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Author(s): David Harper

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Chapter 7

Choosing a qualitative research method

David Harper

Introduction

For those new to research methods, choosing the most appropriate method of qualitative analysis is often one of the most difficult parts of a research project: there seem to be so many from which to choose and the differences between them can seem opaque. How should one go about the process of choosing? Unfortunately, it is a topic that is often glossed over in many books yet it is often a central concern for academic examiners or journal reviewers. In this chapter I will outline some of the things which researchers need to take into account in making a choice.

An important point to make at the start is that this chapter will focus only on choosing a method of data analysis and not of data collection which was addressed in chapter 5. Readers might find it helpful to read these chapters in conjunction since, as noted in that chapter, it is important that you collect data that: map onto your research questions; sufficiently warrant the kind of claims you will wish to make; and which match the epistemological assumptions of your method of analysis.

In this chapter, I will outline some of the key considerations in choosing a research method and show how different methods are useful for addressing different kinds of research questions.

A pragmatic approach to choosing an analytic method

The received view about choosing a method is that it should fit the research question but that is not the whole story. The proposal here is that choosing a research method is very much a pragmatic matter and, whilst the research question is important, there are other factors which may need to be considered. For some, the key issue is to clarify one's epistemological assumptions and then choose a research method which is consistent with it. However, this presupposes that one's epistemological stance is not also a matter of choice.

For example, for those training to be therapists or mental health professionals, the primary goal may be educational rather than investigatory – for example, to learn how to use a particular research technique. Priebe and Slade (2006) note that other considerations in choosing an appropriate method might include: the scientific interests of the researcher; their preferences for a particular method; the researcher's expertise in a method; the current popularity of that method; and the relevance of the method to the target audience. Slade and Priebe (2006) note the importance of funding considerations – who will fund the study and in what outcomes are they

interested? The audience of an empirical scientific journal will have slightly different expectations from those of an academic examiner. A policy maker, on the other hand, may be more interested in the implications and outcomes of a study and whether it can be generalised to other populations. Service users might be concerned to hear about the involvement of service users in the study (see chapter 4), that their experience has been understood and that the study will lead to practical changes in services.

Once one has weighed up these considerations one can begin to formulate a research question.

Developing a research question

What questions are most suitable for qualitative research? Qualitative methods are, in general, better at developing rich descriptions of phenomena and processes – aiding conceptual and definitional clarification. Common forms of questions include:

- How does the social process occur?
- What are the key elements in experiences of the phenomenon?

Of course, for some researchers, the primary aim may not be to describe an empirical phenomenon, it may be to ask a question underpinned by certain theoretical preoccupations (e.g. feminism, subjectivity, power) and/or drawing on particular theorists (e.g. Foucault, Deleuze etc). Thus, one's theoretical and, to some extent, political orientation is also a choice which needs to be made.

As I have noted, each qualitative method has a different focus and, in Box 1, we can see the key foci of a range of methods. Readers can look for the focus that seems to encompass their research idea and they can then look in the relevant method chapter and read the section on research questions. Once a method seems appropriate it is advisable to read a number of different empirical examples of the use of that method in order to see the full range of questions which can be addressed.

BOX 1 ABOUT HERE

Be wary of overly broad and vague questions since the danger here is that the decisions about what the analyst is going to focus on are not made explicit and are simply put off until after data collection. A good qualitative clinical research question needs to be broad and open-ended but of sufficient clarity and specificity.

Once one has formulated a research question, one then needs to make a final selection of the method, choosing the one which best addresses the question. However, the methods vary in their assumptions and so it is to this issue that we turn next.

Qualitative methods and their assumptions

Many readers more familiar with quantitative research methods will know that there are a variety of different methods which are used to answer particular kinds of question (e.g. covariation, change over time etc.). Methods only 'work' if certain conditions are met. Qualitative methods differ for exactly the same reasons. Firstly, each is useful in asking different kinds of research question -- some focus on individual subjective experience, others investigate social processes, others still examine the societal realm. Secondly, as we saw in chapter 5, using one kind of method one might assume that what a participant says is a relatively transparent window onto their thoughts and feelings but using a different method one might assume that what people say is much more influenced by the context of the interaction.

