audio- or video-recording but, more importantly, also gives participants the right to refuse to participate in research or withdraw from it. They can exercise this right at any stage of the research process.

Audio-recording is useful because it enables you to capture the exact words of the interview, inclusive of questions; this means that you don't forget important answers and words afterwards. It enables you also to maintain eye contact and pay attention to what participants say, without having to concentrate on note taking. Try to schedule your interviews in a quiet room if possible. An interview will be wasted if there is a jackhammer or loud traffic noises in the street outside as the external sounds will cover your voices unless you have a highly sophisticated microphone.

**Helpful hint**

Test your recording device and microphone before leaving home, at the beginning of the interview and again immediately after you have recorded the interview. There's nothing worse than discovering your equipment has malfunctioned and you have 'lost' the interview. You may never get the chance to do the recording again.

When you have finished your interview, label and date the tape or digital file. If your material is confidential, only pseudonyms should appear on the tape, digital file or its transcription, with real names and their pseudonyms stored in a different place.

### *What is the best type of device for recording interviews?*

Increasingly, researchers are turning from tape recorders to digital audio-recorders for the clarity of recording, and because interviews can be transferred easily to a computer for storage and playback, as well as listened to on an MP3 player or iPod. However, we prefer the old-fashioned cassette tapes because these can be transcribed more quickly using a transcribing machine, which is not yet available for digital recordings. A downside of using cassette recorders is that they sometimes break down or the batteries run out. Remember, therefore, to pack extra batteries and tapes.

Whatever type of equipment you opt for it is likely to be fairly expensive, so do find out if equipment (including transcribing machines for tapes) can be borrowed from your university.

### *Transcribing*

If you are a novice researcher, we would advise you to transcribe (or have transcribed) the full text of all of your interviews. This is not necessarily essential if you are more experienced. You might choose instead to select portions of interviews for transcription, transcribing only the areas which link to your developing theoretical ideas.

However, the fullest and richest data are gained from transcribing interviews verbatim. We suggest that – if possible – you do your own transcribing because this allows you to immerse yourself in the data and become sensitive to the issues of importance. Be warned, however, that transcribing is a frustrating business because it takes so much time. One hour of interviewing takes between five and seven hours to transcribe. Often it takes even longer if you are not used to audio-typing. Therefore, it may be worth paying a typist with a transcribing machine to do it. This, however, is expensive. It also means you are less intimately involved with your data. A further point is that a typist may ignore the 'pregnant pauses' and hesitations which are salient to you but not to someone who wasn't there when the recording was made. On the other hand, having tapes or audio-files transcribed gives you more time to listen and analyse. The decision about this depends on you.

**Helpful hint**

If you intend to employ a typist to transcribe your recordings, remember to advise them on the confidentiality of the data. You may have to note this in your ethics application.

Number the pages of your transcripts, ensure the face sheet contains date, location and time of interview, and identify the code number or letter of the informant. Many researchers number each line of the interview transcript so that they can pinpoint specific data when searching for them. It is useful to have wide margins in order to leave room for analysis or notes and comments. Notes in the margins and also within the text might refer to some of the non-verbal signals indicated by informants at various points in the interview, and your assessment of their meaning in relation to their speech.

The process of listening to the recordings and reading through your transcripts will make you sensitive to the data. At this time, any theoretical ideas that emerge should be written down in the form of memos and fieldnotes (see Chapters 9 and 18).

### *Taking notes*

An alternative, if less effective, method of recording data is note taking during or immediately after an interview. Some researchers employ both audio-recorder and note taking on the basis that this allows them to register participants' facial expressions and gestures, together with their own reactions and comments, alongside the words that are spoken. Taking notes, however, may disturb participants and certainly prevents you from maintaining eye contact. To overcome this, we suggest taking notes only when recording is not feasible or if interviewees do not wish to be tape-recorded. Notes can then be written up immediately after the interview.

If participants deny permission to record, interviewers generally take notes throughout the interview, hoping that these will reflect the participant's words as accurately as possible. However, unless you have excellent shorthand it is unlikely that you will be able to take down more than a fraction of the sentences. Therefore, select the most important words or phrases and summarize the rest.

An alternative form of recording is to write up your notes after the interview is finished. This should be done as soon as possible after the interview in order to capture the essence, behaviour and words of the informants, together with your own thoughts. It is worth considering how, in your note taking, you can differentiate between your own thoughts and the words of informants.

### *Archiving*

A minimum of three copies (usually more) should be made of transcripts, a clean copy without comments locked away in a safe place in case other copies or your computer files are lost or destroyed. Remember to constantly back up your transcripts and fieldnotes on your computer and on a separate memory stick.

An advantage of text-based instant messaging is that your interview is automatically transcribed on the messaging window, with details of the speaker and time, which you can print off immediately. However, not all programs archive your exchanges, and therefore you may need to copy and paste from the window into a separate document in order to save the interview on your computer.

Asynchronous conversations such as email exchanges are an automatic, continuously developing record of social interactions, offering you the means to track conversations in chronological order.

## The researcher–participant relationship

In qualitative approaches to interviewing, whether face-to-face or online, there is a great degree of closeness and personal involvement between researcher and participant. This reflects the emphasis placed on the researcher as the human instrument of research. A good interviewer–participant relationship, therefore, is crucial to the success of the research. If you are able to establish rapport from the beginning of the research process, the evidence you collect will be valuable and insightful. Issues to consider in the interviewer–participant relationship concern status, trust and your 'communicative competencies', which we discuss next.

### *Relative status of interviewer and participant*

A fallacy exists that the interviewer and the person interviewed work together in a relationship of complete equality. This is not always possible, for reasons which include differences in age, relative knowledge, hierarchical status and the goals of researcher and participant. Nevertheless, your relationships should be based on mutual respect and a position of equality as fellow human beings. The onus is on you, as a researcher, to respect the way in which participants develop and phrase their answers (Marshall and Rossman, 2006) because they are, after all, not passive respondents but active participants in an important social encounter.

Access to persons in a position of power can be difficult, especially if you are an undergraduate student. Individuals in 'elite' positions have an overview of an industry, an organization or culture, or may have access to scarce information, such as consumer patterns and trends. However, usually they have little time to spare for research participation or, when they do agree to take part, they are often only interested in pursuing their own personal agenda in interviews. As a student or subordinate employee conducting research, you need to be patient in order to get access, and then diplomatic in how you phrase your questions when you get it.

It is possible that in online interviewing status issues may be less pronounced because of the visual anonymity. For example, our own anecdotal evidence suggests that cultural issues of power-distance often come into play in face-to-face encounters between people of different nationalities but these are less extreme in email or telephone interactions. Email, especially, appears to be a non-threatening mode of communication to those whose first language is not English. If your electronic communication is relaxed and friendly, status differentials will be less salient.

### *Trust*

Trust is built up through your involvement with and interest in your participants and because of your communication competencies. Having good interpersonal skills and being adept at social interaction is important. Relationship-building begins at the start of the research process, when you make initial contact. A concise, initial letter or email explaining your research project (in non-academic language) should be sent to potential participants, explaining the purpose and value of your project and the reason for making contact. You may wish to follow this with a telephone call.

**Helpful hint**

Work on building trust right from the start of your face-to-face or online interview. Begin by engaging in brief, casual conversation. This helps informants to feel relaxed with you. Perhaps say a little about your project. Ask if they've been interviewed in this way before, or perhaps have undertaken their own research project at some stage.

We have already discussed some non-verbal and active listening skills. These are important not only for encouraging responses, but also for helping participants to relate to you as an individual. In addition, you need to ensure that you are confident, non-judgemental and careful in your comments. These skills, together with the way you dress and your general mannerisms, tell participants something about your professionalism as a researcher. They serve to shape participants' judgements about your sincerity, your motivation and whether they will be able to trust you or will be damaged in some way by the material you collect from them (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008). Taking care with your appearance, so that you fit in to some extent with your participants, is a first step in helping them to relate to you.

### *Building trust in Internet-based research*

It could be argued that the Internet provides insufficient social cues to enable the 'human' element to be conveyed in interviews. However, increasingly researchers are discovering that meaningful relationships can indeed be developed online. For a start, without the visual or contextual cues existing in face-to-face communication online the balance of power between interviewer and interviewee is shifted to some extent. Rapport therefore can be created relatively easily (Gruber *et al.*, 2008). However, James and Busher (2006) point out that it is precisely because of the absence of conventional social signal systems that the balance of power in email exchanges continues to rest primarily with the originator, that is, the researcher. Although they themselves managed to build trusting relationships with informants in their asynchronous web-based research, trust was built on previously existing relationships. Researchers should be forced to think carefully, they suggest, about the problems of building collaborative conversations and trusting relationships 'with participants they cannot see and may never meet' (p. 417).

Because the nuances of voice, expression and gesture are not available in online interviewing, words or emoticons are used instead to convince your participants that you are not a 'faceless computer' in receipt of their confidences. Responses such as 'That's funny. You're quite a comedian' indicates that you are amused. 'Great, I appreciate your thoughts' is a quick way of saying more than just thanks.

When conducting cross-cultural research over the Internet, there is a greater likelihood of misunderstandings, which can undermine relationships. To overcome this, encourage your participants to feel free to ask for clarification or to negotiate the meanings of your questions. Your questioning might be along the lines of: 'If there is anything I say which you find odd, or if there is a question that makes you feel uncomfortable, please do let me know. That's the only way to help me learn or to prevent me making the same mistake again.' This approach flags up that you are sensitive to informants and are committed to developing the relationship.

A challenge, however, concerns the extent to which you, the researcher, are able to trust your informants, particularly those with whom you engage online. While your participants may be enthusiastic about taking part at the beginning of the interview, because you cannot see them you don't know if they have lost interest halfway through, have become distracted, got annoyed or turned cynical. These are all reasons why people might answer your questions instrumentally or untruthfully, or may just wander off and disappear from the online interview. Without visual social cues, there is also a risk that informants are not who they say they are, or that they are engaging in impression management. Conducting interviews online, therefore, involves a degree of persistence, trust and willingness to communicate openly on your part as well as that of your informants.

## Limitations and problems in interviewing

Problems in interviewing concern a possible gap between what informants say they do and what they actually do, the time-consuming nature of interviews and the interviewer effect.

### *The rhetoric of interviewing*

The increased use of interviewing as a method of data collection in the social sciences draws attention to what Atkinson and Silverman (1997) term 'the rhetoric of interviewing'. This, they argue, relates to the assumption that, through interviewing, researchers gain full access to the inner feelings and thoughts, and thus the private self, of their interviewees. Atkinson and Silverman question the 'overuse' of the interview and claim that it is often viewed naively or uncritically by researchers, who take the words of informants at face value and do not reflect or take an analytical stance. For example, some informants may fabricate or elaborate in order to enhance their self-esteem or cover up discreditable actions, and indeed at times you may discover discrepancies between what participants say and what they actually do.

For this reason, it is beneficial to validate the evidence you have obtained from interviews. This is done by discretely checking statements or issues with others involved in the same situations, by referring to documentary evidence and also by collecting data about social action and interaction from observation, although the latter may be prohibitive online unless you are studying virtual communities. Observation not only complements interviewing but is also a form of within-method triangulation (see Chapter 5 for more on triangulation and validity). The situation itself, therefore, also becomes a source of data.

### *Time consuming*

Although interviews offer the benefit of being very flexible, they are limited by their time-consuming and labour-intensive nature. This applies particularly to the data analysis stage. You might be very enthusiastic during the early data gathering process and only realize when you are involved in transcribing and analysing just how much time you need for the work. In Internet interviewing, the time commitment may be more onerous on the part of participants. It is easy to drop out of email conversations or real-time discussion groups if there are time constraints, or if interest or motivation levels ebb. For this reason, some researchers debate the value of online, in-depth interviews.

### *The interviewer effect*

The effect of the interviewer on the interview itself needs to be acknowledged. Sometimes informants react in particular ways to you as a researcher and modify their answers to please or to appear in a positive light, consciously or unconsciously. Spending time with participants so that trust develops is one means of minimizing this, although monitoring and reflecting on responses encourages you to be mindful of this issue.

### *'Hearing the data'*

Rubin and Rubin (2005) speak of the 'art of hearing data', while Kvale and Brinkman (2009) see interviewing as a craft, and indeed interviewing depends on both sensitive listening and analytic-interpretive skills. As a researcher, you will react to the words you hear in a face-to-face interview or read on the computer screen, and your responses will differ from those of your participants. This is because, within the framework of the research, you both have different priorities. This has to be recognized so that the perspectives of researchers and informants can be made explicit in the research report. A further issue is the possibility that you may misinterpret the words of participants. Nevertheless, if you spend long periods of time interviewing for a research project it is probable that you will come to a reasonable understanding of the viewpoints of various groups and individuals and therefore will be able to interpret your data sensitively.

### *Reflexivity*

Throughout the process of interviewing, the need for careful, ongoing reflection should not be underestimated; this is essential to enable you to gain insights on the meaning of the data you collect, and to better understand the dynamics of the interviewer–interviewee relationship in its particular context and its influence on the data. Being reflexive also refers to looking self-critically at your own assumptions and focus of enquiry because of their influence on the manner in which you carry out interviewing – as a 'conversation with a purpose' or as a pipeline for transmitting information.

## Summary

- Qualitative interviews are flexible, enabling you to examine the topic from your informants' point of view.
- Qualitative interviews are usually unstructured or semi-structured.
- Questions and issues emerge from the preceding answers, creating an evolving, but focused, conversation that does not conform to a rigid plan.

- There are a variety of types of open-ended questions, depending on your purpose.
- Face-to-face interviews are audio or video based and transcribed, or recorded by note taking during or after the interview. Text-based online interviews can be automatically archived or saved directly onto the computer.
- Building a relationship of trust and rapport with informants is essential to the success of your project.
- A critical, reflective stance should be taken towards evidence obtained from interviews because of issues such as the interviewer effect, the different agendas of researchers and participants, and the dynamics of relationships.

# 15 Focus groups

Focus group research can stand on its own as an approach to enquiry or may be used in combination with other methods. Because focus groups – both conventional and online – are a form of in-depth interviewing, the chapter should be read alongside Chapter 14, on interviewing. This chapter notes that:

- the purpose of focus groups is to concentrate on one or two clear issues or objects and discuss them in depth rather than investigate a great variety of matters in one study;
- questions, answers and opinions are produced by members of the group themselves, inspired by the dynamic of the group setting;
- Internet-based focus groups are effective only if participants have access to and are proficient with computer-mediated communications.

The chapter covers:

- the nature, origin and purpose of focus groups;
- how to make decisions about the composition and size of the sample;
- tips for conducting focus groups;
- specific issues concerning the facilitation of online groups;
- the role and involvement of the interviewer.

## Introduction

Focus group research generally helps public relations and marketing communications researchers to gain substantial insights into a variety of issues and strategies, from the macro (such as the influence of national cultures on public relations or strategic decision-making) to the very detailed (such as consumer responses to advertisements). The focus group approach does not rely merely on the ideas of the researcher and a single participant; instead, questions and answers are produced by members of the group themselves.

**Key point**

A focus group involves a *group* of people – often with common experiences or characteristics – who are interviewed by a researcher (who is known as a moderator or facilitator) for the purpose of eliciting ideas, thoughts and perceptions about a specific topic or certain issues linked to an area of interest. The ultimate goal in focus group interviewing is to see the topic (which may concern a service, product or issue) from the participants' point of view.

The key features of focus groups are:

- they provide evidence from many voices on the same topic;
- they are interactive and dynamic;
- they allow participants to socially construct their views, which in turn can result in attitude change;
- they provide a supportive forum for expressing suppressed views;
- they allow you to collect a large amount of data fairly quickly;
- they are often used in conjunction with other methods, including those which are quantitative.

One reason for choosing to use the focus group method is because it provides you with evidence from a range of different voices on the same subject. Focus groups create settings in which diverse perspectives and experiences on a particular topic can surface. They allow you to see how people interact when they are considering a topic and how they react when disagreeing with each other. Focus groups have special value if you are interested in identifying particular attitudes and behaviours, such as consumer responses to advertisements or brands, or if you want to examine the meanings and experiences of people in relation to an event, an issue, media content or a particular topic. The method can help you find out how several people work out a common view, or a range of views, about a topic and *why* they feel or think the way they do.

Another benefit of focus groups is their interactive nature. When participants hear about the experiences of other members of the group, they will often argue with one another or challenge the views of others. They also expand on and refine their own ideas and perceptions of the topic after hearing what others have to say. Each person's comments, therefore, encourage further responses from other participants and thus opinions may be elicited or worked up through the group interactions. Drawing on the ideas of Davis (1997) and Moisander and Valtonen (2006), we suggest that group interaction does the following:

- stimulates thoughts in other respondents within the group;
- causes participants to take account of a range of different views within the group, some of which challenge their own;
- encourages greater depth of discussion;

- reminds individuals of things they may have forgotten;
- helps other participants to better verbalize and develop their thoughts and opinions;
- encourages a shift in participants' attitudes.

Focus group research is ideal for providing access to participants who are traditionally suspicious of research and for bringing to the surface meanings and emotions that might not be articulated elsewhere. The group setting contributes to the building of trustful relationships between participants and researcher and also provides a supportive forum for the expression of opinions that might not be disclosed even in private. This is particularly notable in research conducted over the Internet; computer-mediated communications seem to have the potential to engender a heightened permissive environment where it is not uncommon for complete strangers to candidly discuss personal views and attitudes (Mann and Stewart, 2000). It appears that people like the safety and anonymity that are offered by the computer screen.

Focus group discussions allow you to collect a large amount of data in a relatively short space of time. They are quicker and cheaper to conduct than individual interviews with the same number of participants. By bringing together between six and 10 people for a specific period, you benefit from a range of insights which can be transcribed and analysed more quickly than if you were conducting a number of one-to-one interviews. These advantages apply equally to online group research. In addition, online groups can be put together more quickly and easily than face-to-face focus groups because it is possible to recruit, confirm and conduct within the space of only a few days. They also have the potential for quicker analysis because group discussions can be immediately recorded in a document and printed out, producing an instant transcript, or loaded directly into a content analysis program (Gaddis, 2001).

Although focus groups are not an appropriate method for use within phenomenology and grounded theory approaches (except the latter in exceptional circumstances), in many cases they can be deployed in a mixed methods strategy alongside other research techniques, including quantitative methods. For example, they are capable of generating findings that are then applied to the construction of a questionnaire. They also have the potential to obtain in-depth data at the end of a survey. Whether focus groups are used alone or together with other methods, the evidence gained is normally analysed by qualitative methods.

**Example 15.1: Assessing the perceptions of Singaporeans in research that is both qualitative and quantitative**

Through an examination of the communication behaviours of citizens in relation to customer service, three researchers in Singapore aimed to assess whether the situational theory of public relations could be applied to the cultural setting of that country. The methods selected were focus groups and a quantitative survey.

Participants in groups based on demographic criteria discussed their retail shopping experiences, including how they responded when they received either good or bad customer service. The focus groups provided deep insights into the cultural norms of participants, allowing the researchers 'to gather rich data pertaining to the cultural idiosyncrasies among the participants and the role these played in their communication behaviours' (Sriramesh *et al.*, 2007: 315). The survey helped to differentiate the various types of publics based on how they responded to the problem of poor customer service.

The two forms of evidence (both qualitative and quantitative) were found to support each other. For example, while the survey indicated that 52 per cent of people found it too bothersome to complain about poor service, the focus groups revealed that this was because of scepticism about the seriousness with which organizations dealt with complaints.

## The origin and purpose of focus groups

In the past, focus group techniques have been used extensively for business and market research, but they are now well established within the social sciences. Focus groups have been employed as a method of research since the 1920s when marketers realized that listening to and acting on the ideas of customers and clients not only helped to improve products but also stimulated sales. Despite this early enthusiasm, the first book on this type of in-depth interviewing did not appear until 1946. This was written by Merton and his colleagues and was based on their investigations into war propaganda effects during and shortly after World War II. Today, both traditional and online focus group interviews are used widely by researchers working in the area of communications (such as public relations evaluation), policy, political communications, organizational research, marketing and advertising.

Some applications of the focus group method include:

- examining behaviour and attitudes;
- exploring strategic policies and strategies;
- developing and understanding relationships with brands, products and services;
- investigating corporate and industry issues;
- investigating social, political and environment issues;
- testing advertising messages or concepts;
- auditing and evaluating corporate communications.

## Sample composition and size

There are five stages in focus group research: planning, recruiting, moderating, analysing and reporting (Morgan, 1998). In this section, we deal with recruiting and moderating, noting how planning takes place not only at the start of research but also as you go along. Analysing qualitative data and writing the research report are discussed in Chapters 18 and 19.

### *Recruiting*

When recruiting participants for focus groups, the type of sampling you use is purposeful (see Chapter 13). This means that your choice of participants is based on well-defined criteria which are determined by the aims of the research. For example, through her research Pompper (2007) sought to 'illuminate experiences of a neglected group of women in the workplace' (p. 296), namely Latina public relations practitioners. Therefore, she selected participants for her focus groups who were female, Latina public relations practitioners.

#### *Composing focus groups*

Depending on your aims, your first decision will be to select either pre-constituted or researcher-constituted groups.

**Key point**

Pre-constituted focus groups are social or professional groups that already exist (for example individual members of an environmental activist group). Researcher-constituted groups are those that you create for your own research purposes.

*Pre-constituted groups* may consist of colleagues who share the same speciality (such as the board directors of a consultancy), or members of a particular department or project team (such as everyone working on a client team), or they may be members of the same social club or association (such as women members of the Public Relations Institute of Australia). The advantage of choosing pre-constituted groups is that they are more natural, and therefore participants may be comfortable in each other's company. On the other hand, a group of immediate colleagues or friends may be hesitant about revealing sensitive ideas or private thoughts in front of others with whom they have a continuing relationship. Another problem with pre-constituted groups is that their past history may inhibit or bias them in a particular direction.

*Researcher-constituted groups* allow you greater control over the individual composition of the sample (Deacon *et al.*, 2007: 58) but the members will not know each other and therefore group interaction may take some time to 'warm up'. On the other hand, if your focus group interviews are taking place online and you have recruited from a pre-existing chat room, conference group or listserv (an advanced form of electronic bulletin board), participants may not know each other but will be familiar already with computer-mediated communications and 'virtual' relationships.

Once you have decided whether you are going to select pre-constituted or researcher-constituted groups, your next choice is between *homogeneous* (similar) or *heterogeneous* (dissimilar) groups, although sometimes group selection combines both characteristics. Homogeneous groups are the most common and are characterized by people with similar interests or experiences, positions or roles, ages or gender, etc. Shared characteristics are likely to contribute to an immediate feeling of rapport, especially when the similarity is gender based. The natural rapport that occurs in same-sex groups can motivate individuals to contribute enthusiastically to group discussions (Finch, 1993).

Heterogeneous groups consist of individuals with different social, cultural, political and economic characteristics. Gender, age and status are major factors which affect the quality and level of interaction in groups, and through this the data (Stewart *et al.*, 2007). In mixed-gender groups, both genders have a tendency to 'perform' for each other, and therefore there can sometimes be unhelpful or biasing interplay between the different types of participant (Evans *et al.*, 2000). In online research, these issues are less likely to occur because participants are disembodied (except when webcams and video conferencing are being used), with few or no visual pointers to reveal class, gender, age, ethnic origin and status. Therefore mixing participants in heterogeneous groups for Internet-based research is more common than in face-to-face interviewing (Gaddis, 2001).

A problem in sampling for online research is that you can never be sure that your participants are who they say they are. However, if you recruit from a website or listserv that is associated with your research topic, then it is likely that your participants will share an interest in and knowledge of the area. Also, if you carry out email conversations with participants prior to the focus group taking place it is probable that you will have a good sense of the authenticity of participants. (See Example 15.2.)

**Example 15.2: A pre-constituted, homogeneous group**

Henrietta O'Connor and Clare Madge examined how and why one particular consumer interest group – new parents – made use of parenting websites. They carried out a real-time, virtual focus group with members of an online community, all regular users of the UK website for new parents www.babyworld.co.uk. While computer-mediated communication carries the danger that participants may disguise their real identities, O'Connor and Madge carried out extensive email conversations with potential interviewees prior to conducting the focus group. In this way, they felt certain they could ascertain that they were who they said they were, i.e. all new parents who interacted with the Babyworld website (O'Connor and Madge, 2003). (See also Example 15.4.)

### *Size*

The purpose of focus groups influences not only their composition but also their size. If you have a topic that is controversial or complex, a small group will enable you to deal more sensitively with it. On the other hand, a less intense topic area can be dealt with more effectively in a larger group where there is a wider range of opinion but a lower level of involvement by participants. Between six and 10 participants is the norm for traditional focus groups, although sometimes groups may consist of as few as three members.

At the top end of the range, the larger the group the more noisy it becomes, making it difficult to distinguish voices when you come to transcribe the interview. On the other hand, if there are only a few participants group dynamics do not work as well. In our experience, six members is about right for most research purposes associated with traditional focus groups; it is a large enough number to provide a variety of perspectives but small enough not to become disorderly or fragmented. However, when you are recruiting people for focus groups, it is worth slightly over-recruiting just in case some don't turn up.

In online group interviews, the size will depend on the time sequence you have chosen. Focus groups conducted in real time can mirror some of the issues of traditional group interviewing, such as too many participants, and some voices will be 'drowned out'. That is, some members will be denied the space to respond because others' enthusiasm or fast keyboard skills allow them to get in first and frequently (Mann and Stewart, 2000). This makes your moderating role more difficult in terms of how you structure and control the dialogue. In addition, if there are too many members there will be too many 'threads' or strands of conversation for you to follow and moderate. Therefore, six to eight participants is a reasonable number for focus groups conducted in real time.

However, size is less important in non-real-time research because participants contribute at times to suit themselves. This means that participant numbers can be large; for example, we have conducted asynchronous group interviews with up to 30 people. The problems, however, are that not all participants feel involved enough to contribute, some may be disinclined to self-disclosure and also the discussion can become very disjointed (Mann and Stewart, 2000). The ideal number, therefore, will depend on the nature and aims of your research.

**Example 15.3: How many focus groups to carry out**

The number of focus groups used to collect data for a research project depends on the research aims and the demands of the phenomenon under investigation. For one research project the usual number is about three or four, but the actual number depends on the complexity of the research topic. For example:

- *Topic of study*: the career paths of public relations practitioners in innovative environments.

- *Methods*: two focus groups, each comprising from five to ten communication practitioners from different types of organizations. Also individual interviews.

(Hughes and Porter, 2007)

- *Topic of study*: public relations ethics and the role of the public relations function as 'corporate conscience'.
- *Methods*: four focus groups, each with eight to twelve PR managers and executives. Also individual interviews.

(Bowen, 2008)

- *Topic of study*: citizens' perceptions of fairness and legitimacy in political advertising.
- *Methods*: seven two-hour focus groups with six to twelve American citizens. Also a survey.

(Stevens *et al.*, 2008)

- *Topic of study*: change communication, culture and identification in corporate acquisition.
- *Methods:* twelve 90-minute focus groups with three to eleven employees and managers. Also individual interviews.

(Pepper and Larson, 2006)

### *Conducting focus group interviews*

Plan your focus group interviews carefully. Start by contacting participants well in advance of the interviews and then follow this up nearer the time with a reminder of the venue and timings.

In online focus group research, time is an important factor. Interviewing takes place in real time (synchronously) or non-real time (asynchronously) or a combination of both. Each type generates different data.

*Real-time focus groups* require participants to be online at the same time and to make their contributions simultaneously. Individuals and respondents post their messages to the group so that everyone sees them on a single screen at the same time. Alternatively, they use online video conferencing. Chatting in this way is often very fast paced, with less depth or reflection in the responses than in asynchronous discussions. Also, because you take a highly involved moderating role, the direction of discussion is likely to be more focused.

*Non-real-time focus groups* do not require participants to be available at any particular time. Instead, people can enter and leave whenever they wish. This can be done by using email or accessing listserv and conference sites. Because there is no pressure to respond immediately to questions, asynchronous interviewing is valuable when you are seeking detailed and highly reflective comments (Mann and Stewart, 2000). However, a danger is that it is possible for participants to refer questions to friends, or seek information elsewhere, presenting the answers back into the focus group as their own opinion.

Your role as a moderator of an asynchronous group is more passive than in synchronous interviewing, although you still need to offer encouraging and motivating comments. You are less interventionist because it is impossible for you to be logged on and available every moment of each day that the research takes place.

In *time-extended focus groups* questions are posted and responded to privately or publicly in a threaded message style or in a wiki community writing format. Everyone can see both the questions and the answers and even simultaneously respond with their impressions, experiences, answers and additional questions. The notion of extended time relates to the ability to leave the sessions online for prolonged periods, during which time participants can add to, modify or comment on their own or others' postings (Berg, 2009: 183–84).

*The length of sessions* for focus group interviews varies but is usually about two hours for a traditional focus group. This allows you time for introductions and building rapport before you begin the main questioning. If you decide to offer refreshments, this will extend the session. If you are interviewing online, aim for no longer than 90 minutes. This period ensures that participants' interest does not flag but remains strong enough to provide high quality responses. It also helps you maintain your own concentration; any longer and fatigue can set in because of the high demands placed on the moderating role.

