

2 RESEARCH DESIGN

The flexible research procedure of qualitative research that was touched upon in Chapter 1, might suggest that this type of research requires little or no planning and that researchers can work with whatever they encounter. Nothing is further from the truth. Researchers face the difficult task of finding a balance between their preparations, resulting in a research plan and conducting the research in practice. The research plan contains the research questions, the research purpose, an ethical paragraph, a plan for disseminating the findings and an outline of the overall research strategy as well as the specific methods, techniques and instruments to be used. A plan provides structure, but it should not interfere with flexibility. A plan provides certainty, but should not block other promising options. This chapter provides pointers for handling this ambivalence in the design of a qualitative research project.

LEARNING AIMS

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Name and reflect on all elements of a research plan
- Reflect on the use of literature in a qualitative study
- Recognize a research question that is framed in a way that demands qualitative methods
- Formulate a qualitative research question when a research topic is given
- See how descriptive and explanatory purposes of research are related
- Distinguish between the purposes of fundamental and applied research
- Account for the choice of qualitative research methods in a study
- Work out the composition of a sample when starting with an a priori theory
- Employ theoretical selection in a qualitative project
- Identify some commonly used strategies for getting access to and recruiting participants

Planning a research project

The planning of a qualitative research project seems to run counter to the open procedure described in Chapter 1. The open and flexible approach should not lead to a non-committal attitude in which anything goes. Thorough preparation, resulting in a research plan or project proposal, prevents distraction from the actual topic. A research plan also promotes the (continual) fit between the parts of the research. The research problem, research questions, purposes, sample, data collection, analysis and reporting should be tuned to each other.

A research proposal not only has a function for you as a researcher, it is also extremely important for third parties, such as instructors, supervisors, granting organizations, commissioners, ethical committees and so on. Since in modern day research no one can afford to skip writing a research proposal before commencing the actual research, a lot of attention is paid to the quality of research proposals in recent years (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003a; Connelly & Yoder, 2000).

A proposal needs to demonstrate what the research entails. This means that it has to provide answers to the following questions: What is being researched? Why is this subject examined? How will this be done? Where will the study take place? It is important that these questions are answered in a logical and convincing manner. Maxwell (2004) describes the research proposal as an argument which should convincingly demonstrate why this research should be done, what activities it will consist of, and to which results it will lead. This last point refers to the researchers being able to assess what they think they will know, and potentially what they will be able to do, once the research has been conducted.

Planning the analysis stage already in the research plan is probably the most difficult part. Of course, the chosen research approach (see Chapter 1) will determine what needs to be done during analysis. When, for example, one is aiming for an ethnographic study, a study using conversation analysis or a case-study, the relevant methodologies prescribe certain procedures. When the purpose is to generate a grounded theory about a basic human psychosocial experience, you might say something about the concepts you are probably going to use in the analysis and how you will approach the analysis, for instance how coding will be employed and which software for qualitative analysis will be used (see Chapters 6 and 7).

An essential part of your analytic plan in the research proposal is to indicate to reviewers that data collection and data analysis alternate in qualitative research. This is a vital part of the qualitative research procedure, and one of the main reasons that not all parts of the research can be planned in advance (Bruce, 2007). In the design stage you need to indicate how you plan for the interchange of data collection and data analysis and in how many cycles you plan to finish. For example, you may plan to observe two school classes, analyse the data and then search for two new classes. You plan to do so in three rounds until you have a minimum of six classes. If that turns out not to be enough, your plan will include the search for more classes (see last section of this chapter).

However, as Patton (1999) acknowledges, research proposals are judged not only on the use of rigorous techniques and methods for gathering data and careful

analysis, but also on the credibility of the researcher, which includes training, experience, track record, status and presentation of self (Chapter 9). Moreover, the quality issue is related to the philosophical belief in the value of qualitative inquiry (see Chapters 1 and 8). Judgement is also dependent on the fundamental appreciation of qualitative research methods and it is to be expected that some people will probably never be satisfied with whatever 'quality outcomes' the research proposal promises. All researchers should be aware of this strategic or political dimension involved in judging and funding research proposals.

TIP

Several criteria for the evaluation of qualitative proposals have been developed. These standards are used by reviewers of, for example, funding agencies. If the series of questions can aid the reviewer to evaluate qualitative research, it can also help you to prepare your proposal and argue your choice for qualitative research methods. See, for instance, Morse (2003) about the review committee's guide for evaluating research proposals.

Literature review

Various resources are available for choosing a research topic and arriving at a proper problem formulation. A very important resource is literature, next to, for example, talking to field experts. Reviewing literature means that the researcher has taken notice of the accumulated knowledge gleaned from books and articles on a certain topic. Sometimes this background literature provides current social science theory. Theory is not the same as literature, and although both terms are sometimes used to depict what has been written about a certain area, theory refers to coherent frameworks that try to describe, understand and explain aspects of social life.

At one time it was considered inappropriate to read about a research topic before embarking on a qualitative undertaking. As an extension of this rule, no clear research question was formulated. Why was this so? Qualitative researchers wanted to do justice to the research subject and be open-minded about what they would encounter in the field of research. Their argument was that if they were to read in advance, they would have an opinion by the time they reached the field. Reviewing previous research, and especially getting acquainted with prevailing social theories, would distort their receptiveness to new ideas and discoveries. It would block their inductive reasoning necessary to generate new theories.

This idea was challenged. An argument for reading other people's research is that scientific knowledge has to accumulate. If no one takes notice of previous work the wheel keeps on getting re-invented. This is time-consuming, unethical, costly and not in the spirit of scientific work. At about the same time that this argument was issued, the research climate formalized. A research proposal without a description of

the problem area and without a research question all of a sudden did not stand a chance with supervisors, granting organizations, commissioners and hosts.

The problem statement then came to be seen as a preliminary guideline for the research instead of a fixed starting point that determined the entire research procedure. It was acknowledged that the research problem and the research questions are generated at the start of the study and based on available but limited knowledge. Therefore it is permitted to adjust the research questions during the research if there are good arguments to do so (see the next section). This reasoning takes into account that it is very difficult to formulate a proper research question before a connection has been established with the field of research. Researchers sometimes use a pilot study to get familiar with the field.

