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# Introduction: Approaches to Qualitative Research

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

**John Hogan, Paddy Dolan & Paul Donnelly**

Undertaking a dissertation can be a daunting prospect, irrespective of whether a student is an undergraduate or a postgraduate. The idea of having to start with a blank sheet of paper and finish with anything between 15,000 words for an undergraduate dissertation, and 100,000 words for a PhD dissertation, is an arresting thought. But, even these coarse figures fail to capture the true extent of the work involved, as a finished dissertation is usually only a distillation of volumes of work and words that far exceed the finished product ultimately presented. However, the process can be made significantly easier if the student is genuinely interested in her / his topic of research, and can achieve clarity of vision through formulating, early in the research process, exactly what it is she / he wants to find out. This can be achieved by having a clearly-defined research question and a research methodology that is carefully structured to investigate that exact research question. However, even this prescription risks simplifying a complex and dynamic task. Qualitative research, in particular, is rarely linear, with each phase seen as a discrete entity. Researchers tend to work in a circular way, devising and rephrasing their research questions as they engage critically with existing theories. The research question will grow and evolve, as it becomes more theoretically informed and precise. The central question is, in effect, the 'translation' by the researcher of the various theories purporting to explain the phenomenon of interest in a form of words that captures his or her interpretation and understanding of the explanations (theories). In longer-term research projects, such as MPhil and PhD dissertations, the researcher may get the opportunity to go through this circular process several times, with each iteration representing an advance in understanding and methodological practice. Often, initial analysis of emerging data will lead the researcher to refine the research question at the very least. Sometimes, it may be entirely rewritten, or new theories may be identified as potential explanatory resources for hitherto unseen phenomena that have become interesting to the researcher.

For such projects, accidents and serendipitous encounters with people and data should not be avoided for fear of diversion from the imagined linear path of research. In qualitative inquiry, paths are rarely linear. But, minor dissertations at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels may not offer the same scope for unexpected discovery. This is simply a matter of 'time constraints'! In such circumstances, we argue that it becomes even more important to develop a tentative research question early in the process. This will guide reading for the literature review and aid the refinement of a theoretically-informed research question. Of course, the precise constraints any student faces depend on many factors, the most important of which will be the guidelines of the examining institution or university.

In terms of writing a research dissertation, one of the most difficult issues facing a student is selecting her / his research methodology – should this be qualitative, quantitative, or some mixture of the two? Each of these approaches is better suited to answer certain kinds of research questions and it is critical that the researcher understands which approach addresses which type of research question best. Thus, choosing a research methodology is not always as easy as it seems. The fact that the issue of methodology selection arises after the research question has been selected, but prior to the carrying out of the actual research, means that the methodology will determine the kind of research that is conducted and whether the findings will fit with the research objectives of the dissertation. Generally speaking, research questions focused on *how* certain processes, events, or structures are inter-related tend to suit qualitative methods. This is because the researcher is interested in particular modes of development and needs to see precisely how these change, or how they are expressed and articulated. Of course, quantitative methods also examine the inter-relationships between 'factors' or 'variables' (this is the purpose of statistical regressions and correlations, for example), but here the analysis tends to show *that*, rather than *how*, such factors are related. The precise mechanisms and processes, intended or unintended, are usually obscured, rather than revealed, by purely statistical approaches. But, mixing qualitative and quantitative approaches can be very useful in providing more complete explanations of social phenomena. While such mixed methods are not addressed in this book, we believe that qualitative methods can by themselves produce compelling knowledge of how and why people behave as they do, whether in organisational, family, personal, or other social roles.