### *Choosing the right environment*

The environment for online and traditional focus groups is important. A neutral site is a good venue; obviously, this needs to be comfortable and, if possible, familiar. If, however, this site is in a public arena there may be distractions such as noise or other disturbances. For example, a hotel conference room might constitute a neutral space but, depending on the topic, it may be seen as too formal and alien for some participants to feel relaxed enough to express their opinions openly.

Arguably, the 'site' of online discussion groups is a neutral space because participants are unlikely to be aware of the physical location of other group members. In addition, it is probable that they are seated in front of their work or home computers, in an environment to which they are already accustomed. This neutral space, therefore, helps to minimize feelings of bias or alienation. However, a downside is the potential for distraction, whereby interviewees may not be fully engaged with the online discussion if they are dealing with interruptions of which the moderator may not be aware.

In selecting rooms for conducting traditional focus groups, ensure that they are big enough to seat all participants comfortably; a spatial arrangement of a circle or semi-circle is usually the most successful seating arrangement. Place your voice recorder in a position where it will pick up everyone's discussion. For focus group work, it is essential to have a top quality recorder which is able to record people sitting at different distances and speaking in different volumes from a variety of positions in relation to the microphone. Note that, as well as recording your interviews, it is also usual to make fieldnotes on anything unusual, interesting or contradictory. This helps to jog your memory when you are listening to the tapes and reading the transcripts. In online research, participants' contributions are automatically recorded *verbatim* and can be printed off as an accurate transcript.

**Key point**

The stages in a focus group interview include:

1. Introductory remarks and ground rules.
2. 'Warm-up' stage.
3. Outline of the context for the discussion.
4. Main discussion:
   - general questions;
   - more focused questions.
5. Summing up.

*The discussion guide*

Focus groups have been described as being more akin to brainstorming than structured group discussions because of their spontaneous, interactive nature. Nevertheless, successful group interviews are not totally spontaneous but work to a clearly identified agenda, or discussion guide. This prevents them from deteriorating into chaotic or ambiguous discussions and helps them run to time. The discussion guide serves as a checklist which makes certain that all salient topics are covered and in the proper sequence.

When conducting online discussion groups, it is usual to give out the discussion guide in the first few minutes of the session because this ensures that you use the time well for synchronous interviewing. Of course, you need to make it clear that participants are at liberty to contribute their own topics and questions as well (Mann and Stewart, 2000).

*The procedure*

From the beginning, it is important to establish the ground rules so that all group members know how to proceed. This begins at recruitment and continues into the interview itself. Commence the discussion session (whether it is face-to-face or online) by introducing the topic, outlining the objectives of the session and pointing out what is expected of participants. You can do this in online interviewing by posting an initial welcome message on the conference site. If participants have not met you, include something about yourself, perhaps with a photo; remember that at this stage they may not even know whether you are male or female.

It is helpful to clarify to everyone that there are no correct answers; what individual participants think and feel is what you are interested in finding out about. This signals that you are keen to establish a non-judgemental environment where self-disclosure and uninhibited discussion are permitted.

### *Rapport*

Putting the group at ease right from the start is an important skill, especially if none of them have met before. However, if the group is already established, participants will be familiar with each other and the 'warm-up' time will be shorter. This allows you to focus more quickly on the main topic. On the other hand, if participants are meeting for the first time in the interview session or at the online conference site, you will need to spend some time establishing rapport within the group in order that interaction will be facilitated. O'Connor and Madge (2003) ensured that when the participants in their online focus groups arrived at the virtual meeting place they were already familiar with the group moderators because they had spent some time exchanging emails and chatting online while trying to set up the focus groups. Once the online interviews started, they invited everyone to introduce themselves and share personal information in order to establish common ground and therefore rapport.

### *Stimulus material*

Strategies such as showing an advertisement or telling a story related to the topic help to stimulate interaction. The introduction of other stimulus material such as vignettes, photographs, mock-up publications, advertisement executions on boards or actual products is also useful (note the section on 'Projective and elicitation techniques' in Chapter 17). Many of the same stimuli can be used for online discussions as well as face-to-face interviews. In online researching, participants can be directed to websites in order to view graphics, images or background information. However, a problem with online stimuli is that often the full impact may be lost because of the two-dimensional environment of the computer (Greenbaum, 2000). One way around this is to mail samples or tangible items to participants for discussion online at a later date (Gaddis, 2001).

**Example 15.4: Conducting an online focus group**

With reference to Example 15.2, marketing researchers Henrietta O'Connor and Clare Madge began their investigation with a web-based survey and then, after recruiting participants who were all members of a virtual community, they conducted Internet-based focus groups. They explained the procedure as follows:

> We sent each interviewee the [conferencing] software and a set of guidelines on installation and use. If problems arose, e-mail or telephone advice was dispatched. The interviewees were then e-mailed a list of possible dates and times for interview and we set up a series of four group interviews with between two and four respondents at different times of day and week to suit both the participants and researchers . . . We allowed one hour for the interview but asked the interviewees to be online a few minutes early to ensure that everyone was successfully connected. Each interview began with a welcome message and introductions of those 'present'. We went on to introduce ourselves and provide guidelines about the interview, explaining the format of the questions and highlighting potential technological difficulties. We then went on to begin with a general question which, like the following eight questions, was linked to the themes raised in the original survey. At the end of each interview we thanked the participants, invited them to request a copy of the transcript, and explained the publication process to them.
>
> (O'Connor and Madge, 2003: 136)

## Questioning

When asking questions in traditional focus groups, researchers generally proceed from the more general to the specific, just as in other qualitative interviews. For example, you might begin by eliciting general knowledge about a specific product in order to put members at ease, and then go on to a deeper discussion of group members' thoughts or feelings about the product.

Online questioning, however, differs in that questions are usually predetermined and follow a set sequence. The reason for this is that 'the high interactivity of real-time focus groups introduces the risk that the data will be superficial' (Mann and Stewart, 2000: 122). Chatting online encourages brief, non-reflective responses which may take the discussion along a different route to that which you had intended. Therefore it is worth preparing specific questions in advance in order to ensure that you gain data that are sufficiently rich and focused. Remember that, as in face-to-face interviews, you may have to depart from your prepared text in order to probe for clarification and follow up certain points.

Involving all participants rather than letting a few individuals dominate the situation demands that you draw on all your skills in diplomacy. This is easier if you are working with a smaller group. A good moderator will not be abrupt with dominant individuals or this will send the wrong message to other group members, making them either hesitant to speak out in case they are 'reprimanded' or liable to say anything in order to avoid being attacked. Instead, when you are in the moderating role, you might encourage others to speak (or write online) by saying, 'Let's hear from someone else now' or 'It would be interesting to know if anyone has other views on this.' In face-to-face encounters, you might also avoid making eye contact with dominant individuals, looking instead at others whom you wish to hear from. Another way around this if you are researching online synchronously is to send a private message to a particular group member, asking them to 'speak up' or present their opinion. This conversation is read only by the recipient, not by other members of the group.

**Example 15.5: Asking questions in focus groups**

In an investigation into how employees and managers made sense of a recent corporate acquisition and the associated internal change communications, Pepper and Larson asked questions about the following:

- people's thoughts about the organizational culture;
- the differences between cultures in business units and work sites;
- how communication was managed during the acquisition;
- key lessons learned about good and bad communication within the company.

(Pepper and Larson, 2006: 70)

If you encounter extreme views within a group, these are usually balanced out eventually by the reactions of the majority, although problems can occur if a dominant individual hijacks the discussion and leads the group off in another direction. There is a very real danger of this occurring in asynchronous online research because by the time you enter the discussion the topic may have moved on into areas which are tangential to your research. International participants, for instance, may have been contributing for up to 12 hours while you were sleeping and unable to moderate the conversations. This highlights the need for you to regularly monitor the group discussions.

Conflicts within groups can sometimes be illuminating because they highlight contrasting stances towards a topic. However, although effective moderators explore conflict by trying to discover the reasons why participants hold dissenting views, you also need to ensure that any personal hostility between members is diffused. To find out more about interviewing techniques, both online and face to face, turn back to Chapter 14. Note especially the sections on questioning and probing.

## Ethical issues

In focus groups, as in all other research, ethical issues such as confidentiality, anonymity and impartiality must be considered (see Chapter 4). Confidentiality can be problematic in group interviews if members of the group discuss the findings in other settings and situations. Remind participants to keep their group discussions confidential. Anonymity cannot be guaranteed in traditional focus group research as members of the group may be able to identify other participants even if you only use first names in your written report. A further issue concerns the need for you to be impartial and fair in your moderation of group discussions. If some participants make remarks that are hurtful to others, or show prejudice, you have to find ways to deal with this.

## Interviewer involvement

As a researcher, you are the facilitator or moderator in group interviews. Generally a single researcher facilitates groups, but two moderators are advantageous if group discussions are very fast paced or complex. Sometimes moderators split the roles so that one person maintains the discussion while the other thinks ahead to new topics, introducing them at an appropriate moment. On the other hand, each moderator may take the lead for different topics, although when two moderators work together it is essential that each is familiar with the other's interviewing style.

The qualities of an effective moderator are the same as those of an in-depth interviewer: flexibility, open-mindedness, skills in eliciting information, and the ability to both listen and interpret. In addition, because you take on a leadership role when moderating, you must have excellent social and refereeing skills. These allow you, first, to guide participants towards effective interaction. Then they enable you to focus and control the discussion without coercing participants or directing the debate in any way. This skill is emphasized when moderating online discussions because it is easier for participants to lose attention when they are not making direct eye contact.

The creation of an open and non-threatening group climate is one of your most important initial tasks whether you are moderating traditional or online groups. You must be able to stimulate discussion and have insight into and interest in the ideas of participants. If the group feels at ease with you, the interaction will be open and productive, and participants will be comfortable about disclosing their perceptions and feelings about the research topic. However, one of the difficulties of Internet-based research is that you are unable to sense the nature of the atmosphere of the group dynamics in the same way as you would in traditional focus group interviewing.

If the discussion is wandering or if time is limited, it may be necessary for you to get more involved as an interviewer. This tactic leads the discussion more quickly to the core of the topic.

### Helpful hint

If you want to examine the real feelings of participants, hold back on questioning. Ideally, much of the discussion will then evolve spontaneously from the dynamics of group interaction. Participants will build on each other's comments and, through the group interaction, remember forgotten feelings and thoughts. In this way new ideas evolve which you may not have thought about before. Even vulnerable informants can be supported by the voices of others (Morgan, 1997).

## Limitations and problems in focus group research

Although there are clear benefits to undertaking focus group research, there are also limitations and some problems. These mostly stem from the effects of group interaction. Indeed, it is probable that you will have greater difficulty managing the group debate and less control over the outcome than if you were conducting one-to-one interviews.

First, one or two individuals within a group may dominate the discussion, introducing bias or influencing the direction if other members are compliant.

In a similar way, group pressures can distort the expression of individual opinions. Some participants may be reluctant to express extreme opinions if they feel this will deviate from group expectations or if they are afraid that they will be ostracized by the group. The result is that participants may relinquish their critical stance towards the views of other members and there may be conformity in thinking or convergent answers (Carey and Smith, 1994). In group interviewing, therefore, participants affect each other. However, a key reason why researchers choose focus groups is precisely because the social dynamics of the group are an important part of the research interest and are not usually seen as a problem. This is because interactions between participants illuminate taken-for-granted ways of talking about the subject as well as the way certain aspects of it are silenced (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006).

The whole atmosphere of face-to-face group discussions may seem very contrived to some participants. The impersonal climate of some settings makes natural, honest conversation unlikely in some cases. For this reason, it is important to ensure that you have selected a suitable room and layout for your interview sessions where participants will feel comfortable. However, researchers who study public relations and marketing communications from a cultural frame consider that although individuals taking part in focus groups may be divorced from their natural cultural setting, this does not mean that their conversations are 'unnatural' or distorted. Instead, cultural researchers place great value on studying how different statements are produced in different contexts (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006).

The moderator's style may contribute to bias. Although researchers endeavour not to express their biases in focus group research, sometimes it is difficult to avoid this. A special relationship with a specific individual, an affirmative nod at something of which you approve, or a lack of encouragement for unexpected or unwelcome answers may bias the interviews. In addition, an aggressive, confrontational style may lead participants to say whatever they think you want to hear in order to avoid attack. Or, if you take the style of 'playing dumb', participants may withdraw because they think you are being manipulative or dishonest. Therefore, your style, gestures and facial expressions have to be controlled in order to show members of the group that you are non-judgemental and that you value the views of all participants.

If the group consists of members who are unable to verbalize their feelings and thoughts, you will have difficulty encouraging group interaction and also generating good data. One of the reasons why certain individuals feel inhibited about making contributions to group discussions may be because members have disparate educational backgrounds. Merton and King (1990) stress the importance of the educational homogeneity of groups, because when educational status differs considerably some members are afraid to speak out and may even be silenced. Similar educational background (and sometimes social backgrounds also) is a factor that needs to be taken into account when determining the composition of groups. To some extent, this is overcome in online researching because, as long as participants are able to express themselves via the keyboard, status differentials may not be recognized.

It is not uncommon for confrontation and conflict to occur in group interviews. While confrontation can lead to stimulating and lively debates, and conflict can provide rich data, they also may be destructive. In Internet interviews, conflict may be expressed through ‘flaming’, which includes personal abuse, hectoring or bad language. Not only does this affect rapport within the whole group, but some participants may subsequently absent themselves from the online discussions. Unless you are experienced as a moderator, with a sensitivity to group feelings, it is unlikely that you will be able to diffuse the tension constructively, whether you are facilitating face-to-face or online discussions.

Although it is fairly easy to set up appointments for individual interviews if you are conducting one-to-one interviews, if you are coordinating individuals for group interviews it is more difficult. Not everyone who has been invited will attend, but you will still have to go ahead with your discussion even if only a few have turned up.

Transcription can be much more difficult in traditional group interviewing because people’s voices vary and the distance they sit from the microphone influences the clarity of their contributions. For this reason, it is a good idea to take fieldnotes either during or immediately after each session.

Further problems which relate specifically to online focus group research include, first, the difficulty of knowing whether participants are who they say they are. It is not really possible to establish who is behind the computer screen and whether or not someone else has been substituted for them.

In some cases, it is difficult to create group dynamics via computer-mediated communications because participants are reading from computer screens rather than interacting verbally and non-verbally. Video conferencing offers a way to overcome this problem. Online focus groups lack the in-depth emotional information (Heckman, 2000) and group constructed atmosphere obtained from body language, tone of voice and group interactions. The use of emoticons goes some way to overcoming the problem (such as the ‘happy face’, ‘:-)’, or the use of capital letters to indicate frustration or shouting). These, however, must be artificially introduced by participants rather than emerging naturally in conversation.

The involvement of multiple participants in online focus groups can lead to discussions which are disparate in their focus; sometimes many conversational threads make it difficult for participants to follow the discussion. Subsequently discussions can be superficial in their content, as trains of thought are lost, or key input is overlooked because participants are focusing on keying in their own comments, or because the conversation is moving too quickly (Mann and Stewart, 2000; Gaddis, 2001).

Internet-based focus groups will only be effective if participants have access to and are comfortable with the technology. If you want to garner comments that have been made freely and clearly, then you will need to take care to select people who are proficient at contributing and interacting in an electronic forum.

Finally, in traditional focus groups participants are unable to do anything that will detract them from the proceedings because they are closeted in the interview room for the duration of the session. In a real-time, online environment, however, you are never able to know if participants are engaged in other activities which may affect their concentration, such as watching television, reading a book or eating dinner while the session is happening (Greenbaum, 2000). This may or may not be problematic, depending on the aims of your research.

## Summary

- In focus group research, several small groups of people are interviewed by one or two moderators in order to explore participants' points of view, thoughts and feelings towards a certain topic or issue.
- The role of the facilitator is to encourage interaction between group members and ensure the discussion stays focused.
- Stimulus materials or projective techniques are commonly introduced to encourage debate.
- Different types of group include pre-constituted or researcher-constituted, heterogeneous or homogeneous. Different issues confront each type of group.
- Time is an important factor in Internet-based research. Focus groups can take place in real time or non-real time, or in a time-extended mode.
- The strengths of focus groups also contribute to their limitations, especially in relation to their interactive nature, the multiple voices involved and the subsequent group effects.

# 16 Observation

Observation is a strategy in qualitative research that helps researchers to become familiar with an online or conventional setting by systematically and ethically recording what they see and hear 'in the field'. It can be used as a qualitative method in its own right, or as a way of collecting data in ethnographic, grounded theory, action research approaches and in case studies. The chapter discusses:

- the nature of observation in qualitative research;
- different types of observation, including Internet based;
- the different dimensions of the setting which help to focus the research;
- how to collect the data and raise appropriate questions about what is being observed;
- the importance of keeping fieldnotes and a field diary;
- specific issues related to observation of online activities.

## Introduction

As a method for conducting research in public relations and marketing communications, observation is infrequently acknowledged. Yet the process of observing in order to acquire information pervades most everyday activities and is an intrinsic part of other methods of research. Whether you are conducting interviews or running focus groups face to face or via the Internet, you unconsciously take note of your research surroundings and the way people behave within them, using this knowledge to help you make sense of the data you collect. If you consciously select to use observation as a formal research method, recording what you see and hear becomes an essential part of the process of observing, and should start from the earliest possible moment (Waddington, 2004).

### Key point

Observation entails the systematic noting and recording of events, artefacts and behaviours of informants as they occur in specific situations rather than as they are later remembered, recounted and generalized by participants themselves.

With the exception of research into consumer behaviour, observation appears to hold a marginal status in public relations and marketing communication because it is rarely cited as a research method in published accounts. Yet, used systematically to supplement other research methods or as the primary research technique in a study (such as in ethnography or within a case study design), observation provides an important means of accessing and understanding the ways in which people act and communicatively interact. This applies not only in real settings but also to the electronic interactions which go on between individuals participating in web-based social contact or information seeking and sending behaviours (Lee and Broderick, 2007).

Classic early observation studies as well as contemporary explorations (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) indicate that observation should be complemented with interviewing; researchers first observe and then question participants about what puzzles them in the setting. Observation of human action provides you with data about the behaviours of people as well as social processes as they are enacted within the realms of the social reality of participants. Observation enables you to identify the conscious as well as the taken-for-granted actions that participants rarely articulate despite participating in them. These insights can then be discussed and extended through follow-up interviews.

For example, imagine questioning students about how they socialize while on the university campus. Probably they would tell you about the friends they meet for coffee between lectures, where they go for lunch and what they eat and drink. They might talk about their regular Friday evenings in the university bar, and perhaps some of the campus musical events they've attended. However, if you were to shadow them over the course of a week, you would be likely to observe how they texted each other after or during lectures, arranging where to meet. Possibly, you would note how group study sessions in the library involved both intellectual and social exchanges. You'd watch as students bumped into each other while crossing between lecture theatres, and made plans to catch up later, say during a training session in the gym. And, of course, during the course of the day you'd overhear how friends socially interact via mobile telephony, chatting with each other about their past, present and future social activities.

Observation used in this way provides a technique for distinguishing between what people say they do and what they actually do, and investigating any contradictions between the two. The gap between claimed and actual behaviour may be due to a number of reasons. Participants may be unaware or not conscious of their actions, perhaps because the actions are so habitual. Alternatively, they may want to look good in the eyes of the researcher who is asking them questions. Such socially desirable responding may arise if you are doing research on sensitive topics, or where participants do not want to expose their harmful or wrong behaviours (Rundle-Thiele, 2009), or where there is strong public opinion associated with the topic.

**Example 16.1: How observation reveals differences between what is said and what is done**

When auditing organizational culture and internal communications in a British manufacturing company, Donna McAleese, Owen Hargie and Dennis Tourish noted that the annual report articulated corporate values related to social responsibility: the company wanted to 'make a difference' through its dedication to employees, the community and the environment. However, the researchers' observations and interviews with staff led them to conclude that the company did not live up to its promises. Staff stated:

> Oh, yes, management say that they listen and maintain that they want to hear our views and opinions, but when it comes down to it, they don't give a damn.
>
> (McAleese *et al.*, 2009: 335)

The researchers' observations showed a discrepancy between what the company espoused and what it actually did.

Observational studies, particularly participant observation, offer a holistic perspective and graphic description of social life. When you actively participate in a setting for some time – such as when you work in an organization, engage long term in an online discussion forum or become part of a virtual society such as Second Life – eventually you no longer will be considered a 'spectator' by members. By closely engaging with the setting, you find that people become used to you and continue to go about their business in their accustomed ways. This enables you to note their unexpressed intentions and expectations, the significance of events affecting social relations and the multiplicity of participants' experiences. Critical incidents, dramatic events and language use, such as the choice of words, can be investigated, along with the exits and entrances of members of the group you are studying and their communicative interactions.

Strategies involved in observing and participating in qualitative research include:

- a prolonged engagement in the setting;
- use of native language and conversation as data, and also included in the written analysis;
- participating in everyday as well as non-routine activities;
- observations which are informal as well as formal;
- the recording of fieldnotes.

(modified from DeWalt and DeWalt, 2002: 4)

We discuss these further through the rest of the chapter.

As a research method, observation has great potential in longitudinal studies such as those which examine social processes and change. A strength of observation is that it can be less disruptive and more unobtrusive than other methods. Therefore, you are less likely to influence the data you are collecting. However, it is rare for a study to be conducted by observation methods alone. Usually researchers observe the situation and then question participants, as illustrated in Examples 16.5 and 16.6.

To some extent, the characteristics of observational research differ when it is carried out via the Internet because what you see and read on the screen is the research setting where all the interactions and relationships occur. When observing online, you can't physically see a research participant's reactions or the context in which they live or work to help you understand, for example, if they are making a joke or being sarcastic. This makes your observations 'culturally neutral' because there are no surrounding cultural signals to give you clues about the phenomena you are watching. In addition, all your data come from the perspectives of participants rather than your own direct perceptions. Not only do you need, therefore, to be highly sensitive to the norms of online communication in order to understand the online world, but you also need to be skilled in 'reading' the nuances of electronic texts and images.

## The centrality of participation in observation processes

The issue of participation has been the subject of much discussion by qualitative researchers who have arrived at a variety of stances with regard to the degree to which a researcher participates in or engages with the setting. This is particularly pertinent to online research, where the presence and identity of the researcher may be concealed if they have chosen to observe without engagement the interactions that take place on a bulletin board, chat room or blog, for example. According to the classic text by Gold (1958), this means being a 'complete observer', where you are like a 'fly on the wall', having no interaction with the online community, which is unaware of your presence.

While observation of this nature reveals patterns of activity which tell you much about the everyday encounters of people with each other, with brand usage or with cultural artefacts and institutions, the technique owes much to principles that are fundamental to quantitative research. These concern the need for observers to be detached in order to maintain objectivity and not to impact the setting by their presence. Indeed, this is the reason why Langer and Beckman (2005) consider that the technique of distanced observation should be the norm for all online research.

However, as we have discussed elsewhere, qualitative researchers generally object to the idea of playing the role of an outsider looking in. Instead they seek to be an insider taking part and immersing themselves in the world of participants. This role allows them to lessen the status and activity differences between themselves and the people at the research scene, enabling them to achieve a greater understanding. Countering the stance of Langer and Beckman, Kozinets (2006) writes that when researchers are 'careful and considerate' there is little chance of disrupting online communities by active involvement; instead, there are valuable insights to be gained from both observing and participating.

**Key point**
Qualitative researchers who observe both conventional and Internet settings endeavour to participate actively in the contexts they study. For this reason, in qualitative research observation is often referred to as 'participant observation'.

Participant observation means that you take part to some extent in the activities of the people you are observing. At one end of the scale is observation used within an ethnographic approach (see Chapter 9), which requires long-term involvement, sometimes over years, in a setting. Here the aim is to take an unstructured approach to your research, not limiting your observations to particular processes or people, but allowing your research focus to crystallize as the research proceeds. At the other end of the scale are briefer, occasional encounters with a setting where observation may be somewhat more structured because it plays a supplementary role to other methods. The most appropriate role for researchers, according to Seale (2004: 233), is one where you are positioned between a strangeness which avoids over-rapport and a familiarity which allows you to grasp the perspectives of people in the situation.

## Different types of observation and participation

The typology of Gold (1958) has been influential in enabling researchers to articulate the distinction between the extent of participation and observation. While it is not without its critics, its use lies in its ability to identify the various strengths and weaknesses of the different forms of participant observation. Gold proposed four 'master roles' for the researcher:

- complete participant;
- participant as observer;
- observer as participant;
- complete observer.

### *The complete participant*

The complete participant is part of the setting and takes an insider role that involves covert observation. At this point, we would stress that this is not a suitable role for novice researchers because it is problematic for a number of reasons. If you are an experienced researcher and choose to employ this method of observation you become a fully functioning member of the setting, which might be, say, a PR consultancy or a consumer lobby group, and are not known by others as a researcher. Therefore, they respond to you as a colleague rather than a researcher. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) promote the effectiveness of this role by contending that there is 'no better path to knowing the feelings, predicaments, and contradictions of others than to be with the other in an authentic relationship' (p. 145).

However, there are a number of problems associated with this type of research. First, the scope of your movements as a researcher is limited to what you can experience in your member role, which probably spans only part of the total activity of the group or organization (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). Second, the use of interviewing techniques is ruled out, unless, of course, you wish to 'blow' your cover. Third, because you are actively involved with people at the scene it is possible that you may 'go native' and lose the ability to critically assess the situation in which you are immersed. A further potential problem is that if you are a novice researcher it is unlikely that you will be granted ethics approval from your university to conduct such research because of its potentially unethical nature.

While acknowledging the above problems, we note, however, that research of this nature may be valuable if the settings you enter are characterized by beliefs and norms that do not admit criticism (and where, for example, you wish to expose unethical practices), or where there is guarded access or when the situation is very sensitive. For example, a senior faculty member of an American university revealed how the unethical activities of the campus PR department resulted in the university president being scapegoated and sacked (White, 2009). Although much of her evidence was derived from the interviews and document analysis that she carried out following her initial participant observations, she admits that she took notes during meetings and other events where the crisis was being discussed and these covert observations obviously gave her greater contextual insights into the progress of the crisis and its lack of effective management.

### Example 16.2: Reflections on the consequences of doing covert research

Participant observation was employed in two separate action research projects by John Oliver and Kevin Eales, the former working as an outside consultant-researcher to a service provider and the latter a manager-researcher in a family business. In designing their separate projects, both researchers took care to ensure that covert observation was the most appropriate method, and then gained ethical clearance for their research. However, on completion of their projects they reflected that, with hindsight, they 'had been (to a degree) deceptive, which had left us with a sense of being untrustworthy' (Oliver and Eales, 2008: 353). They felt 'uneasy' about the way in which they had used the host companies and research participants to meet the needs of their research and their individual agendas, despite having worked within an ethical framework. In conclusion, they urged future researchers to carefully consider the potential implications of doing covert research, in terms not only of ethical issues, but also of the emotional costs to themselves. (See also Example 4.8.)

We would question seriously whether covert observation in any private or closed setting, without the knowledge or permission of the people observed, is ethical. After all, with the exception of easy-to-access online discussion groups, many of the places that researchers enter to study public relations and marketing communications issues are not public, open situations, such as a conference, exhibition or an event, where nobody can be identified. Instead, they involve individuals in a situation in which trust, friendships and client or customer confidentialities are likely to be exploited. Do note, however, that where observation *does* take place in public, open settings 'unobtrusive measures' are likely to be permissible and may indeed produce valuable data.

In online research, the issue is more complicated. A contemporary ethical debate concerns the appropriateness or otherwise of observing others without their knowledge while they take part in public, online forums and chat rooms. Some researchers consider this a violation of another's rights and privacy, while other researchers claim that it is the same as being a non-participant observer and therefore not a problem. If your research necessitates observation via the Internet, then it is up to you to decide if you should acknowledge your role to online participants, bearing in mind the extent to which the knowledge may or may not impact your findings (Gaiser and Schreiner, 2009: 30). Ethically, it's best to inform participants, which you can do initially by interacting with a site moderator about the research effort, telling them about how data will be collected and used.

To find out more about ethical issues in research, turn back to Chapter 4.

**Helpful hint**

Check your motives before undertaking *complete participant observation*. Is it ethical to conceal your research aims and role?

### *The participant as observer*

This research role requires you to take part in the work of the stakeholder or cultural group under investigation, undertaking duties and responsibilities but, to some extent, also holding a privileged status. This is because although not fully integrated into the routines and subjective realities of the group, you are still allowed to take part. People in the setting acknowledge your presence as a participant who also observes because you have previously sought and gained their permission for your exploratory study. Research of this nature allows you to move around in the location as you wish, observing in detail and depth. If you employ this method for online research, you are considered to be a member of a community by its members but your participation may be minimized when compared with the complete participant role. Example 16.3 provides an illustration of the involvement of one participant who also observed.

Lindlof and Taylor (2002: 148) note that a greater degree of reciprocity distinguishes this role from that of the complete participant. You may have to continually adjust the terms of your participation as members find out about, and seek reassurance over, your role and the evidence you are gaining. For new researchers this type of observation is more difficult than interviewing, and potentially more stressful because of the ethical issues involved. In some cases you may have to make it quite clear that you are not a 'spy' operating on behalf of management (Oliver and Eales, 2008). It is up to you to ensure that you respect participants' right to privacy, including taking measures to ensure people are not disturbed while they are working. Obviously this doesn't apply to online observation.