Taking notice of the literature does not automatically imply that the whole idea of openness to the field has been abandoned altogether. Researchers try to put the knowledge they extracted from the literature aside in order to approach their field work with an open mind. 'Bracketing' is the common term for this process, although it has some deeper thoughts connected to it in phenomenology. It is only in the analytic phase that the knowledge is brought forth and used again.

Is a blind or naive undertaking of research possible anyway? And are you capable of temporarily disregarding knowledge that you obtained from reading at all? If you thought that you could design a research project without theoretical notions, then just think for a moment about your topic choice and problem formulation. The choice to study a particular topic and the way it is phrased already show a way of thinking about the issue and your theoretical stance. And it should, because by embedding yourself in a theoretical context you also find out what is of significance for you and what you consider worth putting energy into. It is part of ethical awareness in research to subscribe to research which is congruent with your values (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

TIP

Novice researchers are often daunted by doing a literature search. The amount of publications is overwhelming. Every single publication found leads to new literature references. Some of these detail only one aspect of your research problem, but since you are not sure yet what you are going to study you cannot find out how much detail you will need for a certain topic. This is a chicken and egg scenario. There are good books available to help you through this phase, such as Fink (2004).

Gradually researchers realized that a literature search had an important function in the planning and execution of research. First of all, literature helps you to come up with a research topic. Not only does previous research provide numerous topics in your area of interest, it also shows which answers have already been given to certain questions. Consequently, it allows you to identify a gap in the existing knowledge and to delineate your own research. The connection of your research to recent

theoretical ideas and debates makes it easier to identify the scientific area that you want to contribute to. The literature might make you aware of different angles of study, as you may have a one-sided view of your subject.

TIP

Most publications mention keywords that indicate what the study is about. With the use of keywords the study is embedded into a certain discipline, such as psychology or sociology, and the smaller areas within these disciplines, like counselling psychology organisational sociology. At the same time they make clear to which speciality the study contributes. Readers may use the keywords to search for additional, related literature.

A literature study can make you streetwise with regards to certain limitations and/or opportunities in the field, for instance with gaining access to the field (see last section of this Chapter). You absolutely need literature to help you generate your measuring instruments, whether this is a topic list for interviews or an observation scheme. Sometimes you can 'copy' the questions posed by others and replicate some of their work, and the previously used instruments can also inspire you to generate your own.

A literature review facilitates the analysis. A theoretical framework derived from literature indicates how you will approach the research analytically. This is not to say that the framework will dictate which variables will be examined. It is not in the nature of qualitative research to use a fixed coding scheme that constricts data collection and pre-sorts data. Instead, the literature could provide a 'skeletal framework' (Morse, 2003). The skeletal framework is taken quite seriously in that some researchers limit the findings of their literature search to some global notions and ideas, while working with only a few concepts. These concepts have not yet been formalized and are therefore known as 'sensitizing concepts' or 'guiding concepts'. The term 'sensitizing concepts' was coined by Blumer (cf. Bryman, 2008), who contrasted them with 'definitive concepts'.

Definitive concepts have a fixed content that is reflected by its measure, i.e. the indicators that stand for the concept. For instance, equity in caregiving relationships is thought to be measured by the items on a survey (Box 1.1). In contrast, sensitizing concepts start out with a broad and general description and as such they can function as the researcher's lens through which to view the field of research. The principal role of the concept is in ordering the collected data, while the specification of the concept and its clarification take place in the analytical stage. This concept clarification contributes to theory development. Examples of sensitizing concepts from a study on alcohol use by adolescents are social identity, escapism and risk behaviour (Engineer, Phillips, Thompson & Nicholls, 2003) (see next section). The use of sensitizing concepts in the analysis process will be treated in more detail in Chapter 6.

Be aware that you can consult the relevant literature whenever you need to. You do not need to finish the reading stage before you can start your research. When you feel confident that you are on the right track and have read the key publications on

your topic, start your research project. The research questions may need adjustment at various points throughout the research project. As the problem changes and is refined, it is generally necessary to refer repeatedly to relevant literature and read things that are deemed important at that moment.

TIP

Examples of reviews of qualitative research can help you to find a useful way of cataloguing the findings of a literature search. You could benefit from a rather simple table listing all relevant studies, like the one presented by Chapple and Rogers (1999). They headed the columns 'Author', 'Aim of the study', 'Method', 'Main findings' and 'Examples of why a qualitative method is illuminating', and in the rows they placed the different publications in alphabetical order. Such an aid forces you to summarize what is useful for you in each particular publication. It will also encourage you to formulate why a qualitative design is appropriate.

Research question and purpose

A research proposal starts with a research problem. Based on the research problem is the formulation of the problem statement that can be thought of as consisting of a research question and a research purpose. A clear research question and purpose direct the entire research project, including the data analysis. Asking relevant research questions is essential for gathering the right data and consequently to provide the analysis with the necessary input to ultimately answer the research questions. The answer to a research question is knowledge. The research goal indicates what the knowledge obtained will be used for. In other words, why is it worthwhile to answer the research question? What is the use of the whole endeavour? It is important that the research question and research purpose match. Both are discussed in more detail below.

Research question

The research question is the central question which the researcher wants to answer by doing the research project. The research problem must be sufficiently focussed and defined in order to formulate clear research questions. Qualitative inquiry allows one to answer questions about the nature of social phenomena under study rather than the prevalence of phenomena. This means that all aspects of a phenomenon will be dissected and described, and possibly an attempt will be made to understand how the phenomenon is built-up, what the relationships are between the different parts, and what influences the absence or presence of certain parts.

From the above-mentioned it follows that qualitative research can deal with so-called descriptive questions as well as with explanatory questions. For instance,

in a study into binge drinking (Engineer et al., 2003) a descriptive question is 'What experiences do adolescents have with criminal behaviour, misbehaviour and risky behaviour during night life?' An explanatory question in the same study is 'How do criminal experiences of these adolescents relate to their use of alcohol and the effects of excessive alcohol use?' Descriptive questions deal with the 'what' of social phenomena, while explanatory questions deal with the 'why' of these phenomena.