It is in order to address these complex issues that that we have produced this book on qualitative research. The various chapters present examples for dissertation students in terms of how they might go about conducting

qualitative research. Additionally, the chapters' findings show how students might consider presenting their own findings. To this end, each of the chapters has been structured like a mini dissertation with introductions, brief literature reviews, methodology sections, and finally analysis. Thus, the book was written with the intention of assisting dissertation students as they grapple with the difficulties of selecting and implementing a research strategy. Somewhat unusually for a qualitative research textbook, we have not addressed philosophy of knowledge issues to any great extent and certainly not through separate chapters. We would suggest that trying to deal with philosophical problems is not really the purpose of most organisational, consumer and other social research. While philosophical debates between positivism and interpretivism have often been superimposed upon quantitative and qualitative debates, this was always an oversimplification. Some qualitative methods and principles have positivistic origins and deciding finally on your own position in these philosophical debates is likely to close off important options and opportunities in the research process. Where philosophical concerns were of interest and relevance to the research studies discussed in the book, the contributors have sought to integrate the discussion of philosophy into their research strategies. Happily, the former strict opposition between qualitative and quantitative researchers has significantly receded and, with that, perhaps the reliance on philosophy as a source of research direction has declined to some extent, too.

## THE QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO RESEARCH

Qualitative research is a multifaceted approach that investigates culture, society and behaviour through an analysis and synthesis of people's words and actions. Unlike quantitative approaches, it does not try to transform verbal symbols into numerical ones; the data remains at the level of words, either the research participants' own words, the words written in documents or the words used by the researcher herself / himself to describe the activities, images and environment observed. It tries to get to the heart of what exactly led to decisions, or choices, that were made, and how these choices came to take the form that they ultimately did.

Generally speaking, qualitative research has 'traditionally' been conducted by means of direct observation of a sample, case studies, personal

experiences, introspection, an examination of relevant texts, interviews, focus groups, life stories, and the researcher's own participation in the settings that she / he is researching. But, with the advent of various new types of information technology devices and media, the range of things to be directly observed in qualitative research has greatly increased. Thus, in addition to observation, interviews, and documentation, there are now emails, text messages, instant messages, Twitter, online chat, as well as various online forums and blogs that can be examined. As Marshall & Rossman (2006: 2) point out, 'qualitative research is pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people'. As we can see from the above, the media through which people communicate have greatly expanded in recent years, giving qualitative researchers a much broader field to inquire into. Qualitative research is a 'broad approach to the study of social phenomena' (Marshall & Rossman, 2006: 3). This 'allows qualitative research to pay special attention to the "qualities" of experience, aspects of life that quantitative approaches typically gloss over' (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997: 11). Put crudely, qualitative research is all about researching specific meanings, emotions, and practices that emerge through the interactions and interdependencies between people. It is concerned with social and personal processes and relations. Rather than reduce or abstract from these relations various static properties of individuals or groups in isolation, it seeks to examine how various sub-units and sub-processes derive their functions due to parts played in broader, composite units. As such, the so-called 'micro' aspects of life are connected to the 'macro' level, which reflects the links between many people and organisations. The emphasis on process and fluid relations tends to make qualitative inquiry more suitable. Of course, not all research dissertations will prioritise these aspects, so each student must think, or be reflexive, about the specific combination of research methods that will answer her / his research questions.

Denzin & Lincoln (2005: 10) argue that the term 'qualitative' suggests qualities, processes and meanings that are not examined through experimentation, or measured in terms of quantity. Each qualitative research approach possesses a series of unique steps in the analysis of findings and uses a range of strategies of inquiry. We stress that qualitative research is not subjective research; it is not based on one person's point of view, or biased towards one particular outcome. The findings from this research must be rigorous and dependable. Qualitative research sometimes takes place in natural settings, where researchers can conduct their research in the presence of the people they are studying, or within the environment they are examining. Thus, 'qualitative research is uniquely suited to discerning

humans' participation in what happens to them' (Fischer, 2005: 411). However, perhaps the most common qualitative methods – interviews and focus groups – do not occur in 'natural' situations as such. Here, the researcher has arranged a social situation specifically, and usually exclusively, for the generation of data. The research participants would not be in these situations but for the efforts of the researcher. These situations, however, can be treated as social encounters and accomplishments, as well as being an opportunity to encourage the participant to recall memories and experiences regarding prior or recurring events and activities.

Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias (1996: 281) argue that qualitative researchers 'attempt to understand behaviour and institutions by getting to know the persons involved and their values, rituals, symbols, beliefs and emotions'. This encapsulates the idea that qualitative research tries to make sense of phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. This can prove very important in evaluating research, in that an understanding of how certain events came about can be as important as what the particular events actually were.

## WHAT SETS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APART FROM QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH?

The qualitative approach to research differs from the quantitative approach in a number of distinct and important respects. Qualitative research tends to focus upon small samples, rather than the larger samples associated with quantitative research. Sampling in qualitative research is generally purposive, that is, the subjects, or cases, selected for examination are chosen specifically, due to some characteristic of interest to the researcher and her / his research topic. Researchers also play a key role in the research process itself. They are not observing events from a remove, but tend to be intimately involved in the research process. They bring with them particular theoretical frameworks and concepts, which influence how they interpret what they uncover. The data is examined by the researcher in a manner that requires her / his own interpretation of the results, based on the interplay between theoretical foregrounding prior to data generation, experience, understanding, and certain coding techniques that she / he has developed to analyse and synthesise data. Thus, 'qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter' (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994: 2). This use of multiple methods is representative of

an attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, with the recognition that objective reality can never fully be captured. As Flick (1998: 7) argues, 'qualitative research is not based on a unified theoretical and methodological concept'. Instead, the approach's strength is derived from the diverse approaches to qualitative research used in the world today.

'Qualitative research is concerned with collecting and analysing information in many forms, chiefly non-numeric' (Blaxter *et al.*, 1999: 60). Qualitative research, when done properly, can involve the designing of an approach that does justice to the complexity of the object under study. In this regard, the object of study is not reduced to single variables, but is studied in all of its complexity (Flick, 1998: 5).

Exceptional situations, and persons, are often the focus of qualitative research. While the objective of this research can be to examine, support or refute existing theories, the researcher can also develop new understandings, modify or extend prior theoretical frameworks, or even formulate new theories. Thus, the qualitative researcher seeks examples of both expected and unforeseen relationships within the data, which are compared and contrasted. However, 'qualitative methods cannot be regarded independently of the research process and the issue under study' (Flick, 1998: 1). Qualitative research recognises a researcher's interaction with the topic of study as part of the knowledge creation process. Researchers' reflections on their own research actions become an element of the project, constituting part of the data.

Perhaps a final word needs to be said on the popular representation of qualitative research in some textbooks, for example, marketing research. Often, qualitative data and methods are portrayed as 'exploratory', 'soft' or 'inconclusive'. This implies, of course, that the use of a particular method can guarantee the findings of research inquiries. This is plainly unrealistic. Throughout scientific history, researchers have relied purely on quantitative methods for the generation of theories, only for those theories to be rejected later. No method is 'conclusive', if by that we mean that the results are universal, eternal or definitive. Explanations can always be improved and research is an ongoing process, hopefully extending our knowledge of the social world we inhabit. Some phenomena, like an organisation's sales levels, or workforce, can be easily quantifiable, and others, like organisational culture and structure, less so. The ability to count things does not make them more real, more precise or more accurate. Counting is just one means by which we, as human beings, make sense of our world. Often, we need to understand action and strategy from the perspectives of the actors and thinkers. People act and think through

language, the social symbols that are passed on and extended from one generation to the next, and so it is sometimes more appropriate, more realistic and precise, to explain social action in terms of verbal symbols.

However, in the end, neither a qualitative nor a quantitative research approach is better, and they are not mutually exclusive (Best & Kahn, 1989: 89). Like any other tool, a research methodology is neither good nor bad, its true value being determined by the skills and understanding of researchers using and moulding it in their pursuit of answers to the unique research questions they are asking. In that respect, an understanding of what qualitative research is, what it can achieve, what its limitations are, and what sets it apart from quantitative research, is very helpful.