### Example 16.3: Participating while observing a day in the life of a public relations consultancy

While undertaking doctoral research, Kate Price spent extended periods in two public relations consultancies, working as an executive while also observing and recording the daily activities of PR practitioners. Here is an extract from her journal.

> Daily morning newspaper review.
>
> Due to start at 9.30 but kicks off just after a 9.45. Eight members of staff gather round the communal kitchen table: a range of people including office manager Sophie and director Sam. Most of them are eating oranges from the bowl of fruit in the centre.
>
> I've been given the Times to scan for pertinent stories. According to Lucy, relevant stories might be anything that relates to a client's industry or could just be a story that indicates an interesting trend or attitude among journalists, the public or government. Or – perhaps more commonly – could just be an interesting piece of news to share among the team. I'm finding it a difficult juggling act to contribute usefully to the meeting while still concentrating on observing: I keep switching from one perspective to the other – in and out. Still find it a bit awkward to be interloping among this group, who all seem so at ease with each other. . .
>
> I'm sure this daily newspaper review will improve staff's sense of what makes a good news story and what journalists are interested in reading, PLUS help them 'scan the horizon' for upcoming relevant issues. However, there's a focus only on print rather than broadcast and electronic stories – this is in spite of an obvious interest in electronic news (regular references to BBC website outside this paper review meeting, for example). Are trade journals done separately? Must find out.
>
> (Kate Price, doctoral candidate, personal correspondence, 2009)

### *The observer as participant*

As an observer who participates only by being there, you have only minimal involvement in the situation. Unlike in the previous role, you are not normally part of the setting; instead, you are there primarily to observe rather than take part. For instance, you might observe a press conference but not be involved in it in a journalistic or public relations capacity. In online research you would be observing without being a member of the discussion group. Nevertheless, you should still negotiate with gatekeepers or online participants to allow you access and ask permission of all participants for them to be observed.

Before entering the setting, you are likely to know the kind of information you need and the amount of time required to collect it. Therefore, participant observation of this nature is often more acceptable to informants because there is less uncertainty over the data that you will gain and less disruption to them. An advantage of this type of observation is the possibility of asking questions, of being accepted as a researcher but not called upon to play a role as a member of the workforce or social group. On the other hand, you are prevented from playing a 'real' role in the setting and thus your insights may not be as rich as they would be if you were fully immersed in the field.

**Example 16.4: Observations on rugby sponsorship**

The role of sponsorship within brand strategy and the importance of the fit between sponsor and sponsored was Nicholas Alexander's research focus. He investigated the topic through a case study of the Welsh national rugby team and the company which sponsored its sports shirts. He interviewed the marketing and management teams at the Welsh Rugby Union and the sponsor's marketing and communication executives.

In addition, he observed those involved in the sponsorship environment, interacting with them naturally and spontaneously. For example, when the researcher attended a rugby match in the company of an executive and other staff from the sponsoring organization, he was introduced to and conversed with the press, public relations and marketing personnel, as well as members of the rugby team.

In the sponsorship environment, the researcher was involved in rounded discussions, gaining insights into the reality of statements that came out of the previously conducted semi-structured interviews and also the constructed marketing message. These interactions on match day confirmed the reality of the message, its integration into a range of marketing activities and how much the message was embedded in the thinking of the marketing team and the sponsorship relationship. Such observations and natural conversations, which took place while the researcher was in the role of observer as participant, provided verification in a way that would not have been possible through interviews alone.

(Alexander, 2009; and also based on personal correspondence, 2009)

Within the category of observer as participant can be found the observational technique of shadowing, where you follow one person through their daily routines and personal communication activities. The ability to see their environment through their eyes, questioning them as you go along, offers an invaluable perspective to the qualitative researcher (McDonald, 2005). Shadowing is ideally suited to the study of expert practitioners (such as Mintzberg's (1973) classic study of the nature of managerial work), yet the technique is rarely employed in public relations or marketing communications. This is surprising as the role of communication practitioners has been the focus of research interest in a range of international studies, using other methods which involve self-reporting.

Perhaps the difficulty in accessing individuals and organizations for extended periods of close, personal involvement may account for researchers' reluctance to employ this method of observation. Or it may be due to the physical, mental and emotional exhaustion that a shadower faces due to 'running about all day' as they immerse themselves in the work life of a single practitioner, while simultaneously recording a vast amount of data that then needs to be processed in the evenings in order to preserve its quality and contemporaneous nature (McDonald, 2005: 458). A further difficulty is in managing the relationship between the shadower and the shadowed member, who may find it frustrating to have to provide a running commentary to the researcher throughout the course of the day.

If you are involved in shadowing you have been granted a privileged position and confidential access. Therefore, take care at all times to maintain discretion, never compromising or embarrassing the person being shadowed. Ethically, your research report should anonymize the participant and the company they work for so that they are unrecognizable, unless they agree otherwise.

## Helpful hint

Observer effects can be a problem in shadowing. It's worth considering – and writing a reflective section on this in your methodology chapter – the extent to which you think your presence in following a practitioner about for days on end may alter the nature of the work they do. And what effect do you think your involvement may have on those who interact with the person you are shadowing?

### *The complete observer*

This role relates to that which we identified earlier in the chapter as 'simple observation' or, as some term it, 'silent observation'. Here you take no part in the setting but employ a hidden approach, creating no impact on the situation at all. This mainly occurs when you employ a one-way mirror to observe focus groups, make use of video cameras to observe various activities, as indicated in Example 16.6, or observe online discussion groups without taking part, as in Example 16.5.

For this method of research, some argue that ethically it is essential to gain consent from everyone involved in the setting. This includes seeking permission from those who have power to withhold or grant access, such as managers. This poses problems for online researchers, however, especially as one of the reasons for conducting covert research online is to observe natural behaviours without distorting them through the acknowledged presence of the researcher. Based on your own moral stance, you will have to decide the best course of action.

If you do seek permission to carry out silent, online observation, do this by posting a message of your intentions on the appropriate website. On the other hand, if you decide that this is an inappropriate course of action at the outset of your project you would be wise later on to obtain permission from individuals whose comments you intend to reproduce in your written report. You may wish to follow Kozinets' advice and ensure you use member checks, presenting your findings to the people who have been studied in order to solicit their comments (2006: 136). (See Chapter 18 for more on member checks.) In this way, you show concern for the rights to privacy of participants. Yet even this strategy is not without its critics, who argue that if online interactions can be freely accessed they are in the public domain and there is no need to seek consent to quote them.

On the whole, the issues of access as a *complete observer* are more problematic and complex than for other forms of data collection because of the potential that the method holds to do harm to the interests of participants. Unlike in the complete participant role, where you act in ways that conform to the norms and moral order of the group, in the complete observer role you have no meaningful contact with informants. Therefore they have no opportunity to give you feedback or to influence your interpretation of their actions and experiences.

With this method, there is a danger of being ethnocentric – seeing the situation from your own cultural viewpoint (while too much involvement in the setting brings the threat of 'going native'). The establishment of rapport with informants before your research begins is also a good way to overcome the problem of ethnocentricity (while asking questions about observations might prevent you from 'going native'). It is worth designing your research so that the observer role is applied alongside other methods, such as interviews.

**Example 16.5: Observing without being seen**

In Saudia Arabia, because freedom of expression is limited and the traditional media are censored, the Internet has become a popular site for extremists, liberals and Muslim fundamentalists to express and disseminate their views. Studying a Saudi Arabian, political online community, three academics from Australia, the USA and Jordan conducted silent observations, informally for four years and then formally over three months. They watched people interacting online without their knowledge, recording daily fieldnotes in a journal, along with their reactions, reflections and interpretations of their observations. Accompanying their surveillance, they content-analysed posts to the community's forum, and also carried out interviews.

The researchers found that although the site continues to be blocked and contributions to it are censored, it has become increasingly important as both a source of information about politics and an avenue for self-expression. It is now influential in the political public sphere of the country. This is despite the fact that some involved in the community have been arrested by the Saudi secret service and sent to prison because of their writings in the forum (Al-Saggaf *et al.*, 2008).

While Gold's typology of 'master roles' (or types of participant observation) is helpful in identifying the different degrees of researcher involvement as participants or observers, the framework tends to limit the researcher to one role or another. In reality, situations change, roles shift and indeed at times researchers seem to carry out multiple roles. For example, although you may be acknowledged as a researcher in the group you are studying, there may be some aspects of your observation that you are carrying out in a covert fashion. In another example, you might begin an online study in the complete observer role in order to gain an understanding of the culture of a virtual community (such as in Example 16.5). Once you are familiar with the language, online norms and some of the issues, you may decide to take a more participatory role by engaging in the online discussions (for an example, see Example 9.1 in Chapter 9, on 'Ethnography'). The degree of overlap between the roles depends not only on the stage you have reached in your research, but on the position and role of the people being observed, on your own interest about what you are watching, on the overall research design and incorporation of other methods, and even at times on your own ability to remember the role that you have pre-selected!

## The process of observing

Before observation can commence, you must be able to define the field (or the setting) and its scope, including the actions and interactions that take place within it. In Table 16.1, Spradley (1980: 78) identifies some of the dimensions that make up the field. It is worth taking note of these as they will help to focus your observations.

The main research question, problem or puzzle that you decide to address is very much shaped by the nature of the setting you have chosen to study. In some instances, it may be appropriate to concentrate on some aspects of the setting more than others, depending on what is going on and also depending on your area of interest. However, do remember that in a study which uses observation it is important to pay attention to the whole context to some degree because what you're interested in doing is providing a holistic description of the setting and the activities that are occurring.

*Table 16.1* Dimensions of 'the field'

| *Dimension* | *Explanation* | *Example* |
|---|---|---|
| Space | the location | a PR consultancy |
| Actor | members or participants in the setting | consultants and clients |
| Activity | behaviour and actions of people | implementing a crisis campaign |
| Objects | the things located in the setting | architecture, decor, documents |
| Act | single actions of people | ringing a journalist |
| Events | what is happening | a press conference |
| Time | timeframe and sequencing of activities | beginning and end of the campaign |
| Goal | what people are aiming to do | objectives of the campaign |
| Feelings | the emotions that people have | attitudes towards journalists |

Adapted from Spradley (1980: 78).

Take a look again at Example 16.3. Note how Price's fieldnotes show her primary focus is on how consultancy members go about the task of doing the daily newspaper reviews. But note also how she pays some attention in the first paragraph to the consultancy environment and to the less central activity of eating while working, indicating the informality of the setting. She highlights these aspects because her study aims to find out about how public relations practices are influenced by organizational culture, and therefore her choice of methods and the focus of her observation are shaped by her research goals.

Participant observation varies on a continuum from open to closed settings. Open settings are public and highly visible, such as street scenes, restaurants, corridors, reception areas, conferences and events, and many types of online settings, including blogs and Internet bulletin boards. Closed settings are less accessible and include personal offices, meetings, presentations, instant messaging windows or private chat rooms and places where small groups go about their everyday routines.

When you first enter the field it will seem confusing and you may experience difficulty in relating much of what you are seeing to your research topic. However, be patient and non-judgemental. Don't try to fit your initial observations into a theory about how or why something happens. This is particularly important in cross-cultural research, where the activities of participants may carry quite different meanings to those of your own culture. It may take a long time before you are able to reach an informed understanding of the gestures and communication behaviours of people from different national cultures.

Therefore, spend time getting to know the people in the setting, familiarize yourself with what is occurring and begin to adopt the perspectives of the participants in your study. Learn to see things as they do. Remember to respect the norms and regulations of the setting in order not to intrude on its routines. This means taking care about where you stand, when you speak and how you address people. As time goes by, your ideas will start to crystallize, enabling you to develop a descriptive narrative of the events and actions taking place before your eyes.

**Key point**

Doing participant observation is like working in a funnel structure. Start with a wide view and a broad research question. As you get to know the people and surroundings your ideas and research questions will become more focused.

Spradley (1980) claims that observers progress in three steps: using descriptive, focused and finally selective observation. Descriptive observation proceeds on the basis of general questions that you have in mind. Everything that goes on in the situation is data and is recorded, including colours, sounds and appearances of people in the setting. As time goes by, certain important areas or aspects of the setting become more obvious; focus on these because they contribute to the achievement of the aim of your research project. Your investigation therefore moves from broad to narrow observation as you concentrate on smaller units, such as the similarities and differences in the use of social media among groups and individuals. Eventually the observation becomes highly selective as you concentrate just on the key issues which relate to your topic.

In some cases, researchers enter settings with a specific, narrow focus in mind. This may be the result of undertaking secondary analysis and interviews first. Observations are then focused from the outset because you already have a good idea of what you are looking for.

### *Asking yourself questions*

Key questions to ask yourself as you observe are:

- *'Who' questions*: who and how many people are present in the setting or take part in the activities? What are their characteristics and roles?
- '*What' questions*: what is happening in the setting? What are the actions and rules of behaviour? What are the variations in the behaviour you observe? What are the physical surroundings like?
- *'Where' questions*: where do interactions take place? Where are people located in the physical space?
- *'When' questions*: when do conversations and interactions take place? What is the timing of activities?
- *'Why' questions*: why do people in the setting act and communicate the way they do? Why are there variations in behaviour?

(LeCompte and Preissle, 1997)

Mini tour observation leads to detailed descriptions of smaller settings, while grand tour observations are more appropriate for larger settings.

In some cases, researchers make use of cameras and video equipment to catch movements and expressions of participants more accurately (as in Example 16.6).

Bear in mind, however, that video cameras may be intimidating or disturbing to participants, causing them to change their behaviour. A benefit to you as a researcher, however, is that you can re-run a video as many times as you like afterwards, capturing and recapturing important moments. Furthermore, a video can be used as a stimulus in interviewing. Of course, video tapes must be kept secure and confidential, and cannot be shown to colleagues or friends, only to your supervisor with the permission of participants.

Although some researchers like to use still photographs, these are only useful if you wish to freeze a situation in time in order to, say, recall physical surroundings, note spatial relationships among participants or between participants and products, or remind yourself of how people are physically interacting with cultural artefacts. When participants guide researchers' photographic choices or take pictures or videos themselves, this provides you with clues as to the unarticulated significance of events or people. However, photographs are not able to demonstrate the processual character of the situations you are studying in the same way that a video recording can.

**Example 16.6: Recording participants' personal perspectives with miniature digital video cameras**

Richard Starr and Karen Fernandez described how they gave consumers tiny video cameras, the size of a postage stamp, attached to a baseball cap in order to record everything that was visible and audible from the consumers' point of view: what they saw, heard, where they moved, how long they spent in certain areas, how others interacted with them, and the contexts in which these activities occurred.

In the second stage of data collection, the consumers watched a replay of their video and were asked to spontaneously recall what they were doing, deliberating about or feeling. The interviews were also videotaped. The researchers took great care to follow ethical guidelines about informant and bystander privacy.

The methodology was valuable because it provided three different perspectives: first-person recording, the interview recording and the analysts' interpretation (Starr and Fernandez, 2007).

### *Writing fieldnotes and keeping a field diary*

In Chapter 9 we noted the importance of making meticulous fieldnotes during and after your periods of observation. These are detailed descriptions of the setting and the behaviour of participants, translating observation into a written record. They should be written as soon as possible after you have observed events to overcome the problem of memory recall. Your own reflections on the situation and your feelings about it are also recorded in fieldnotes. At the beginning you will probably write down most of what you observe, but your fieldnotes will become progressively more relevant to emerging concerns.

While fieldnotes are as important in online research as in face-to-face studies, the nature of them differs. First, when you are observing online there is no need for you to record the salient moment-by-moment occurrences. This is because computer-mediated communications result in an automatic written record of each exchange amongst participants. In addition, there is no need for you to write about contextual influences on behaviours and implicit assumptions, because you cannot observe the setting in which participants live and work. This means that there is no non-written information (such as artefacts and non-verbal behaviour – although emoticons give an indication) to provide you with clues about communicative interactions. Use your fieldnotes in online research, therefore, to help develop your ability to get 'a feel' for what is going on, to practise your intuition about the mood or intentions of participants and to make a note of your impressions regarding emerging themes.

A field diary or journal allows you to record your growing recognition of emerging themes, changes in those themes and other comments about how you saw and interpreted the data. The journal is critical in tracing your own growth in the process of data collection and in evaluating the implications of your own background and theoretical orientation to how you relate to the people and contexts you study.

**Example 16.7: Fieldnotes from a study of how brand meaning is created**

A researcher's fieldnotes describe her visit to the setting, a branded shop and her observations of the products on sale: children's dolls and associated merchandise. The excerpt is used within an article on sociocultural branding to offer insights into how her experience might be likened to that of brand fans.

> My God! These are very beautiful things. 'Cute!' as Americans say. I'm really impressed, surprised at the richness and the beauty of all the things I see. There are so many of these beautiful dolls with marvelous clothes and suits of different shapes and colors. . .For a while, I'm not able to appreciate all the particulars because there are simply too many things to see. Too much for my eyes and my mind. I feel like a little girl under the Christmas tree and a bit shamefaced to show my feelings to my colleagues. . .My surprise is like being in the Toy Place of my childhood fables. . .I can remember that I felt emotions that reminded me of my childhood that drew me back: enchantment, joy, airiness, happiness, and innocence. These are the feelings and sensations I am living now. These feelings remind me of the illusion and airiness of dreams, the possibility of building a beautiful world, and to imagine a painless and perfect life. A life of beauty and wealth.
>
> (Diamond *et al.*, 2009: 124–25)

(See also Example 9.5.)

### *Analysis*

Analysing observations follows a similar process to that of interviews. (Turn to Chapter 18 for more on this.) Observational data are the events and actions which you have seen, heard and recorded in the setting, and which you have recorded in your field diary. Further data are the explanations and comments you have recorded in your fieldnotes and analytic memos. Recall that, as in all qualitative research, once you have collected the initial observational data, analysis starts straight away. The collection and analysis of data interact and go in parallel. In this way, your observation becomes progressively focused on the emerging and interesting themes that relate to your research question.

As your study comes to an end, consider how you will withdraw from the field. Do this slowly, thanking participants for their involvement in the research and informing them of how you will use the data and their access to them. It is polite to write a thank-you letter to each participant after you have left the field.

## Limitations and advantages in observational research

Undertaking research by observational methods is time consuming. It takes time to negotiate access and time in the field to familiarize yourself with all the goings-on and make meticulous records at the same time. For this reason, observation in its most participative sense is rarely carried out by undergraduates, whose availability for long research projects is often limited.

However, in some cases the duration of observation may be shortened if you are already *au fait* with a setting. For example, previously you may have worked in a consultancy specializing in arts sponsorship and wish to return there to make a systematic observation of how they match sponsors with relevant arts events. You already understand the structure and culture of the company so would be likely to fit in very quickly. What you might overlook, however, are activities and situations that, while important to your topic, are taken for granted both by you and by participants because they seem familiar. In this situation, there may be a tradeoff: a shorter introduction to the company but the potential to miss insights because you are already a cultural ‘insider’. If you suspend your prior assumptions and look at the company as a ‘marginal native’ your perspective will be fresher and more insightful.

The close relationships that develop between researcher and researched often result in researchers naturally acquiring the same worldview as those who live or work at the research setting. This is a common risk when you have much in common with participants. To overcome this, continue to remind yourself of your researcher role, and regularly discuss your findings with an outsider such as your supervisor.

Whether you are an experienced or novice researcher, participant observation can be fun as it can enable you to take a professional role – perhaps as a fully employed communications practitioner – while simultaneously working as a researcher. However, as we have found in our own participant observations, it can also be somewhat stressful as you juggle the demands of helping out your colleagues while also carrying out the tasks related to your research involvement, such as recording your observations and writing up your notes. Good time management skills and excellent interpersonal communication are needed.

One of the advantages of using observational methods is that they give you direct access to social processes as they happen in the natural environment of the participants. You can ask questions about your observations, sometimes even at the time when they occur. A corollary disadvantage is that you will only see what is in front of your nose (Deacon *et al.*, 2007) because you cannot be in several places at once and may miss crucial events because they occurred elsewhere.

A threat to the validity of your research arises during data collection. If participants are aware of being observed there is the possibility that they may react to your presence and behave atypically or out of character. This is called 'the observer effect' and tends to disappear the longer you are able to spend in the research setting.

Earlier in the chapter (pp. 000–00), we wrote that observation techniques can be less disruptive and more unobtrusive than other methods. While this is true, we wonder just how feasible it is to enter and leave a scene without making some sort of ripple on its surface. Over the course of a period of participant observation people get to know you, make friends with you, sometimes show off in front of you or even ignore you. These actions are all responses to your presence. No matter how careful you are not to disturb the setting, you will always make an impact, even if a minimal one, on those with whom you come into contact. Therefore, weigh carefully the consequences of your entry into the field. Will the people in your study be 'used' in an inequitable exchange relationship? If so, the research is likely to be unethical. Ideally, your aim as an observer is to treat people in your study as collaborators, that is, stakeholders who shape the enquiry itself.

## Summary

- Observational techniques, whether conducted online or conventionally, involve watching and recording contemporary events and activities as they occur in a particular setting.
- Usually observers closely engage with a setting, although there are different degrees of involvement, from covert observation to full participation as an 'insider'. Different types of involvement may be employed within the same study and even within the same period of observation.
- Observation often starts with a broad research question which is narrowed down and sculpted by the key issues at the scene.
- Fieldnotes translate observation into a written record. They prod your memory and provide data that can be used directly in the written report.
- Ethical issues are highly salient in observation because of the potential to do harm to participants.

# 17 Written, visual and multi-media materials

A number of techniques which rely on the collection of data from documentary or text-based sources are used either to supplement interviews and focus groups or to stand on their own as the main research procedures. Research of this nature is commonly called qualitative content analysis, document analysis or text analysis. The chapter covers the following:

- documents as written, visual, multi-media or Internet-based records;
- diaries as specific types of documents, often created by participants through writing, photography or videography expressly for research purposes;
- projective and elicitation techniques, including vignettes, photo-elicitation, mood boards and collages, thematic apperception test, word or picture association, sentence completion, projective questioning, brand mapping and cartoons.

## Documents as data sources

In the fields of public relations and marketing communications, there is a huge range of different types of documents available for research. Some are naturally occurring and continuously being updated, such as diaries, blogs and the personal webpages of individuals. Others are archived, such as photographs, films and recordings found in personal or organizational collections, or alternatively uploaded onto websites such as YouTube or Flickr.

Some documents – or texts – are produced for administrative or corporate purposes, such as emails, websites, minutes of meetings, reports, sponsored broadcast documentaries, advertisements in the traditional media or in multi-media formats, together with internal employee newsletters, whether in hard or electronic formats. In many cases, documents are created for purposes of impression management or self-presentation, as with corporate or celebrity media releases, video bulletins and annual reports, even autobiographies. Texts also include news and features produced by the mass media, such as broadcast news bulletins, e-journals, and articles written for local newspapers.

**Key point**

Documents – also called 'texts' – consist of words and images in written, printed, visual, multi-media and digital forms. They may be naturally occurring, recorded without the intervention of a researcher or produced by research participants at the request of researchers.

Texts – or documentary sources – therefore, are artefacts of social communication created by individuals or organizations for personal or public consumption. They can be a rich base of primary or supplementary evidence in public relations and marketing communications research, indicating the way in which an individual, such as a consumer, or a group of stakeholders or an organization views its past and present actions, achievements and social interactions. As a data source, they also illustrate the processes of how individuals and organizations publicize and justify themselves to those they consider important. For those undertaking research from a cultural perspective, documents as cultural texts provide valuable knowledge of the cultural dimensions of the marketplace or of the production and consumption of culture. Alternatively, they offer insights into the role of managed communication as a mediator of contemporary culture.

The multi-media nature of the Internet environment means that if you are undertaking an online study your exploration will be based at every stage on documents, whether written or visual (still or moving). Even if you are interviewing through instant messaging, analysing blog posts or interpreting the meaning of a sequence of YouTube videos, the fundamental source of data is documents.

Documents are important in qualitative research because:

- on the whole, access to them is low cost and often easy;
- the information provided in them may differ from or may not be available in spoken form;
- documents endure over time, allowing you to trace a sequence of events, and thus compare and contrast communication practices and audience responses at different points in time.

If you find it difficult to gain direct access to participants in the research setting you wish to investigate, or if you are interested in carrying out historical research, this method of collecting data will be particularly useful for you.

Research which employs documents as a data source is called document analysis, documentary analysis, text analysis or, more commonly, qualitative content analysis. It differs from quantitative content analysis, which is concerned with identifying and counting patterns of frequency and regularity in a large number of texts. Qualitative content analysis 'begins at the point where statistical presentation reaches its limits' (Pickering, 2006) because it offers a means of revealing features that are hidden or latent in the content, such as irony, rhetorical and stylistic devices, metaphors and figures of speech or constructs associated with visual images. These all can be very revealing of cultural norms and nuances.

Many documents are already in existence when you start your work; others are initiated and organized by you. For example, historical documents, archives, weblogs and products of the media exist independently of you, while personal diaries might be written by participants in your study at your request (see the section on diaries, pp. 283–287). In many cases, these data are more comprehensive than the evidence you might acquire from interviews or questionnaires conducted over a short time period, especially if you are focusing on a case study organization or industry. This is because documents span time, allowing you to track historical processes or reconstruct past events and ongoing processes that are not available for direct observation. This helps you to better interpret the possible 'rewriting' of events by interviewees in later verbal accounts. It also enables you to identify the factors that over time have led to particular decisions or courses of action, such as why crisis communications may have been mismanaged or how and why certain marketing alliances have developed. Using documents as sources, therefore, allows you to cover much longer time spans than is typically feasible through the application of other qualitative methods.

**Example 17.1: Longitudinal research using documents as a source of data**

In the Soviet era, the former communist republics of Central and Eastern Europe were totalitarian states, with propaganda as the official form of communication. As they transitioned to democracy, Western-style public relations gradually emerged. Kaja Tampere traced this process between 1989 and 2000 by researching articles in the daily newspapers of both the Baltic states and Russia, as well as a range of legislative and organizational communication documents. She complemented document analysis with interviews and participant observation. She experienced difficulties in her investigation because many documents were classified as 'secret papers' and therefore were unobtainable. She found that people were too afraid to talk about these materials (Tampere, 2008).

If you wish to gain information about individuals or companies where access is restricted or denied, analysing documents is a useful method because of its unobtrusive, non-reactive nature. This means that you don't have to actively engage with individuals involved in your study. For many students wishing to undertake international research, document analysis can be a useful method of comparing communications between countries without all the expense of having to actually travel. Instead, you can examine documents such as company statements, corporate websites, press cuttings and reports that are freely available in the public domain. While there are limitations to this, as we discuss at the end of this section (pp. 282–283), such indirect access can still be worthwhile as long as you don't take the data at face value but check, interpret and triangulate your evidence against other data sources.

Not only does the analysis of documents provide you with insights into, for example, how companies or consumers construct and demonstrate knowledge, it also provides you with evidence of the thinking of other researchers. This is because when you undertake secondary analysis (or desk research) you collect data from any one or more of the following different sources:

- documents which have been written by other researchers, such as journal articles, books and dissertations either in traditional or electronic forms (note that in future the ideas of other researchers may be available increasingly in interactive or multimedia (rather than written) formats, such as the photo-, sound- and video-essays presented in the special DVD issue of the journal *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 2005, volume 8, number 3);
- raw data collected by other researchers (e.g. archived interview transcripts) which you re-use;
- material that has been collected and presented by organizations in the course of their operations, such as websites, pamphlets, television broadcasts, letters, emails and reports, or alternatively material produced by individuals as part of their everyday lives, such as diaries, blogs, photographs and videos.

**Key point**

Secondary data are data collected by others for a purpose other than your own research goals. Secondary analysis is any additional analysis of an existing set of written, visual or multi-media documents. It involves you offering a different interpretation or developing knowledge which augments or contrasts with that presented in the original enquiry.

In secondary analysis, you re-analyse other researchers' data and/or reports in the light of your own particular topic. Examples of texts which might form secondary data for research include: research-based reports produced by government departments and regulatory agencies (for example reports on viewer complaints about television advertising compiled by the television regulator); reports based on investigations produced by non-official agencies such as trade associations, consumer associations, professional bodies, market research companies and pressure groups; reports produced by organizations such as annual reports, broadcasts on television or radio, podcasts downloaded from websites; and articles and books generated by academics. Records and documents such as these position your primary research within its broader context. Alternatively, they can offer different, critical perspectives on the data you gather from other methods.

### Example 17.2: Websites as documentary sources

John Sillince and Andrew Brown examined how police forces seek to shape and position themselves as legitimate organizations to often highly critical publics. They analysed corporate communications on police websites, choosing websites as data sources because:

- they are important communication media through which the police employ a range of rhetorical strategies to present their interests to various audiences;
- ‘websites tend to feature a considerable amount of interesting and relevant text-based information that lends itself to interpretive analysis’.

(Sillince and Brown, 2009: 1836)

Having trawled the websites of 43 English and Welsh police forces, the researchers coded the data inductively, based on:

- the effectiveness of the police as a law enforcement agency (e.g. they coded statements related to improvement/failure, crime statistics, evaluations, satisfaction and detection rates);
- community (e.g. requests, advice, partnerships, responsiveness, specialisms);
- progressiveness (e.g. statements on gender balance, ethnic diversity, sexual orientation, age profile, the disabled).

(Sillince and Brown, 2009: 1836–37)

Through the process of coding, they identified 446 extracts of website text. They then analysed these extracts to discern the rhetorical strategies that occurred most commonly, clustering the extracts into broader categories which they named according to the different rhetorical strategies.