Research questions in qualitative research often start with words such as 'how', 'which' or 'what'. Box 2.1 provides a number of examples of research questions from qualitative studies.

BOX 2.1 EXAMPLES OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS FROM QUALITATIVE STUDIES

- How can we explain the extent and nature of football hooliganism at different football clubs and in different countries, and variations therein over time? (Spaaij, 2006)
- Do psychiatric/mental health nurses provide meaningful caring response to suicidal people, and if so, how? (Cutcliffe, Stevenson, Jackson & Smith, 2006)
- What perceptions about information systems/information technology (IS/IT) are held by government authorities and how are they reacting to problems they have in IS/IT initiatives in government? (Lee & Kim, 2007)
- What are undergraduate medical students' perceptions and experiences of teaching in relation to gender and ethnicity? (Lempp & Seale, 2006)
- What are young people's experiences of crime, disorder and risk-taking in the night-time economy and in what ways are drinking patterns, attitudes to drinking alcohol and the effects of binge drinking related to these experiences? (Engineer et al., 2003)
- How do unaccompanied minor refugee youths, who grew up amidst violence and loss, cope with trauma and hardships in their lives? (Goodman, 2004)
- How has the meaning which women attribute to sedatives and their use been influenced by information which they have gathered from their daughters, people in their social networks or other sources? (Haafkens, 1997)

The research question is often broad and encompassing, and is usually divided into multiple sub-questions that further structure the research. Formulating sub-questions is difficult for a number of reasons:

- They must use the terminology that fits the chosen approach or tradition (see Chapter 1).
- They need to fall under the umbrella of the overall research question, confining the research to topics described in the overall question and allowing you to make a contribution to the knowledge in a particular scientific area.

- Research questions must match one another and follow logically one after the other. By answering the related research questions you build an argument in the research report.
- The questions need to be answerable by means of the proposed research. This implies that abstract concepts may only be used when they can be defined and translated into operational terms. Only then will they become researchable, which means that empirical data can be collected in relation to the operational terms in order to observe the concepts.

In Chapter 1 the emergent design of qualitative research was discussed. In proceeding from a problem to more specific issues and questions defined by information collected in the field, the researcher may realize that the initial question is somehow inappropriate, that it just does not make sense in terms of the realities of everyday life. Or the researcher may discover that many important issues in need of study were not anticipated at the onset of the project. If the research project were to continue as planned, it would yield less interesting results than if adjustments were made now. Researchers may also discover that they do not get access to their preferred field of research, forcing them to reformulate the research question in such a way that they are able to get access. Although there can be good reasons for tightening the research question(s) during the research process, it still needs to be motivated. However, researchers rarely include these changes in the original questions in their report. One exception is the example in Box 2.2, taken from a study on caregivers to people with dementia in nursing homes (Bosch, 1996).

BOX 2.2 ADJUSTING RESEARCH QUESTIONS TO THE FIELD

Bosch (1996) started her research with the global question: How do elderly with dementia experience reality? This was divided in the following sub-questions:

- What is 'reality' for elderly suffering from dementia?
- How do caregivers define this reality?
- Are there differences and similarities between these definitions of reality?
- What are the consequences of these differences in perceived reality for nursing home care?

Bosch writes that during participant observation in nursing homes, these questions became increasingly focussed on differences in life course between female residents who had been housewives, males who had been in paid employment or religious females who had lived in a monastery. Also the level of trust the nursing home residents experienced was highlighted. The extent to which staff attempted to create trust became an important subject of study. The questions Bosch formulated during the research process were:

- How does the social biography influence the resident's behaviour when living in a nursing home?
- Are there differences in behaviour between former housewives, males with paid employment and nuns?

- Can these differences be explained by the social biographies?
- To what extent does social biography play a role in the longing for and experience of trust on psychogeriatric wards in nursing homes?
- Which problems do staff members face when creating trust?

Knowing that you can adjust the research question during the research process does not mean that you can relax at the start of the process and expect the research question to take shape later on. Researchers who use an emerging approach know that a well-prepared research plan will serve to keep the process on track rather than going off at a tangent. Jorgensen (1989) recommends that the problem statement, including the research question and purpose, should be sufficiently broad to permit inclusion of the central issues and concerns, yet narrow enough in scope to serve as a guide to data collection. A proper literature search enables formulation of related questions and highlights the difficulties that can be expected when working in the field.

TIP

Researchers should not be discouraged by the quality of the research questions that are reported in publications. Those reported questions are the final, definitive questions formulated by researchers at the end of their research process. They make it seem as if the researchers knew exactly what they were looking for from the beginning. Usually this is not the case; it is considered quite normal that the formulation of a proper research question is fraught with joys and perils.

Research purpose

Two distinctions can be made with regard to the research purpose. The first distinction is between research mainly aimed at description and research mainly aimed at understanding or explanation. The second distinction is between fundamental and applied research. We will look at each of these in turn.

Describing what people think and don't think, believe and don't believe, and do or do not do is a contribution to scientific knowledge in itself. On completion of the research we will know more than we knew before about the way some people think about certain things, what certain places look like, or what activities take place somewhere. When describing certain phenomena while examining a particular scene, the researcher must judge these phenomena as relevant. In qualitative research, the phenomena are commonly referred to as 'categories'. A description of what takes place adds to the empirical knowledge of a certain field of study.

Box 2.3 gives an example of a research project into football hooliganism from an international perspective. Football hooliganism is defined by the author as 'the

competitive violence of socially organized fan groups in football, principally directed against opposing fan groups' (Spaaij, 2006: 6). It is clearly descriptive knowledge derived from the literature that demonstrated similarities and differences between various countries and football clubs as well as changes over time concerning hooliganism.

BOX 2.3 DESCRIBING FOOTBALL HOOLIGANISM

For hooligan rivalries to develop and persist, the existence of at least one similar, oppositional fan group is a necessary condition (Spaaij, 2006). However, hooligan behaviour is not restricted to intergroup fighting but may also include missile throwing, vandalism, racial abuse, or attacks on police or non-aggressive supporters. The violent behaviour takes place not only at or in the immediate vicinity of football stadiums or fields, but also in other places, such as city centres, pubs, nightclubs or railway stations.