## THE AIMS OF THE BOOK

The primary objective of this book is to introduce students to the concepts underlying qualitative research and how this kind of research can be conducted in a practical manner. To this end, it discusses various approaches to qualitative research and provides examples of these approaches being carried out in practice. In doing so, the book shows how various disciplines all use qualitative research in order to discover answers to their own particular research questions. We also show how qualitative methods can never be completely divorced from the intellectual adherence of their practitioners. Researchers' worldviews inevitably influence the qualitative approach they adopt, the tools they use, develop and employ, and the interpretations they bring to the findings uncovered. This is why researchers need to reflect (to be reflexive) on their own social position in the research process, to examine their dispositions and inclinations that may close off certain research possibilities. In doing so, their results can become more dependable and theoretically generalisable. The intention of all this is to familiarise students with the underlying tenets of qualitative research, so that, instead of being intimidated by it, they feel that they can take ownership of the concept.

The book is primarily designed to be a qualitative research guidebook for undergraduate and postgraduate students undertaking dissertations as part of their course of study. As qualitative methodologies can be applied across a broad spectrum of disciplines, the book can be used by students working in any area of research from business studies to the social sciences. One of our intentions in writing this book is to disabuse students of the often-voiced

misconception that there must surely be one qualitative methodological approach for researching in one discipline and another, completely different, methodological approach for researching in another discipline. In fact, across a range of disciplines, as divergent as business, politics, and sociology, authors may take the same qualitative approach, for example, a discourse analytical approach, to examine a series of in-depth interviews conducted with a small number of interviewees. By setting out various qualitative approaches, showing how these overlap, and how they are applied across a broad range of disciplines, our aim is to remove this misconception.

Although the book is highly theoretical, and methodologically rigorous, it is full of practical examples. These examples show how the theories and approaches discussed can be employed to acquire information that goes into constructing valid academic arguments that answer basic research questions. In most of the chapters, the authors set out a specific qualitative methodology to be employed in investigating a unique research question. This allows students to follow the process through from research question, to methodology formulation, to analysis, and finally to findings and conclusions. In this regard, we feel that the book shows how methodology can be applied in practice, making clear both the use and value of qualitative approaches in research. Thus, the chapters deal with a range of real world problems and not abstract conundrums often found in research theory texts. Ultimately, most of the dissertation students reading this book will be conducting dissertation research for the first time and that puts an onus on the authors to impart as much theoretical and practical knowledge as possible in as concise a manner as is feasible. By avoiding chapters that focus on general rules of thumb and certain 'central' principles of research that must be adhered to at all times, we did not engage in an overly prescriptive approach to the research process. What we provide is methodology, informed by research questions, and real world analysis informed by theory, so as to provide answers to those research questions.

Students should use this book as a handy reference guide, and sample exemplar, when conducting their own research and they should see the chapters as mini-templates of what they should be aiming to produce themselves. Our hope is that students will see from the chapters that it is the theoretically-informed research question that sets the tone for all that comes in its wake. This question determines the particular qualitative methodology adopted, which determines the nature of the findings produced, which in turn influences how these findings are interpreted. Thus, each stage in a research process must fit with what came before it

and with what will come after it. All aspects of the research must align. However, the ultimate value of a piece of research is not judged for the kind of questions that it asks, but from the quality of the results produced. Mismatches between research questions and methodologies are a problem that has dogged many a potentially great dissertation, as the results produced have failed to properly address the questions asked.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book provides a unique insight into various approaches to qualitative research, as practiced at the cutting edge of academia in both Ireland and further afield. It brings together a number of academics from various universities and disciplines, each of whom contributes a chapter utilising a qualitative methodology of their own particular design. Additionally, the final chapter of the book contains a discussion conducted amongst a number of the contributing authors on various issues surrounding qualitative research methodologies, in general, and the conduct of research, in particular.