They found that through the self-presentation communication strategies on websites the police attempted to control the perceptions of both internal and external publics. They concluded that police organizations work systematically to manipulate both public opinion and significant internal publics by disseminating conflicting (rather than coherent) information.

When documents are used to complement primary methods of data collection they allow you to paint a fuller and sometimes more accurate picture than or alternative to that which has emerged from, say, interviews or focus groups (Deacon *et al.*, 2007). This enables you to counteract some of the possible biases of other methods.

**Example 17.3: Using documents to supplement an interview-based project**

Suzana Rodrigues and John Child carried out longitudinal research between 1986 and 2000, focusing on the development of the corporate identity of a Brazilian telecommunications company. They collected data from the following sources:

- interviews with executive directors to define the main characteristics of the company and describe what and for whom the company stood;
- autobiographies of telecommunications sector leaders archived in the Ministry of Telecommunications – the material was qualitatively content analysed against the categories arising from analysis of the interviews; the autobiographies provided significant insights into the early part of the company's life;
- the company's annual reports and key internal documents such as the union newspaper – these conveyed information about organizational priorities, including their social role, and their identity claims.

(Rodrigues and Child, 2008)

### *Authenticity, credibility, meaning, representativeness*

When using or quoting from documents in research, it is important to establish that they are authentic and credible, how they are interpreted and the extent to which they represent the universe of relevant documents.

If a document is genuine, complete, reliable and of unquestioned authorship, then it can be said to be *authentic* (Macdonald, 2008). If it is not authentic, it may be a forgery or a deliberate misrepresentation. To establish authenticity, you need to consider the history of documents as well as the writers' motives and biases.

*Credibility* is concerned with whether a document is free from error or distortion. Accuracy might be affected by an author's proximity in time and place to the events described and also the conditions under which the information was acquired at the time. In the study outlined in Example 17.1, the researcher lived and worked in one of the Baltic states during both the communist era and the transitional economy and therefore was well placed to access and interpret the documents of the period that she used in her research.

In order to be assured of the credibility of documents, you need to ask questions such as who produced the document, why, when, for whom and in what context. It is also worth asking what information the account is based on; how accurate, honest, frank and comprehensive is it? Are there any signs in the account of partiality or axe-grinding? Consider, for example, the different motives that influence the messages contained in a sales brochure, a chief executive's speech to shareholders, a television investigation into a company's practices, a public relations consultant's contact report and a document which presents the findings of a company's SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats).

*Meaning* concerns how documents are interpreted. Documents are socially situated products, produced and intended to be read, seen or heard within a particular social context; they are an integral part of other systems and structures. Therefore they highlight understandings and interpretations of life within the organization, industry or culture where they were produced – which is likely to be a very different setting from the one with which you, as an analyst, are familiar. It is important, therefore, not to take documents at face value or to isolate them from their context (as quantitative content analysis does), or they will be deprived of their meaning. Try instead to interpret documents according to their setting, study the situation and conditions under which they were recorded and try to establish the writers' intentions. Remember, though, that, as in other types of data analysis, the meaning is tentative and provisional and may need to be reappraised if new data present a challenge.

*Representativeness* is often difficult to prove because on many occasions you have no information about or control over the numbers, variety or form of documents with regard to a particular event. Some documents may have been lost or destroyed, and others may exist but you may have no access to them because of issues of confidentiality or secrecy (as in Example 17.1). Therefore, whenever you undertake historical research (such as tracking a company's archived annual public relations plans or advertising strategies) you must take these gaps and limitations into account and make them clear when you present your results. Bear in mind, however, that qualitative document research is less concerned with representative samples than it is with purposive or theoretical samples (see Chapter 13 for more on sampling).

### *Limitations of documents as data sources*

It is difficult to generalize about public relations and marketing communications from documents because these are inevitably political and subjective. They are produced by people whose motives may be to persuade, to put a spin on information or to represent only a particular viewpoint. Indeed, in many cases the only documents available for research may be those produced by and for elites, that is, people in power, such as the senior management team of an organization or the government of a country. Yet that in itself may be useful if there are few other sources in existence to uncover the ideas and worldviews of such informants, as Tampere (2008) illustrated when investigating media and corporate communication in communist regimes (see Example 17.1).

Documents, therefore, should be used with caution (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). They should be cross-checked and triangulated with other sources of data. You need to interpret them with a great deal of care, paying attention to authenticity, credibility, meaning and representativeness.

In archival studies, you have little control over what data are available and can end up having to make do with the material you have because little else exists.

*Post hoc* analysis, therefore, may lead you to a variety of interpretations which cannot be validated from other sources. In this case, you need to make clear in your text the problems and issues facing you and note that your interpretation is not definitive but only tentative.

## Diaries as documentary sources

Diaries – whether based on a written text or on visual images – are also documents and sometimes are produced specifically for a qualitative study (Banks, 2007). Unfortunately, in public relations and marketing communications diaries have been neglected as a research method even though they have the potential to offer invaluable insights into the immediate present from an insider's point of view. Two recent exceptions are the audio-taped journals kept by people involved in a cause-related corporate outreach event which Edwards and Kreshel (2008) included in their investigation into corporate communication, and the online diaries completed by communication practitioners as part of Ashra's doctoral research (2008). Diaries are an established research strategy in historical and anthropological research and are becoming increasingly popular in social research as a means of understanding people as both observers of and participants in social life (Hookway, 2008).

### Key point

Diaries may be either unsolicited documents spontaneously produced by informants or ones which are stimulated by the request of a researcher. Diaries can take the form of traditional, handwritten or typed records, or make use of technology – such as digital or video cameras to record visual diaries, or computers to create online extensions of personal diaries.

When used in qualitative research, diaries have an open format response style. They encourage informants to record an account of their personal feelings and experiences about events that are personally meaningful to them.

Diaries allow you to collect data about the responses of informants according to their interpretations and within the worlds in which they live or work. In effect, this means that diaries are useful for enabling you to do the following:

- access situations and places that might otherwise be inaccessible for a participant observation study (such as the boardroom, or customers' homes, in a highly sensitive situation or in a distant geographical location);
- study different events and organizations simultaneously, comparing the perspectives of several writers;
- come to an understanding of the attitudes, feelings, emotions and responses of those involved in particular situations;

- capture an ‘ever-changing present’ (Elliott 1997) because of the closeness of the experience and the recording of it in a diary;
- better understand the role of biographical, environmental, cultural and social contexts in shaping communication practices.

**Example 17.4: Using diaries in research**

When investigating the social uses of advertising by young male adults, three researchers included the diary method within their research design (Mitchell *et al.*, 2007). Participants were given a diary and ‘briefed to record any instances of advertising that they used, spoke of, recalled or replayed’ (p. 207), recording their thoughts and feelings over a two-week period. Ideally, they needed to write in their diaries as soon as they experienced advertising.

Follow-up interviews were conducted in order to clarify, probe and explore further the young men’s experiences. Interviews incorporated some reflective questions about the diary process:

- Did the diary-keeping influence your normal behaviour with regard to you using advertising?
- Do you think that you recorded all the uses of advertising you experienced?
- Were the diary entries typical of a normal two-week period?
- What are your thoughts on the social uses of advertising?
- Is there anything you would like to add that you did not record in the diary?

(Mitchell *et al.*, 2007: 208)

Diary-based research could be employed effectively in public relations and marketing communications to explore a variety of topics, including one or more of the following:

- The *emotional reactions* of publics or communications practitioners as they are expressed over time. For example, the research in Example 17.3 took place over a short-term period of study, only two weeks. Longer investigations might trace how consumers respond to advertising campaigns over a month or more, how disempowered communities relate emotionally to unethical corporate activities over a period of years, or how employees respond to management communications at different points in time over the course of a year or so.
- The exploration of *specific behaviours* over time. For example, young people’s smoking habits in relation to tobacco sponsorship, the experiences of consultants in managing client relationships, and the activities involved in preparing for a pitch or designing an advertising campaign.
- Research into *social interactions*. Topics might include press officers’ dealings with journalists or work-based relationships in communication teams. In her

study of communication practitioners, Ashra (2008) analysed their online diary entries to find out how they made sense of the events they commonly experienced within their natural work setting.
- A comparison of the *perspectives* of different stakeholders over time, for example the views of environmental activist groups and government legislators, or PR educators and the PR industry.

The choice of participants depends on the aim of your study, although a key question to ask yourself is: 'Who is relevant?' If, for example, you are interested in studying how press releases are used as a source for television news bulletins, your sample of diary recipients would be those involved in the process of media relations (public relations consultants, in-house press officers, television journalists, news editors, news agency journalists). Of course, such a study would need to have consideration for the busy lives of informants; diaries require time to complete and this is often a deterrent to participation. People who may be willing to spend an hour being interviewed are often unwilling (or unable) to take time out for periods of personal reflection and writing.

### Helpful hint

Spend time at the start of diary-based research setting up your procedures. Explain them carefully to participants, and then check back after the study has started to make sure everyone is clear about what to do. This helps to keep people motivated.

Conducting a pilot study helps to iron out any problems with the general format of the diary and its feasibility. For example, in the project outlined in Example 17.4 the researchers discovered after a pilot study that participants would get bored if required to fill out diaries for too long, so they restricted the period of the study to two weeks. Because you will not be present when people are recording their diary entries, you should ensure that the method of completion is self-explanatory and any questions are clear. Participants will be motivated to complete the diaries on a regular basis if you explain the objectives of your study, and indicate how much time, and how often, they should spend on their diaries.

Following her experiences of using online diaries in her doctoral research, Ashra (2008) points to the necessity of examining in detail the technological, structural and linguistic aspects of the diary at the piloting stage. She indicates that when you pilot an online diary, you should:

- ensure you sit with individual participants as they complete the diary, noting the manner in which they complete their entries and how long this takes, and checking also to see if they experience any technical difficulties;

- revise it if necessary and then pilot again with the same people as many times as necessary before coming to a final version;
- test each version yourself to see how user friendly it is.

(McGrath, nee Ashra, personal correspondence, 2010)

The frequency with which participants complete their diaries will depend on the aim of the study and their availability, but it might be at the end of the day, after a particular event such as a visit to a client or at defined intervals, say every four hours.

You will need to decide how much structure is required in the diary. Some researchers argue that preset headings help to focus diaries. Such headings might indicate specific activities, events, attitudes or feelings. However, these make the diary rather inflexible because even if participants consider other information is pertinent they are not able to record this. Preset headings, therefore, go against the spirit of qualitative research. Instead, you might encourage participants to write about whatever they perceive to be of relevance to themselves at that point in time. Suggesting that writing takes up no more than a page at each session makes the task more manageable for writers. Alternatively, there may be particular issues or aspects of an event or experience that you want to see covered. In this case, you should draw participants' attention to these at the start of the diary completion process.

**Key point**

The usual diary tools are paper and pen, computers or dictaphones for written texts. Digital cameras and camcorders are used for recording visual diaries.

When analysing diaries, look for key words or phrases that you see repeated throughout the document. Code these and then search for overarching themes or categories which encompass the coded extracts. Example 17.2 shows how a set of websites were analysed as documentary data. The process of analysing is made more explicit in Chapter 18 and alternatively in each of the chapters in Part II.

A point to note is that the confidential nature of the research material from the diary method should be respected at all times. Not only will some of the information you receive be commercially sensitive, but it will also reveal the innermost thoughts and feelings of your participants. Diary-based research involves high trust relationships between researchers and participants. Ideally, these begin to be built at the piloting stage and then are strengthened throughout the research, as well as when/if you conduct follow-up interviews (Ashra, 2008). For a well-illustrated example of the diary method, see Symon (2004).

### Limitations of the diary method as a documentary source

The use of diaries in research will only be effective if participants are able to express themselves well in writing. People therefore need to be carefully selected, with literacy a prime consideration.

A major concern is participant attrition, especially in the first week of a study. Maintaining a diary is a time consuming and often onerous task, especially if participants are busy communication practitioners. If diary-based research is to succeed you need continually to offer encouragement and reassurance to participants to ensure they stay motivated and committed to completing their diaries. For this reason, naturally occurring weblogs may offer a more workable alternative, although, obviously, they are unlikely to be focused on your research question in the same way as researcher-provoked diaries. Also you need to remember that they are always written for an implicit audience so are subject to some extent of self-presentation (Hookway, 2008).

## Visual images as documentary sources

In the present 'mass-mediated world where rich, colorful, multilayered, sound effects-laden, quick-moving, quick-cutting, audio-visual information is increasingly the norm' (Kozinets and Belk, 2006: 335), marketing researchers and visually oriented sociologists have become interested in harnessing the capabilities of new technologies to present their work in multi-media forms. Rather than relying solely on the traditional written dissertation or journal publication, they offer their raw data, work in progress and also final interpretations on websites, including photographs, video and audio segments, interviews, documents, links to other websites, and also space for commentary by readers and participants. In future, such sites will offer valuable resources to those interested in undertaking historical studies and secondary analyses of the visual texts related to marketing communications and consumer culture. For an overview of examples of this type of work in sociology, we suggest you refer to Harper (2005).

When you draw on visual images to support your research, both static and moving images can be used as data sources. These offer 'restricted but powerful records of real-world, real-time actions and events' (Loizos, 2000: 92), as well as insights into the cultural dimensions of, say, the marketplace or organizations or the marketing communications profession. Brand logos, corporate identities, product images, advertising images and creative drawings depicting personal identity are all visual phenomena of interest to marketing communications researchers. Visual sources of data include photographs, paintings, advertisements, films, videos and websites. Some may occur autonomously, while others may be motivated by the requests of researchers for participants to capture their experiences or feelings visually. To date, public relations investigators have yet to take much interest in analysing the visual image.

Visual methods are commonly employed in ethnographic research to support researchers' observations by portraying aspects of the phenomenon under investigation as well as the context in which they occur. For example, photos or videos can elucidate how rail commuters respond to a billboard on a station platform. Alternatively, pictures drawn by a researcher or research participant while sitting in on a round-table meeting of communication professionals can indicate the unspoken hierarchical status of some in that particular situation. Sounds and images from digital recording equipment can be incorporated directly into fieldnotes.

Visual data, therefore, can help you explore contemporary and historical perspectives on communication activities, as well as physical and spatial features related to your phenomenon of interest. They also can be valuable as prompts to evoke memories and feelings in participants (see the section on 'Projective and elicitation techniques', pp. 291–297). In marketing communications research, especially that undertaken by the advertising industry, visuals are a common source of data. Visual analysis may be based on a single photo, advertisement or film, but this is rare as researchers usually depend on a series of images in order to make comparisons or establish patterns.

**Example 17.5: Analysing television advertisements as visual documents**

In the Arab Gulf, doctoral candidate Layla Al Saqer examined the role of public relations in facilitating participation in social change. One of her two case studies centred on a national drugs prevention programme in Kuwait, which she studied through an analysis of a series of television advertisements. In viewing the images, she focused on deconstructing the inherent power relations. She noted how the advertisements used communication techniques and technical devices designed to draw viewers into the 'story', not as empowered participants but as publics amenable to the authority of the narrator.

Alongside the visual texts, she studied transcripts of interviews and focus groups, fieldnotes from observations and newspaper reports (Al Saqer, 2007).

Holbrook (2005) draws attention to the collective photographic essay as a visual research approach, which rests on the use of photos and short written descriptions collected from participants who have previously been given a disposable camera by researchers. They are expected to take pictures of scenes, objects or situations that they perceive as reflecting the topic of research (in two of Holbrook's projects, this was the experience of living in New York City and what participants defined as 'beauty'). They then write briefly an explanation of what the photos mean and why they chose a particular image. Researchers then analyse the photos and writing by seeking common themes and categories across both types of data.

Holbrook suggests that this approach to visual analysis is a quick and potentially insightful method for gleaning insights into the meanings that participants associate with the phenomenon in question. Perhaps there may be value in extending this technique through the use of social media such as Facebook, whereby participants could upload and comment on their photos or videos, and their social networking partners could offer further comment. In this way, you might gain novel insights into the process through which cultural meanings are constructed concerning your topic of investigation.

Depending on the aim of your research project, you might ask participants to draw pictures which they then explain to you, or which they collaboratively interpret in a focus group setting. In a sense, requesting that participants take photos or make videos and films for research purposes can give rise to similar issues to those related to the use of research diaries. They can be used to explore the same topics, but have the additional benefit of being able to show objects, people and contexts that the image creator considers important, together with their interrelationships.

### Example 17.6: Asking participants to create and explain drawings in research

David Stiles examined organizational image, identity and related communication expressions. He was concerned to identify how stakeholders perceived two business schools, one in the UK and one in Canada. He asked them to draw how they saw their relevant organization by prompting them as follows:

> Imagine that you're trying to communicate with someone who can't read or write. Some people say that each place you work in has its own personality. I want you to imagine that your organization has its own personality and do a rough sketch to try to explain to this person who can't read or write what that personality looks like.
>
> (Stiles, 2004: 129)

After participants had made individual drawings, they discussed them in a focus group, moving on to collaboratively compile a composite drawing. The researcher videotaped the focus group discussions and activities.

We briefly draw your attention here to a new form of visual expression and medium for which researchers have not yet refined specific methods of research (Pace, 2008). This is YouTube, where users act as film producers, directors or actors, uploading self-recorded videos or compilations of re-edited images culled from advertisements, films and television programmes. On the site, the images develop meaning over time because of their relation to other material on the site, cultural artefacts such as major television series and films, and ongoing cultural debates. Other Internet-based forms resemble YouTube, such as blogs and chats, but what is different about YouTube is the following:

- the purposeful intent of users to disseminate stories to an audience;
- the use of 'visual tales' (Pace, 2008: 220);

- the chronological sequence of the collection of images and episodes on the site.

At the time of writing, YouTube offers a challenge to investigators because there are few academic studies to illuminate how best to analyse and interpret its content. However, it is likely to be a valuable resource for those interested in branding, consumption, contemporary culture and public discourse.

### *Analysing visual documents*

It is not uncommon to analyse visual texts by the analytical method of qualitative content analysis, following much the same procedure as you would for written documents, that is, coding, categorizing and seeking broad themes (see Chapter 18). Note that software packages such as NVivo are able to assist with analysing visual images as well as written texts.

However, some researchers prefer to follow a discourse analysis approach (see Chapter 10) or rely on semiotics to inform their analysis, as in Al Saquer's (2007) enquiry in the Arab Gulf (see Example 17.5). In brief, semiotics offers a set of methodological tools for revealing the hidden meanings inherent in visual texts. As an approach to analysing symbols in everyday life, it can be employed to study all forms of data, although we confine our discussion here to visual evidence. Semiotic analysis allows you to take an image apart and trace how it works in relation to wider cultural meanings. The basic idea for this type of visual analysis is that certain aspects of an image, such as an advertisement, stand for something else; thus they function as signs. Moisander and Valtonen (2006) give the example of high heeled shoes, which might be considered to represent femininity.

If you choose semiotic tools to analyse advertising, your aim is to uncover the cultural communication codes that marketing communicators draw on in order to persuade consumers to form desired interpretations about brands. As a researcher, you are interested in examining how advertisements make connections between the product (such as a Rolex watch) and another sign (such as the famous tennis star Roger Federer), thereby transferring the meanings associated with the sign (such as Federer's glamour, fame and affluence) to the product. Because consumers interpret advertisements based on their cultural understandings, it is important that you analyse advertising and other visual texts within their wider cultural contexts. This means searching for the meaning of advertising messages by examining their interdependence with other cultural texts and images.

There are two key terms in semiotics linked with how meaning is identified by researchers. *Denotative meaning* refers to the obvious or apparent meaning of something, such as large waves indicating the probability of good surfing conditions. Connotative meaning is that which is associated with a certain social context, and often includes personal feelings or the cultural value associated with something. For a seaside community that had experienced the disaster of a tsunami, for example, large waves might be associated with the loss of home, family, the breakdown of community and feelings of fear and grief.

Schroeder (2006) has extended ideas from semiotics specifically to the arena of marketing research. His work is informed by a critical perspective, concerned with the contextualized and historical nature of contemporary images, and the role of marketing in creating cultural meaning. He points to a set of questions for interrogating marketing-related visual data, which include:

- How do images communicate strategically?
- How do images circulate in consumer culture?
- How do consumers understand advertising images?
- How do images relate to brand meaning?
- What does the World Wide Web mean for visual consumption?
- What are some ethical and social implications for the reliance on images in marketing communication?

(Schroeder, 2006: 304)

Schroeder offers as an exemplar a critical visual analysis of an advertising campaign for the Calvin Klein perfume CK One featuring the model Kate Moss. He illustrates how meaning is visually constructed in the campaign through the use of wider cultural codes, noting how the image of Moss – as a spokesperson and icon of alternative fashion – contributes to CK One's meaning construction (p. 316). For more on semiotics, see Mick *et al.* (2004) and Rose (2001).

In summary, visual images such as photographs, drawings, films or videos may be created by research participants themselves for the specific purposes of a research study. Alternatively, they may have been produced autonomously, coming into existence during the course of the investigation (such as when a video is uploaded onto YouTube) or have been composed prior to the research commencing, for example an historical picture or an archived photo collection. They can provide material additional to other sources of data or stand on their own. In all cases, they are analysed as documentary sources in order to find new insights into the phenomenon or area under study.

### *Limitations of visual images as documentary sources*

Although the images we see in pictures and films and on websites may seem like 'reality', in fact the way in which we interpret these is how we have been taught to see them, i.e. through a process of cultural construction. While the camera may not lie, the photographer or videographer always has a purpose and point of view towards the taking of images and therefore visual documents are not objective representations of something real. Techniques of manipulation are common in all professional or amateur image-taking: some things are selected while others are ignored; images are composed, edited and digitally enhanced, etc. It is important to consider why certain aspects have been emphasized and what has been left out. Further, Loizos (2000) reminds us also that visual texts were constructed in a particular context and by different people. Do take care, then, when selecting and analysing images; look not only for detail but also for overall meaning.

Another concern about interpretation centres on visual materials that are created at the behest of researchers. Stiles (2004) cautions investigators not to rely on their own ‘expert’ judgement of what participants are trying to convey ‘because second-hand accounts invite misinterpretation’ (p.137). Instead, researchers should attempt to analyse the drawers’ or photographers’ own explanations.

## Projective and elicitation techniques

Projective and elicitation techniques rely on the use of written, visual or multi-media texts as well as physical products to stimulate participants to talk about often deep-seated beliefs and opinions. Although public relations researchers rarely use these techniques, marketing researchers consider them invaluable for uncovering the often subliminal characteristics of consumers, such as consumers’ basic motivations to buy or not to buy, consumers’ reactions to colours, size and shape of packaging, or names of products. They also see them as effective in eliciting the cultural discourses of informants about marketplace phenomena. The insights gained from projective techniques are often used to inform the development of advertising campaigns.

### Key point

Projective and elicitation techniques are ways of using stimuli and indirect questioning to motivate participants to verbalize unframed or subconscious attitudes, or underlying emotional values and needs. They are used also to generate cultural talk about phenomena under investigation, stimulating participants to express ideas and construct meanings. They are always used alongside other techniques such as interviews, focus groups or observation.

Because people’s motives and attitudes are implicit, often they are not able to articulate these. Therefore, by asking participants to interpret the behaviour of others or to provide a response to ambiguous verbal or visual stimuli such as a picture or a story, you are inviting them to indirectly project their own personality, beliefs and feelings onto the situation, and thus express their personal emotions. This enables you to generate information about participants that they are not even conscious of themselves.

Projective and elicitation techniques are useful when you are researching sensitive topics that people have difficulty talking about, such as if they are afraid to make themselves look silly or prejudiced or because they consider that it may be impolite or offensive to talk about the topic. The techniques are invaluable for overcoming these sorts of difficulties in cross-cultural research.

A further benefit is that they help to overcome the communication barrier of social desirability factors where informants try to say the right things to please the interviewer.

Projective techniques have a long history in sociological and anthropological research (especially in ethnographic studies), their origins dating back to the late nineteenth century (Rook, 2006). Of the many techniques used in contemporary marketing communications research, the most common are outlined below.

### *Vignettes*

These are short scenarios or stories relevant to your research topic that can take a single form or a combination, including written and spoken narratives, visual imagery such as drawings, photos, videos or sound. Participants are invited to respond by projecting themselves into the imaginary scenario, which may be complex or relatively straightforward, as in Example 17.7. By commenting on a story or scenario in this way, participants can distance themselves to some extent from the issue under investigation, making it easier to talk about personal experiences.

**Example 17.7: Using vignettes to study a sensitive topic**

A common PR practice in China is to pay journalists for media coverage. In order to elicit the views of Chinese PR practitioners about the ethics of the practice, masters student Jewel Du used a series of vignettes within interviews. These included the following:

*Scenario 1*

> Your new client (Body Shop cosmetics) has just entered the Chinese market and needs media coverage to establish the company's presence. You know that you secure positive stories in a local publication by paying for them – but the clients refuse this request and think this is an unethical way of doing PR. What do you do? (*There is no 'right' or 'wrong' answer*.)

*Scenario 2*

> You and your team are trying to pitch to a big budget client. This is very competitive but you have heard that a journalist's friend knows this client very well (maybe through a working context). What do you recommend to your company and your team? (*There is no 'right' or 'wrong' answer*.)
>
> (Du, 2007)

### *Photo/video-elicitation, mood boards and collages*

When researchers use their own sets of still or moving photographs – or those taken by informants – to provoke responses from interviewees, they do so based on the notion that images can provide a rich set of visual cues that help both interviewer and interviewees to consider and talk about aspects of social and cultural phenomena. In a similar way, images clipped out of magazines to create a mood board or collage, and drawings created by participants, can also be used as stimuli as well as visual data, interpreted as visual cultural stories (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006: 96).

**Example 17.8: Using mood boards in brand image research**

Participants in a Dutch study which aimed to differentiate between four beer brands were asked to identify celebrities who in their view were typical of the beer brands. From piles of magazines, they cut out pictures of those who matched well with the individual brands, gluing these onto a separate sheet for each brand.

Unlike in many studies which employ mood boards for further elicitation, the researchers did not carry out follow-up interviews with the collage creators in order to verbally debrief about what they were trying to say and follow up any further issues. Therefore the study is somewhat limited, relying on the interpretations solely of the researchers rather than in conjunction with participants.

The mood boards were analysed by recording the numbers and types of celebrities selected as well as the general impression produced by the collages (Hofstede *et al.*, 2007).

### *The Thematic Apperception Test (TAT)*

Here you ask individuals to graphically depict a story or scenario in their own writing or through a drawing and then you look for the common themes in what they have said. Another way of applying the test is to present informants with a series of cartoons or pictures (as for photo-elicitation described on p. 293) depicting a particular situation, say a woman walking past an outdoor poster then stopping to look at it. You then ask them to describe that person and her responses.

### *Word or picture association*

Using this method of free association, you ask participants to say the first thing that comes to mind when you show them a picture, or give them a particular word. For example, you might say, 'Tell me the first thing you think of when I say '*X*' brand.' This provides clues about consumer vocabulary concerning a particular brand.

In cross-cultural research, it is important to develop stimuli that are equivalent in interpretation and meaning in the cultures being studied. Line drawings and pictures are useful because they are subject to fewer problems of interpretation or culturally determined role models. They therefore help to avoid miscomprehension by participants.

**Example 17.9: Using free association in media brand research**

In a North American study of media brand differentiation conducted by Walter McDowell, participants were invited to respond to two free association tasks, which were expressed by the researcher as follows:

1 When I say the word CNN (or Fox News Channel or MSNBC), what thoughts and feelings come to mind?
2 Among the three 24-hour cable news channels, Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN, how do you see CNN (or Fox News or MSNBC) as being different than the others?

(McDowell, 2004: 314)

The author concluded that this was a feasible methodology to capture and differentiate abstract media brand associations in a qualitative research setting and that the technique could be useful for more elaborate studies in the future.

### *Sentence completion*

Like word and picture association, if you employ the technique of sentence completion you are relying on spontaneity of response. Participants need to complete sentences, stories, arguments or conversations, such as:

- When/If I am working with an overly demanding client, I. . .
- If I feel a strong emotion in relation to my client, I. . .
- People who use the Internet to find holiday information are. . .
- When I see a young guy driving a fast sportscar, I. . .

Individuals are required to project themselves into the situation and indicate their feelings in relation to the event (such as in a consultancy–client relationship), or to indicate their perception of someone is a particular situation (such as the Internet user). If your participants are sports car drivers, Internet users or PR clients, it is generally assumed that this description also applies to them.

If the area of enquiry is sensitive, you would begin your series with a few innocuous sentences, gradually ‘funnelling’ down to more difficult ones. The sentence completion test is particularly useful if people are unable to openly express anxieties and annoyance.

### *Projective questioning*

When you use projective questioning, you aim to discover participants’ feelings by asking them to give their opinions about the actions or attitudes of other people. This allows them to respond freely because they are not stating explicitly how they would personally feel about or deal with the same situation.

### *Brand mapping*

This is also classed as a completion technique. You place a variety of brands or products in front of participants so they can see, handle and discuss them. This enables you to find out people's perceptions about the image of brands and their relationship to them.

### *Cartoons (or blank balloons)*

Cartoons usually involve two characters, with one character's words in a speech balloon and the other's balloon empty. You invite participants to give the reply that is suitable for the occasion. Responses are limited to a few words. The idea is that participants project their own opinions onto the words or thoughts of the cartoon character. A picture showing a consumer talking to a travel agent, for example, could be used to assess consumer attitudes towards travel agents in general or towards booking holidays through travel agencies.

