# Introducing qualitative research in psychology

## Adventures in theory and method

### *Carla Willig*

# Contents

# one

# From recipes to adventures

**Contents**

'It involves opening up to new and possibly unsettling experiences.'

'It means venturing into new territory.'

'It's discovering something new and exciting; there's a little bit of danger.'

'It is exciting and unusual, out-of-the-ordinary. There's a big element of enjoyment and there may be an element of challenge. It's something that will develop me as a person.'

'Enid Blyton stories . . . [laughs] . . . It's exciting, possibly involving a degree of risk to oneself; scary on occasion but it comes out alright at the end. You're glad you've had them.'

'An exploration involving new places, meeting new people and having new experiences outside of the norm. These could be both positive and negative in nature.'

'Adventures are sudden, surprise events which are pleasurable, because they are unexpected.'

Talk of an 'adventure' captures the imagination. We want to know what it was like, how it felt, what happened next. We look upon the adventurer as someone who has been changed by the experience, someone who will never be quite the same again. The definitions above were provided in response to my question 'What does the term "adventure" mean to you?' Most of them include references to something 'new' and as yet unknown, something we have not experienced before. At the same time, the 'adventure' is perceived as a positive, if somewhat risky, enterprise. I suggest that we should think about the research process as a form of adventure. When I was an undergraduate student, I thought of 'research methods' as recipes. Research appeared to involve choosing the right ingredients (a representative sample, a standardized measurement instrument, the appropriate statistical test) and administering them in the right order (the 'procedure'). Having done our best to 'get it right', we would hold our breath, hoping that the experiment had 'worked' – much like hovering about the kitchen, waiting for the perfect roast to emerge from the oven. Now I look upon research in a different light. 'Research methods' have become ways of approaching a question. They are also ways of justifying an answer (this is where research methods meet *epistemology*, to be discussed below). Either way, my understanding of research has moved from a mechanical (how-to-apply-appropriate-techniques-to-the-subject-matter) to a creative (how-can-I-find-out?) mode. In the process, I have replaced the metaphor of research-methods-as-recipes with a view of the research-process-as-adventure.

In this chapter, I want to explore in some detail what 'research' is all about and how qualitative research methods in psychology fit into this picture. To do this, I need to introduce some key concepts from the philosophy of science, such as 'epistemology', 'positivism', 'empiricism' and 'hypothetico-deductivism'. In the process, I shall problematize familiar concepts such as 'science' and 'knowledge'. The aim of the chapter is to provide a context within which to place qualitative research methods in psychology and to identify the defining features of such research.

## How, and what, can we know?

*Epistemology* is a branch of philosophy concerned with the theory of knowledge. It attempts to provide answers to the question, 'How, and what, can we know?' This involves thinking about the nature of knowledge itself, about its scope and about the validity and reliability of claims to knowledge. Research methods provide ways of approaching, and hopefully answering, our research questions. Research methods can be described as 'the way to the goal' (Kvale 1996a: 278). However, first we need to identify our goal and be able to justify our choice. We need to be clear about the objectives of our research and we need to have a sense of what kinds of things it is possible for us to find out. In other words, we need to adopt an epistemological position.

## Positivism

One epistemological position is *positivism*. Positivism suggests that there is a straightforward relationship between the world (objects, events, phenomena) and our perception, and understanding, of it. Positivists believe that it is possible to describe what is 'out there' and to get it right. Such a position is also referred to as the 'correspondence theory of truth' because it suggests that phenomena directly determine our perception of them and that there is, therefore, a direct correspondence between things and their representation. Kirk and Miller's (1986: 14) definition of positivism emphasizes positivism's assumption that 'the external world itself determines absolutely the one and only correct view that can be taken of it, independent of the process or circumstances of viewing'. A positivist epistemology implies that the goal of research is to produce objective knowledge; that is, understanding that is impartial and unbiased, based on a view from 'the outside', without personal involvement or vested interests on the part of the researcher.