Whereas other methodology books seek to separate the section discussing methodology and the theories behind it from the practical application of those methodologies, this book integrates the two in its various chapters. Most chapters begin with a research question followed by a brief examination of the literature, then a discussion on the qualitative methodology being used, before employing this methodology in researching the specific question. In this manner, the chapters show how a qualitative methodological approach is constructed, then employed in practice, and how the results are interpreted by the researcher. The reader can clearly see how each author carefully tailors the qualitative approach to suit her / his own research question's requirements. Each methodology section flows seamlessly into the case studies in which it is employed in searching for answers to the overarching research question initially set out. An essential element of all the chapters is that that they are grounded in the reality of their research questions. In this respect, the chapters, in many ways, resemble small dissertations in themselves. Thus, the student is presented with a book made up of chapters that, in many instances, constitute smaller versions of what they themselves will have to produce when required to complete a research dissertation. Roth (2006) argues that a book with a layout such as this can lead to advanced thinking by students on the issues

surrounding research. This structure addresses one of the primary criticisms of qualitative methodology books, namely, authors failing to speak from experience and successfully imparting the learning they possess.

As the various contributors to this volume work in such diverse fields as economics, sociology, organisational theory, research methodology, international business, human resource management and politics, their range of research interests are very broad. Nevertheless, what the book clearly shows is that, irrespective of the topics studied, there are certain commonalities and consistencies in relation to qualitative approaches to research that bridge the broad range of disciplines and research interests. Thus, there is continuity between the chapters, as there is a certain crossover between a number of the contributions. From this, readers will see how methodological approaches can have similarities, to a certain extent.

Thus, qualitative approaches to economics can employ methodologies that are almost identical to those employed in studies of international business. Qualitative approaches to researching organisational structure and forming can be very similar to, even complimenting and overlapping with, approaches used to understand policy change in a political science context, as well as methods to illuminate developing consumer cultures. So, for example, the chapter focusing on processual and historically-informed organisational theorising uses a path dependence approach and is followed by a chapter focusing on identifying critical junctures in macroeconomic policy. Critical junctures are a concept used to explain periods of radical change in historical institutionalism, a concept akin to path dependence, and are used to explain continuity in political institutions and policies. This chapter is followed by one addressing the apparent discontinuities embedded within long-term continuities of structural change in consumer culture and society. Thus, overlaps exist within the methodological approaches to what, on the surface, appear to be very different research questions. It is this apparently unobtrusive similarity that allows the methodological approaches to overlap to such an extent. A similar situation arises in relation to the chapters on discourse analysis. One chapter outlines, in broad brushstrokes, an overview of discourse analytical approaches to research, while the following chapter examines consumer culture amongst preschoolers, using a conversation analysis form of discourse analysis. Thus, although the topics studied here using qualitative approaches can be different, the tools employed to find the answers to the questions asked can be similar.

It should be noted that, whether it is academics or students who are doing the research, the approach is generally the same. In many instances,

the research skills that academics developed as students, when writing their own dissertations, are the same skills that they employ here. Ultimately, both academics and students are seeking answers to research questions and using methodology to help them work their way through that process. The only difference is that academics have more experience, and therefore more knowledge, of the process than students.

## THE PRESENTATION OF THE BOOK

The qualitative research, as set out in this book, acknowledges biases and values, recognition of something that is integral to qualitative research today. As Mertens (2003) points out, this recognition of bias represents honesty, and openness, in research. It also acknowledges the reality of the situation. All contributors recognise that, as researchers, they have inherent biases, irrespective of their efforts to achieve the most impartial results possible. As Gubrium & Holstein (1997: 12) acknowledge, 'qualitative research is distinguished by a commitment to studying social life in process, as it unfolds'. As part of that social life, researchers, and all they bring to the research process, influence how they collect information, analyse this information and interpret the findings.

The chapters of the book show that there is no one best way to conduct qualitative research, or that there is one methodological 'silver bullet' to enable us to answer exactly the research question we pose. Here, we stress that formulating the right methodology to address a research question is a reflexive, iterative process, often involving trial and error until the proper approach is defined. While choice of methodology is reflexive, the results it achieves are not, and, thus, care is the watchword when it comes to the selection of methodology.