Previous descriptive studies show the 'what' of the social phenomenon of football hooliganism. Research clearly shows that football hooliganism is not a universal phenomenon, but a European, Latin American and, to a far lesser extent, Australian phenomenon. However, there are differences depending on the particular countries or football clubs involved, for instance with regard to scale, nature and time of origin. In North America there is no equivalent of football hooliganism, although individuals or small groups do participate in common assault, drunken and disorderly behaviour and confrontations with the police during sports matches. The same applies to Asia.

All cases of hooliganism that take place at different football clubs within a country seem to be similar at first glance. For example, British research demonstrates that the typical hooligan is a mainly male, white, working-class young adult. But when Western European countries are compared, there appear to be local and regional variations in the social backgrounds of football hooligans. In some countries the middle- and upper-classes have also been involved, as well as women and middle-aged individuals.

Scientists, however, are a special breed. They not only like to see what is there, they also like to know why it is there. Spaaij wonders 'why' the extent of football hooliganism is not evenly or randomly distributed and 'why' not every country or football club is equally affected. His aim is to add to sociological theory regarding football hooliganism and for this to serve as a basis for more effective and more proportionate policies at international, national, regional and local levels. Researchers often prefer to contribute to explanations in order to further develop the current theory on their field of interest. Description is considered more limited than explanation: it is possible to describe without explaining, however it is not really possible to explain without describing.

In the literature Spaaij (2006) already found several theories that applied to football hooliganism, such as the 'cleavages theory'. This theory states that the fault lines that

exist in every society, whether with a religious, linguistic or class orientation, shape the nature of the hooligan groups. Another valid theory is the social identity theory that assumes that hooliganism offers young, male adults a possibility to demonstrate their masculinity and superiority towards significant others and establish their social identities. According to Spaaij, these explanations are insufficient and need to be complemented with the local context, such as the origin and history of a football club and the interpretation and priorities of the parties involved regarding official and informal policies. In his study he compares six Western European football clubs and adds evidence for already existing and new explanations.

In Box 2.4, two cases are presented based on the research of Spaaij (2006). The first one is a case description of Sparta, one of the six studied football clubs. The second one is a case description of one individual hooligan and composed by me on the basis of Spaaij's information. By presenting these materials it becomes clear that description as well as explanation can take place at different levels.

BOX 2.4 UNDERSTANDING FOOTBALL HOOLIGANISM

The case of Sparta: explanation at club level

Rotterdam in the Netherlands is a multi-club city including, among others, Feyenoord and Sparta. Spectator behaviour at Sparta is commonly perceived by the authorities, the media and the supporters themselves as 'friendly' and unproblematic. Sparta is one of the oldest football clubs in the Netherlands, founded in 1888, and has an elite character. When football gradually spread across all social classes, Sparta dreaded the roughness and lack of civilization of the working-class clubs. Their stadium, Het Kasteel [The Castle], symbolizes Sparta fan culture and their roots in the local area.

A historical rivalry with Feyenoord exists which reflects socio-economic and cultural differences between two parts of Rotterdam separated physically as well as symbolically by the river de Maas. Sparta is the community club of the North-West and Feyenoord represents the working-classes in the South of Rotterdam. Sparta has a gentlemen's reputation, which contrasts sharply with the persistent hooligan stigma of the Feyenoord supporters.

During the rise of intergroup rivalries in the 1970s, the club's officials persistently complained about the misbehaviour of opposing supporters. For a 'friendly' club it was difficult to see that the attendance of the home crowd declined because of spectator violence and that the club sometimes had to pay for damage brought on by other supporters. This spiralled further into financial problems, and consequently Sparta failed to attract substantial numbers of new young supporters. The character of the local area in which the stadium was based gradually changed due to an influx of immigrants who had little or no bond with the area and the community, let alone the football community. Due to these events Sparta found their fan base was aging rapidly.

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Recently, a small number of young fans have turned to hooliganism, which compromises the club's 'friendly' image and threatens relations between the club and its supporters. These young fans often have not grown up in the area of Het Kasteel, but live in neighbouring suburbs. They have middle-class backgrounds and sometimes higher education. They are attracted to hooliganism as a way to 'spice up' their otherwise boring lives. One of these supporters is Dennis.

The case of Dennis: explanation at hooligan level

Dennis lives in a suburb of Rotterdam. He saw the violence of other hooligan groups and was eager to become a hooligan too. He is a university student but finds it boring. Dennis is a thrill seeker and always looks forward to the excitement of the football games during the weekends. What he really likes to do is to travel to football stadiums in other cities and fight the rival football fans there. Frightening rival supporters, making them run away in their own city is an exciting experience. The opposition is humiliated and then exacerbated when it is in the papers the next day.

Dennis and his friends have formed a group and call themselves the Sparta Youth Crew (the SYC). They are encouraged by few older supporters experienced in fighting and hooliganism. The SYC members wear right-wing symbols not because they are loyal to their political ideas but rather to provoke and shock others. Dennis yearns to be part of one of the most notorious groups with a real reputation in hooliganism.

He thinks of other fans as boring and real softies, but at the same time he does not view himself as a hard-core criminal like the Feyenoord hooligans. The SYC is more 'civilized' and sophisticated than other groups as they have rules that other hooligans do not, such as not attacking non-hooligan supporters and not inflicting injury to someone lying helplessly on the ground. Sparta nourishes the friendly image, and that is where Dennis and the SYC do not fit in. Because they operate away from their own football grounds, however, and have escaped formal social control, Dennis believes that they will not get caught.

The various accounts described in the literature led Spaaij (2006) to propose that football hooliganism might be shaped by the major 'fault lines' of particular countries, whether social class and regional inequalities, religious diversity, linguistic sub-nationalism or political groups. This indeed partly explains cross-national dissimilarities in football hooliganism, yet it fails to account for more specific spatial and temporal variations, i.e. local fault lines. Spaaij's research also confirms the assumptions of the social identity theory. The hooligan groups studied emphasize the differences between themselves and their opponents mainly in two ways. First, in terms of club and/or city, neighbourhood, regional, ethnic, religious, national or political allegiance (cleavages theory), and second, in terms of (de)masculinization ('real' men versus 'boys'). The sense of being a 'hooligan' is a key part of their social identity.