### *Limitations of projective and elicitation techniques*

Like other qualitative methods, the value of projective and enabling techniques depends to a large extent on your expertise as a researcher. It requires considerable skill to identify and code common themes in participants' answers. Also, as a moderator you bring your own style to discussions and your subjective judgement to the interpretation of results. Interpretation of the data is highly subjective.

Projective tools should never be relied upon to the exclusion of discussion and evaluation. Even if they are produced by participants themselves, such as their own video narratives or photo collages, these need to be employed as probes to further elicit expressions of participants' responses to the task.

When dealing with sensitive issues or privacy concerns, consider whether it is appropriate to select homogeneous samples for the employment of your projective techniques. For example, in a study using projective methods to elicit childhood memories about brands and their meanings, Braun-LaTour *et al.* (2007) noted that each generation has a different viewpoint about brands, based on the cultural environment in which they grew up. Therefore, the researchers ensured that each of their age cohorts was interviewed in a separate focus group.

Projective and elicitation techniques are not without their critics and should be used with extreme caution, not least because of the controversy surrounding their ethical nature. Rook (2006: 153) notes that they have been 'admonished as intrusive procedures that trick respondents into giving information that they would otherwise not be inclined to provide'. However, these challenges to their value may apply less to marketing communications research than to research in clinical psychology. In marketing research, Rook suggests, participants are more likely to find projective exercises 'interesting, engaging and fun' (p. 153). Nevertheless, he raises a caution that is worth reflecting on before making the decision to include the technique in your research.

Projective and elicitation techniques are time consuming to apply – and therefore may be expensive to conduct. They are impossible to replicate identically over time.

Unless you are highly trained at interviewing or running focus groups, you are unlikely to be successful in employing projective tools, which are always used in conjunction with interviews or focus groups. However, marketing researchers continue to use them because they break down many barriers to communication by enabling participants to associate a feeling or behaviour with a different person or object than themselves.

## Summary

- *Documents*, also called texts, are important in qualitative research because the information contained in them may differ from that which is obtainable from other methods of data collection. Documents might be written, visual, multi-media and Internet based.
- Documents endure over time, allowing you to gain historical insights.
- Qualitative content analysis or document analysis can be undertaken without engaging with individuals involved in your study. This is helpful when access is restricted or denied.
- Written and visual materials should be cross-checked and triangulated with other sources of data.
- When interpreting them, they should not be divorced from the social settings in which they are generated and interpreted.
- *Diaries* offer insights into the attitudes, feelings, emotions and responses of people involved in specific situations
- Because diary-based research involves high trust relationships between the researcher and the diary-creator, it is important to respect confidentiality at all times.
- *Visual material* such as photographs, films and paintings is useful in qualitative research, whether it exists prior to the research or is generated through the research project.
- *Projective techniques* allow participants to indirectly project their own personality, beliefs and feelings onto situations. Therefore they are valuable for sensitive or cross-cultural research.
- *Analysis* of documents can be done in a variety of ways, for example qualitative content analysis, discourse analysis and semiotic analysis.
- *Documents and diaries* are capable of standing alone as research sources. However, these and other methods outlined in this chapter may also be used together with interviews, focus groups or observations.

# Part IV

# Analysing, interpreting and writing about the data

# 18 Analysing and interpreting the data

Each methodological approach to qualitative research has distinct ways of analysing data, which are addressed within the relevant sections of each chapter in Part II. Generic analytical procedures – those not associated with a specific methodology or research orientation – are outlined in this chapter. Research of this nature sometimes occurs in undergraduate investigations when students opt to employ qualitative methods without following any one research approach. For a brief overview of generic qualitative research, turn back to Chapter 6.

This chapter outlines the general process of qualitative data analysis and considers:

- a general approach to qualitative data analysis;
- organizing the data prior to analysing them;
- coding and categorizing the evidence;
- finding patterns and working propositions;
- interpreting the data;
- evaluating the interpretation and demonstrating how it conforms to quality criteria;
- some specific analytical issues, including analysing multiple data sources, documents, fieldnotes, electronic sources and secondary analysis;
- computer-aided data analysis software.

## Introduction

When you have finished collecting your source material, you may feel that you are 'drowning in data' because of the large amount of evidence that you have accumulated even for a small-scale study. Over a short period of time, it is likely that you will have acquired an array of fieldnotes, company reports and records, emails, research diaries, transcripts of interviews, and also perhaps a collection of oral, visual or multi-media information such as photographs, films, radio broadcasts or websites. The process of bringing order to this great variety of data by organizing, structuring and construing meaning is what researchers call 'qualitative data analysis'. Starting with your raw data, you use analytic procedures to transform them into something meaningful, thereby gaining understanding (Gibbs, 2007).

The discussion in this chapter focuses on written evidence; if you are interested in reading about analysing visual materials, turn back to Chapter 17.

New researchers who embark on qualitative research for the first time often place too much time and emphasis on the literature review section of their dissertation, not fully appreciating the importance of the analysis and interpretation stage of research. Yet this is where you offer your own, creative insights into the meaning of what you have found, and therefore it is primarily in this section that you show the originality of your work.

The process of analysing, interpreting and explaining is not easy, may be frustratingly slow and time consuming, and also involves a good deal of uncertainty as you try to make sense of the data. Yet it can be exciting and rewarding also when you make new discoveries that eventually will contribute to knowledge or practice in public relations or marketing communications. At the same time, the process also stimulates your intellectual growth and professional development as a researcher.

**Example 18.1 The student voice**

> The greatest sense of discovery I have ever had occurred when I was analysing the focus group data. . .I started finding things that nobody had found before, organizing the data in ways that led to a theory. It was a long and painstaking task going through the data, but I needed that complete immersion to find what I was looking for.
>
> (Peter Simmons, doctoral student)

> I didn’t have any real problems analysing my data. The methods for analysis that I had discussed with my supervisor worked well for the data I obtained and thematic recommendations became clear as the analysis progressed.
>
> (Lauren Magid, undergraduate student)

> Analysing data was incredibly difficult. I think I did about 10 drafts before I was happy with the themes I had chosen.
>
> (Elysha Hickey, undergraduate student)

> Although I used software to help me analyse the data, I preferred doing my analysis manually. I wrote notes on the transcripts or highlighted important words and phrases with a pen. I found overarching themes and major categories from two different perspectives. . .there was an interplay between those. . .It was great for me to see how my work mirrored some of the findings of the published literature – and also found new things too.
>
> (Catherine Archer, masters student)

Qualitative analysis differs from quantitative because in most cases – though not in phenomenology – it does not take place in one discrete stage after all the data has been collected but starts as soon as you have carried out your first interview (or other method of data collection). The adaptable nature of qualitative research means that the results of your ongoing analysis inform and interact with your subsequent data collection, allowing you to ask questions or even change your methods depending on what you are finding out.

The qualitative research process, then, is both inductive and deductive. Usually it starts inductively. This means that, initially at least, you find patterns, themes and categories directly from the data – instead of imposing themes on the data that you decided upon before commencing your analysis (i.e. at this stage you do not search the data for the topics, themes and concepts that you identified earlier in your literature review; that comes at a later stage). Later the process of qualitative research becomes deductive because as your research progresses you develop working propositions and ideas which you test out over the next stages of your data collection and analysis. This may even involve searching for new data that confirm your propositions. Often at this point you will draw also on the literature to relate your data to the findings of other relevant studies or to theoretical ideas.

There is a constant interplay, therefore, between analysis and data collection, which is why qualitative research is often described as iterative.

Occasionally, qualitative data analysis may start out with deductive analysis. This occurs when you are more explicit about the themes or categories you want to consider at the outset of the coding process. Reasons for doing so may be because you wish to use qualitative research to test an existing theory (this occurs rarely in qualitative research) or you wish to investigate the transferability of another author's ideas to a different social context. For example, Edwards (2009) incorporated some of the core principles of Bourdieu's theory into her coding scheme because she was interested in exploring the application of his theory to a PR setting. In another example, Ravasi and Schultz (2006) sought to elaborate theory about organizational identity, image and culture rather than generate a completely new theoretical framework. Therefore, they drew on the literature to provide labels for the terms and concepts they found in their primary data. This type of deductive analysis is similar to an inductive approach in that it is cyclical and iterative, involving you in close and repeated consideration of the data. The main difference, however, is that you begin your analysis with a loose idea of some predefined areas of interest which you explicitly look for in the data (Lewins and Silver, 2007: 86).

A second instance of where deductive analysis might occur is if you simply know what you are looking for, as in the case of action research, where your focus is always on applied and practical understanding or solutions for a specific organizational or industry problem. In this instance, your coding might be based on particular questions you ask at the outset, i.e. you code interviewees' responses with the relevant question-labels. However, coding in this way can restrict the adaptability of your research, causing you to overlook interesting and useful aspects that are outside the question structure (Lewins and Silver, 2007).

**Key point**

Qualitative data analysis is concerned with the following:

- *Data management and organization*: an initial process of carving up the mass of unwieldy data into manageable chunks by coding, memoing and summarizing them into patterns and configuration.
- *Asking questions of the data*: what is going on? Who says? Where and when is it happening?
- *Interpretation*: bringing meaning and insight to the words and acts of participants in the study by generating concepts and theories (or theory-based generalizations) which explain the findings. The key question to ask and answer at this point is: 'So what does this finding mean in the light of the literature and my main research question?' You then communicate the meaning of your findings to others through your written report.

Although data coding and interpretation are common to most types of qualitative analysis, there are no rigid stages or rules for undertaking the process, unlike in quantitative research, where there are well-established methods and procedures. Flexibility and openness lie at the heart of qualitative research, though not all approaches are the same. You should follow the analytical approach which you consider best fits your overall research design and the nature of your data (turn back to the chapters in Part II to read more about the specific analytical techniques related to each methodological approach).

For one of the clearest and most well-articulated discussions of how data collection and analysis were done, we suggest you seek out the article on organizational identity threats by Ravasi and Schultz (2006) in the leading international publication *Academy of Management Journal*. Alternatively, in the *Journal of Public Relations Research* Edwards (2009) offers a sound methodological reflection on her analysis of power in public relations.

In this chapter, we present a general approach to qualitative data analysis, considering first the overall process of analysis and then some generic analytical techniques.

## The process of qualitative analysis

Analysis of the data does not start when data collection ends, but should be continuous throughout your entire study. Whenever you transcribe an interview, write up your fieldnotes, log and store any visual data, or reflect upon your research experiences, you are likely to be undertaking some form of preliminary analysis because new ideas will probably emerge which will lead you into a new area of exploration. As you undertake your fieldwork, you should be searching for common themes in your data, making a start on coding and developing some early concepts. We discuss how to do this later in the chapter.

The preliminary stages of analysis are fairly simple, although later stages become more complex as your study evolves. Begin by writing (in a new computer document or handwritten memo) a description of the factual elements of your research, such as the overall context, the setting and the specifics of the participants, as it is important to know these elements before beginning the analysis itself.

### *Transcribing and listening*

From the start of your project, it is best to get into the habit of listening to your audio recordings as soon as possible after interviewing or observing. Go through your observation and documentary notes thoroughly, as well as other data sources such as pictures and materials downloaded from websites. This is the first step in analysing.

The second step involves transcribing your interviews and typing up any scribbled interview and fieldnotes. Alternatively, if you used a digital pen, transfer your notes immediately onto the computer. Do this while your ideas about the newly collected data are still fresh in your mind. Transcribing involves more than the simple task of transferring voice and handwritten notes into a computer file; judgements need to be made about what interactions, gestures and facial expressions to include. Type up participants' words exactly as they were spoken rather than attempting to paraphrase or summarize them because often the terms that participants use or the order in which they express ideas can be very meaningful. The section in Chapter 14 on transcribing offers more detailed advice on dealing with interview transcripts, but we emphasize here the benefits of doing your own transcribing for reasons of ethics and greater familiarity with the data.

### *Organizing the data*

It is important to check that you have recorded and labelled everything in a systematic manner. This helps to keep your data intact, complete, organized and retrievable. Cross-reference dates, names, titles, attendance at events, descriptions of settings and situations (such as communications campaigns or events that relate to your study), chronologies and so on. This is invaluable when you come to identify categories, piece together patterns and plan for further data collection. In some cases, researchers like to keep a special project book or computer file in which they jot down all of their ideas and thoughts, cross-referencing to various data sources.

Ensure that all the data are to hand. Are your fieldnotes complete? Is there anything that you have put off to write later and didn't get around to finishing? Are all of the interview transcriptions complete and have they been accurately typed up? Check the quality of all the evidence you have collected before starting to analyse it.

### *Coding and categorizing*

Coding is a central and important process in qualitative analysis (Morse and Richards, 2002) whereby you make choices about what words you will use to label the ideas or themes you see repeatedly in your data. Not only does coding help to organize the overwhelming amount of data, but it is also integral to the task of interpreting public relations and marketing communications phenomena. This is because your decision to create a particular code has a defining effect on what you find in your collated data. Coding informs the decisions you make about what is worth saving, how to divide up the material, and how incidents of, say, activities or talk relate to other items or interesting topics that you coded earlier. This process is both intuitive and creative.

Coding can be carried out manually or by using software designed for qualitative analysis. In this first section, we discuss how to analyse manually without the aid of computer software.

#### Key point

A code serves as a label that represents an idea or a phenomenon in sections of a text which are similar or have the same meaning. Codes help you to reduce and simplify the evidence in order to begin to make sense of it. You undertake coding throughout your analysis of the data.

Coding does not start until you have read through your evidence several times and are so thoroughly immersed in it that you have begun to get an overall idea of the big picture. Even if you have conducted only a couple of preliminary interviews or observations, you will start to get a sense of some of the key words, issues or themes that seem to be repeated in the evidence. Look for indicators of these early ideas in other materials you have collected, such as documents, broadcast texts and digital records, making a note in the margin against the relevant passages. The labels you use to describe these early ideas are the beginnings of coding, the purpose of which is to identify and constantly compare commonalities and differences in your material in order to formulate categories of interest.

#### Example 18.2: Analysing the crisis communications of a Swedish company

How a Swedish tobacco firm engaged in crisis communication and image repair work was the focus of a study by Peter Svensson. He collected all public statements made by the company over the course of the crisis: CEO speeches, articles in newspapers, television news broadcasts, press releases and the annual report. To analyse these, he carried out the following procedures:

1. He organized the public statements chronologically in order to reconstruct the order in which the crisis events occurred.
2. He organized and coded the material thematically by use of concept cards. He labelled each card with a word or phrase that he identified in the data, then added onto the cards relevant pieces of text or words from his collection of evidence.
3. He continuously compared, contrasted and reorganized the concept cards until all the material had been captured, cut-up and labelled onto appropriate cards.
4. He reorganized the cards until there were 'as few labels as possible without losing touch with the complexity of the data' (Svensson, 2009: 562). This resulted in seven large cards (or overall labels), indicating key themes in the material.
5. He clustered the seven themes into two overriding themes: *the discourse of collectivism* and *the discourse of individualism.* These represented broad tendencies in the material, and served to encapsulate the complexity of the public image repair activities of the tobacco company.

In writing about the case study, Svensson structured his discussion of the findings under two subheadings according to the two main themes, presenting supporting evidence in the form of quotations from the material that he had previously grouped under each label or code. (See also Example 19.8.)

How do you know what to identify and how to describe what you find? You might discover something that is particularly interesting and label it with the words that informants themselves use. Or you might choose words that describe an idea in the evidence such as 'trust', 'ethics' or 'responsibility'. Or you might find hints in the evidence of something you need to think more deeply about which you could label 'Potentially important'. If you use as labels the specific expressions or words that participants use to suggest an idea, these are called '*in vivo*' codes. Not every interview, observation or document text reveals interesting *in vivo* codes, but when you do spot them in the data it's worth taking advantage of them as they have the ability to transport you directly into the world of your participants (Corbin, 2006a).

**Example 18.3: *In vivo* coding**

When Peter Simmons investigated sports communication, he identified a number of *in vivo* codes which related to how referees communicated with players. These included the following:

- Ref should know the game.
- Ref should know where the ball is going.
- Let the game go on.
- Didn't get away with it.

(Simmons, 2009)

An alternative type of code is a 'topic code' (Richards, 2005), which is when you yourself create a term to describe something that you see in the data but which the people in your study are either not aware of themselves or are not able to express. It is important here to take a great deal of care in making this type of construction in order to avoid creating concepts that are not really in the data.

When you have identified a code (by either highlighting words or phrases with a highlighter or writing in the margin of a text and then making a note in your notebook or computer file), compare new evidence as you collect it against your original examples. Check to see that new material fits with your original code. If it does, then label it with the same code.

**Example 18.4: Coding a focus group transcript**

After a salmonella poisoning outbreak in the UK stemming from Cadbury's chocolate bars, the company delayed recalling its products or making a public announcement. In the wake of the controversy, master's student Kate Price undertook a study of trust and communications. This is how she coded one page of a focus group transcript.

| *Participants* | *Utterances* | *Codes* |
|---|---|---|
| K | Well you know you just can't go wrong with honesty – and that seems to be in such short supply. So even if [Cadbury's] had delayed [their announcement] and they had kept it under wraps, hoping that [the crisis] would go away and nobody would ever find out about it – you could kind of forgive somebody for that because you could just think, 'I might be a bit freaked out if I'd made a mistake' – [but] if they'd said 'boy – we got that wrong'. . . | 'Can't go wrong with honesty'<br>Fear of honesty<br>'Can't go wrong with honesty'. |

| *Participants* | *Utterances* | *Codes* |
|---|---|---|
| A | . . .the old hair shirt. . . | |
| K | . . .'we really did get that wrong and we're sorry about that and we think we've made a big mistake and we did not show the respect to our customers we should have done, so we're really sorry' | Importance of apology |
| J | 'And we've taken steps to make sure it doesn't happen again'. . . | |
| C | People don't like saying sorry though, do they? | Fear of honesty |
| A | No, they don't. | |
| K | Which is so stupid because it's the surest way, I think, to get people to believe what you're saying again. | Importance of apology |
| *Interviewer* | *Is there any kind of atonement that they could have done and didn't do?* | |
| A | That would have probably been sufficient actually – just to admit they were wrong. It's like trying to get a straight answer out of a politician. | Importance of apology |
| K | It felt like that guy on the radio reminded me of a politician – that Cadbury's guy. | Cadbury spokesperson as politician |
| A | Well, he would be a politician – he was their spokesman. | Cadbury spokesperson as politician |
| K | He was a spin guy – yeah. | 'spin guy' |
| *Interviewer* | *So would you have been more convinced if it had been someone from their factory – or one of their scientists?* | |
| A | Yeah – at least they would have known what they were talking about. You wouldn't have felt they were just giving the party line. | Spokesperson as individual expert, not politician |
| Jt | And presumably a [Cadbury's] committee made a decision on exactly what should be released as opposed to years ago it would have been the owner who would | No individual responsible – no accountability |

| *Participants* | *Utterances* | *Codes* |
|---|---|---|
| | have said, 'We've goofed chaps, let's apologise'. . .And [now] they would have had all their hangers-on and the spin doctors and this and that and the other because again, like K was saying about globalization, it would have an impact perhaps further afield than just here in the UK and hit their share prices. | Impact of lack of honesty |
| A | But the funny thing is, even ten or fifteen years ago we might have actually accepted the situation as it has played out but I think we have just become the ultimately cynical generation. | Customer cynicism |
| J | Mmm. | |
| A | Because it doesn't matter who you listen to being interviewed any more, you just get the feeling 'Ok, it's another interview, you've got something to sell, you've got a point of view to make, you are going to tell us anything you think we want to hear.' | Customer cynicism |
| Jt | Or are we less naïve, do you think? | |

(Price, 2007)

The *in vivo* codes are 'can't go wrong with honesty' and 'spin guys' because these are the direct phrases used by participants. Other labels are topic codes created by the researcher herself to describe an idea in the data.

A page of interview transcript or fieldnotes may end up with many codes written in the margins. Some passages may be coded in more than one way because they relate to more than one theme or issue that you have identified. The same codes will also relate to relevant examples in other types of data you have collected. Don't worry at this early stage about having too many codes; you can refine them as you go along.

In many cases, as you read through your texts you will find that some codes seem to belong together and therefore can be linked. In practical terms, this means that ideas which belong together can be marked with a pen in the same colour. You may find it useful to copy and paste these sections into a file on your computer labelled with a new combination code. In this way, you start to shift from simple descriptive codes to developing broader categories, patterns and abstract concepts. For an example of this, turn to Example 18.6, which illustrates over three columns (1) some extracts from interviews, (2) the initial codes which the researcher applied to the quotations, and (3) the broader categories, which encompassed a number of the initial codes. Note how the codes of 'perception of equality' and 'common wellbeing' have been embraced within the category of 'motivation to share'. Note also the comment at the foot of the Example which indicates that all of the researcher's categories were refined down further to four overarching categories, and to one unifying theme.

If you are analysing more than one type of data (documents and transcripts, for example), it is important to cross-reference between the different data sources, seeking similarities and differences within and between all your data-texts. As you identify codes, and material which fits with those codes, you need to transfer the evidence into files so all the examples for each code are collected together into one category. Remember to identify the extracts before adding them to the coded files. Traditionally, researchers either used pens of different colours to mark particular categories or themes or physically cut up their data-texts, pasting sections into coded folders or ring-binders. Today, it is possible to do this more quickly by computer, opening an on-screen file for each code and pasting in sections of evidence. Alternatively, the software programs for qualitative analysis facilitate your coding and categorizing, thus enabling you to manage your ideas systematically. We discuss some of these electronic packages towards the end of this chapter (pp. 322–323).

### *Memoing*

Writing memos stimulates your thinking and helps you retain your momentum. In addition to fieldnotes and other types of memos, Gibbs (2007) suggests that you write a memo at the analysis stage in which you record all the labels you use in your emerging coding system, describing the ideas to which the codes and categories refer, and also reflecting on their potential relationships to broader, expanded categories. When writing memos of this nature, don't be afraid to be creative and 'off the wall' with your thinking as sometimes what may seem far-fetched conceptually might end up being highly insightful if verified later in your data (Corbin, 2006b).

#### Example 18.5: Memoing as analytical reflection

Following a conference discussion where she had presented some of the conceptual ideas emerging from her doctoral research, Jo Fawkes wrote a memo to herself about her learning experience. Writing in this way helped her to wrestle with the critical comments of colleagues, to reflect upon their challenge to her work and to use these ideas to further develop the concepts as she moved forward in analysing the data.

> Surely new insights [from my research] will raise new questions for practitioners, the profession as a whole? [I'm] finding it bit depressing,

the stress on practice, feels like ideas are being constrained into boxes, marked 'outcomes' rather than the experience of the journey – luckily other panel members seem keen to encourage free thought, to expand and challenge existing concepts and can see that something new might/will emerge from this process which – if the concepts are thought through clearly enough – will have an impact in the outer world. This is my sense: if the ideas stay undeveloped and woolly, they will float away, but if they are rigorously challenged throughout the thesis, something of substance will result. The fact that I can't exactly describe this result at the beginning of the process is not a weakness.

Is part of the above tension a reflection of the dynamics contained in [the philosopher] Jung's ideas: they are bound to be threatening to the status quo because they demand we look at the hidden underbelly of practice, professionalism and of course our own selves above all? Perhaps jumping to results looks safer? It is important to allow for current ideas to be destabilized for new ones to surface, means letting go of certainties about what PR is and isn't, and what ethics is and isn't.

- *PR & shadow*:
  - People pleasing aspects of PR:
    - o seduction – empathy/anima;
    - o solution – control/animus;
  - shadow is most powerful in a weak ego (field?) – how mature is PR?
  - shadow is the treasure (Hollis) to be discovered and embraced;
  - who do we want to be? – our fullest, deepest self.
- *PR as hermeneutics*:
  - interpretation, shamanism, spin;
  - the translators, of one to the other; public to org; org to public;
  - the language of interpretation, narrative theory.
- *Action*:
  - Need to define terms, esp profession, to include practitioners *and* academics – the field of PR, 'community of practice' – see Bartlett, 2007.
  - Need to reclaim right to explore ideas in conceptual PhD, while *using* the 'why bother' voices as a potential audience – remember that this voice does not want to do Jungian analysis or deconstruct own ethics or that tricky stuff. Arguments must address this voice – not be stifled by it, but put the case for change, while remembering that most who take that view will not be persuaded, as is their right.

(Jo Fawkes, doctoral candidate,
personal correspondence, 2008)

As your research progresses, you should continue to search for themes, categories and clusters in the data gathered from all your sources, labelling them and then finding linkages that will help you to explain them. Continue also to draw on the literature in order to relate your data to theoretical ideas as well as contextualize them. This will help you to develop abstract concepts which explain your findings. Take care not to impose an external system on the data, such as a predetermined theoretical framework, because this will not be open to adaptation as your research progresses. Qualitative research excels at finding points of entry into new areas of enquiry, and therefore it is important to remain open to new discoveries, allowing your patterns and concepts to grow naturally out of an interaction between what you discover in the field, your experience and your evolving knowledge.

Nevertheless, you will find that because of your initial reading of the literature, existing theory will sit in the back of your mind as you ruminate on your evidence. Piore (2006) suggests that it plays a role similar to that of a team of your colleagues sitting beside you arguing about what you are finding and what your material means. So although you will certainly find new insights inductively, in a sense your readings and understanding of particular disciplinary theories will also subtly inform your interpretations.

In some cases, when you compare evidence against a code it might not fit. This may indicate that you need to consider developing another code – or perhaps your original codes may need modifying or refining. If you find that two codes describe the same phenomenon, condense them into one. As you continue collecting data, it is probable that some codes will no longer be relevant because you have found more suitable labels or because your research has taken a new direction. In this case, you will have to go back over all of your evidence, recoding your earlier data-texts.

### *The limitations of coding*

Although coding makes your data more manageable, it also deflects attention away from phenomena that you have not coded because they don't seem to fit anywhere. However, these may be potentially useful information so you need to incorporate them somehow. One way is to construct a coding system that allows you to account for uncategorized ideas and activities (skip to the section on 'Searching for negative cases and alternative explanations' – p. 319 – for more on this). Another strategy is to reject a coding system altogether and attempt to carefully tease out the subtle and various meanings of words, coupled with an informed understanding of the broader structures within the data, similar to the process used in discourse analysis (see Chapter 10). This takes account of another problem of coding, which is the loss of the context of what is said when you fragment data minutely and in great detail through coding.

### *Looking for patterns and working propositions (or emergent hypotheses)*

By now, your data will be fragmented into dozens, if not hundreds, of different codes. The next stage requires you to integrate these into something more stable, compact and coherent so that you can make sense of them all and focus your subsequent fieldwork back onto your main research question.

**Example 18.6: Identifying broad themes**

The communication processes of knowledge sharing in a Swiss knowledge-intensive company – a public relations and marketing communications consultancy with a number of different divisions – was the topic of research by masters student Barbara Schaefer. Here are examples of the broad themes she identified and used for coding quotations (in the second column) and then clustering them into larger categories (the third column). These are just a few of the multiple codes and categories she found in her data.

| *Quotations* | *Codes* | *Categories* |
|---|---|---|
| 'The right to exist of the different disciplines [and divisions] is accepted. Nobody feels that one discipline is in the lead. This has to do with the structure [here]. (W4:22) | Perception of quality | Motivation to share |
| 'In principle, I find it very fruitful to bring these two disciplines together since in branding we do mostly conceptual and creative work whereas PR works mostly conceptually and on a content level. And creative work should not only serve creativity, text not only content' (W4.2) | | |
| 'I think it's more about working together. Each of us has to work hard to reach a common aim. And it's in everybody's interest that the other one knows if things go wrong or whatever' (W3.28) | Common wellbeing | |
| For those who are motivated anyway, this is not a big issue, they would do it anyway (W4.36) | | |
| 'Each of us constantly thinks about who needs to know what' (W1:22) | | |

| *Quotations* | *Codes* | *Categories* |
|---|---|---|
| 'Of course we belong to the Group, but 'up here' we are primarily [our own named division]' (W5.2) | Own group perceived as superior | Barriers to knowledge |
| 'These advertisers, they want to sell a funny plan, and the brand identity people want to create a CD manual and stifle every idea, or the PR guys don't have the slightest idea anyway – let them write some product PR texts' (W4.20) | | |
| 'Cross-media thinking is rare. What I mean is transfer that the possibilities the internet offers should be taken into account. These possibilities are different today than they were two years ago.' (W6.8) | Lack of mutual understanding | |
| 'The know-how-transfer is extremely difficult. I mean, the other employees may hear about the accounts we have, but no exchange about solutions, ideas, etc. exists. There are single cases which are presented. But it would also be interesting for us to see what they are actually doing.' (W5.10) | | |

In writing about her methodology, Schaefer reported that she' repeatedly studied the transcripts, pinpointing interesting and repeating themes within the texts, cross-checking them with themes emerging from the document analysis and observation. From this process, one unifying pattern emerged, namely that it is mainly the conception each person has of what the relationship is (or ought to be) with the other party which impacts the degree of knowledge sharing' (2007:42). From the above categories together with others, she identified four different types of social relations which she used as headings to structure her discussion of her results.