Turning to the content of the book itself, in **Chapter 2**, Conor Horan addresses the absence of work in business academic literature, textbooks, and practical teaching tools aimed at guiding students toward selecting and developing research topics for dissertations. The first part of the chapter, dealing with topic selection, provides guidelines and questions that student researchers should think about when embarking on a research process. These guidelines reflect the challenges faced during the research process. Their application will vary depending on the context and rationale underpinning the proposed research. The questions included here are intended to provoke some thought relating to the research process and are

written with a generalised and somewhat standardised research process in mind. For this reason, these guidelines must be regarded as broad considerations and are not prescriptive in nature. It must be remembered that every student researcher's process will be highly personalised and it is the decisions made within this research process that are of interest in relation to how knowledge claims are arrived at. These decisions will be made in the context of the issues raised in this section. The second part of this chapter provides an outline for topic development, guiding students toward writing and continuous re-writing of the purpose statement, the broad research question and sub-research questions. A process of arriving at sub-research questions, in the context of the overall broad research question, is highlighted using the research topic and the research idea. Research students are required to tackle key questions underpinning the rigour of their research as they deal with each stage of the research process. The importance of this is discussed throughout the chapter.

In **Chapter 3**, Marian Crowley-Henry presents an aspect of the evolving research approach of ethnography and participant observation, delineating the complexities involved in classifying research as ethnographic, given underlying discrepancies in how the approach is applied and the respective philosophy behind its use. The chapter offers an overview of contemporary literature concerning ethnography in social research, from classic ethnography (such as Clifford, 1988; Mead, 2001[1928]) to the placement of all qualitative research as ethnographic (Mason, 2002). The author's own research (Crowley-Henry, 2007; Crowley-Henry & Weir, 2007, 2009) is considered in order to provide a concrete example of a contemporary ethnographic piece of research. Practical examples of real fieldnotes and extracts from interview transcripts are presented in the chapter. Key guidelines for conducting ethnographic research are shared, meriting the adoption of an ethnographic approach to research, even for undergraduate students who may not have the opportunity to conduct longitudinal studies for their dissertations.

In **Chapter 4**, Banu Özkazanç-Pan discusses an auto-ethnographic research project, which was carried out based upon the postcolonial frameworks of Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak. Guided by postcolonial concerns raised by each of these scholars, the chapter examines and critiques existing approaches to international management theory and research on representation and globalisation. To this end, the chapter discusses fieldwork carried out that addresses issues of power, gender and identity during the fieldwork encounter, as relevant to postcolonial research projects, by providing excerpts of observations and interviews. The chapter

focuses on the international entrepreneur as a way to demonstrate how international fieldwork, with a focus on globalisation, might be carried out using a postcolonial framework and also discusses theoretical and methodological implications of postcolonial approaches to research.

In **Chapter 5**, Kristina A. Bourne, supported by socialist feminist theorising, which addresses the assumption of a public / private divide, considers how the 'social fact' of work and family as separate domains is produced and sustained. Based on ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism, the chapter shows how the author shadowed ten women entrepreneurs as they went about doing 'work-family'. In this chapter, the author describes the theory that underpins her study's methodology and details how she identified the participants, and the strategies she used to collect, manage, and analyse the data. Lastly, she provides a snapshot of her ethnographic findings.

In **Chapter 6**, Paul Donnelly seeks to address calls for more processual and historically-informed organisational theorising. The chapter considers the notion of path dependency, an approach which holds that a historical path of choices has the character of a branching process with a self-reinforcing dynamic, such that preceding steps in a particular direction induce further movement in the same direction, thereby making the possibility of switching to some other previously credible alternative more difficult. Path dependence seeks to assess how process, sequence and temporality can best be incorporated into explanation, the focus of the researcher being on particular outcomes, temporal sequencing and the unfolding of processes over time. Thus, proceeding from a consideration of the position afforded history in the organisational literature, this chapter outlines the tenets of path dependence theory, before sketching out its application in the practice of doing research.