The second distinction that we mentioned at the beginning of this section is between fundamental and applied research. Roughly speaking, research serves to gain scientific knowledge purely to extend what is known on a certain topic. This type of research adds to the existing, theoretical knowledge in a certain area of interest and is also known as 'fundamental' or 'basic' research. Research can also provide knowledge to facilitate change in problematic situations. When the research question is answered, the knowledge may help to apply changes to, for example, formulate policy initiatives or develop fruitful interventions. This type of research is referred to as 'applied' or 'policy-oriented' research (Clarke, 2008).

Applied research aims to resolve an unwanted situation or improve an already functioning situation. A description of a certain situation can be very valuable in itself, but often explanations are necessary in order to be able to predict and direct behaviour. Once the reasons underlying a certain type of behaviour are clear, one could try to reorganize the policy to deal with this behaviour. For instance, because football hooligans are better understood, one can adequately predict which matches are likely to result in riots and destruction. Measures may then be taken in order to prevent this violence from happening. Spaaij (2006) concluded that violence and damage have increasingly displaced to city streets, pubs and railway stations, mainly as a consequence of the constrictive security measures in and around football stadiums. From the example on hooliganism it might be clear that one research project might serve both fundamental as well as applied purposes.

In order to contribute to the solution of problems by means of research, researchers have to ask 'how-can' questions (Zee, 1983). These questions give centre-stage to solutions and alternative measures. An example of such a question is: How can football hooliganism be diminished? At times, qualitative researchers mistakenly assume that their studies will automatically lead to usable results, because their study reflects the participants' perspective. These researchers pose 'how-come' questions and 'sympathizing' questions. A 'how-come' or explanatory question is: How come that recently a more cohesive fan group has originated that regularly engages in football hooliganism and consists of young males with middle-class backgrounds and high levels of formal education? An example of a sympathizing question or interpretive question is: What does it mean for hooligans to engage in violent behaviour during football games? By answering these questions, researchers describe the likely patterns of an individual or a group. However, they do not self-evidently bridge the gap between the participant's experiences on the one hand and research, policy and practice on the other. We come back to this issue in Chapter 8 when dealing with the use of qualitative findings.

TIP

Creswell (2006) has developed a very useful format for formulating the research purpose in diverse traditions within qualitative research. In this format, terms are used that belong to certain traditions in qualitative research. The format inspires the researcher to think about the exact framing of the research question

and it is an opportunity to signal the reader the specific tradition that will be used. With some minor adjustments the format looks like:

The purpose of this [tradition, type] study is to [understand? describe? explain?] the [central focus for the study] for [the unit of analysis: a person? processes? groups? sites?]. At this stage in the research, the [central focus being studied] will be generally defined as [provide a general definition of the central concept].

This template forces the researcher to think about all the essential parts of the research and to formulate them as clearly as possible at that moment.

Legitimizing the choice for qualitative research

After having formulated the central focus of the study, including the research questions and goals, arguments why qualitative methods are the best procedure to choose should follow. The most salient reasons to account for qualitative methods are detailed below.

- *Exploration*: When a study has an explorative nature – for instance, a newly emerging field of interest that has not yet been extensively examined – you need methods with a maximum of explorative power. Qualitative methods do live up to this because of their flexible approach. As we have seen, the research questions can be tailored to the field of study. In addition, data collection and data analysis can be continually adjusted to the emerging findings. That is why both activities are conducted in small cycles instead of one after the other.
- *Description*: Qualitative methods offer the opportunity for participants to describe the subject of study in their own words and to do so largely on their own conditions. They may express views, give words to their experiences and describe events and situations. Likewise, with the use of various observation methods, extended descriptions of cultural behaviour, knowledge and artefacts can be obtained (see Chapter 4). The information gained is not limited to preconceived questions and categories, and as a consequence can provide rich and detailed data that leads to focussed descriptions of a given phenomenon in the social world.
- *Explanation*: Qualitative methods can lead to an interpretive rendering of the studied phenomenon. By cycling between data collection and data analysis, early conjectures can be checked in further cycles of new data collection and subsequent analysis of comparative cases. Through the constant comparison of data with the emerging ideas, a more abstract and conceptual model can be generated that is grounded in the data.
- *Change*: Sometimes, manoeuvrable methods are wished for to follow-up on fast developments in the studied area. Some subjects do change really fast as they gain momentum, for instance, the change in focus of a political publicity campaign after

a drop in the opinion polls, or the change in policy when two companies merge. Since qualitative methods are flexible and cyclical, they can be adjusted to the field and measure possibly important decisions and subtle activities that could have major consequences.

- *Use:* Qualitative methods hold the promise to yield findings that reflect the participants' perspective and that fit the substantive field. As a consequence it is expected that the findings will have relevance for the field and can be easily transformed into interventions for practitioners. Although this is only partly the case, as was mentioned above, results relevant to the target group might encourage the adoption of new policy measures.
- *Sensitivity:* Qualitative researchers often choose to examine other people's experiences and emotions. They have a preference for studying topics that are strange, uncommon or deviate from the 'normal' situation. It is assumed that these topics can be more easily captured in research that leaves much of the control to the participants, although within well-defined limits. Sometimes qualitative researchers go to great lengths to recruit participants from populations that are difficult to reach in order to thoroughly investigate topics that desperately need to be studied (see Chapter 3).

In a qualitative research proposal you have to argue that qualitative methods have the potential to produce the findings that are going to realize your goals. By and large, the characteristics of qualitative research as described in Chapter 1 are the selling points of this type of investigation. The reasons for choosing qualitative research methods are not mutually exclusive. In Box 2.5 an example is given in which all reasons for choosing qualitative methods seem to apply (Cutcliffe et al., 2006).

BOX 2.5 A JUSTIFICATION OF USING QUALITATIVE METHODS

Although there is an abundance of literature on suicide and despite the relevance of suicide to psychiatric/mental health nurses, the authors assert that there is a paucity of research in this specific area. In other words, it needs to be *explored* whether nurses provide meaningful caring response to suicidal people, and if so how.