Continue to work back and forth between the coded categories and their subcategories as you search deductively for relationships between them. These relationships indicate patterns in your data. The patterns help you to identify some broader, central themes which are able to provide you with an overall understanding of all the disparate sub-themes. The patterns also enable you to relate your findings to concepts and categories in the existing literature. Indeed, in some cases it might be appropriate to derive new codes and concepts from the literature itself.

As patterns and central themes become apparent, you are likely to begin to develop working propositions, testing their plausibility through the data. A working proposition is like a mini-hypothesis. For instance, in the study outlined in Example 18.6 a working proposition was ‘When a social relationship is conceived of as “communal” by people working in the different divisions of the company, then knowledge becomes a common resource and sharing it seems only natural’ (Schaefer, 2007: 46). By continuing to search through your data, you challenge these emergent hypotheses and confirm or refute them.

Deviant cases must be accounted for, that is, contrary occurrences or negative examples which occur when some elements of the data do not fit into your working propositions or initial explanations. Finding such cases usually challenges your working propositions, resulting in your having to revise them. For example, if Schaefer had found a group of marketers in her focal company who shared knowledge despite having no collegial or communal relationships with others in the company, she would have had to consider the appropriateness of her working hypothesis and also the reasons for the deviancy.

**Helpful hint**

Writing analytical memos to yourself enables you to explore connections between the data and record your intuitive ideas as they relate to both the data and the literature. Store these in a separate folder or in a computer file.

The compilation of interim summaries enables you to reflect on the work you have done, consider any changes you may need to make in your coding and further fieldwork, and focus on your main research question. If you are exploring multiple case studies, summaries provide you with an opportunity to develop some provisional cross-case analyses.

### *Interpreting the data*

Interpreting is the analytical process of ascribing meaning to your data, explaining to others, such as your readers, what your data means in order to help them understand what it is that you have discovered in your investigation. Just as you analyse your evidence right from the start of collecting it, so you construct meaning about the analysed evidence in a continuous cycle of data collection–analysis–interpretation–data collection.

Making selections of certain ideas, readings or quotations in order to confirm or challenge your developing concepts is part of the process of analysing and interpreting. Although it is important to preserve participants’ perspectives on their social realities, you are also construing and conferring your own understandings about the analysed data, comparing them with the conclusions of other researchers who have published similar or related relevant studies. This process of transcending the data – or interpreting – involves arriving at your own assessment of what your findings mean in relation to appropriate knowledge in public relations and marketing communications. In qualitative research, it also involves generating theory or new conceptual models or making theory-based generalizations that can be further developed in later comparative studies. Even categorization is a step towards interpretation as you select how to analyse the data and distinguish between what you see as important or unimportant.

While it may seem a daunting task to develop theory from a small-scale student project, 'theory' does not necessarily mean a robust, fully fledged theory along the lines of cultural theory, relationship management concepts or co-orientation theory. Often it has taken many decades and numerous associated projects for these to evolve their principles and characteristics. Instead, you may be involved in identifying theoretical concepts, propositions or descriptions that relate solely to a single company which you have investigated, such as how the company's corporate branding and image interact, and the value of these concepts to the company's managers involved in constructing a more positive reputation.

Alternatively, you might develop a model of how and why internal communications facilitates employee participation in the health sector of the region where you live, or you might consider the impact of corporate discourse on the cultural life of a community group in a region of your country. At the same substantive level, you might also consider why political communications in your state government ignore the views and voices of certain minority groups.

**Key point**
Theory is a supposition or proposition which provides explanations for a phenomenon.

So how do you go about generating theory? At the same time as you are concentrating on discovering relationships within the data, you are also seeking to explore relationships between your data and the relevant literature. This involves tacking back and forth between the evidence collected from your fieldwork and the literature. This helps you to find a coherent theoretical framework that is informed by and which fits with your interpretation of the data. As Weick puts it: 'The process of theorizing consists of activities like abstracting, generalizing, relating, selecting, explaining, synthesizing, and idealizing. These [are] ongoing activities' (1995: 389). True analysis involves giving your data wider significance by positioning your study within the body of knowledge that has been developed in public relations and marketing communications.

**Example 18.7: Developing theoretical concepts**

In the Swedish study by Peter Svensson referred to in Example 18.2 he drew attention to the relationship between two key themes which he found in his data – 'the discourse of collectivism' and 'the discourse of individualism'. He explained that these demonstrated how an organization, by means of skilful rhetoric, managed to embrace and exploit two polarized, ideological positions (collectivism and individualism) within the same communications response. In associating this finding with theories of attribution and framing, he generalized his case study results by pointing out how organizations in crisis situations appropriate the critical language of their opposition and protest movements, turning it into a rhetorical weapon in their own public defence strategy (Svensson, 2009: 572).

Not all qualitative research involves generating theory. For instance, some studies seek to be descriptive, though this description is dense, analytic and exhaustive. Such studies, however, still endeavour to provide a link between data and theoretical knowledge in order to recontextualize a particular case or issue to a more universal sphere so that readers can identify more readily with it. In ethnographic studies, for instance, theorizing often involves identifying beliefs and values in the data and then comparing them with established theory. Through this process of analysing and interpreting, new models or theories are developed.

As in grounded theory, the generalizability or transferability of theory that you develop is determined by its 'abstractedness'. If you have developed substantive theory, this will be context bound and applicable only to the setting in which your study took place. On the other hand, if you have developed formal theory this will be more abstract and transferable to many contexts or experiences. Bear in mind, however, that much qualitative research involves single case studies or small samples and therefore your attempts at generalization will be tenuous (for more on generalization, see Chapter 5).

### *Evaluating your interpretation*

Patton (2002: 212) writes that qualitative analysis needs to be meaningful, useful and credible. If your conclusions relate directly to the questions that you have asked, your analysis will be meaningful. If your interpretation of the data is understandable to readers and is clearly presented, your analysis is useful. Finally, to be credible, you must demonstrate that the perspective you have presented will stand up to rigorous scrutiny, with reference to specific quality criteria, such as reliability and validity or alternatively authenticity and trustworthiness. Although we discuss these in depth in Chapter 5, we note here three important aspects which you should consider when analysing your material. They concern the following:

- searching for alternative explanations and negative cases;
- carrying out a ‘member check’ or respondent validation;
- being reflexive about your interpretation.

### *Searching for negative cases and alternative explanations*

Remember that you are seeking to develop an argument and make a case for your particular interpretation of the data. This means undertaking a *critical* analysis, which you do by challenging the themes and patterns that initially seem so obvious, and also by considering instances that do not fit within the patterns. Sometimes deviant cases throw up useful new insights, as we noted previously. It is important, therefore, to search for other, plausible explanations for the data, the connections between them and their relationship to previous research. This involves identifying and describing rival or competing themes, negative cases and explanations that might lead to different findings. It means thinking about other logical possibilities and then seeing whether the data support those possibilities. Marshall and Rossman (2006) contend that if you are not able to find supporting evidence for alternative understandings you can feel confident that the explanation you offer is the most plausible of them all. This is discussed further in Chapter 5.

### Helpful hint

When you come to write up your report, you should be able to demonstrate how you weighed the evidence and considered alternative cases and explanations.

### *Carrying out a ‘member check’*

To analyse the sense of your data in their context, consider carrying out what is known as a ‘member check’ or ‘informant validation’. This can be done in a number of ways, including by asking respondents to read your written interpretation of the evidence you have collected and comment back to you, or feeding back to respondents your impressions and findings about their organization, industry or activities. The aim is to seek confirmation that your interpretation of the data matches the views of your research participants. A more detailed discussion of this topic is found in Chapter 5.

### ***Being reflexive about your interpretation***

In Chapter 5, we noted that reflexivity was concerned with explicitly recognizing the role of the research process and acknowledging the researcher’s own experiences and location in this process. Etherington (2004) calls this ‘critical subjectivity’. As a qualitative researcher, you are not an uninvolved bystander but a social being who has an impact on the behaviour of those around you. Therefore when you come to evaluate your interpretation of the data you should reflect upon the implications of your methods, values, biases and research choices for the public relations or marketing communications knowledge that you have generated. You should also reflect upon the wider context in which your research – and your interactions with it – occurs.

What, for example, might be the consequences for an investigation into careers and equal opportunities practices in Australian advertising agencies if you, the researcher, were an Aboriginal woman with a first degree in public relations?

- Would your ethnicity or disciplinary background influence the theoretical perspective you chose to frame your topic?
- Would it influence the sample and research methods you selected, thereby allowing only certain voices and not others to be heard in your research?
- To what extent would your disciplinary background lead you to concentrate on certain aspects of the research setting and not others?
- How might your physical presence have influenced the data you collected, as a black, female researcher interviewing predominantly white, male advertising executives about equal opportunities?
- To what extent would your interpretation be biased by your ethnicity, disciplinary background and your previous career experiences?
- If the media is currently reporting on wider public debates about the gendered nature of advertising, how might this affect responses to your study and your reading of them?

Issues such as these require critical self-reflection because of the notion that your role as a researcher is inherently tied up with how you have derived and interpreted your findings, that is, with how you have constructed knowledge in the field of public relations and marketing communications. (Note that the topic of reflexivity is discussed in a number of different chapters in this book, including in relation to quality in Chapter 5 and writing up the research report in Chapter 19.)

In some cases, you may also wish to reflect upon the view that language or text is socially, historically, politically and culturally located. In particular, if you are writing an account that is based on an ethnographic or discourse analysis study you are likely to acknowledge that the documents or transcripts you read – and the research report which you produce – are versions of the social context in which they are situated. This entails recognizing the implications and significance of your decisions as both researcher and writer.

## Some specific analytical issues

### *Analysing multiple sources*

Many qualitative methodologies combine more than one method of data collection. In analysis, it is important to cross-reference between the different data sources, looking for similarities and differences within and between all your data-texts. In the earlier part of this chapter we offer some universal suggestions for analysing and interpreting the data. Now we come to specific issues related to particular types of data-texts.

### *Analysing documents*

Qualitative document analysis (also called qualitative content analysis) differs from quantitative content analysis, which is where you endeavour to generate a statistical map of the basic contents of written and electronic documents by measuring the frequency and extent of messages. In qualitative document analysis, on the other hand, you find narrative data, that is, primarily words, although sometimes you might also collect some numerical data to support your qualitative evidence.

Whereas the major purpose of quantitative content analysis is to verify or confirm hypothesized relationships, the aim of qualitative document analysis is to discover new or emergent patterns, including overlooked categories, which might be those used by participants themselves (for instance consultants' own depictions of their client relationships). If you are dealing with statistical reports within a qualitative study, for instance, you should explore the ways that the statistics have been organized and presented, searching for the key messages and meanings that the authors wish to convey. For more on using documents as sources of data, turn to Chapter 17; this chapter also has a section on analysing visual documents (pp. 290–291).

### *Analysing fieldnotes*

When you are analysing interviews, codes can emerge from the words and concepts that are familiar to your informants. This does not happen when you are working with fieldnotes from your observation sessions. Instead, codes are likely to be the result of a 'brainstorming' session where you come up with a multitude of plausible accounts for the meaning of the activities you have observed. Each of these accounts forms possible codes which need to be compared with fieldnotes from other observations within the project. When you have refined your codes into more manageable patterns or themes, it is worth writing these up in formal, abstract terms. For example, if 'creativity' emerges as a code that is applicable to the data you have gathered for your research into the work roles of publicists operating in-house or freelance, you should try to think of other situations where creativity is prevalent in communication- or service-related activities and interactions, as documented in the literature. This will help you to identify aspects of the process of creativity which you can then look for when you switch back into examining your own data on the practices and people involved in doing promotional work.

### *Secondary analysis*

Secondary analysis is when you analyse pre-existing data that have been collected by someone else (Heaton, 2004). We discussed this in Chapter 17 with regard to the analysis of documents. Secondary analysis also refers to the reuse of 'raw' data such as transcripts and fieldnotes compiled by other researchers. A useful website which lists archive repositories holding qualitative data is http://www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/about/introduction.asp.

One of the problems associated with reusing someone else's material is that you may not have an insider's understanding of the cultural and political context in which the data were produced because you were not there at the time of data collection (Hammersley, 1997). Another research issue concerns the fact that you may have little control over what data are available; you are reliant on whatever exists in the archives. Analysing data *post hoc*, therefore, may lead you to a variety of interpretations which cannot be validated from other sources. Nevertheless, 'secondary analysis offers rich opportunities not least because the tendency for qualitative researchers to generate large and unwieldy sets of data means that much of the material remains under-explored' (Bryman, 2008: 561).

### *Computer-aided qualitative data analysis*

Software designed to assist the analysis of qualitative data is known by the acronym CAQDAS. A range of packages are available, the best known being ATLAS.ti, QSR NUD*IST, NVivo and Ethnograph. Each offers a variety of tools and products which, according to Lewins and Silver (2007), generally enable the following functions:

- planning and managing your project, including building an audit trail;
- memoing, including keeping track of ideas as they occur and building on them as your work progresses;
- searching for strings, words and phrases;
- coding and recoding into themes and categories;
- storing and retrieving;
- marking and commenting on data;
- hyperlinking.

These types of activities and procedures can be linked to each other via the software, thus stimulating your conceptual thinking. Some packages are able to handle multimedia data, allowing you to segment and code audio and video data in a similar way to written text. Another tool is the mapping function provided by dedicated mapping software packages such as Decision Explorer. This is useful when you want to develop a theoretical model because the function is able to present a visual structure of a complex set of data, and integrate and connect relationships, patterns and abstract ideas with the data (Lewins and Silver, 2007).

#### *The limitations of using computer-assisted data analysis programs*

The value of computer-assisted data analysis packages has been by no means universally embraced by qualitative researchers. On the one hand, some argue that the application of a program leads researchers to be more explicit about their analytical procedures because the software enhances the transparency of analysis (Bryman, 2008). Others suggest that the software forces the analyst to undertake the process of analysis in a rigid and structured way (Bryman and Beardsworth, 2006). Therefore, if you prefer to work in a less structured way you may decide to dispense with CAQDAS packages.

Many researchers believe that the use of computers will expedite analysis; this is a fallacy as it takes time to become proficient in the various analysis programs. For an undergraduate study it is probably not worth putting in the effort to learn the complexities of the software unless you intend to go on to undertake further research after completing your dissertation. You may find the usual Word for Windows software is sufficient for your purposes. For postgraduates, once you have learned the programs you will find that they certainly do offer a fast, efficient and powerful facility for organizing and planning your data, especially when the data are numerous, as in multiple case study research. However, remember that the main decisions in data analysis are still made by you. Computer programs may be great for searching, cutting, pasting and highlighting different types of linkages or relationships, but computers cannot, of course, interpret the data; that is up to you.

Arguably, the main problem of using computers is the distancing of the researcher from the data, as it is possible to be less involved with your texts than you would be by repeatedly reading and immersing yourself in the data. Therefore, listening to audio recordings and reading your transcripts are still vital tasks in your research. However, some deny the notion of distancing, suggesting instead that the software actually increases your closeness to the data because of the ease of access you have to whole data files, and because of the interactivity between the different tools and functions of the software (Lewins and Silver, 2007).

Despite the challenges and controversies regarding the use of computer software for analysis, it has been largely accepted in qualitative public relations and communications research. Certainly funders seem more impressed with research that employs computer packages. One of the best references for a simple but detailed explanation of basic features is Bryman's (2008) short chapter on NVivo.

## Summary

- Data analysis is concerned with reducing your data to manageable chunks and interpreting them.
- In most qualitative approaches, there is a constant interplay between data collection and analysis. Analysis begins when data collection begins, continuing simultaneously.
- Qualitative analysis involves searching for categories and patterns in the data that will help you make sense of your evidence. Coding facilitates this.
- Finding patterns in the data enables you to relate your findings to concepts and themes in the existing literature. This helps to generate theory, new models or theory-based generalizations.

- A specialist software package can be a valuable tool for analysing the data but should not be a substitute for your own thinking, judging, deciding and interpreting.
- Your study should be able to stand up to rigorous scrutiny. Strategies for demonstrating that you have carefully weighed the evidence include searching for alternative explanations and negative cases, carrying out a 'member check', and being reflexive about your interpretation of the data.
- It is often overlooked that report writing is intrinsic to analysis. In order to explain the findings of your study, you need to communicate them to a wider group of readers, which you do by writing up your findings. Chapter 19 focuses on this aspect.

# 19 Writing the report

Writing is a crucial aspect of the research process in which you develop your thinking and communicate your ideas to a wider audience. This chapter deals with writing and structuring the research report. It notes that:

- the research report is a persuasive document which aims to convince readers of the quality and importance of your work;
- the structure of the report conveys the process and outcomes of your work in a logical sequence; some basic elements of structure are common to most research reports.

The chapter offers suggestions for:

- finding your own writing style and voice;
- structuring the report for an academic dissertation and for a professional report;
- presenting the data and developing a storyline.

## Introduction

After you have collected and analysed your data, you will be ready to complete the writing up of your research report. This may be in the form of a thesis, dissertation, professional report, conference paper or article. Writing is a crucial aspect of research because, in the process of putting your thoughts down onto the page, your ideas and argument develop and solidify. Therefore, writing is not something you do only in the final weeks or months of your research project; writing starts early, right at the outset of your thinking about and reading around your topic. Writing is critical because this is the key way in which you communicate your ideas to a wider audience.

**Helpful hint**

Start to communicate from day one – in writing! The more frequently you write, the better both your writing and your thinking will become.

Doing qualitative research is an iterative or cyclical process whereby you write down your ideas, draft out a chapter or section and then return later to redraft your written thoughts. As you continue to read, discussing ideas along the way with colleagues and your supervisor, undertaking your research and writing up further chapters, so your thinking develops. Towards the end of your research project you may still be adding to or refining your literature review chapter in the light of your interpretation of the primary data.

When you first started thinking about your project you may have come up with a rough outline for the structure of your research report. Don't worry if this changes as your research progresses. Initially a draft structure is helpful in organizing your thinking, ordering your information and encouraging you to get some words down onto paper. Start writing where you feel most comfortable. The introduction may not be the easiest place to begin so start elsewhere if you prefer and move on to the first chapter when you feel ready. As you write sections within chapters you will revise and change the order along the route. A key advantage of qualitative research is its flexibility, and this applies also to the writing stage of qualitative research.

Most research reports have a similar basic structure which helps to convey the process and outcomes of your work in a logical sequence. There is nothing to prevent you organizing your work in a different way if you want to, as long as all the main elements (listed in Example 19.2) are included somewhere within your report.

**Helpful hint**

Write to persuade as well as to inform.

As you write and structure the report, it is worth reminding yourself that the presentation of research is essentially a rhetorical or persuasive activity (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2007). You are not just putting down onto paper your evidence and your interpretation; instead, you are seeking to convince readers that you have completed a piece of work of high quality that makes a significant contribution. If your report is an academic one your contribution will be in a particular area of public relations or marketing communications scholarship. Essentially, what you are attempting to achieve through your writing is an authoritative voice in the academic community. If you are writing a professional report it is likely that you will be making a contribution to the development of company or industry knowledge.

## Your readers and your voice

Keep in mind the readers of your report and their expectations. There are differences in the style and structure of reports written for company settings, funding bodies or universities. Employers, for instance, are most interested in the results and implications for business. They are less concerned with philosophical and theoretical issues and will not wish to see references in the text or a long bibliography at the end. Academics, however, see these as vital.

To some extent, whether you write in the first or third person is a matter of personal preference, although the use of the first person singular indicates the integral role of the researcher in the study. Van Maanen (1988) has convincingly illustrated the difference between personal and impersonal writing styles, showing how each produces a different account of the same evidence (note the discussion about this in Chapter 9). He and others contend that the writer should not be excluded from his or her writing because there is an intrinsic connection between the researcher and the evidence. Indeed, Wolcott (2009) believes that the critical role and presence of the researcher are of such major importance that use of the first person (i.e. insertion of 'I' in the text) 'should be the rule rather than the exception' (p. 17).

Nevertheless, most of the academic and professional literature in public relations and marketing communications tends to be written in the third person ('the researcher concluded that. . .') or in the passive voice ('it was discovered that . . .'). Writers in these disciplines rarely use the 'I' word. Those who disembody themselves in this way imply that they have had nothing whatsoever to do with the knowledge they are presenting. It's as if the evidence and its interpretation arrived from out of the blue. This impersonal style of writing is essentially a quantitative research technique where objectivity is the name of the game and distance and detachment are seen as important.

**Helpful hint**

Learn to develop your own style and 'voice' – and enjoy using them – but check with the conventions of your institution about what is an appropriate style for submitted work.

However, your writing style may be dictated by the conventions of your academic institution, funding body or editor, forcing you to write in a formal, impersonal style. If this is the case, it is often a good idea to write your first draft in the first person, because in this way you learn to develop your own style and tone of voice. Part of your voice is the rhythm of your natural writing, the words and phrases you use, and the way in which you structure your thoughts. The first person singular allows you to 'keep in touch with *your* ideas, *your* reactions, *your* beliefs and *your* understandings of what other people have written' (Rudestam and Newton, 2007: 245). You can always remove the 'I' from your writing in the second or third drafts, although sometimes it is acceptable to leave it in for the introduction and methodology sections because here you are describing what you chose to do and why.

**Example 19.1: Different styles in writing**

Below are the first paragraphs from three different research reports. The first and last are extracts from published articles, the second from a doctoral thesis.

*The academics' article*

> A 31-year-old mother of two was recently diagnosed with breast cancer. In the next few months she will have chemotherapy treatments, undergo a radical mastectomy, begin radiation therapy, and prepare to participate in a 3-day walk to raise money to fight the disease. Around the country, thousands like her will 'give' to a cause as individuals, joining forces with other individuals, organizations, private foundations, and corporations not only to fight disease, but to work for a better environment, improve education, provide relief in times of natural disasters and terrorist attacks, to make a difference in the world in countless ways. . .In contemporary fundraising efforts, the role of corporations in framing social issues and contributing to social causes has become at once more visible and more complicated. Yet, the impact of that participation on the social narrative has been largely unexplored.
>
> (Edwards and Kreshel, 2008: 177)

*The doctoral student's thesis*

> This thesis provides detailed qualitative data about the role of public communication and public relations in social change in the Arab Gulf societies. It describes the role of interdisciplinary theoretical communication approaches used in public communication programs in promoting social change. Multiple perspectives are provided of communication planners, journalists and the target audiences. Focusing on two case studies, the thesis sheds light on the relationship between key players and their respective role in social change in specific Arab contexts. Thus, this thesis contributes to public relations and social marketing research and offers new theoretical understanding of public communication practice and ethics in the Arab Gulf.
>
> (Al Saqer, 2007: 1)

*The academics' article*

> Creative professionals in advertising agencies ('creatives') are commonly described by outsiders as quirky and insincere, brash and brilliant, and even mendacious. Few such accounts have focused on the subjective experience of being a creative professional. Because of this surface treatment, it has never been clear how these people arrive at an identity that satisfies themselves and others in their workplaces. This research opens up this area for investigation.
>
> (Hackley and Kover, 2007: 63)

## Structuring the report

A distinction between qualitative and quantitative research lies in the potentially flexible structure of the qualitative report. Despite this, most reports follow a basic structure similar to the one outlined in Example 19.2. However, this can vary depending on the aims of your research and your research design. If your methodological approach uses grounded theory, for instance, you might wish to begin your report with your methodology discussion. In qualitative research, the findings and discussion are the most important elements of the final write-up, and in consequence these sections contain more words than the others.

**Example 19.2: A conventional structure for a qualitative, academic report**

- title
- abstract
- acknowledgement and dedication
- table of contents
  - including figures and tables
- introduction
  - background and justification for the study
  - including the aim of the research
- literature review
- methodology and research design
  - description and justification of methods
  - including the type of theoretical framework
  - the sample and the setting
  - data collection
  - data analysis
  - validity and reliability in qualitative terms
  - ethical considerations
- findings/results and discussion
- conclusion
  - including implications and reflections
  - areas for future research
  - recommendations
- references
- appendices.

Professional reports follow a slightly different structure, although the main elements are similar. See Example 19.3. Professional reports are often shorter in length than academic reports, with a style of writing that is detached, ‘punchier’ and more condensed. Sentences and paragraphs are shorter. The presentation involves more bullet points and diagrams than are usual in an academic report. There is usually less emphasis on the methodology and more on the recommendations.

**Example 19.3: A conventional structure for a qualitative, professional report**

- title
- executive summary
- table of contents
    - including figures and tables
- introduction and methodology
    - background to the study
    - purpose of the study
    - description and justification of methods*
    - the sample and the setting*
    - data collection*
    - data analysis*
    - validity and reliability in qualitative terms*
    - limitations of the study*
- findings
- discussion and conclusion
    - implications for the organization or industry
    - recommendations
- appendices.

(* Note that sometimes these six subheadings may be placed in the appendix, rather than the introduction.)

Whether your report is an academic or professional one, each chapter should have an introduction and a summary, with clear signals throughout to guide readers along the route. Your introduction should outline briefly the purpose of each chapter and provide an overview of its structure. It also may indicate to the reader how the chapter links to your research aim. The summary pulls together the main points you have made in the chapter, highlighting the key issues and showing how they connect to the following chapter. Through your discussion, the signals help readers to follow the line of your argument. For instance, helpful signalling techniques include sentences such as: ‘Having presented the main debates concerning corporate identity and image, I now go on to discuss empirical research in this area.’

**Helpful hint**

Say what you’re going to do (*in your chapter introduction*), say what you did (*in the body of the chapter*) and say again what you’ve done (*in your chapter summary*).

### *Title*

When you began your research project you will have made a stab at identifying a working title. This title is used mostly for administrative purposes initially and is only tentative, so can be changed easily as your ideas and focus sharpen (but don't forget to inform your supervisor and the research degrees committee of your university about this). The final title of a study is important because it is the first and most immediate contact the reader has with the research. We suggest a concise and informative title, one that captures attention but also gives an indication of the main focus of the report. It is quite common for writers to begin with a main title followed by an explanatory subtitle.

**Example 19.4: Some explanatory titles**

- Flyposting: An Exploration of a 'Controversial' Medium (Black and Nevill, 2009);
- Strategic Communication in Multicultural Markets: Korean and American Cultural Differences Towards Leisure (Kang and Davenport, 2009);
- Interpersonal Knowledge Sharing in Communication Consultancies (Schaefer, 2007);
- In Search of Career Satisfaction: African-American Public Relations Practitioners, Pigeonholing, and the Workplace (Tindall, 2009);
- Vigilante Marketing and Consumer-Created Communications (Muñiz and Schau, 2007);
- The Importance of Brands in the Lunch-Box Choices of Low-Income British Children (Roper and La Neice, 2009);
- Integrating Emotion with Identity in EU Strategy (Moore, 2009).

The title page of a dissertation or thesis contains the title, the name of the researcher, the date of the dissertation and the name of the educational institution where you are enrolled. There is generally a pro forma for the title page at most universities. Professional reports carry similar information on the title page.

### *Abstract*

The abstract is a summary of the research and is written after the study has been completed. It appears on the page following the title, before the table of contents and the full report. Abstracts are important because it is on the basis of these that readers commonly make a decision about whether or not to read the full report or article. In many cases, readers may discover your report by accessing a library abstract catalogue or online database of abstracts. Therefore it is essential to use the abstract as a means of conveying as much information as possible, as interestingly as possible, as concisely as possible.

**Helpful hint**
In your abstract, tell people what you did, why you did it, how you did it, what you found out and why it's important.

The abstract should contain a brief overview of the following:

- the research question and aim;
- why the topic is important and worth studying;
- the methods you have adopted;
- the main findings of your study;
- the implications in the light of other research.

If you have space, you might also wish to emphasize the significance of the contribution made by your study. In a dissertation or thesis, the abstract should contain between 150 and 300 words.

**Example 19.5: Abstracts**

The length of the following two abstracts is 90 and a 117 words, respectively. In a student dissertation, the abstract could be a little longer, perhaps extending the discussion of the implications of the study (or the recommendations for practitioners).

*Disaster Communication: Lessons from Indonesia*

> This article explores public disaster communication in the context of five separate disasters in Indonesia, including acts of terrorism in Bali and Jakarta and the 2004 tsunami. The concept of high reliability organizations (HRO), which explains how highly complex organizations function in unpredictable and dangerous circumstances, is applied here to explore how one public relations firm under contract to several Indonesian government departments handled these complex disaster communication challenges in partnership with its clients. Propositions about the role of HRO characteristics in permitting or preventing effective disaster communication are advanced.
>
> (Dougall *et al.*, 2008: 75)

*Brands Inspiring Creativity and Transpiring Meaning*

> This study uses participant observation to undertake an ethnographic exploration of the meanings of brands and objects in an online virtual world. Through the perspective of symbolic interactionism and the theory

> of self-preservation, the meanings of brands and objects emerge in relation to status in game play. Players create user-generated content with brands to gain status within and outside of the game. Game advertisers encourage players to create branded objects related to their avatars through clothing, accessories, pictures, and machinima. Similarly, players use non-advertised brands to create avatar names, clothing designs, advertisements, and other communications. The process of social interaction influences status meanings in the multifaceted communication among players, the game, and advertisers, with impacts on self-preservation.
>
> (Hansen, 2009: 25)

In a professional report, there is an *executive summary* rather than an abstract. The executive summary is usually one or two pages long and provides an overview of the report, with the emphasis on the findings and implications. Key issues are often highlighted through the use of bullet points.