In this chapter, I will focus on the philosophical assumptions of each method described in this book as a way of differentiating them. A misapprehension which has developed over the years is that there is a major philosophical difference between quantitative and qualitative methods but few between different qualitative methods. This is, however, an over-simplification. For instance, as we will see later, not all qualitative methods focus on subjective experience and some would even be sceptical about the concepts used in describing it. Also, in terms of their underlying philosophical assumptions, some qualitative methods have more in common with some quantitative methods than with other qualitative methods.

In a research interview, if a participant says 'I'm happy' and we report that 'the participant is happy' we are making a whole set of assumptions: that the participant has clear knowledge of their emotional state; that they are honestly communicating it to the researcher and so on. However, these assumptions are contestable: the participant may think they are happy but the expression on their face or other indications might suggest otherwise. Similarly, the interviewee may be saying they are happy for a variety of reasons in addition to actually being happy: they may not want to burden the interviewer; they may want to close off an area of questioning because they do not feel safe with or do not trust the interviewer; or the person may be responding to demand characteristics (Orne, 1962) – implicit role expectations as a result of being a participant in a research project.

Just because you want to make a certain claim does not mean it is immune from criticism. Thus, researchers making the assumption that there is a direct correspondence between what a participant says and how they subjectively feel needs to be able to justify this on the basis of argument and evidence. Similarly, researchers making the assumption that there is no direct correspondence between what is said and experienced need to be able to justify that position. The kind of assumptions researchers make about the relationship between their data and the world are called epistemological assumptions. In the chapters following this one are eight chapters on a range of qualitative methods. In each of these chapters, contributors have helpfully identified the key epistemological assumptions made by that method and so the aim in the next section is to introduce these concepts. For each method it is important to see what research questions it can address and what assumptions it makes. These help us to see what one can (and cannot) claim on the basis of our study when it is written up.

What is epistemology and why does it matter?

Epistemology is the philosophy of knowledge or 'the study of the nature of knowledge and the methods of obtaining it' (Burr, 2003, p.202). In other words, it is concerned with research-oriented questions like 'how can I go about gathering knowledge about

the world?' and 'how do I know what I know?' Within philosophical debates about knowledge, epistemology is contrasted with ontology which is the 'study of being and existence. The attempt to discover the fundamental categories of what exists' (Burr, 2003, p.203). The difference can be summarised briefly: epistemology concerns what it is possible to know whereas ontology concerns what there is to know in the world 'out there'.

Different philosophical traditions have answered these questions in different ways. There are different ways of mapping these assumptions and, as Madill and Gough (2008) point out, there are almost as many typologies of qualitative methods as there are authors. For example, Guba and Lincoln (1994) delineate positivism; post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism and examine each with regards to ontology, epistemology and methodology. However, for the sake of simplicity I will, following Willig (in press), focus on three main epistemological frameworks which could be argued to underlie Guba and Lincoln's categorisation: realism; phenomenology; and social constructionism. There are a number of dimensions which differentiate between these traditions as we will see, however a key one is the extent to which qualitative data are seen as mirroring and reflecting reality. This is often termed the realism-relativism continuum. Realism is the position that the data collected mirror reality. Relativism, on the other hand, is the position that there are many valid interpretations of the same observation and so data are not seen as directly mirroring reality.

Within each of these traditions, there are variants and I will describe these too as they map more closely onto individual methods in the following sections. Rather more space will be given to social constructionism as there have been vigorous and, to the novice, somewhat confusing debates within this tradition.

Epistemology underpins knowledge claims not only in research but also in psychotherapy. Since many readers will be familiar with the psychotherapies I will give examples of psychotherapies that are associated with epistemological frameworks as well as examples of methods. In the section that follows, I will draw heavily on Willig (in press) which is a very clear exposition of debates about epistemology in qualitative research. She also notes how debates about epistemology map onto ethical and political debates in psychology and thus, in trying to identify where you stand epistemologically, you may also need to reflect on your ontological, ethical and political commitments (see also Parker, 2005).

Realism

Researchers working within the realist tradition assume that there is a direct relationship between what is observed and the nature of reality and they assume that the world is rule-bound. As Willig (in press) notes, the aim is 'to generate valid and reliable knowledge about a social and/or psychological phenomenon which exists independently of the researcher's awareness of it' (p.XX) She argues that the researcher is essentially cast as a detective, attempting to uncover the rules governing social and psychological mechanisms or processes – thus ethnography and the earlier more realist versions of grounded theory would be located here. For example, Light's (1980) ethnography of the training of US psychiatrists identifies the implicit rules which govern situations like ward rounds, evidencing these claims by citing fieldwork observations and interviews with key participants. Similarly, in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, there is an attempt to delineate the 'rules' of local interactions.