Positivism has a long history and few, if any, scientists and researchers today claim to be unreconstructed positivists. In fact, when the label is used in contemporary epistemological debates, it usually constitutes an insult. This is because it is now generally accepted that observation and description are necessarily selective, and that our perception and understanding of the world is therefore partial at best (for a clear discussion of the nature and limitations of scientific knowledge, see Chalmers 1999). What people disagree about is the extent to which our understanding of the world can *approach* objective knowledge, or even some kind of truth, about the world. The different responses to this question range from naive realism, which is akin to positivism, to extreme relativism, which rejects concepts such as 'truth' or 'knowledge' altogether. In between, we find positions such as critical realism and the different versions of social constructionism (see Parker 1998).

## Empiricism

*Empiricism* is closely related to positivism. It is based on the assumption that our knowledge of the world must be derived from 'the facts of experience' (see Chalmers 1999: chapter 1). In other words, sense perception provides the basis for knowledge acquisition, which proceeds through the systematic collection and classification of observations. These include experiments. According to this view, simple observations are combined to give rise to more complex ideas, and theory follows from observations. That is to say, theory is constructed to make sense of the data collected through observation. Again, few, if any, scientists and researchers subscribe to a pure form of empiricism nowadays. It is generally accepted that sense perception does not provide direct and uncontaminated access to 'the facts'. The more we know about a phenomenon, the more detail we perceive when we observe it. Perception is inevitably selective and people can be trained to observe the same phenomenon in different ways,

depending on the purpose of the observation. However, modern-day empiricists would argue that knowledge acquisition depends upon the collection and analysis of data. They do not believe that purely theoretical work can move us closer to the truth, and they propose that all knowledge claims must be grounded in data. At this point, it is important to differentiate between the terms 'empiricist' and 'empirical'. While 'empiricist' refers to the attitude that all knowledge claims must be grounded in data, 'empirical' is a descriptive term referring to research involving the collection and analysis of data.

## Hypothetico-deductivism

A number of serious practical as well as logical limitations of positivism and empiricism led to the development of alternative theories of knowledge. Karl Popper's critique of *inductivism* and subsequent formulation of *hypothetico-deductivism* constitutes the most influential alternative. It now forms the basis of mainstream experimental psychology. Popper was aware of the fact that a collection of observations could never give rise to a categorical statement such as 'a follows b'. However many times we observe that a follows b, we can never be sure that our next observation will be the same again. There is always the possibility that the next occurrence will be an exception. This is the problem of *induction*. Popper was also unhappy about the fact that many influential theories appeared to be able to accommodate a wide range of observations, interpreting them as confirmation of the theory's claims. It seemed that no scientific theory could ever be conclusively verified. This is the problem of *verification*. To circumvent these problems, Popper proposed that instead of induction and verification, scientific research ought to rely upon *deduction* and *falsification*. Popper's *hypothetico-deductive method* does just that. Here, theories are tested by deriving *hypotheses* from them which can then be tested in practice, by experiment or observation. The aim of the research is to put a theory's claims to the test to either reject the theory or retain it for the time being. Thus, rather than looking for evidence that *confirms* a theory's claims, hypothetico-deductivism works by looking for disconfirmation, or *falsification*. In this way, we can find out which claims are *not* true and, by a process of elimination of claims, we move closer to the truth.

## Critique of the 'scientific method'

Popper provided science with a method that avoided the problems associated with induction and verification. However, Popper's hypothetico-deductivism, in turn, was challenged in the 1960s and 1970s for failing to acknowledge the role of historical, social and cultural factors in knowledge formation. The critique of hypothetico-deductivism includes the following charges:

1 *Hypothetico-deductivism does not provide sufficient space for theory development*
Here, it is argued that the method's reliance on hypotheses generated by

existing theories forecloses the possibility of generating completely new theories. If all we can do is test existing theories to either reject or retain them, we are unlikely to come across entirely new and unexpected insights in our research practice. To be fair, Popper (1969: 231) did propose that researchers should be adventurous and test 'bold conjecture(s)', since most is learned from mistakes; however, even the boldest hypotheses are based upon existing knowledge and expectations. What hypothetico-deductivism does not allow for is that the evidence overturns received wisdom and makes us see things in a completely different light.