'Meaningful' care needs to be defined by the suicidal people themselves. As participants, people were chosen who had made a serious attempt on their lives or felt they were on the cusp of so doing and had received 'crisis' care from the psychiatric services. In semi-structured interviews participants talk about the caring experiences that were helpful to them. Their perspective including the interactions in which they felt listened to and understood is *described*.

From the analysis of the data about meaningful caring interactions, the researchers deduce that the participants go through a process that leads them from alienation from the world to a new connection with the world. Nurses can help them go through these stages. They do so through 'reflecting an image of humanity',

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via 'guiding the individual back to humanity' to 'learning to live'. This theoretical model demonstrates that suicidal people occupy themselves with getting a grasp on life again and *explains* what is considered meaningful care in the different stages.

The practice of providing care for the suicidal client clearly involves at least two people and also occurs over a period of time. A *change* is observed in the basic psychosocial problems that suicidal clients go through. The situation of their interactional partners, the nurses, is subject to change as well. Caring as such is a dynamic social phenomenon and qualitative methods fit this nature.

From the findings *practical implications* can be deduced. Based on the findings, a theory of meaningful caring practice of suicidal people is developed. Each of the three stages indicated in the theory is described by way of particular meaningful performances of the nurses. Distinct practice implications arise from this, such as the competence of nurses to be comfortable with co-presencing, that is, to be able to hold back from being too instrumental, and the need to be comfortable with death and talking about suicide.

The *sensitive* nature of the subject makes the choice of a qualitative methodology perfectly understandable. It deals with existential issues and topics such as mortality, death and suicide, the use of mental health services, insecurity and dependability on others. Suicide itself is emotionally draining and subject to stigma as well (see Chapter 3). A face-to-face conversation between a client and a researcher seems to suit this situation best.

Sampling, recruitment and access

When the research question and purpose have been formulated, the next step is to find a setting – participants, locations, organizations, places – in which to conduct the research. The chosen setting should be the best possible to observe your subject. Usually it is not possible to study all aspects of your chosen subject; therefore you have to take a sample, that is, to select cases. There are several sampling strategies in qualitative research, and the main distinctions are described in this section.

Choosing a setting

In selecting a setting, Morse and Field (1996) use the principle of maximization. This means that a location should be determined where the topic of study manifests itself most strongly. They conducted research on pain and the way in which nurses offered consolation and comfort. They considered investigating this topic in the context of childbirth, but decided not to. They reasoned that pain might be maximally present

during labour so that, as a consequence, the need for consolation and comfort would be high as well. At the same time, the study would observe pain for a specific period (labour) with a known goal (birth of the baby). These reasons led them to investigate the phenomenon at emergency units. This environment also maximizes the chance of pain occurring, but in a very different and less predictable form. The message is: choose a location in which you can learn most about your topic.

The more abstract the topic of inquiry is, the more the researcher has to determine where the research is to be conducted. The most logical place to go to investigate football hooligans are the football clubs and the football stadiums. However, the increased use of information systems and information technology could be investigated in governments, businesses, public and private sectors, using different kinds of technology systems and on different levels within these organizations. It is up to the researchers to decide which field offers the best opportunities to learn about their research subjects, which field is most interesting, and which field is most likely to be accessible.

Not every research topic requires the researcher to think about the choice of the location. If a football club decides to commission research into new restrictive policies, the field of research is fixed. The case is already specified and constitutes the focus of the research question. However, this does not relieve researchers of having to think about the relationship between their setting and other settings (Mason, 2002). In order to determine the value of research and assess the extent to which findings may be generalized, it is important to consider what a particular setting may or may not teach us about the phenomenon we are studying (see Chapter 9).

Purposive sampling

Composing the sample in qualitative research is different from the common sampling approach used in quantitative research. There has even been an objection to the use of the term 'sample' since it carries connotations that some find undesirable for qualitative research. These connotations have to do with the following. In quantitative research it is paramount that statistical representation is implemented. The probability that the case falls within the sample is determined by chance, and the sample reflects the proportional distribution of relevant population characteristics. Based on the findings in this randomly selected sample, probabilistic assertions may be made about the entire population, commonly referred to as generalization or statistical inference (see Chapter 9). Statistical rules and procedures are used to make such assessments.

Although both procedures – random sampling and statistical inferences – do not apply to qualitative research, the term 'sample' is widely used in qualitative research terminology. A sample consists of the cases (units or elements) that will be examined and are selected from a defined research population. In qualitative research the sample is intentionally selected according to the needs of the study, commonly referred to as 'purposive sampling' or 'purposeful selection'. The cases are specifically selected because they can teach us a lot about the issues that are of importance to the research (Coyne, 1997).

All samples in qualitative research have some features in common (Curtis, Gesler, Smith & Washburn, 2000). The samples are often small, although that is not a fixed rule. Cases are studied intensively, and each case typically generates a large amount of information. Generally samples are not predetermined, and selection is sequential, interleaved with data collection and analysis. Sampling strategies in qualitative research typically aim to represent a wide range of perspectives and experiences, rather than to replicate their frequency in the wider population (Ziebland & McPherson, 2006).

Two types of purposive sampling can typically be distinguished in qualitative research (Curtis et al., 2000). One form of purposive sampling is suitable for qualitative research, which is informed a priori by an existing body of social theory on which the research questions are based. In this case the sample selection is driven by a theoretical framework which guides the research from the outset. Many different sampling strategies can be found, for instance drawing a unique case, a critical case, an extreme case or a typical case, drawing for maximum variation and homogeneous drawing (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The other form is theoretical sampling, designed to generate theory which is grounded in the data, rather than established in advance of the fieldwork. Theoretical sampling is based on the grounded theory approach (see Chapter 1). Theoretical sampling is defined as 'the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his data and decides which data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges' (Glaser, 1978: 36).

Examples of both types of sampling are given below. The first type, purposive sampling in research that already starts with a theoretical framework, is illustrated by the study of Spaaij (2006) into football hooliganism. He chose to examine this phenomenon in more than one football club (multiple case study design). In order to make a proper selection of cases, he reviewed the literature and consulted experts on the subject. Because Spaaij had a rather strong theoretical impetus in his research, his sample was chosen beforehand. Box 2.6 describes how and why Spaaij selected football clubs according to the principle of maximum variation.