In **Chapter 7**, John Hogan and David Doyle show how hypotheses, and the observable implications derived for those hypotheses, can be tested in researching a real world phenomenon. They do this by developing a testable framework for examining critical junctures in macroeconomic policy in Ireland, the US, Britain and Sweden throughout the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The chapter begins with a brief introduction, followed by a short review of the literature on the concept of critical junctures. Thereafter, the chapter sets out the reasons for case selection, followed by the methodology to be employed and the testing of that methodology against the countries selected for examination. The sequence of methodology development, and its testing, occurs in three discrete stages,

each of which logically follows on from the one preceding it. From this, it is possible to see how a theoretical framework can be developed and tested, and the ensuing results examined. Based upon these results, we can determine whether the revised framework 'works', by which we mean that it accurately captures something of the reality of the world political economy, or does not work and is therefore in need of further revision.

In **Chapter 8**, Paddy Dolan focuses on the fact that consumer and organisational research has undergone a significant shift in favour of qualitative methods over the last 20 years, but interviewing, whether 'in-depth' or group, continues to dominate the literature. However, the use of documents offers considerable scope for the development of processual explanations. Such texts reflect, and in part constitute, the social realities pertaining to particular organisations and even societies. By tracing the changes in the meaning and emotional connotation of specific words, phrases and practices, the researcher is able to gain a purchase on social and cultural change over time. The chapter illustrates this method, which is adapted from the figurational approach of Norbert Elias, through an analysis of the development of consumer culture in Ireland. The process of analysis and synthesis involves the fluid coding of relevant extracts of parliamentary speeches. Individual parliamentary debates have been analysed separately based on the 'codes' developed for each debate. This ensures that the meaning of parliamentary speech is not decontextualised from the flow of the speech itself, but is rather understood holistically. From the interpretations of individual analyses, key themes across time were identified. The approach diverges from conventional qualitative data analysis, whereby codes are established to represent homogenous data extracts, which are internally uniform and externally heterogeneous in relation to other codes.

In **Chapter 9**, Brendan K. O'Rourke provides an overview of discourse analytical approaches to research. The field of discourse analysis (DA) is vast, varied and contested, with traditions ranging from the conversational analysis of Sacks (1995; origin. 1964-1972), to more Foucauldian-inspired approaches (e.g., Kendall & Wickham, 1999), to critical discourse approaches (Van Dijk, 2001; Fairclough, 2003) to the differing psychological perspective of Potter & Wetherell (1987) and Harré (2004). This diversity means that this overview is necessarily selective, but nonetheless aims to give an introduction from where the interested readers can further investigate those currents of DA that are of interest. In order to locate DA within the range of methodology discussed in this volume, and to argue for the unity of various DA approaches, a short history is

provided. A survey of DA is then provided, organised by what various approaches mean by 'discourse' and by what theories they use for analysis. A guide to further reading is provided for those wishing to explore exemplars of empirical work in business in various DA traditions.

In **Chapter 10**, Olivia Freeman argues that consumer culture is viewed as a social resource, which children can draw on as they engage with one another through talk-in-interaction. The chapter addresses children's conversation around the artefacts of consumer culture, including toys, TV programmes and movies, to illustrate a conversation analysis (CA) informed discourse analytic (DA) approach to research. This research was motivated by questions around what children 'do' with brand knowledge in a social context. The CA-informed DA approach draws upon a number of influences, including Gilbert & Mulkay (1985), Edley & Wetherell (1999) and Goodwin (2006). CA focuses on people's own interpretation of interaction, as revealed in the turn-by-turn unfolding of conversation, while DA critiques the representational view of language, focusing instead on the performative dimensions of talk interaction (Woofitt, 2005). The CA-informed discourse analytic approach is intended to provide textured description and a rich interpretation of multi-party interactions. This chapter demonstrates the possibilities for direct engagement between consumer researchers and preschoolers.