### 2  Hypothetico-deductivism is elitist

Since hypothetico-deductivism works with existing theories and relies upon deduction from existing systems of thought, it excludes those people who are not familiar with such theories and systems from its practice. The hypothetico-deductive method encourages the formation of communities of scientists and researchers who test their own and each other's theories. For the outsider or novice, it is difficult, if not impossible, to contribute to knowledge generation, if knowledge is defined as the rejection or retention of existing theories.

### 3  Hypothetico-deductivism is a myth

Popper proposed that knowledge generation should be a piecemeal process. Through the rejection of false hypotheses, knowledge would grow, slowly but continuously. Individual scientists contribute to this process by testing their hypotheses to identify those theories which could be discarded. Thomas Kuhn ([1962] 1970) fundamentally disagreed. He argued that, in reality, theories are not really put to the test in this way. While scientists were attached to a particular theory, they did not reject it on the basis of experimental evidence. Instead, if the evidence did not support the theory, they assumed that the experiment had gone wrong in some way. Thus, failure was attributed to the scientist and the design of the experiment rather than to the inadequacy of the theory. Kuhn argued that science did not progress in an evolutionary, piecemeal fashion, as Popper had suggested, but that it developed in leaps, through scientific revolutions leading to paradigm shifts. Here, a paradigm – a particular conceptual framework – is stretched to accommodate all kinds of evidence. Anomalies and inconsistencies accumulate until wider socioeconomic and historical processes allow a new paradigm to emerge and to provide a legitimate alternative to the previous one. Once the new paradigm has gained the upper hand, it in turn will resist change for some time to come.

## Feminist critique of established epistemologies

Many of the problems and limitations associated with the established epistemologies outlined above were identified by feminist scholars. In the 1960s and 1970s, they drew attention to the fact that women had been largely invisible in social scientific work and that where women had been 'studied', they had been found to be inferior to men in terms of attributes such as moral

development, intelligence and conversational style. Such 'findings', feminists argued, were then used to justify and perpetuate existing inequalities between men and women in society. To challenge these inequalities and to end the oppression of women, feminist scholars questioned the epistemological (and methodological) foundations upon which sexist knowledge claims rested. This gave rise to an extensive critique of 'male science'. This critique includes the following key arguments:

### 1 *The male as the norm*

The vast majority of studies using human participants were carried out with male subjects. This was partly due to opportunity (most researchers used university undergraduates as easy-access subjects and most of these were men) and partly due to the assumption that men constitute the prototypical 'human subject'. As a result, findings based upon studies with (young, white, middle-class) male subjects were generalized to the population as a whole. In other words (young, white, middle-class) men set the standard against which other members of society were then measured. This meant that when women were later used as participants, their performance and behaviour were assessed against the male norm and found to be wanting. One of the most well-known critiques of the 'male as norm' approach in relation to moral development was formulated by Carol Gilligan (1982). Gilligan challenged Kohlberg's (1976) claim that, on average, women's moral development was less advanced than that of men. Kohlberg's claim was supported by many studies which had used his moral development scale. This scale places individuals somewhere between Level 1 (lowest) and Level 3 (highest) of moral development. The levels, and stages in between, represent a transition from basic moral considerations (e.g. in terms of the outcome for the individual) through those based on external approval to those involving personal conscience. The scale had been developed by presenting male subjects with a series of hypothetical moral dilemmas and by categorizing their responses. Gilligan argued that men and women were socialized to develop different moral orientations, whereby girls were encouraged to develop a care orientation and boys were encouraged to develop a justice orientation. Kohlberg's scale was based upon a justice orientation and was therefore bound to favour male participants. Gilligan conducted research which identified alternative patterns of moral reasoning used by female participants who faced a real-life moral dilemma (abortion). She argued that the women's moral considerations based around non-violence within a care orientation were just as advanced as Kohlberg's Level 3 (personal conscience). They were merely different.