The vast majority of quantitative research is realist, though few researchers make this assumption explicit because it is taken for granted within mainstream mental health research. There are two subsidiary approaches within the broad realist tradition: direct realism and critical realism.

Direct realism

Direct realists (sometimes called scientific realists) assume that data directly mirror reality. They are thus both ontologically and epistemologically realist. They have, in the past, been referred to as positivists though this is a much misunderstood term (Miller, 1999; Shadish, 1995) and probably best avoided. Shadish (1995) argues that few researchers could be categorised in this way. Some, but not all, behaviour therapists might identify as direct realists.

Critical realism

Critical realists (also termed post-positivists: Guba & Lincoln, 1994) are ontological realists in that they assume that our data can tell us about reality but they do not view this as a direct mirroring. For example, though I might have interviewed someone about their experience of depression they may not be fully aware of all the factors that influence their experience – early life experiences, family beliefs, cultural expectations, the history of the concept itself (e.g. is it entirely synonymous with the ancient humoral notion of melancholia?). As a result, then, often our data will not be able to tell us ‘directly and explicitly, what it might be (historically, for example, or politically), that drives, shapes and maintains these structures and practices’ (Willig, in press, p.XX) and so critical realists argue that we need to go beyond the text and draw on other evidence, perhaps from other disciplines. A number of psychotherapies could be located in this grouping including cognitive behaviour therapy and some forms of family therapy (e.g. structural and behavioural). For an example of how a critical realist position can inform the conceptualisation of depression see Pilgrim and Bentall (1999). Dorling and Simpson (1999) gather together a range of work which could be termed critical realist. Thematic analysis and more realist forms of grounded theory could also be located here.

Phenomenology

Phenomenologists are interested in the nature of subjective experience from the perspective of research participants themselves. As a result, this is the framework which most often appeals to psychotherapeutically-inclined researchers because their work is often focused on how a client subjectively experiences the world. There is less of a concern with whether what a person says -- for example, about the past – is factually accurate. Rather the focus is on understanding the past from the participant’s perspective. Because of this, phenomenology is not at the direct realist end of the spectrum. However, it is equally not a relativist approach in that it is assumed there is some correspondence between what a person says and their subjective experience (though this might also be influenced by how much rapport the participant felt with the researcher and so on). For this reason it is often located roughly in the middle of the realism-relativism axis when it is represented in

diagrammatic form. However, this axis privileges a method's stance on the status of 'external reality' but as this tends not to be a major concern for phenomenological traditions it is not easy to place on the continuum. Often, as a result, phenomenology is placed in the middle of the continuum but I think this is misleading rather than illuminating.

The humanistic psychotherapies could be located in this grouping as would Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and existentialist-informed phenomenology (see chapters 8 and 9).

Descriptive

Descriptive phenomenologists try to avoid imposing the researcher's categories or theories. Rather the aim is to capture the essence of a participant's subjective experience in their own terms, delineating key elements and using the participant's terminology.

Interpretative

Many phenomenologists wish to go beyond the text and, instead, to interpret the experience and so render it more meaningful. Larkin et al (2006) and chapter 8 suggest that what is added in this process of interpretation is placing a participant's account in a broader social, cultural and theoretical context. It is one of the tenets of IPA that the focus on interpretation foregrounds the interpretative role of the researcher.

Social constructionism

Social constructionist researchers are less focused on phenomena in themselves and are more interested in how the phenomena are seen. They are thus interested in how knowledge is generated – hence the focus on construction (Gergen, 1985). This generation is viewed as a primarily social process. Social constructionist are sceptical of the universal knowledge claims characteristic of direct realists, particularly in the social sciences, preferring more local and provisional claims. They question everyday taken-for-granted assumptions, arguing that these need to be seen in their social, historical and cultural context. Social constructionists are also interested in how some claims about reality are seen as having more validity than others. Since claims about knowledge are made through language, a study of how language is used is often a key component focus in social constructionist work. Social constructionists differ from phenomenologists in that they do not see descriptions of experiences as windows onto a person's thoughts and feelings – rather, they view these as accounts which might be serving a range of interpersonal and societal functions. Moreover, they would see 'thoughts' and 'feelings' as concepts worthy of study in their own right – for example, what do they tell us about the ways in which socially and culturally available ways of talking about subjective experience are often dualistic and atomistic? Indeed, the social in social constructionism refers to the manner in which what is experienced by the individual is experienced through culturally shared categories of meaning – thus the social constructionist project is critical of individualistic and intra-psychic approaches in the social sciences. Within psychology, the field of discursive psychology has attempted to take common psychological concepts like attitudes and reconceptualise them in a