### *Acknowledgement and dedication*

You might wish to give credit to those who supported, advised or supervised your research, or acknowledge the input of participants in the study. If you decide to dedicate the report itself to particular individuals such as family or friends, keep the dedication simple.

### *Table of contents*

A table of contents acts as a guide to readers and also indicates the overall structure of your report. It is positioned before your first chapter and lists the chapters against their associated page numbers. It is usual in professional reports and also in some marketing projects to number not only chapters but also subsections of chapters, as illustrated here:

| | |
|---|---|
| Chapter 5 | Findings and discussion |
| 5.1 | Introduction |
| 5.2 | The launch of the anti-smoking campaign |
| 5.2.1 | Managing social change |
| 5.2.2 | Political, economic and social contributors to success |
| 5.2.3 | The role of the media in social change |

Whether you number your dissertation subsections or not will depend on the conventions of your institution.

Tables of contents include separate lists of figures or illustrations and tables contained in the report. In undergraduate student projects the table of contents should be concise and need not be too long and detailed.

### *Introduction*

The purpose of the introductory chapter is to orient your readers and therefore this first chapter should explain what the study is all about. Do this by covering the following:

- the aim of the research;
- the research question or problem;
- the background of and rationale for the research;
- the boundaries of the research;
- the importance and contribution of the study.

The above elements do not necessarily have to be written in this order; nor do they have to be written as separate sections. Indeed, you may wish to integrate some of them. When you come to provide the background to your research, remember to justify why you have chosen this topic by explaining how you became interested in the research question. In an academic report, it is likely that you will indicate here how the project relates to scholarship (perhaps the topic has not been covered extensively or it has been neglected). However, you might decide to point instead to an industry context in order to indicate the gap in knowledge that will filled by your study. Edwards and Talbot suggest that if you are able to answer the following questions in your introduction you will have provided a good enough rationale or justification for your study: 'Why this (rather than another topic), why now, why there, why me?' (Edwards and Talbot, 1999: 167). Turn back to Example 19.1 and look at the second example in the box; note how Hackley and Kover (2007) begin to address the 'why this, why now?' questions.

In setting out the boundaries of your research you are indicating the scope of your study. Is it an industry-level study, or a multiple case study of a variety of settings, or a single case study of one organization, or a detailed examination of a communications process, for example? The scope of the study indicates to readers how far you will be able to make generalizations from your evidence. On the whole, research into a single organization, for example, would mean that your findings would apply only to that one organization and could not be transferred more widely (although it is possible to suggest 'tendencies' or to generalize to a theory; for more on this, see Chapter 7).

### *Literature review*

In Chapter 3 we discussed reviewing the literature and developing an argument that flows through your study. When you come to write up the report, the literature review either stands on its own as a separate chapter or becomes an integral part of the introduction. The literature in qualitative studies has a different place and purpose from that in quantitative research, where an extensive review of all studies in the field is used to develop hypotheses that are tested through primary research.

In qualitative research an examination of the relevant literature is made in order to:

- identify gaps in knowledge that the study aims to fill;
- inform the process of collecting and analysing the primary research;
- evaluate the implications of the study.

By the end of the literature review section, the reader should be in no doubt that your study is appropriate for meeting the research aim.

**Key point**

The literature review acts as a foundation for your study. It does not need to contain a detailed analysis of every text on the topic, but should contain a discussion of important, pertinent publications that shape your enquiry.

Of course, in all qualitative studies you need to show some of the relevant research that has been done in the field. This involves summarizing the main methods and findings from previous research, and critically evaluating them. You should indicate also how they relate to the project in hand. However, in qualitative studies, because some of the literature is integrated into the findings, only the most pertinent work needs be discussed in the literature review section.

### *Methodology and research design*

The purpose of the methodology chapter or section is to tell your readers how you gathered your data, what you ended up with and how you analysed them (Silverman, 2010). Silverman's idea of renaming the methodology chapter 'the natural history of my research' is a good one because this is more suggestive of a personal story which threads its way through the successes and false starts, the trials and the errors of your research progress. In almost all cases, your discussion of the methodology is separate from your literature review and the presentation of your findings.

If you choose to write in the passive voice and do little to explain the issues that arose and the decisions that you made, the methodology chapter can be the dullest section of the whole report. On the other hand, it can, and should, be one of the most lively sections because it is here that you introduce your personal involvement in the research, explaining some of the issues, such as:

- how you went about your research;
- what overall strategy you adopted and why;
- the design and techniques you used;
- why you chose these and not others.

(Silverman, 2010)

Through the rest of the chapter, we provide extracts of methodology discussions in the Example boxes. We offer these not because we wish to promote them as lively, stimulating examples of good writing (unfortunately some of them may not conform to all of these features), but because they clearly illustrate some of the points we wish to make. For a fascinating, original and informative research account, which includes a lively documentation of the research process, we would point you instead to Hackley's (2000) account of work life in a London advertising agency.

In your methodology chapter you are likely to include several subsections: the research design and methodology, the setting, the methods, including data collection, sampling, detailed data collection procedures, and a description of the data analysis. As a qualitative researcher, you are the main research tool and have to make explicit the path of the research so that the reader is able to follow your decision trail. In some cases it may be appropriate to write a section about yourself and your background if this is pertinent to the study, such as how your former work experiences allowed you to gain access to sensitive areas or provided you with specialist insights. By writing yourself into your methodology you are showing that you have been ethically reflexive (for more on reflexivity, see later in this chapter – pp. 342–343 – and also Chapter 5).

**Example 19.6: Writing about oneself in relation to the investigation**

Donna Pompper carried out a study of female, Latina public relations practitioners. She wrote:

> Undoubtedly, my identity-worldview shaped this inquiry – from selecting the phenomenon for exploration in the first place, through interpretation of findings.

In her footnote, she stated:

> Thus, I offer the following for context. I am female, White/Anglo, middle-class, educated, heterosexual, and a U.S. resident. I am 46 years old at the time of this writing, and the product of a lower-class upbringing and racially integrated public school education during 1960s social movements.
>
> (Pompper, 2007: 306–07)

At first glance, you might think it somewhat narcissistic and unnecessary to provide all this information. However, each detail is pertinent to the area of her exploration, and by articulating her background and characteristics the author is indicating her position in relation to her material and her participants.

### *Methodology description and justification*

It is usual to begin your methodology chapter with a description and justification of your chosen methodology, explaining the fit between the research question and the methodology.

**Example 19.7: Explaining the methodological approach in a study of corporate social responsibility (CSR)**

This extract from an article by Gayle Kerr, Kim Johnston and Amanda Beatson about how they developed a CSR framework to aid government practice illustrates an introduction to the methodology:

> Given the diversity of CSR models available and lack of agreement about the optimum approach for CSR implementation (Maignan and Ferrell 2004; Wood 1991) there are two key objectives of this paper. The first objective is to develop a suitable CSR framework that can be adapted to a government-advertising context. The second objective is to explore how this modified framework can be applied to the practice of Australian government advertising thus ensuring the advertising outcome has societal benefits. Specifically, two research questions frame this paper:
>
> RQ1: How does government-advertising practice fit into a CSR framework?
>
> RQ2: What steps can government take with its advertising to ensure suitable outcomes from CSR?
>
> This research adopts a descriptive case research design to explore government advertising practices and CSR (McCutcheon and Meredith 1993; Yin 2003). The research design was selected to enable an objective, intensive examination of the phenomenon of interest (Gerring 2004; Yin 2003). Further, case research is a suitable method when a description of events or outcomes allows other researchers to understand the processes and the environment (McCutcheon and Meredith 1993). As the aim of this study is to develop a framework for practical application of CSR, case research was deemed appropriate.
>
> (Kerr *et al.*, 2008: 158–59)

### *The sample and the setting*

Describe your sample, then state how many participants were chosen and the reasons for your choice. Sometimes it is useful to provide a table indicating the relevance of your respondents' characteristics (such as their role and type of company). Your sampling strategies, whether they are theoretical or purposive, should be explained (see Chapter 13 on sampling).

If you are conducting case study research, you would usually begin by describing the setting (or settings) where your research took place before going on to discuss your sampling strategies. If your setting is a company, it is useful to provide a short history or background information, also setting out details that are relevant to your study, such as the number of people involved in the company, type of communications strategy, roles of employees involved in corporate communications and so on. In the study described in Examples 19.5 and 19.10, because the setting was Indonesia the authors presented a brief overview of the country's regional position and geographical layout, its ethnic mix, a short history of Indonesia's civil turmoil and terrorist activities, the political scene, and finally a description of the PR company and its track record in dealing with crisis management.

Readers of your research report will be interested to hear how you gained access in order to undertake your investigation. Your access may be based on your work experiences in a particular setting, which enabled you to gain entry for research. On the other hand, you might have experienced real difficulties in negotiating access to your targeted organization or informants that readers would be interested to read about. State how participants were approached (in person, by email or through an advertisement, for instance). Explain how you received permission from 'gatekeepers'. Note, however, that individuals should not be identified if you have guaranteed anonymity to them.

### *Data collection procedures*

In this section are the details of your data collection procedures, such as interviewing, observation or other strategies you have used, together with any problems you encountered. This should not be an essay on general procedures but a step-by-step description of the work you carried out.

#### Example 19.8: Explaining data collection procedures for a crisis communication study

How a tobacco company, Swedish Match, engaged in crisis communication and image repair work was the topic explored by Peter Svensson. Here he describes how he collected the data:

> I collected the public statements made by Swedish Match in reaction to the lawsuit between May 1997 and October 1998. I particularly focused on five sources of data: three CEO speeches delivered at the annual shareholder meetings from 1997 to 1999, five articles in large Swedish newspapers, three television news broadcasts (1996 to 1997), two press releases (1997 to 1998), and the 1997 annual report. I collected transcriptions of the CEO speeches and the press releases from the Swedish Match homepage, and I obtained the television news broadcasts from A Non Smoking Generation's media archive in Stockholm. This archive provides a collection of everything that has been written, published, and broadcast with respect to the tobacco industry in Sweden in the past decades. After the completion of data collection, I translated all text originally published in Swedish into English.
>
> (Svensson, 2009: 7)

(See also Example 18.2.)

### *Data analysis*

How you went about analysing the data is explained here. You should set out the way in which you coded and categorized the data, highlighting specific themes or theoretical constructs that you derived from the data. This section encompasses an explanation of analysis by computer, if relevant. In dissertations, a more detailed account of the analysis, with examples, is required.

**Example 19.9: Outlining the process of data analysis in a study of PR and power**

Lee Edwards studied the nature of power in PR practice by investigating the communications activities of a corporate affairs team. Part of her discussion of how she analysed the data included the following:

> I began by using NVIVO to analyse the diary and interview data, generating nominal, then analytical categories that I used as the foundation for the interpretive process. Both 'descriptive' coding and 'topic' coding (Richards, 2005) were used to establish associations between categories and understand how they interacted. Codes included categories such as *assessment of own and corporate affairs' position*, *internal relationship barriers*, *story sources*, and *trust in corporate affairs.* Elements from the data were allocated to multiple codes if necessary, and the allocations were cross-referenced to examine the contexts in which they appeared and how they were linked. I then interpreted these categories in terms of types of capital* that the team seemed to be pursuing, or that their activities produced. . .I then compared conclusions drawn from this data with the content of other data sources. . .To avoid interpreting the data in a way that distanced it too far from the reality in which it was embedded, I shared my analysis with the corporate affairs team for their reflection and feedback. They largely agreed with my findings, and I corrected any inaccuracies they picked up. Their thoughts also prompted new angles for analysis that ultimately led to the model outlined in this article.
>
> (Edwards, 2009: 257–59)

(See also Example 5.3.)
* The notion of capital relates to the theory Edwards wrote about in her literature review.

If the outline in Example 19.9 formed part of a discussion within a dissertation rather than an article, it is likely that you would be required (and also have more space) to articulate in greater detail each step of your process of analysis, supported by examples.

*Ethics*

At this point, ethical issues should be raised as they relate to your overall research design and also to specific instances (see Chapter 4).

### *Findings and discussion*

This should be the longest section in your dissertation because it is here that you make your original contribution to knowledge.

In Chapter 3, we discussed how to develop an argument and a theoretical storyline which weaves its way through your writing. In the findings and discussion chapter, where the analysis of the data is presented, the theoretical storyline is now contextualized and extended, with the addition of a field-based storyline. Golden-Biddle and Locke indicate how this works:

> Consisting of a field-based story nested within the structure of the theoretical story, the central purpose of the development is to take readers 'there' – to transport them into the field – and to bridge the worlds of the field and the readers. We take readers into the field by conveying the vitality of everyday life encountered in the field; we bridge the worlds of the [participants], authors, and readers by connecting the field life to our theoretical points. To transport the readers into the field, [reports] need to portray the researchers' firsthand experience with the [participants'] world.
>
> (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2007: 50–51)

Note how Golden-Biddle and Locke draw attention to how the field-based storyline (or the way in which you present the story of your data) sits within a macro story, that is, the overarching theoretical framework that you develop through a review of the literature and from your fieldwork.

Although the writing of Golden-Biddle and Locke is oriented towards research in organizations, it is equally relevant to qualitative studies in public relations and marketing communications. Their ideas are useful for indicating how to incorporate data into your reports in a manner that shows everyday life and experiences in an authentic way, while also providing evidence for theoretical points. The data, they suggest, never stand on their own. No matter how 'detailed and accurate' the observations and quotations that you insert into your discussion, you should never leave the interpretation or implications to readers to work out for themselves. Instead, in conveying your data you should look in two directions, backward to the research situation – to the points of view of consumers you have interviewed, for example – and forward to the theoretical points that you have identified in the literature and which you continue to develop from the data.

**Helpful hint**
Develop a storyline by telling, showing and telling, shifting back and forth between the theory and your data.

There are different ways of developing a storyline, but a common form is by telling, showing and telling:

- *Telling*: here you make a theoretical point. This might be a subheading which indicates what the subsequent paragraphs are about (such as ‘Enjoyment of advertising’) or it might be a discussion of an issue, such as the following: ‘In order to maximize an advertisement’s memorability, the use of humour appeals and repetition of the ad is crucial’.
- *Showing*: illustrate the point with a quotation or with an extract from fieldnotes, as appropriate. Use your data to bring your theoretical point to life.
- *Telling*: now answer this question: ‘What does this mean in the light of (1) my theoretical point, (2) my research aim, (3) wider theory?’ Here you are explaining the data by shifting back to the theory. In some cases, you will respond only to (1) and (2). In other cases, as your discussion develops, you will go further and respond also to (3), building the discussion into a more general consideration of theory, that is, you endeavour to generalize. You are not only presenting the views of the participants but also transcending them and transforming them by taking the study to a more theoretical and abstract level.

By telling, showing and then telling again, you shift back and forth between theory and your data, using the data to contextualize the theory, while also developing it at the same time. Your theoretical storyline and your fieldwork storyline become interwoven and grow together.

Direct quotations from interviews or excerpts from fieldnotes contextualize the theory, making the study more lively and dynamic. The content of the quotations also helps the reader to judge how the results were derived from the data, to establish the credibility of the emerging categories and establish a means of auditing these. Avoid large chunks, continuous duplication or many short quotations which end up fragmenting your writing. On the other hand, you need to be selective about your material, presenting only that which is significant to the study rather than introducing everything you know. A key skill is being able to recognize what to use in your report and what to leave out.

**Helpful hint**
Use quotations prudently (this applies also to quotations from the literature). Ensure they are not taken out of context but accurately reflect the meanings and feelings of participants. Only use those that make a significant point.

### *Structuring the findings and discussion chapter*

There are several ways of presenting qualitative findings and your interpretation of them. The first is the traditional format where you separate your results from your discussion of them. Your discussion chapter or section is where you also introduce the appropriate literature. One follows the other. Applying this style, you would be unlikely to follow Golden-Biddle and Locke's advice of telling, showing and telling in a single chapter. Instead you would be 'showing' in one chapter and 'telling' in the next.

More commonly in qualitative research the findings and discussion are integrated for the sake of the storyline (but no rigid rule exists about this). At the start of a combined findings and discussion chapter some writers present a brief summary of the results in a diagram, and then they discuss each major theme in a few sentences before going on to discuss them more comprehensively, integrating the literature into the discussion where it fits best. In this way, the literature is allowed to serve as additional evidence for the particular category or as a problem for debate.

Keep in mind that you are telling a story, which should be vivid and interesting as well as credible to your readers. The story also has an additional purpose, namely to present a systematic analysis of the data and a discussion of the results. However, it is important to keep the writing clear and understandable for your readers.

**Helpful hint**

There is no point in writing a research account that is inaccessible to its readers. Therefore, tell your research story in words that will be meaningful to your target audience.

### *Reflection and reflexivity*

At the end of your analysis (either in the discussion or conclusion sections), you might reflect on your project and take a critical stance towards it. You can then demonstrate how the research could be improved or extended. You might point to its limitations and to your own bias, which you might not have made explicit in your study up to this point. Although your methodology section will have described some of the problems which you encountered, it is appropriate here to provide a critical overview and suggest whether there are other ways that your research could be carried out if it were to be done again. Not all studies contain this reflective section, although this personal approach is seen as appropriate in qualitative research.

In the methodology section of this chapter (pp. 335–340) and within other chapters, we have drawn attention to the importance of the notion of reflexivity. This is an integral part of writing up the study in an ethical way, showing your own social location and how it has shaped the account. You should demonstrate also how your personal values and knowledge have influenced it. Giving an account of your own position and stance, including your assumptions and interests, does not mean necessarily that you are being self-obsessed. Instead, it indicates your role in your relationship with research participants, and therefore with the data you have collected.

**Example 19.10: Reflexivity in crisis communications research**

In an article about crisis communications during five major disasters in Indonesia, the authors considered it important to point out that one of them was a senior member of the PR company that was employed to manage the crisis.

> While this firsthand experience brings richness of detail and behind-the-scenes insights to the study, the inherent bias of that perspective must also be acknowledged.
>
> (Dougall *et al.*, 2008: 80)

### *Conclusion*

Essential elements in the conclusion are:

- a review of what has been learned from the findings;
- the implications of the study for theory or practice;
- the contribution of the study to knowledge;
- recommendations for future research.

In addition, the following are sometimes found in public relations and marketing communications reports:

- a critical reflection on the limitations of the study (we discussed this in the previous paragraph);
- recommendations to industry or organizations.

The conclusion reviews what has been learned in relation to the aim and the theoretical ideas and propositions that emerged from the study. It must be directly related to the results of the specific study, and no new elements (or references) should be introduced here. The implications refer to how understanding of public relations or marketing communications has changed in the light of your study. In some cases, this is integrated into the section where you discuss the contribution your study makes to knowledge in the area. For example, your study might have challenged accepted thinking on a particular topic or you may have pointed to a new technique that could be used in practice.

**Example 19.11: The implications of a cross-cultural study**

One of the authors of this book, together with a co-author, offered these thoughts in the concluding paragraph of an article about doing cross-cultural PR research:

> Our discussion of collecting data in Mexico City points to the central importance of the cultural context for public relations research. The cultures that characterize research sites impinge upon selectivity at each stage of the investigation. Public relations scholars need to be accommodating of these when making decisions about research design, methods and procedures. Culture also influences relationships between researchers and participants as they interact to co-construct meaning concerning the topic under examination. The complexity of such interactions is amplified through culture's further effect on researchers themselves who are usually changed to some extent through processes of cultural assimilation, no matter how tepid, when spending extended periods in the field as cultural insiders. Public relations research is a subjective activity carried out by researchers who are inherently enmeshed within the cultural realm. We would argue that future research would be enriched if scholars were to gaze more reflexively upon the cultural influences that affect how they conduct research.
>
> (Daymon and Hodges, 2009: 433)

Recommendations for future research are suggestions that you are able to make to further your study. These may be ways of building on your study (say, by using different methods or sampling in a wider context) or they may be new directions that have been revealed through your findings. It is important to remember that the implications must be based directly on the results of the study.

**Example 19.12: Making suggestions for future research into disaster communication**

In their conclusions about public disaster communication in Indonesia (see also Examples 19.5 and 19.10), Elizabeth Dougall, Suzanne Horsley and Chadd McLisky wrote the following:

> Ways to further explore these propositions include observing a similar crisis in real-time. . .Although such observations are extremely resource-intensive and challenging to design and coordinate, they typically yield rich and valuable data. Other useful approaches to enriching this research agenda include conducting a survey of public relations firms

> contracted to government agencies in other settings to determine if these propositions ring true for them, either in practice or theory.
>
> (Dougall *et al.*, 2008: 98)

### *References*

A list of references includes all the texts you have cited in your report. Academic books and articles, professional texts, newspapers or videos and online sources should all be included in the same list. A bibliography includes all of the above and also other texts which you may not have referred to directly in your report but which you have drawn on for your study. It is usual to provide either a list of references or a bibliography but not both.

For academic studies the Harvard system of referencing is commonly used (as in this book), although other formal systems of referencing are acceptable to outside agencies. It is best to find out about this before the start of the study. Compare the references in the text with the selected bibliography at the end of the report and make sure that every reference is included accurately.

### *Appendices (plural of appendix)*

Any material contained in your appendix is supplementary to your research. For clarification and interest, however, it is useful, to include some or all of the following:

- a list of participants (with pseudonyms if necessary), with their ages, experience or length of service if relevant – unless readers of the report are likely to be able to identify participants, in which case you should leave out the list;
- a list of organizations (perhaps with pseudonyms) involved in your research;
- an interview guide;
- a sample interview transcript if your study employed the interview method – this helps readers to understand how your data collection developed;
- possibly some fieldnotes from observations to demonstrate their use.

Attach appendices in the order in which they appear in the chronology of the study. The words in appendices do not count as part of the study. Usually, appendices are placed at the very end of the report after the bibliography. However, custom and practice differ slightly in some institutions and therefore you should check the regulations of your own institution to find out whether you are required to insert them before or after the bibliography.

## Summary

- The report tells readers what you did, why you did it, how you did it, what you found out, what it means and why it's important.
- Two storylines flow through the report: the theoretical storyline and the field-based storyline. The field-based storyline brings theory to life and develops it.
- A useful way to discuss the data is by 'telling, showing, telling': make a theoretical point, illustrate it with the data, explain the data in the light of theory.
- The conclusion reviews what you have learned, and considers the implications of the study and its contribution to knowledge.
- It is important to reflect critically on your study, considering how it might be improved or extended through further research.

# Part V

# Further issues

# 20 Mixed methods research

Typically, mixed methods research is when researchers combine qualitative and quantitative approaches in one empirical study, drawing pragmatically on distinct research paradigms. As this type of research approach is attracting increasing interest, we acknowledge it here but suggest that it is unsuitable for novice or undergraduate researchers because of its complexity.

This chapter discusses:

- the nature and characteristics of mixed methods research;
- the reasons for its popularity and the variety of use;
- the arguments for and against the use of mixed methods.
- the process of doing mixed methods research.

## Introduction

Although mixed methods research is not within the qualitative tradition *per se*, the approach does incorporate qualitative alongside quantitative methods. In the disciplines of marketing, management and sociology, mixed methods enquiry has become increasingly accepted (despite its ideological inconsistencies), and arguably is now the ‘third major research approach’ (Johnson *et al.*, 2007: 112) after qualitative and quantitative. In public relations research, it is certainly not uncommon to combine both qualitative and quantitative methods within a single study (such as when interviews are used to inform the design of a questionnaire), but to date there has been limited engagement with the concept of ‘mixed methods’ and scarce concern with the incompatibilities of the styles and ethos which underpin the methods employed.

In a sense, the decision to mix different methods of data collection and analysis stems from a desire to do ‘whatever works’ (Bryman, 2006), a position also described as being pragmatic rather than ‘purist’. Methodological ‘purists’ choose methods based on their association with a specific favoured ideology or tradition, such as interpretivism or positivism (we discuss this further in Chapter 6). For example, an interpretive study might select any of the methods we describe in the previous chapters of this book, such as interviews or content analysis, while a positivist investigation might opt for a questionnaire which produces quantitative results. A mixed methods researcher, on the other hand, might employ all three methods simultaneously or sequentially.

**Key point**

This type of research requires researchers to have a thorough grounding in both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Because of the combination of methodologies and their differing stances towards social reality, it is both time consuming and complex. Therefore, mixed methods research cannot be recommended to novice researchers.

Mixed methods research offers a potentially valuable alternative for postgraduate and experienced researchers interested in undertaking the type of investigation which Mason (2006) terms 'multi-dimensional', that which generates new ways of understanding the situated complexities of social experience.

Drawing on Mason's ideas, if you were to carry out multi-dimensional or mixed methods research on the relationships between advertising executives and their clients, your research would be able to take account of the following elements or practices, among others: emotional, imaginary, habitual, routinized, accidental, sensory, temporal, spatial, locational, physical/bodily, virtual. It is unlikely that qualitative or quantitative research alone would be able to do this.

**Example 20.1: A mixed methods study of communication and change**

A Dutch branch of a large international organization recently underwent organizational restructuring. This was the site of research carried out by Paul Nelissen and Martine van Selm. They were interested in exploring the role of management communication during change. The researchers first conducted interviews with a sample of employees to find out about their optimism and fears regarding change, and their confidence in management. They sought to uncover emotions and concerns at both the individual and collective levels. Following the qualitative phase, they then surveyed all employees using a questionnaire to gain quantitative information about positive and negative responses and the perceived quality of the management communication.

(Nelissen and van Selm, 2008)

Mason further suggests that people's personal, work and social lives exist in relation to wider domains and therefore research of a multi-dimensional nature offers a way of transcending the macro and micro elements. When mixed methods research is employed in this manner it addresses one of the criticisms levelled against it – that often it neglects structural factors such as class or gender, as well as failing often to engage with contextual factors such as the political and economic.

For example, in a study of political communications the use of a questionnaire would enable you to gather facts, patterns, trends and changes concerning the political preferences of regions or social classes within which citizens are situated. This could be complemented by interviews to elicit the aesthetic, sensory and emotional responses of citizens towards political party communications as well as the interpersonal communications of members of government with their constituents. Mixed methods research therefore has potential for enabling the exploration of different dimensions of the same situated experiences or phenomena in marketing communications and public relations. It encourages researchers 'to see and think about things differently and creatively' (Mason, 2006: 20).

Sometimes qualitative researchers combine a mixed methods approach within an ethnographic or grounded theory design, collecting data either sequentially or in parallel (we discuss this again later in the chapter, on pp. 353–354). This points to the diversity of mixed methods research; it is not only about combining quantitative and qualitative methods, ideologies or traditions but is also concerned with mixing methods or ideologies *within* either qualitative or quantitative research. This chapter deals solely with research designs that incorporate both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Theoretical and practical arguments *for* and *against* mixed methods exist.

The strengths of mixed methods research include:

- its multi-dimensional nature, which allows you to explore a range of different aspects and levels within a single project;
- it enables you to 'simultaneously answer confirmatory and exploratory questions, and therefore verify and generate theory in the same study' (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003: 15);
- it has the potential to overcome some of the limitations of mono-method research, for example enabling you to engage with wider contextual or structural aspects, as we noted earlier.

However, a mixed methods approach is not necessarily the ideal solution to problems you might experience in qualitative (or quantitative) research. Each does well on its own, while pursuing different aims and purposes. For example, qualitative research is context bound, which is its major strength, while quantitative research reaches wider audiences. A disadvantage of mixed methods research is its complex and time-consuming nature. Therefore it is essential that you have a clear rationale for why you have chosen to employ it. The research design must be appropriate to the problem you wish to explore.

## The background

This approach is sometimes referred to as 'multi-methods', 'multi-strategy', mixed methodsology or mixed methods. Its base is in pragmatism, a direction in philosophy that originates from the work of Charles Peirce (1839–1914), William James (1842–1910) and John Dewey (1859–1952) in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Pragmatists are interested in the practical consequences of or 'workable solutions' to problems (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004: 16), paying attention to the effects and expedience of actions in a world of diverse experiences. Research which is pragmatic is applied, practical, instrumental and not necessarily affected by theoretical and philosophical traditions in the same way as research from a more 'purist' stance. This is because mixed methods researchers emphasize the importance of completing the research in a practical and pragmatic way by using whichever method or research strategy is likely to achieve the desired goals, regardless of their ontological and epistemological base.

## The nature of mixed methods research

To design a piece of multi-method or mixed methods research is a complex process because several approaches are involved which have different philosophical foundations and strategies, and hence clarity is of major importance. In the research proposal and also in the methodology chapter of your dissertation or thesis, you need to address the issue of design, which must be appropriate to the problem. As mixed methods research includes both qualitative and quantitative elements, the different aims of each approach should be made explicit. The research question(s) in this type of project should include the 'what and how' and 'what and why' (Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007).

From the beginning, make sure you are clear about the type of mixed methods research you wish to adopt (see below) and the strategies associated with your choice, including the sequencing and prioritizing of methods, whether or not to integrate all your results when you present and discuss them, or whether to write about them separately and then combine the ideas and concepts only at the end of your dissertation. Mixed methods research is a challenging and time-consuming task for beginning researchers.

### *Types of mixed methods research*

According to Creswell (2009), two of the most important ways that qualitative and quantitative methods can be applied in mixed methods research are *sequentially* and *concurrently*. Most frequently sequential procedures are carried out. This is where one type of data collection and analysis is followed by another.