### 2 *The God trick*

'Male science' claimed to be, or at least aimed to be, 'objective'. This meant that researchers had to remain detached from and impartial towards their subject matter. Various procedures were developed to ensure that data collection and analysis were not 'contaminated' by the researcher. These included standardized instructions for subjects, minimization of contact between researcher and participants, blind or double-blind procedures for data collection and analysis, as well as various attempts to 'neutralize' the research environment (e.g. by

removing any personal items from the laboratory or by having the researchers wear white coats). Feminist critics argued that the attempt to be 'objective' and the strategies adopted towards this aim did, in fact, serve to obscure the fact that the researcher's identity and standpoint do fundamentally shape the research process and the findings. They argued that it is impossible for a researcher to position themselves 'outside of' the subject matter because the researcher will inevitably have a relationship with, or be implicated in, the phenomenon he or she is studying. Donna Haraway (1988) refers to attempts to pretend otherwise as the 'God's eye view'. The alternative to the 'God's eye view' is for researchers to reflect upon their own standpoint in relation to the phenomenon they are studying and to attempt to identify the ways in which such a standpoint has shaped the research process and findings. This notion of *reflexivity* will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter and will be returned to throughout this book.

Even though there can be said to be a general feminist critique of established epistemologies and of 'male science', there is no one feminist epistemology or even methodology. Feminist scholars have responded in different ways to the problems and limitations associated with positivism, empiricism and hypothetico-deductivism. Among the various alternative approaches developed by feminist social scientists and philosophers are standpoint epistemology (e.g. Harding 1991), ethnomethodology (e.g. Stanley and Wise 1983) and various versions of feminist post-structuralism (e.g. Henriques *et al.* 1984; Haraway 1991).

## Social constructionism

In recent years, *social constructionism* has become an increasingly influential approach (see Burr 1995). Social constructionism draws attention to the fact that human experience, including perception, is mediated historically, culturally and linguistically. That is, what we perceive and experience is never a direct reflection of environmental conditions but must be understood as a specific reading of these conditions. This does not mean that we can never really know anything; rather, it suggests that there are 'knowledges' rather than 'knowledge'. Language is an important aspect of socially constructed knowledge. The same phenomenon or event can be described in different ways, giving rise to different ways of perceiving and understanding it, yet neither way of describing it is necessarily wrong. An obvious example of this is the choice between describing a glass of water as 'half-full' or 'half-empty'; both descriptions are equally accurate, yet one of them provides a positive, optimistic gloss on the situation ('half-full'), whereas the other emphasizes absence and a lack ('half-empty').

Research from a social constructionist perspective is concerned with identifying the various ways of constructing social reality that are available in a culture, to explore the conditions of their use and to trace their implications for human experience and social practice. Social constructionist researchers in psychology, for instance, have critically examined psychological categories

such as 'emotion' (e.g. Harré 1986), 'prejudice' (e.g. Potter and Wetherell 1987) and 'psychopathology' (e.g. Parker *et al.* 1995) to show how they provide a way of constructing reality rather than simply reflecting it.

## Epistemology and methodology

What is the relationship between epistemology and methodology? To what extent does the epistemological position we adopt prescribe which research methods we ought to use? To address these questions, we first need to differentiate between 'method' and 'methodology'. Although often used interchangeably, the two terms do, in fact, refer to different aspects of doing research. Silverman (1993: 1) suggests that 'methodology' identifies 'a general approach to studying research topics', whereas 'method' refers to 'a specific research technique'. (A further distinction can then be made between methods of data collection and methods of data analysis; see Chapter 2.) It is helpful to differentiate between 'a general approach to studying research topics' and 'specific research techniques' because the former is much more directly informed by the researcher's epistemological position than the latter. For example, a researcher who takes a predominantly empiricist view of knowledge acquisition will approach research topics through the collection of data rather than through theoretical formulations. However, exactly *how* such data are collected (e.g. through observation, questionnaires, interviews) is another question, and it is not something the researcher's empiricist epistemological position prescribes. Hypothetico-deductivism constitutes an exception here, since it offers the researcher both an epistemological position *and* a research method, namely hypothesis-testing through experimentation (but see Chapter 5 for the use of hypothetico-deductivism in case study research).