non-cognitive manner (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992). Willig (in press) characterises the social constructionist researcher's role as that of an architect, interested both in how knowledge is created about the world and from what (cultural) resources and materials. They are interested in interrogating the implicit assumptions in texts that we normally take for granted, what the French literary theorist Jacques Derrida called 'deconstruction' (Derrida, 1967/1998).

Social constructionism is most associated with research methods which focus on language and the cultural and social availability of ways of seeing and talking about the world like discourse analysis and some Q methodology researchers (Curt, 1994, chapter 14). More social constructionist versions of grounded theory would also be located here (see chapter 10).

Sometimes critics accuse social constructionist researchers of saying that phenomena like psychological distress are 'just social constructions' – the use of the word 'just' in these contexts adds to an impression that social constructionists deny that things like distress exists. This is not true – drawing attention to the fact that the way we conceive distress has changed throughout history and varies from place to place is not the same as saying it does not exist and that people do not experience it.

One important confusion to clear up is the difference between constructivism and social constructionism. Constructivism is a word best avoided by social constructionist researchers for a number of reasons, not least because it has a variety of technical meanings within other domains (e.g. perceptual and developmental psychology). It is also a well-established approach to therapy in the form of Personal Construct Theory (Kelly, 1955). Whilst constructivists acknowledge that individuals construct their own perceptions of the world, social constructionists go one step further, arguing that those individual constructions are developed in a social world where, moreover, different constructions have different social power. As a result, constructivism is not located at the relativist end of the realism-relativism spectrum. Confusingly a number of authors use the term 'constructivism' or 'social constructivism' rather than 'social constructionism'. The more individualistic constructivist approach has influenced not only personal construct theory but also a wide range of psychotherapies including cognitive behaviour therapy (Neimeyer, 1999). Social constructionism – which can be seen as the incorporation of many of the ideas associated with post-structuralism and post-modernism (Harper & Spellman, 2006) – has had an influence on narrative and post-Milan family therapists and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Social constructionism is relativist in a number of ways: its scepticism about a direct relationship between accounts and reality; and its assumption that we do not make direct contact with the world but, rather, our experience of it is mediated through culturally shared concepts – in other words that language shapes our experience of reality. However, as Willig (in press) acknowledges, not all social constructionist researchers would describe themselves as relativists. Indeed, over the years commentators have identified two versions of social constructionism. One is described as a 'weak' or 'moderate' variant – which I term here as more critical realist (since this epistemological framework is often referred to by proponents). The other variant is described as 'strong' or 'radical' (although Smail, 2004, refers to it as 'naïve social constructionism' nicely mirroring the term 'naïve realism'!). Here I will refer to it as the more relativist version since, again, this is the framework to which proponents tend to appeal. There is much debate within the broadly social constructionist community and Parker (1998) and Nightingale and Cromby (1999) are a good place to start in understanding the key issues.

Relativist social constructionism

Researchers adopting a more relativistic social constructionist perspective (or a 'radical constructionist' position) take the position that it is not possible to make comments about the nature of reality as we cannot be in direct contact with it. Instead, they argue, we should focus on what we can have contact with – what people say. In other words, one should not go beyond the text in order to interpret it. They treat the things that people say not as a window onto something else but as things worthy of study in and of themselves. A relativist position also means that there is no expectation that different researchers will see the same things in data – indeed, multiple interpretations or readings are to be expected.

A common misconception is that relativist researchers are relativist about everything and thus nihilistic. However, this is inaccurate – these researchers are usually only epistemologically or methodologically relativist, they are not necessarily ontologically relativist. In other words, they are relativist about what we can know about the world but they are not relativist about whether there is a world at all. An ontologically relativist claim would be that I do not know if there is a world or, indeed, that there are many worlds. However, an epistemological relativist goes about their life in the same way as everyone else, treating the world as if it exists. They simply claim that the focus of research should be on what is actually available to us (e.g. transcripts of talk) rather than abstract entities (like thoughts or feelings) which we can reach only via an inferential leap (Potter, 1996). However, as Hacking (2000) notes, many researchers do not make these somewhat subtle differentiations and some constructionist writers appear to conflate epistemological and ontological relativism. Another misapprehension is that epistemologically relativist social constructionists are moral relativists. However, simply noting there are different interpretations of data does not necessarily mean one is arguing that they are all equally as good from an ethical standpoint. Some epistemological relativists argue that relativism is consistent with a variety of ethical and political commitments (e.g. Curt, 1994; Hepburn, 2000; Shakespeare, 1998). Researchers using the variant of discourse analysis termed discursive psychology adopt a methodological relativism (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Hepburn & Wiggins, 2007; Potter, 2003)