**Chapter 11** is a discussion on the nature of qualitative research. In this chapter, a number of contributors to the book contribute to a roundtable discussion on qualitative methodologies. Here, they express their thinking in relation to a range of questions on qualitative methodologies put to them by the moderator, one of the editors of the volume. The objective of the chapter is to provide readers with an insight into a free-flowing discussion amongst academics on the nature of qualitative research. This takes the readers outside of the carefully-structured arguments of the authors, as set out in their various chapters, and presents their thinking on the topic at an 'instinctual' level. This is also something that dissertation students are not often exposed to – an insight into the debates that occur between academics on the nature of research. Such an insight will show that, even amongst those using qualitative research as a tool, there are widely-differing opinions as to how to approach this topic. Hopefully, readers will also be able to take from this chapter the idea that stimulating discussions amongst peer groups is a great way of teasing out the intricacies of complex subject matters. They will see that failure to reach consensus on an issue is not a bad thing as, in research, as in many other areas of life, there are often no right or wrong

answers, only results that require interpretation. Most of all, this chapter presents a myriad of ideas on the ways in which qualitative research can be used in the search for answers to questions.

## CONCLUSION

Qualitative research employs complex reasoning that is multifaceted and iterative (Creswell, 2002) and the reality of qualitative research reflects the reality of human thinking in its iterative approach to questions. When researchers collect data, this is analysed and thereafter they have to decide whether this is answering the question that they are asking, or whether further research is necessary, or whether a reformulation of the question might be what is required. Thus, there is a process at work, with data collection followed by analysis, back to the reformulation of the problem again, and so on.

In essence, this approach to research is grounded in the 'real' world in which we live. Researchers, and the topics that they research, are constituent and interacting parts of that world. The approach is quite different from quantitative research. The primary tool used to gather the required information in qualitative research is the researcher himself or herself, as opposed to an inanimate instrument, such as a questionnaire or online survey, in quantitative research. The findings in qualitative research, as can be seen in the chapters that follow, are presented, usually, though not exclusively, in the form of thick description. The use and presentation of words and arguments, as opposed to 'facts and figures', is the essence of the findings in this approach. The focus is on the experiences of those within the case studies (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990). The findings are usually case-specific and it must be noted that empirical generalisability will always be limited where qualitative research is involved, though findings can, and should be, related to prior or emergent theories. However, what all of the chapters in this book show is that well-constructed research, well-conducted research and well-written findings go a long way towards enabling the reader to understand how findings may be transferable into a wider context (Marshall & Rossman, 2006: 206). The ultimate object of the research, despite the researcher's integration into the entire process, is the production of dependable and credible findings.

A qualitative methodology takes the form of an investigation. Research questions can change based upon the investigation's early findings. The researcher can set out in search of specific information, only to discover

quickly that such material no longer exists, if it ever did. This can be an issue, for example, in relation to such things as historical records in Europe, certain of these having been lost in the various conflagrations that have consumed the continent over the past centuries. In response to this situation, the researcher must either change the focus of the research question, or revise the research question itself. Thus, the iterative process in qualitative research can take hold very quickly.

In order to engage in qualitative research, it is necessary to consider it as a network of various approaches, or a combination of approaches. Qualitative research is not a value-free activity devoid of social, economic and environmental impacts. Findings have relevance and the nature of those findings is influenced by the choices made by the researchers and the academic community's appreciation of those findings.

Our aim in producing this book is to introduce students to the concepts fundamental to qualitative research and the conduct of such research in practice. Numerous qualitative research approaches are discussed and formulated, and examples of their application are then provided. This shows how answers to research questions can be uncovered by qualitative research. The chapters show how the qualitative approaches, in many respects, are linked to the intellectual background of the researchers, to their own interests and preferences. We want students to see qualitative methodology as a tool that can be used to maximise the potential of their research, rather than being intimidated by the notion of this methodology. Our ultimate hope is that students, from across a range of fields, will find this a useful volume in assisting them in conducting research of a qualitative nature.

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