However, not *all* research methods are compatible with *all* methodologies. Even though there is some flexibility in relation to our choice of methods, a researcher's epistemological and methodological commitments do constrain which methods can be used. For example, a social constructionist methodology is not compatible with methods that are designed to measure variables in a population. This is because social constructionism problematizes given constructs such as 'psychological variables'; it questions their validity and it is concerned with exploring the various ways in which they are 'made real'. This cannot be achieved through an attempt to 'measure' such constructs. According to a social constructionist viewpoint, the measurement of psychological variables is itself one more way of making them real, of constructing them.

## Qualitative research

This book is about qualitative research in psychology. Having introduced the concept of epistemology and having considered, briefly, some major epistemological positions, it is now time to explore how qualitative methodology fits into this picture.

First, it is important to acknowledge that qualitative research methods can be, and are, used by researchers with quite different epistemological positions. For example, there are empiricist as well as social constructionist qualitative researchers. This means that, strictly speaking, there are 'qualitative methodologies' rather than 'qualitative methodology'. However, qualitative researchers also share a number of concerns, and it is these that are commonly referred to as 'qualitative methodology'. In this section, I shall: (1) identify these shared concerns and provide a general characterization of 'qualitative methodology'; (2) identify epistemological differences between approaches to qualitative research; and (3) introduce the 'small q/big Q' dichotomy.

## Shared concerns: 'qualitative methodology'

Qualitative researchers tend to be concerned with meaning. That is, they are interested in how people make sense of the world and how they experience events. They aim to understand 'what it is like' to experience particular conditions (e.g. what it means and how it feels to live with chronic illness or to be unemployed) and how people manage certain situations (e.g. how people negotiate family life or relations with work colleagues). Qualitative researchers tend, therefore, to be concerned with the quality and texture of experience, rather than with the identification of cause–effect relationships. They do not tend to work with 'variables' that are defined by the researcher before the research process begins. This is because qualitative researchers tend to be interested in the meanings attributed to events by the research participants themselves. Using preconceived 'variables' would lead to the imposition of the researcher's meanings and it would preclude the identification of respondents' own ways of making sense of the phenomenon under investigation. The objective of qualitative research is to describe and possibly explain events and experiences, but never to predict. Qualitative researchers study people in their own territory, within naturally occurring settings (such as the home, schools, hospitals, the street). These are 'open systems' where conditions continuously develop and interact with one another to give rise to a process of ongoing change. Participants' (and researchers') interpretation of events itself contributes to this process. Therefore, 'prediction of outcomes' is not a meaningful goal for qualitative researchers. Instead, they ask questions about processes, such as 'What do people do when they form groups?', 'How do people manage change in the workplace?' or 'How do people live with chronic pain?'

## Epistemological differences: 'qualitative methodologies'

Silverman (1993: 1) argues that 'without theory there is nothing to research'. This statement draws attention to the role of theory in the interpretation of data. For example, if our data consist of several pages of interview transcript, we need to decide what this transcript represents before we can analyse it (see Kvale 1996a: 278). It could represent a factual account of what happened to the interviewee. On the other hand, it could represent the interviewee's attempt

to disclaim responsibility for what happened. Alternatively, it could be read as an expression of the interviewee's unconscious desires. Or it could provide insight into the interviewee's view of the world. Which view we take of what the transcript represents – that is, how we define the 'status of the text' (see Flick 1998) – will depend upon the theoretical framework from within which we approach the text. And this framework, in turn, is informed by our epistemological stance. For example, if our epistemological position is a social constructionist one, we may approach the text using a discourse analytic theoretical framework. This means that the text is seen as a manifestation of available discursive resources which the interviewee is drawing upon to construct a particular version of events. If, however, our epistemological position is an empiricist one, we might use a version of the grounded theory method or a form of content analysis to identify the categories of meaning used by the interviewee to make sense of events. In this case, the text is seen as a straightforward verbal expression of the interviewee's mental processes. In both cases, the analysis of the interview transcript would be qualitative.