Critical realist social constructionism

Researchers adopting this position (or a 'moderate constructionist' or critical theory approach) take the position that, alongside an awareness of the importance of studying qualitative data in detail, it is also important to go beyond the text in order to add a further layer of interpretation – by setting what is said in a broader historical, cultural and social context. These researchers, then, make certain ontological claims about pre-existing material practices which can influence discourse and thus they draw on some arguments similar to those of the critical realists noted in the realism section, whilst also drawing on social constructionist ideas. This grouping could be said to be ontologically realist but epistemologically relativist. Some researchers in this tradition use Foucauldian approaches to discourse analysis (see Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2007; Parker, 1992, 2005).

Willig (in press) notes that critical realist constructionists are 'concerned with the ways in which available discourses can constrain and limit what can be said or done within particular contexts' (p.XX). For example, how might the availability of things like childcare and employment affect the ways in which

women talk about motherhood (Sims-Schouten, Riley & Willig, 2007a)? However, such readings can be heavily contested (see Speer, 2007 and the response by Riley et al., 2007).

There have been vigorous debates between researchers from these two social constructionist groupings. Epistemologically relativist scholars argue that an ontological realism and epistemological relativism leads to inconsistency and a selective relativism in that the foundations of knowledge claims are only selectively being challenged. Problematising some phenomena in an analysis whilst leaving others unproblematised has been termed 'ontological gerrymandering' (Woolgar & Pawluch, 1985) – referring to the practice of redrawing electoral boundaries in favour of a party or politician and so stacking the cards against other candidates. The reasons against seeing some phenomena (e.g. death) as constructed is said to be defended through the use of 'bottom line arguments' (Edwards *et al.*, 1995). Critical realists worry that the relativist position could lead to a political and moral relativism and that a failure to go beyond the text might mean that important issues like embodiment and subjectivity cannot be fully researched (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999; Gill, 1995; Parker, 1998; Velody & Williams, 1998).

Although many methods can be differentiated by their underlying epistemological assumptions some methods can be used from different epistemological standpoints (see box 2).

BOX 2 ABOUT HERE

When considering mixing quantitative and qualitative methods it is essential to ensure there is epistemological consistency (see box 3).

BOX 3 ABOUT HERE

When you read one of the chapters in the next section then, you can refer back to this discussion to see how that method can be located in these traditions. You will then be able to consider whether the claims and assumptions made within those traditions are ones that you wish to -- and will have the data to -- make. When using a method, it may be a useful (if not essential) exercise to make the assumptions underlying the method -- and thus any claims generated using it – explicit. Doing so will enable you to carefully consider the suitability of all aspects of your proposed study and to choose appropriate techniques for evaluating the quality of your study (see chapter 16). Hopefully this chapter has helped to begin to demystify what is meant by epistemology and emphasised the importance of being able to demonstrate a clear rationale for the choice of a particular method.

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Box 1: Mapping the varied foci of qualitative methods

What kind of focus do you wish your study to have?

- Do you want to map out the concourse/terrain/range of ideas/concepts?
 - Q methodology
 - Thematic analysis
- Do you want to summarise unstructured data in thematic categories?
 - Thematic analysis
- Do you want to summarise unstructured data in thematic categories and then represent them numerically or make numerical or quantitative claims (e.g. about the proportions of participants in various categories)?
 - Content analysis
- Do you want to delineate positions participants take up in discourse with a focus on their ideological context/historical emergence?
 - Foucauldian approaches to Discourse Analysis
- Are you interested in the interactional context of talk?
 - Ethnomethodology/Conversation analysis
 - Discursive Psychology approaches to Discourse Analysis
- Do you want to develop a model of social processes?
 - Grounded Theory
- Are you more interested in the subjective experience of the individual?
 - Individual case studies
 - Phenomenology (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis or Existentialist-informed Phenomenology)
- Are you more interested in the stories individuals and communities tell?
 - Narrative