BOX 2.6 CHOOSING CASES INFORMED A PRIORI BY THEORY

It is logical that Spaaij (2006) would conduct an international comparative study to describe and explain the extent and nature of football hooliganism in different countries. Spaaij wants to describe spatial, cross-case variations: he wants to explain the differences between football clubs in the same country. However, he also wishes to describe within-case variations, that is, variations in hooliganism over time within the same club. Spaaij must therefore study a variety of clubs.

First of all Spaaij chooses three democratic societies in Western Europe – England, the Netherlands and Spain – to study how the fault lines of particular societies shape the manifestation of football hooliganism. Despite significant variations, the socio-economic structures and cultural traditions are comparatively

similar in these countries, and historically football has been a popular spectator sport in all three countries. The fault lines in contemporary English society are social class and regional inequalities. In contemporary Dutch society no single dominant cleavage seems to exist, although some socio-cultural differences between the West and other parts of the country remain and local and regional identities prove remarkably strong. The major fault lines in Spanish society are the centre-periphery divide – regional and (sub-)nationalist identities – and the class divide.

Because the fault lines are supposed to operate on a high level of generality, factors that co-shape the nature and development of football hooliganism on a local level need to be examined as well. With this purpose in mind, one multi-club city is chosen in each of the three countries. Here Spaaij employs sampling for maximum variation. In England, London is appointed, with West Ham United that has a violent image and Fulham FC with a friendly image. In the Netherlands, Rotterdam was chosen, hosting Feyenoord which has the hard nature of an urban working-class football club and Sparta which is referred to as a gentlemen's club. In Spain, Barcelona is selected, with RCD Espanyol as a club with a hostile image and FC Barcelona as a friendly club.

Spaaij decided beforehand where his research would take place, and in doing so he seemed not to live up to the tenet of qualitative research to interchange data collection, sampling and data analysis. This is only true to a certain extent. He did analyse one case at a time and studied each case for its unique characteristics (within-case analysis). At the same time, he let the analysis of the next cases be influenced by what he learnt from the previous ones. So although he chose his cases beforehand, he acted upon the emerging knowledge in his analysis.

Box 2.7 gives an example of the second sampling type, theoretical selection, which involves a study into nursing care for suicidal people (Cutcliffe et al., 2006). Theoretical selection means that the ideas and conjectures that result from the foregoing analysis are checked with newly collected data in comparative cases. With the aim to fill gaps in the findings, specific cases – events, participants, organizations, or groups – are chosen to find this missing information.

BOX 2.7 CHOOSING CASES INFORMED BY DEVELOPING THEORY

The sample of 20 participants selected for the study was obtained using the principles of theoretical sampling. Initial sampling started with former clients who had received care for a 'suicide crisis' as 'community clients'. The authors write:

Following this, the emerging theory indicated that there might be merit in increasing the differences in the sample. Namely, the emerging theory indicated

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that the particular physical and social environment might have an influence on the person and that adjusting the environment to make it as stress free as possible could be a therapeutic intervention. As a result, the research team accessed former clients who had received care for their suicidal crisis as in-patients.

Following this, the emerging theory indicated that the research team needed to sample formerly suicidal clients who had received care in a 'Day Hospital' or 'Day Unit' setting, because there may have been particular therapeutic value for suicidal people in some of the activities that occurred on Day Units. The emerging theory did not indicate any theoretically relevant differences according to the person's gender; neither did it indicate any theoretically relevant differences according to theological backgrounds or beliefs. Neither did the emerging theory indicate any theoretically relevant differences according to race or culture. Thus, no such variations in the sample were pursued. The research team sampled individuals from several geographical locations. (Cutcliffe et al., 2006: 794)

When research seeks to provide explanations, an active search is needed for so-called negative cases. This means that researchers purposefully look for cases which could disprove the provisional findings so far. Searching for negative evidence in this way may ultimately strengthen the outcomes. When a case is found that does not match the findings in the cases studied up to that point, a so-called rivalling or supplementing explanation may be sought; for example, 'This case does not confirm what I thought to hold true so far because ...'. Specifically this strategy plays a role in checking conjectures by further data collection, referred to as 'analytic induction' (Chapter 5).

One could easily get the idea that the field of research is so large that a researcher's work may never be done. When can you cease data collection and stop sampling new units? This happens when a point of saturation has been reached. Once again, this procedure is shaped in grounded theory, and it means that researchers may stop collecting data when analysis of the newly selected cases yields no further information with regard to the selected research topics. This is slightly too simplistic, hence Chapter 6 will specify the meaning of saturation further, as it plays an important role in several phases of the analysis process.

TIP

Once the threat exists that a subject may become too sizeable and complex, the target population can be more homogeneously defined in order to decrease the number of cases that need to be involved in the research. In the study on carers of people with multiple sclerosis (Box 1.2), a variety of family members, such as children, parents, partners and brothers and sisters were set to be included. The literature implied that the group of partners was largest, and that

this group was generally the most heavily burdened (Duijnsteë & Boeije, 1998). In the light of this information, the decision was made to only study the partners, thereby limiting the population, while at the same time increasing attainability.

Even though novice researchers have a hard time believing that saturation is possible, i.e. that cases can be so insignificant that nothing new will be discovered when including them, experienced researchers know that repetition will occur. Once researchers reach the point at which their categories are saturated (see Chapter 6) and they feel like nothing new can be learned from analysing more data, they can cease the data collection. It is not really possible to predict when this will occur, as it depends on the size, variation and complexity of the topic and, again, on the available time and resources.

TIP

It is clear that it is difficult to write about the sample in advance in the research proposal. When planning, only approximations of sample size can be given because one cannot predict how much data will be required to identify themes or categories and to begin developing theory (Morse, 2003). It is therefore important to elaborate carefully on the target population, to explain what principle of sampling will be used, why it was chosen and what is meant by saturation. Additionally, a reasonable estimate of the possible size of the sample may be given. In this estimate, attainability will likely play a role. In the final report it should, of course, be clear for readers what the ultimate sample looked like and how the sample came about. We will deal with this subject in Chapter 4 about writing the research report.