'Qualitative methodologies' can be differentiated according to the extent to which they emphasize reflexivity and by the importance they place on the role of language. These two features are related. *Reflexivity* requires an awareness of the researcher's contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process, and an acknowledgement of the impossibility of remaining 'outside of' one's subject matter while conducting research. Reflexivity, then, urges us 'to explore the ways in which a researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research' (Nightingale and Cromby 1999: 228).

There are two types of reflexivity: personal reflexivity and epistemological reflexivity. *Personal reflexivity* involves reflecting upon the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research. It also involves thinking about how the research may have affected and possibly changed us, as people and as researchers. *Epistemological reflexivity* requires us to engage with questions such as: How has the research question defined and limited what can be 'found'? How has the design of the study and the method of analysis 'constructed' the data and the findings? How could the research question have been investigated differently? To what extent would this have given rise to a different understanding of the phenomenon under investigation? Thus, epistemological reflexivity encourages us to reflect upon the assumptions (about the world, about knowledge) that we have made in the course of the research, and it helps us to think about the implications of such assumptions for the research and its findings. Qualitative researchers differ in the emphasis they place upon reflexivity in their research. For some, both personal and epistemological reflexivity are central to the research process and form an integral part of the research report. Others acknowledge the importance of reflexivity but do not include an in-depth discussion of it in their research reports.

*Critical language awareness* (Fairclough 1995) forms part of reflexivity. The words we use to describe our experiences play a part in the construction of the meanings we attribute to such experiences. Language has a constructive dimension; it does not simply mirror reality. This means that the categories and labels

researchers use during the research process will shape their 'findings'. For example, certain answers are made impossible by certain kinds of questions. If the researcher asks a respondent 'how she felt' during, say, a medical procedure, the researcher is invoking the category 'emotion'. This means that whatever the respondent chooses to say in response to the question, 'emotion' will have to be oriented to. It has been made salient and the respondent's answer will position her in relation to this construct, even when she denies its importance. Qualitative researchers take different views of the extent to which language constructs versions of reality. At one end of the continuum, researchers argue that language plays a central role in the construction of meaning and that it is the task of researchers to study the ways in which such constructions are produced, how they change across cultures and history, and how they shape people's experiences. At the other end of the continuum, we find qualitative researchers who believe that it is possible to describe accurately 'what is going on' in a particular setting; here, language is simply a means to an end or a tool. In between, there are many degrees of critical language awareness.

### *'Small q' and 'Big Q'*

Kidder and Fine (1987) distinguish between two meanings of 'qualitative research'; 'big Q' refers to open-ended, inductive research methodologies that are concerned with theory generation and the exploration of meanings, whereas 'little q' refers to the incorporation of non-numerical data collection techniques into hypothetico-deductive research designs. For example, researchers may include an open-ended question in an otherwise forced-choice questionnaire and then use content analysis to 'score' the qualitative material. 'Little q' does not work from the bottom up. That is, 'little q' methods of data collection and analysis do not seek to engage with the data to gain new insights into the ways in which participants construct meaning and/or experience their world; instead, they start with a hypothesis and researcher-defined categories against which the qualitative data are then checked.

This book is about 'Big Q' methodology. The six approaches to qualitative research introduced here are all concerned with the exploration of lived experience and participant-defined meanings. They do take different positions in relation to *epistemology*, *reflexivity* and *critical language awareness*, but they can all be classified as 'Big Q'. I have decided to exclude 'little q' methods because, although non-numerical in nature, they are characterized by the imposition of the researcher's meanings during data collection and analysis, and strict control over what can emerge from the analysis through the application of predetermined categories for coding. This is, in my view, not compatible with the spirit of 'qualitative methodology' as defined on p. 9.