Box 2: The ‘same’ method may be used by researchers from different epistemological standpoints

Although it is possible to differentiate methods from each other by their epistemological assumptions, in the case of some methods it is also possible to use the method but from different epistemological standpoints. Thus Grounded Theory can be used to ask different questions depending on the epistemological framework within which it is used – Madill, Jordan and Shirley (2000) analysed interview data from a study where participants were relatives of people with a diagnosis of schizophrenia. The researchers conducted the analysis from three different epistemological positions: realism; contextual constructionism; and radical constructionism. As a result, it is important to state one’s epistemological assumptions (i.e. which form of a particular method you are using) – for example whether one is using a realist or social constructionist variant of Grounded Theory (see chapter 10).

Box 3: Methodological pluralism in qualitative research: 'Mixing' methods

There are a number of different ways in which methods can be combined: using different kinds of qualitative data (e.g. naturalistic recordings plus interviews) but then analysing them within the same qualitative method of analysis; using different qualitative methods of analysis to analyse either one or a number of types of qualitative data; and combining both quantitative and qualitative data and methods of analysis.

Researchers may want to use more than one approach for a number of reasons. Because each method has its strengths and weaknesses, there is an argument that each method will be able to illuminate another layer of the topic. Another reason for mixing methods may relate to what data are most likely to persuade the intended audience. A full discussion of the issues involved in using different methods is beyond the scope of this chapter and book but further discussion of some of the theoretical and practical issues involved can be seen in: Bryman (2006); Greene, Caracelli, and Graham (1989); Madill and Gough (2008); Todd, Nerlich, McKeown and Clarke (2004); and Yardley and Bishop (2007). One of the dangers in mixing methods is that important differences in the epistemological assumptions of methods may not be considered (Madill & Gough, 2008).

Combining quantitative and qualitative methods

Here the strengths of qualitative research are combined with the ability of quantitative methods to investigate larger numbers of people, enabling statistical analysis. However, as noted earlier, this needs to occur within a coherent epistemology – for example combining realist quantitative methods with more relativist qualitative methods may require a philosophically challenging rationale. Critical realism is a framework which could accommodate certain kinds of quantitative and qualitative research. When those influenced by post-Structuralist and critical realist ideas use quantitative research, however, they adopt what Parker (1999) terms 'embedded objectivity' – in other words they use it in a manner that is mindful of the status of numbers (Harré & Crystal, 2004):

... [T]here is no reason why qualitative research cannot work with figures, with records of observations, or with statistics as long as it is able to keep in mind that such data does not speak directly to us about facts 'out there' that are separate from us. Every bit of 'data' in research is itself a representation of the world suffused with interpretative work, and when we read the data we produce another layer of interpretations, another web of preconceptions and theoretical assumptions. Numeric data can help us to structure a mass of otherwise incomprehensible and overwhelming material, and statistical techniques can be very useful here, but our interpretations are also part of the picture, and so these interpretations need to be attended to.

Parker (1999, pp.83-84)

Some psychotherapy and mental health training programmes promote the use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. As I have noted, whilst this can work where the methods share epistemological assumptions it is impossible if they do not. Sometimes this approach is suggested for inappropriate reasons -- supervisors might fear that a solely qualitative study will not be sufficient for postgraduate work – hopefully the range of work cited in the current volume will

persuade them otherwise. Students in such situations need to cite the extant literature to not only demonstrate how inappropriate such demands are but, also find other ways of addressing what may be legitimate underlying concerns.

Using different qualitative methods

In box 2 we saw how the same method could be used from different epistemological standpoints. However, recently researchers have used different qualitative methods to illuminate different aspects of the same data set – what some have termed a pluralistic approach to qualitative research (Frost, 2008). Thus Wilkinson (2000) has compared the different analyses that can be developed in relation to women talking about breast cancer when using content analysis, a biographical approach and discourse analysis. Burck (2005) and Starks and Brown Trinidad (2007) use a similar approach in showing how different methods can illuminate different aspects of a topic. Focusing on the topic of delusions, Harper (2007) identifies the range of questions that have been asked by different methods drawing on different epistemological frameworks in relation to the topic of 'delusions'.

Further reading box

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Online resource for choosing between methods hosted by Huddersfield University:
<http://onlineqda.hud.ac.uk/methodologies.php>