From the examples in Box 2.6 and 2.7 it becomes clear that the initial cases are sampled specifically because the phenomena are known to exist in these samples. If possible these should be information-rich cases, that is, cases that fit the purpose of the study (Coyne, 1997). Then as sampling progresses, data collection and analysis are adjusted. The ultimate sampling will consist of balancing a range of sometimes conflicting criteria, for instance, between the maximum informative setting and ethical objections or the possibilities of certain data collection methods and accessibility (Curtis et al., 2000).

Recruitment and access

There is one other important question left with regard to sampling: How do researchers gain access to the field that they would like to investigate and how do they locate participants? Methods of recruitment are very diverse. The same kinds

of resources used in other types of research may be used here (Lee, 1993), for instance, placing advertisements in magazines, on billboards or on the Internet. Researchers may also go to places where they would expect to find potential participants; for example, by going to the beach to meet people who are frequent sun bathers. Researchers may attempt to perform tasks in exchange for cooperation; for example, by tending the bar at a local cultural centre or filling out forms. They could write to organizations or groups asking them to approach people for possible participation in the study. On some occasions, it may be possible for researchers to connect with already running, large-scale research programmes of national research organizations.

Another strategy is the 'snowball' or networking method, which means that an initial number of participants are asked for the names of others, who are subsequently approached. This method is useful when studying sensitive or taboo topics or when target groups are difficult to reach. Examples include women who have had an abortion, family members of a person who committed suicide, or sexual behaviour of gay men. Although snowball sampling seems a convenient and easy way to sample participants, there is much more to an adequate snowball sample than is often believed, as Coxon (1993) found when sampling a community of gay men.

For research in organizations it is recommended that the formal path be followed; for example, sending a letter to the board of directors. When the organization appears interested, subsequent agreements can be made on the exact topic under investigation, the time when the research will take place, the provision of a room for the researcher, executive power with regards to the publication and so on. It is quite common for organizations to 'use' research to look into issues which are important to the company. Many qualitative researchers in the field have discovered that access to organizations has to be renegotiated at every level. Participatory approval from the highest authority does not open every door, and therefore every employee whom the researcher contacts will have to be asked for cooperation individually (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973).

The ways in which this can be done are many, but researchers will often have to go through a lot of trouble to find participants and to get access to them. Difficulty in finding participants who are willing to cooperate can cause a delay in the timeline of the project. Whether or not a research project is ethically sound is sometimes scrutinized by ethical research committees, whose task it is to weigh the costs of the research against the benefits. This procedure will also take time and must be accounted for. We will deal with this subject in the next chapter on ethics.

Readings I learnt much from

- Lee, R.M. (1993). *Doing research on sensitive topics*. London: Sage.
 Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative researching* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
 Maxwell, J.A. (2004). *Qualitative research design. An interactive approach* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
 Punch, K.F. (2005). *Introduction to social research. Quantitative and qualitative approaches* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

Doing your own qualitative research project

Step 2: Writing the research proposal

1. Writing the research proposal is the formal beginning of your research. It can consume around a quarter of the available research project's time. Remember to work cyclically: if you have gained new insights, add them to the proposal and adjust the parts that are affected by the change. New ideas about the research questions might, for instance, change the data collection plan. It is of paramount importance that the parts of your project stay connected.
2. Make a preliminary outline of the proposal containing:
 - Working title
 - Introduction
 - Literature review
 - Research questions and research purposes
 - Research methods
 - Approach chosen
 - Ethics
 - Data collection methods
 - Gaining access and selection of participants
 - Data analysis
 - Schedule
 - Estimated costs
 - References
 - Appendices (for instance, experts consulted in the pilot study, topic list, dissemination of results)
3. Formulate a preliminary research question and sub-questions on the basis of the pages written about your interest in step 1. Think about the purpose of your research: why is it useful to answer the research questions? Reflect on the question 'Who would find my findings useful?' Try to think of what benefits society will gain from this research project. Write it down in your concept research proposal. After a few attempts, let the subject rest for a while and go on to the next question.
4. Start reading the literature and try to connect your subject to what has previously been written about the subject. Reviews, meta-analyses and meta-syntheses are fast ways to orient yourself to the well-known authors and the theoretical perspectives used. Be especially on the look-out for social theory that is used and study keywords and key questions from previous work. Be confident to assess the work of others and select the publications that appeal to you, whether because of the subject, the approach, the methods used or the findings. Adjust the size and depth of your literature study to the time available. Remember that you can read as you go.
5. Return to the research questions and purposes. Consider whether the literature search gives rise to adjustments of both elements, in particular the use of concepts and prior knowledge to specify them and eventually delineate the

- research any further. Take care that the research questions follow logically from the literature review, and be sure that your argument is clear. Try to use the format that was recommended (Creswell, 1998) if you have difficulty with this part of the proposal.
6. Legitimize the choice for a qualitative methodology and write it down in your preliminary proposal. Most of the time your reasons for choosing qualitative research methods are a combination of two or more reasons, as indicated in Box 2.5. Apply the reasons to your research.
 7. Some ethical issues that will reveal themselves in your research will benefit from advanced thinking. While writing the research plan try to anticipate what problems you could encounter during your research and, if possible, try to take preventive measures.
 8. Think about getting access to your field of study. Do you already have contacts in the field who can help you enter it? Can they be of help in other ways in your project? How large will your sample be and what kind of sampling scheme are you planning to use: purposive sampling based on theory known beforehand, or theoretical selection? Write your arguments in the research proposal.
 9. Reflect on whether the literature has fully worked for you (see 'Literature review' in this Chapter). Have you connected your plan with a scientific area? Can you describe what your research will contribute? Have you become streetwise? Are you still enthusiastic about the endeavour or, better yet, has your enthusiasm grown?
 10. Eventually, use a checklist for assessing a research proposal. It will sensitize you for the criteria that are used and what is expected of a proposal. Have you touched upon all relevant topics up to now, and is your first draft convincing to yourself and others?