In a *sequential exploratory design* the findings of one method elaborate on or expand upon another. Usually (but not always) you start with qualitative strategies in order to explore and illuminate a particular phenomenon or process. You then follow up with quantitative strategies to expand on the findings, to show generalizability or to test either the propositions or the grounded theoretical model you developed in the qualitative phase. Quantitative methods, such as a survey, can also illustrate the extent to which the phenomenon you have explored in the first phase occurs more widely within a particular population. For example, in Example

20.2 qualitative research was followed by quantitative in order to investigate the most influential factors in the acceptance or otherwise of SMS mobile advertising by consumers in New Zealand.

**Example 20.2: Sequential exploratory mixed methods design**

In New Zealand, a group of researchers examined consumers' perceptions and attitudes toward mobile advertising via SMS. The study began with video recorded focus groups where the discussions focused on the main variables that consumers believed influenced their mobile advertising acceptance. These included the control of the wireless service provider, permission to receive mobile advertising messages, relevance of the content, the brand or company sending the message, and more. The extent to which these were accepted more broadly was then tested in a quantitative survey.

The authors considered that their research would have been improved if they had undertaken a third phase of research: carrying out further qualitative interviews 'to further elaborate on the initial quantitative analysis' (Carroll *et al.*, 2007: 95).

*Sequential explanatory design* is a more conventional form of mixed methods research. This is where you collect and analyse quantitative data and, based on the results, use a qualitative approach to gain more depth and interpretive possibilities for the study. This type of research is particularly useful when you want to explain the following:

- some of the relationships uncovered through an analysis of the data derived from a survey (Bryman, 2006);
- the existence of a surprising pattern that you have discovered in the data, or alternatively if you want to uncover the process that created an unexpected pattern (Shah and Corley, 2006).

In this type of design, quantitative strategies have priority, driving and informing the qualitative stage; therefore the results of the study can be generalized. In this and other types of sequential design, separate questions are asked in each stage of the research design so that answers emerge one after the other, or sequentially. Thus findings from the quantitative research form the basis for questions in qualitative research or vice versa.

**Example 20.3: Sequential explanatory mixed methods design**

Jisu Huh and Leonard Reid asked the question: 'Do consumers believe advertising is negatively affected when placed near news perceived as biased?' In the first stage of their research, they surveyed 106 people about news bias, credibility of news media and advertising effects, focusing on what they called 'rub-off', the association between negative opinions, beliefs and feelings about news compared with advertisements. In the second stage, they interviewed 50 people, asking them: 'What do you think these results mean?' and 'How do you explain them'. In fleshing out the survey's findings, the interviews uncovered an overriding explanation for consumers' beliefs. The authors also noted that their research design allowed them to study 'the same questions about advertising and its influences from multiple angles for complete empirical understanding' (Huh and Reid, 2007: 24).

When *concurrent* procedures are carried out, both qualitative and quantitative data are collected at the same time. You integrate and interpret the information you gather through both methods simultaneously, using one distinct research strategy to validate or confirm the other. In effect, this form of mixed methods research can be described as triangulation (see later section – p. 356 – and also Chapter 5) because each strategy is considered equally valid, each being employed to overcome the weaknesses of the other.

**Example 20.4: A concurrent mixed methods design**

Through a case study of the Chinese government's crisis communication following the Sichuan earthquake, Ni Chen employed qualitative and quantitative strategies of data collection and analysis concurrently. She carried out the study in real time when the government crisis communication efforts were most evident.

One phase consisted of carrying out a content analysis of transcripts of 30 press conferences held by the Chinese government ministry responsible for crisis communications. The transcripts were downloaded from the ministry website, along with audio/visuals and other supplementary materials. The researcher also analysed pamphlets, news releases, posters, etc. distributed by the ministry.

At the same time, she also carried out telephone interviews with government officials and media personnel.

Further, she surveyed 100 people in Beijing, the Chinese capital, and Chengdu, the capital of the province where the earthquake hit. The survey questions gauged 'what the general public thought of Chinese-government efforts as well as the credibility/reputation/image of the Chinese leaders' (Chen, 2009: 190).

We refer to some of the limitations of using these types of research design at the end of the chapter (p. 356). However, it is worth drawing attention here to Bryman's counsel that unless there is some rationale for the use of mixed methods research ‘there is the possibility of data redundancy, whereby some data are generated which are highly unlikely to shed light on the topic of interest’ (2006: 111). This would waste not only your time and energy, but also those of research participants. Bryman suggests, therefore, that if you intend to conduct qualitative and quantitative research in tandem, it is imperative that you are explicit about your rationale for deploying this research design.

## The process of mixed methods research

Designing and carrying out a mixed methods study is very similar to undertaking single method research, though more complex. Wilkins and Woodgate (2008) propose several steps to consider before undertaking such a study, and though they work in a different field from public relations, their suggestions are applicable in any mixed methods project:

- *Reflect on the appropriateness of mixed methods*: this means considering both qualitative and quantitative aims. Of course, you must be knowledgeable about both qualitative and quantitative strategies in the first place.
- *Provide a justification for mixed methods*: ask yourself whether the methods are to be used as complementary approaches – sequentially or concurrently – or merely to confirm validity.
- *Choose a specific type of mixed methods research* (see the previous section) and decide on the priority of qualitative or quantitative procedures or whether they should have equal weight. Note that your research question influences data collection and analysis.
- *Select a sample that is appropriate to the methods you have chosen*: probability sampling in quantitative research; and purposeful sampling for the qualitative phase.
- *Collect the data*: the type of collection depends on the design of the study.
- *Proceed with your data analysis* according to the separate and specific requirements of both qualitative and quantitative procedures.
- *Interpret the data*: this depends on the manner in which you have decided to combine or integrate the different types of data. For example, you might combine all your data together and initially interpret them inductively (see Chapter 18). Or you might take the findings from each distinct phase and interpret them separately, comparing the findings of one with the other to enrich or enhance the study.
- *Establish the validity and trustworthiness of the findings*: this includes the audit trail, member check (if appropriate) and reflexivity for qualitative findings (see Chapter 5 on how to ensure the quality of your research). For quantitative findings, it includes procedures such as probability sampling and the inclusion of a control group.
- *Report your findings in a formal written account or thesis*.

Remember that before and during the research process, it is essential to consider ethical issues.

### *The place and purpose of the literature*

The literature review in a mixed methods design depends on the specific study. When you start with quantitative strategies, or when you give them priority, you need a lengthy initial review, not only to establish the gap in knowledge but to be able to formulate a hypothesis. On the basis of this, it is possible to develop a rationale for your research. In a sequential exploratory design where qualitative strategies impel the study, you need merely an overview of the literature to show that your research topic has not been researched before in the particular way you intend. Later, as you collect and analyse the qualitative data, you carry out an ongoing dialogue between the literature and your emerging ideas, drawing on the literature to inform and challenge your findings. In a concurrent study, you have a choice between these two approaches, although, ultimately, whichever design you select, the place and purpose of the literature review are driven by the topic under study.

### *Triangulation*

Some researchers adopt mixed methods to establish validity or trustworthiness. Triangulation is the process by which several methods (data sources, theories and method/ologies or researchers) are used in the study of a single phenomenon (see Chapter 5 for more on triangulation). The discussion in this chapter focuses on the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative methods – between-method triangulation. Researchers use between-method triangulation to confirm the findings generated through one method by another. It is suggested that triangulation can improve validity and overcome the biases inherent in one perspective, which is one reason why mixed methods research is often favoured by research funding bodies.

## Critique of mixed methods research

Not everyone agrees that it is a good idea to combine methods. Lipscomb (2007), for example, points out that despite the attractions of pragmatism many mixed methods studies suffer from serious flaws, especially when the different methods and approaches have been introduced unreflectively and suffer from theoretical indifference. This has consequences for the interpretation of the data and therefore many combinations of mixed methods are difficult to integrate or blend. Because qualitative, quantitative and even different qualitative approaches diverge in their underlying beliefs, they are not always suited to incorporation within a mixed methods study. Illustrating this argument we point to grounded theory, which, because it develops theories and hypotheses, might be useful for sequential explorative enquiry but not for explanatory research. Indeed as grounded theory is an explanatory approach it is advisable not to use it for mixed methods studies. Also, many mixed methods researchers integrate the mixed methods approaches rather than presenting two separate studies in one.

The often mentioned claim that mixed methods research is a 'third paradigm' is contested by Symonds and Gorard (2008) and Giddings and Grant (2007). The latter posit that much mixed methods research either fits into the positivist paradigm or has its basis in a post-positivist stance, both of which are usually associated with quantitative methods. Further, in many mixed methods studies the quantitative approach prevails over the qualitative, which is relegated to a subsidiary role in order to enhance or deepen the primary, quantitative findings.

The vocabulary of mixed methods research shows that there is no clarity between the mixing of methods or methodologies. Most researchers working within the approach would advocate the mixing of methods rather than methodologies as the latter are linked to the underlying philosophical bases of methods while the former are mainly techniques for data collection and analysis.

## Summary

- Mixed methods research combines qualitative and quantitative methods within a single study.
- It is intended to overcome some of the limitations of single method research, although whether it does this is debatable.
- With its basis in pragmatism, its focus is practical and empirical.
- Different types of mixed methods research exist, each applied in different ways: sequential exploratory, sequential explanatory, concurrent.
- It is important to engage with the philosophical and theoretical tensions inherent within the approach.
- Mixed methods research is time consuming and complex and therefore more suited to postgraduate or doctoral enquiry than to undergraduate.

# 21 Finishing off

This chapter briefly deals with some of the personal issues that are likely to confront you over the course of doing qualitative research. It offers tips and techniques for working efficiently, staying motivated and getting to the end of your project.

## Introduction

If you have read this far, it is probable that you have already made a start on your research. No matter how enthusiastic you are when you start out, there are times when you start to flag or feel stressed out about the overwhelming amount of evidence that needs to be sifted and sorted. In some cases, you will feel that you are making little progress. Your study time will feel disorganized and, despite your best efforts, you will feel as if you're going nowhere. You might even start to doubt your own ability to deal with the intellectual discipline of carrying out and completing a research project. These feelings are quite natural. Most researchers experience them at some stage or another. The trick is to find coping strategies to minimize the frustrations and maximize the challenge, fulfilment and excitement that doing qualitative research is all about.

Here we set out some of the techniques that have worked for us.

## Staying motivated

### *Choose a topic that interests you*

It is essential to find a topic that fascinates you and which will sustain your interest over a long period. Undertaking research is often lonely, especially at doctoral level, where you may be working for many years in isolation. Even at undergraduate level, a dissertation can take up to nine months to complete. This is a long time if you have become bored with the area of investigation. Make sure, then, that your topic choice is an appropriate one for you. Turn back to Chapter 2 for more on this.

### *Plan the course of your research*

The course of research is never straightforward. Getting hold of books through inter-library loans takes time, interviewees cancel appointments and analysis is achieved only slowly. However, it is important to make a timetable of your *expected* progress because this provides a basis for your activities, even if you have to amend it as you go along. It also means that you can tick off the various stages as you achieve them and chart your progress. Looking back over a whole series of ticks certainly helps to kick-start the momentum when it's flagging.

Make sure you talk through your plan with your supervisor, who will be able to advise you on its feasibility. Ensure that you do not put the majority of your efforts into collecting the data and reading the literature, because, although you analyse constantly, the final interpretation and writing up *always* take much longer than expected. Build in plenty of time for this.

### *Get enough rest and relaxation and aim for a healthy lifestyle*

One of the reasons why stress and boredom set in is because you are too close to your work and too tired. Perhaps you've been studying every day without a break. Take some time off, go for a walk, meet friends for a coffee, get an early night! By setting your work aside for a day or so, you often return to it with much more creative energy.

### *Make a schedule for your day*

At some stage, the problem may not be that you are working too hard but that you cannot get round to starting at all. It's easy to waste a morning sleeping in or having a long lunch with friends. Try to schedule each day so that you work productively and in accordance with your own body rhythm. Some people work best in the morning, others late at night. Find out what's right for you and then concentrate your study periods into those times.

Working in spurts of three-quarters of an hour is often helpful. Stop for a drink, spend five or ten minutes walking around a bit, then start back again for another three-quarters of an hour. In that way, the day doesn't seem to stretch endlessly ahead but can be dealt with in manageable chunks.

### *Talk to others about your research*

Even if you feel your progress is slow and there is little to discuss, continue to meet with your supervisor – don't go and hide in a hole! The mere act of talking through your ideas, or lack of them, with a supportive supervisor often triggers new thoughts because your supervisor will ask questions that bring a broader perspective to your work. Meet with friends, family and other research colleagues too. Discussions with those outside your field can lead to a fresh perspective on your work.

## Getting to the end

### *Start writing early and keep on writing*

Get into the habit of putting your thoughts down onto paper or the computer screen every day. We can't stress enough the importance of starting to write as soon as you begin your project. One of the problems that cripples researchers is that they become overwhelmed by the volume of data they have collected. If you are able to write about it as you collect your data, your analysis proceeds in a manageable way and your ideas and reflections develop coherently. This is good practice for your report writing skills too.

### *Remind yourself of the progress you've made already*

When things seem overwhelming, remind yourself of how far you've already travelled on your intellectual journey. Think back to when you first began the project and consider what you know now that you didn't then. You'll surprise yourself at the knowledge you have gained and the skills you have acquired.

### *Take one step at a time*

Carrying out a research project is a daunting task. Think about it as a series of stages and consider them one at a time, only looking as far ahead as you need. Before you realize it, the stages are behind you and you've successfully reached the end. Now congratulate yourself on a task well done – and go and book that holiday!

## Student reflections on doing research

We end this book with the voices of current and recently completed research students as they offer some tips to you, the reader, on doing qualitative research:

> If I was to do it again, I would get my bedroom, USB, book shelves, computer file system super-organized. I wasted so much time looking for things! I would probably ask more questions when I'm unsure (sometimes I was afraid to do this because I felt I would sound silly) and speak up more when I was unhappy with the way I was being guided. I'd also be more disciplined in sticking to a schedule – my research is going to run three months over because I haven't planned well. I'd also take more notice of my supervisor's advice to 'chip away' at it, not do things in big rushed chunks! I'd be less of a hoarder when it comes to literature that really isn't that useful.
>
> (Elysha Hickey, undergraduate student)

> My tip would be don't get so caught up in your research that you forget to have a life as well! Due to the short timeframe for an honours thesis, students have a tendency to become so immersed in the work that they don't want to

(or feel like they shouldn’t) stop to do other things or take a break. I found that when I did take a week off from the work, I returned to it with new insight which ultimately made the thesis better.

(Lauren Magid, undergraduate student)

Start early, plan everything, listen to your tutor and learn from your peers. Pick a subject that is achievable, don’t overstretch yourself. And if you’re married, buy your spouse lots of nice things to compensate for all the times you’re stuck on your computer.

(Stuart Mills, masters student)

Doing a dissertation is a challenge but also a joy. The pressures of a young family (my son was only a few months old when I started my dissertation), work, job moves and securing funding while trying to complete a course and dissertation part time were sometimes overwhelming. That said, now I have completed my masters I feel a great sense of achievement. . .I also hope that my achievement makes me an attractive prospect to employers. Either that or they will think I am a bit mad!

(Catherine Archer, masters student)

THE END.

# Appendix

## An example interview guide

In order to demonstrate the impact of postmodern perspectives on public relations practice, Derina Holtzhausen and Rosina Voto examined the discourse of 16 public relations practitioners, whom they interviewed using the interview guide below. The results of their study (including quotations from the interviews) can be found in their article published in the *Journal of Public Relations Research* (2002, volume 14, issue 1).

1 Introduction and discussion about the activities of the organization and its public relations department, such as size, roles and duties, and reporting structure.
2 Discussion of the organization's attitude toward people from diverse backgrounds, such as women, ethnic and sexual minorities, and people with disabilities. Explore real examples.
3 Discussion of minorities in the public relations department itself, whether there is an active programme to employ minority practitioners, and the practitioners' general attitude towards this issue.
4 Exploration of differences of opinion between practitioner and department and management. Ask for real examples. Discuss practitioner's comfort level with stating opposing views and the culture around differences in opinion and viewpoints in the organization.
5 Ask practitioner to describe feelings and actions when employees or external publics have issues with the organization that they cannot resolve on their own. Does he or she ever feel the need to speak out on behalf of colleagues or people outside the organization who do not have as much power as they have?
6 Explore involvement in social or community actions where the practitioner applies public relations skills. Ask for examples and explore the factors that make such involvement difficult or impossible.
7 Discuss the possibility of public relations as an activist function, both in the current organization and in activist organizations such as environmental or social activist groups.
8 Ask practitioner about the level of the function and whether it is included in the highest management level of the organization. Explore from here the need

for power and whether the practitioner feels she or he has enough power to fulfil the public relations role as she or he wishes or sees best.

9 Explore organizational issues (both internal and external) that the practitioner feels strongly about and whether the practitioner has the power to address these issues. Ask for examples.

10 Discuss the concept of public relations as a bridging function and whether this requires the practitioner to be neutral. Explore the concept of choosing sides, and how conflict is handled in the organization. Are there ever situations where the practitioner is unable to resolve conflict between the organization and a public? Ask for examples.

11 Ask whether the practitioner ever considers the historical, social or political realities of the organization's publics before or during communication activities.

12 Discuss the organization's attitude towards change in society and the business environment and whether the organization is more open to change than in the past.

13 Discuss the level of democracy in the organization and to which extent publics are taken into consideration in the decision-making process.

14 Explore the practitioner's understanding of the role of change agent and whether this role is performed.

15 Explore the role of the practitioner as 'the conscience of the organization'.

(Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002: 83–84)

# Glossary

*Action research*: A cyclical approach where researchers and/or practitioners collaborate to change the status quo, evaluate their actions and modify them in the light of evaluation to improve the situation. The process goes on until the optimum improvement has been achieved.

*Aide-mémoire*: Key words or phrases kept by researchers that are a reminder or aide to their memories and focus on the agenda of the study during in-depth interviewing.

*Alternative explanation*: Explanations that disconfirm or are different from the original explanations of the researchers by which the data also might be explained.

*Assumption*: A belief or conjecture of the researcher which has not been verified by evidence.

*Audit trail* (or *decision trail*): A detailed description of the ongoing actions of researchers to show the processes by which they came to their decisions.

*Authenticity*: A term used to show that the findings of a research project are authentic and represent the participants' perspectives.

*Bias*: A distortion, error or inaccuracy in the processing (sampling, data collection or analysis) or reporting of the research (rooted in quantitative research).

*Bracketing* (in phenomenology): A process by which researchers set aside their assumptions about the phenomenon under study.

*CADQAS*: Computer-aided/assisted qualitative analysis software

*Case study*: An intensive examination, using multiple sources of evidence) of a phenomenon within its naturalistic context which is bounded by time and place.

*Category*: A cluster of concepts and ideas with similar characteristics that form a unit of analysis.

*Causality*: A link between cause and effect – where the cause creates the effect.

*Coding* (in analysis): Examining and breaking down the data into pieces of text and labelling them.

*Concept*: An abstract notion that describes a phenomenon.

*Concept mapping*: Linking concepts and presenting the relationship diagrammatically.

*Constant comparison* (in grounded theory): Data analysis where incoming data are compared with those previously collected.

*Construct*: A construct is built on concepts or categories and has a high level of abstraction. In qualitative research it is sometimes used for a major category that has developed from a collapsing or reduction of several smaller categories.

*Constructionism* (social constructionism): An approach in social science based on the supposition that human beings are involved in creating their own social reality and that the social world cannot exist independently of human beings. In research terms this means that participants and researcher construct meaning together.

*Context sensitivity*: An awareness of context.

*Contextualization*: Researchers locate people, data and processes in their specific social context.

*Core category* (in grounded theory): A central phenomenon emerging in a grounded theory study which relates to the other categories in the research and integrates them.

*Criterion* (pl. *criteria*): A standard by which something is evaluated.

*Criterion-based sample*: See *Purposive sampling*.

*Critical incident technique*: A data collection and analysis technique focusing on people's behaviour in critical situations and events.

*Critical theory*: The view that people can critically evaluate social phenomena and change society in order to become emancipated, and which has its origin in Marixism.

*Data* (pl. but sometimes used as sing.): The information collected by researchers and from which they draw their conclusions.

*Data analysis*: Organization, reduction and transformation of the data previously collected.

*Deductive reasoning*: A type of reasoning that proceeds from general principles to explain specific cases.

*Delimitations*: The boundaries of the research, describing what is included or excluded.

*Description*: A detailed account of the significant phenomenon or phenomena in the research to generate a picture of the world as seen by the participants.

*Design* (*research design*): The plan of the research, including strategies and procedures for sampling, data collection and analysis.

*Deviant case*: An occurrence or instance that is contrary to what has been found in the rest of the data; an example where some elements of the data do not fit into the working propositions or initial explanations of the researcher.

*Discourse*: A way of talking or writing about something to make it meaningful. Underpinned by assumptions about what we know to be 'true', it constitutes, or produces, a particular view of social reality.

*Emic perspective*: The 'insider's' point of view, which is culture bound (see also *Etic perspective*), a term used specifically in anthropology.

*Epistemology*: The theory of knowledge, an area of philosophy concerned with the nature of human knowledge.

*Ethnography*: Anthropological research that is concerned with a description of a culture or group and its members' experiences and interpretations. An ethnography is the completed product of ethnographic research.

*Etic perspective*: The outsider's view, the perspective of the observer or researcher (see also *Emic perspective*).

*Exclusion criteria* (sing. *criterion*): Conditions/factors/people that are excluded on the selection of sample (see also *Inclusion criteria*).

*Exhaustive description* (in phenomenology): Writing that integrates significant statements and captures the participants' experience in depth and exhaustively.

*External validity*: Generalizability (see *Generalizability*).

*Field*: The general area and/or the setting of the research.

*Fieldnotes*: Notes and records made by the researcher from observations in the field.

*Fieldwork* (initially a term from anthropology): The collection of data 'in the field' by observation, interviewing, etc. outside the laboratory or library.

*Focus group*: A group of individuals who provide information about a particular product or topic.

*Gatekeepers*: People who have the power to allow or restrict access to an organization, a setting or participants for research.

*Generalizability*: The extent to which the findings of a qualitative study can be generalized, that is, applied to other events, settings or groups in the population (see also *Transferability*).

*Grounded theory*: A research approach which generates theory from the data through constant comparison, initially developed by Strauss and Glaser.

*Hermeneutics*: A branch of phenomenology that focuses on the interpretation and meaning of text rather than the description of a phenomenon.

*Heterogeneity*: The extent to which units of a sample are dissimilar in traits which might be important for the study.

*Homogeneity*: The extent to which units of a sample are similar in characteristics and composition important to the research.

*Hypothesis*: An assumption, theory or tentative statement of a relationship between variables which can be tested, verified or falsified.

*Idiographic methods*: Methods focused on the unique and individual. These differ from *Nomothetic methods*, which seek law-like generalities subsuming individual cases.

*Immersion*: The process whereby researchers engage in and become completely familiar with the field.

*Inclusion criteria* (sing. *criterion*): Factors or conditions that are taken into account or will be met in the choice of sample (see also *Exclusion criteria*).

*Induction*: A reasoning process in which researchers proceed from the specific, the individual and concrete to general and abstract principles.

*Informant*: An individual who, as a member of the group under study, participates in the research and helps the researcher to interpret the culture of the group (see also *Key informant*).

*Informed consent*: A voluntary agreement to take part in a study after having been informed of its nature and aim.

*Interpretivism*: An approach in social science that focuses on human beings and the way in which they interpret and ascribe meaning to their experience and world.

*Interview guide*: Potential questions which are used flexibly and not always sequentially by the interviewer in in-depth interviews.

*Interview schedule*: Standardized questions which are used by the quantitative researcher, who uses the same sequence and wording for each respondent. (Qualitative researchers use an interview guide rather than a schedule.)

*Interviewer effect* (also observer effect): The effect of the researcher's (interviewer's or observer's) presence on the research.

*In vivo code* (in grounded theory): Codes that are phrases of the participants and which the researcher also uses as a label.

*Iteration*: Movement between parts of the research text and the whole, between raw data and analysed data.

*Key informant* (in ethnography): A long-term member of a culture or group who has expert and intimate knowledge of its rules, customs and language.

*Limitations*: Restrictions and incompleteness of the research (not always used in a negative way).

*Member check*: Checking and verification of the data or interpretations with participants.

*Memoing*: Notes of varying degrees of abstraction made when carrying out fieldwork.

*Method*: Procedure and strategy for collecting, analysing and interpreting data.

*Methodology*: The framework of theories and principles on which methods and procedures are based.

*Narrative*: The account of experiences by the participants which they transmit to the researcher.

*Nomothetic methods*: The search for law-like generalities or rule-following behaviour that subsume individual cases (see also *Idiographic methods*).

*Objectivity*: A neutral and unbiased stance.

*Observer effect*: See *Interviewer effect.*

*Ontology*: A direction of philosophy concerning the nature of being. It is related to assumptions about the nature of reality.

*Paradigm*: A perspective or approach to reality recognized by a community of scholars. A position that provides the researcher with a set of beliefs to guide the research.

*Participant observation*: Observation in which the researcher becomes a participant in the setting or culture under study.

*Phenomenology*: A philosophy which explores the meaning of individuals' lived experience through their own description. The research approach adopted is based on this philosophy.

*Phenomenon*: The central concept to be researched; in *phenomenology*, the meaning of the experiences in the life-world of the participant in a study.

*Pilot study*: A small-scale trial run of the research.

*Positivism*: A direction in the philosophy of social science which aims to find general laws and regularities (oriented towards cause and effect) based on observation and experiment parallel to the methods of the natural sciences.

*Premature closure*: Arriving prematurely at an explanation or theoretical ideas before the study is complete.

*Progressive focusing*: Starting with broad questions which become progressively more specific or focused in the research.

*Proposition*: A working hypothesis which comprises linked concepts. It establishes some regularities and relationships between categories.

*Pseudonym*: A fictitious name given to an informant to protect their anonymity.

*Purposive* (or *purposeful*) *sampling*: A sample of individuals chosen by certain predetermined criteria relevant to the research question (also called criterion-based sample).

*Raw data*: Data which have not yet been analysed.

*Reactivity*: Reactivity occurs when participants react to the presence of the researcher and change their behaviour. The researcher also reacts to the responses of the participants.

*Reflexivity*: Critically and ethically considering the implications for the knowledge the researcher generates by his or her location in the research, his or her biases, values, theoretical predispositions and research preferences, including choices of methods and methodology.

*Reliability*: The ability of a research tool to achieve consistent results.

*Research aim*: The intention of the researcher to uncover something about the phenomenon under study in order to answer the research question.

*Research question*: The problem or statement that guides a study and establishes the baseline for other questions.

*Rigour*: A high standard in research which seeks detail, accuracy, trustworthiness and credibility (or having validity).

*Saturation*: A state where no new data of importance to the specific study and developing theory emerge and when the elements of all categories are accounted for.

*Serendipity*: A chance and unexpected discovery during data collection, often by searching for something else.

*Storyline*: An analytic description of the story told in the research.

*Subjectivity*: A personal view influenced by personal background and traits, often based on experience.

*Symbolic interactionism*: An interpretive approach in sociology that focuses on meaning in interaction, particularly language and signals.

*Tacit knowledge*: Implicit knowledge that is shared but not openly articulated.

*Theoretical sampling* (in grounded theory): Sampling which proceeds on the basis of emerging, relevant concepts and is guided by developing theory.

*Theoretical sensitivity* (concept developed by Glaser): Sensitivity and awareness of the researcher to detect meaning in the data.

*Theory*: A set of interrelated concepts and propositions that explain social phenomena.

*Thick description* (concept developed by Geertz): Dense detailed and conceptual description which gives a picture of events and actions within the social context.

*Transferability*: The extent to which the specific knowledge gained from the research findings of one study can be transferred to other settings.

*Triangulation*: The combination of different methods of research, data collection approaches, investigators or theoretical perspectives in the study of one phenomenon (e.g. qualitative and quantitative methods, interviews and observation, etc.).

*Validity*: The extent to which the researcher's findings are accurate, reflect the purpose of the study and represent reality (validity in qualitative research differs from that in quantitative research).

*Verification*: Empirical validation after testing a hypothesis; in qualitative research, testing a proposition or a working hypothesis.

*Vignette*: A short scenario or story which is written or visual and used as a projective technique.

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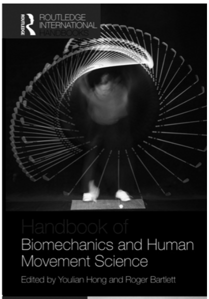
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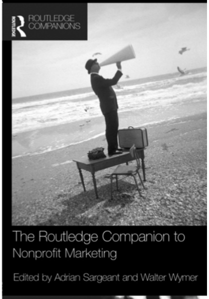
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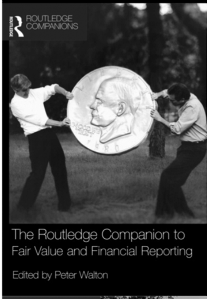
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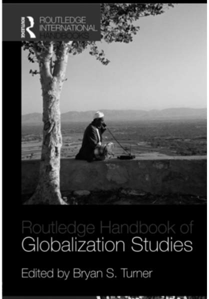
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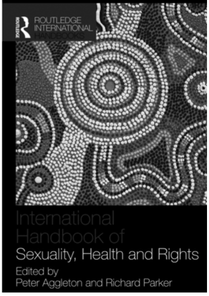
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