## Overview of the book

This book aims to introduce people unfamiliar with qualitative research methods to some of those methods which are most appropriate for qualitative research

in psychology. Chapter 2 discusses key aspects of qualitative research design. These include the formulation of a research question, the selection of suitable data collection techniques, as well as ethical considerations and reflexivity. Chapters 3–8 introduce six approaches to qualitative research in psychology: Grounded Theory, Interpretative Phenomenology, Case Studies, Discursive Psychology, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis and Memory Work. Each chapter introduces the approach and its procedures and techniques for gathering and analysing data. It identifies its advantages and disadvantages, and it discusses ways of writing up the research. To facilitate comparison between the six methods, I shall raise three epistemological questions in relation to each approach. These questions will be identified in the next section. The concluding chapter (Chapter 9) addresses the question of evaluation of qualitative research. The book also reproduces three research reports written by third-year psychology undergraduates (see Appendices 1–3). These reports illustrate how qualitative research methods can be applied in practice, within the real-world constraints of an undergraduate course. All three reports are of a high quality. For the reader's benefit, I have inserted explanatory comments into the reports. These are italicized and preceded by the initials C.W. for easy identification.

## Three epistemological questions

To be able to evaluate research in a meaningful way, we need to know what its objectives were and what kind of knowledge it aimed to produce. For example, there is no sense in criticizing a study for not identifying the cognitive precursors of a particular behaviour, when the aim of the study was to find out what it felt like to engage in the behaviour. On the other hand, a study concerned with the subjective quality of a particular experience *can* be criticized for using methods that constrain participants' ability to express their feelings openly and in sufficient detail. To be able to compare methodological approaches with one another and to be able to evaluate the extent to which studies using these approaches have met their own objectives, we need to have a clear understanding of their epistemological basis and their methodological requirements. The following questions can help us identify a methodology's epistemological roots:

1 *What kind of knowledge does the methodology aim to produce?*
Qualitative research can produce descriptions or explanations. It can aim to 'give voice' to those whose accounts tend to be marginalized or discounted. It can aim to interpret what people have said in order to explain why they may have said it. It can aim to make links between micro-processes, such as doctor–patient communication, and macro-structures, such as economic and social relations. It may be designed to capture the subjective 'feel' of a particular experience or condition, or it may wish to identify recurring patterns of experience among a group of people. What kind of knowledge a methodology aims to produce depends on its epistemological position (i.e. its view of what can be known and how).

**2  *What kinds of assumptions does the methodology make about the world?***
This question takes us into the realm of *ontology*. Ontology is concerned with the nature of the world. While epistemology asks 'How can we know?', the question driving ontology is 'What is there to know?' It can be argued that ontological concerns are fundamental and that it is impossible not to make at least some assumptions about the nature of the world. For example, our starting point may be the assumption that events are generated by underlying structures such as socioeconomic relations. This would constitute a materialist ontology. Alternatively, we may assume that psychological phenomena are independent from such structures. This would be an idealist position. Ontological positions can be described as 'realist' and 'relativist'. A realist ontology maintains that the world is made up of structures and objects that have cause–effect relationships with one another. Materialism, for instance, subscribes to a realist ontology. A relativist ontology, by contrast, rejects such a view of the world and maintains instead that the world is not the orderly, law-bound place that realists believe it to be. A relativist ontology questions the 'out-there-ness' of the world and it emphasizes the diversity of interpretations that can be applied to it. Idealism is an example of a relativist ontology.

**3  *How does the methodology conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?***
All qualitative methodologies do recognize that the researcher is, in one way or another, implicated in the research process. However, there are differences in the extent to which qualitative methodologies see the researcher as being the author, as opposed to the witness, of their research findings. Some methodologies see the researcher as the central figure in the research process because it is the researcher who constructs the findings. A helpful metaphor here would be to describe the researcher as a builder who constructs a house. The same bricks (the data) could be used to build a number of very different buildings. Other methodologies, while acknowledging the importance of the researcher, do not perceive the researcher as the author of the findings. Instead, they see the researcher as someone who uses their skills to unearth the evidence. Here, the research process is perceived as a treasure hunt rather than a construction process.

These three epistemological questions will be raised again in relation to each of the six qualitative method(ologie)s introduced in this book. They will provide a framework for discussion, evaluation and comparison of the six approaches in the final chapter.

## Further reading

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