

Introduction to **Qualitative Research Methods in Psychology**

Third Edition

Dennis Howitt



INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE METHODS
IN PSYCHOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE METHODS IN PSYCHOLOGY

Third Edition

Dennis Howitt

Loughborough University

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Pearson Education Limited

Edinburgh Gate
Harlow CM20 2JE
United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0)1279 623623
www.pearson.com/uk

First published 2010 (print)

Second edition published 2013 (print and electronic)

Third edition published 2016 (print and electronic)

© Pearson Education Limited 2010 (print)

© Pearson Education Limited 2013 (print and electronic)

© Pearson Education Limited 2016 (print and electronic)

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ISBN: 978-1-292-08299-8 (print)

978-1-292-08303-2 (PDF)

978-1-292-13333-1 (ePub)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for the print edition is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for the print edition is available from the Library of Congress

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
20 19 18 17 16

Cover: Cover image © Andy Ryan/Getty Images

Print edition typeset in 10/12.5 pt Sabon by Lumina Datamatics

Print edition printed in Malaysia

NOTE THAT ANY PAGE CROSS REFERENCES REFER TO THE PRINT EDITION

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PREFACE

Before the 1980s mainstream psychology was a quantitative monolith smothering all other approaches to psychology, or so the story goes. Around this time, qualitative methods began to emerge in force and they have grown in strength. This is not entirely a fiction but it is a creation myth rather than a precise and historically accurate account of the dark days before qualitative psychology. Probably my experience is a little different from that of most psychologists. At the end of my first year as a psychology student I was sent for six months to the factory floor (and eventually the personnel offices) of Morganite Carbon which was then in Battersea, London. The reason? Essentially to experience life as a factory worker and to write a project on my experiences. In other words, *participant observation* or *ethnography* – and the experience of real life. At the end of every couple of terms we were sent to other locations. I spent six months at the prison in Wakefield and another six months at St George's Hospital, London. At Wakefield, I did my first study of sex offenders (possibly the first ever study by a psychologist of sex offenders in the United Kingdom). This was an interest which was to resurface years later with my studies of sexual abuse and paedophiles. At St George's Hospital my colleagues included Fay Fransella, an important figure in the field of George Kelly's *personal construct theory* – an early precursor of social constructionist approaches in qualitative psychology. Indeed, I attended the first conference on personal construct theory while at Brunel University and, I am assured though cannot vouchsafe it, was in the presence of George Kelly himself. Actually we got rather a lot of personal construct theory.

At Brunel, I remember being fascinated by the sessions on psychoanalysis given to us by Professor Elliot Jacques. Not only was Jacques famous at the time as an organisational psychologist bringing psychoanalytic ideas to industry but he was the originator of the concept of the midlife crisis! However, the key influence on any psychology student who studied at Brunel University at that time was Marie Jahoda. Ideas and questions were what counted for Marie Jahoda. She had worked with or knew anyone who was important in the social sciences at large. Sigmund Freud was a friend of her family. She would speak of 'Robert' in lectures – this was Robert Merton, the great theorist of sociology. She had worked with and had been married to Paul Lazarsfeld, the great methodologist of sociology. And she had been involved in some of the most innovatory research in psychology – the Marienthal unemployment study. The 'problem' – meaning the intellectual task – was key to doing research. The ways of collecting data merely followed, they did not lead; analysis was a way of life. I have a recollection of Ernest Dichter, who figures in the discussion of market research, talking to us about apples – what else. I followed Marie Jahoda to The University of Sussex and remember the visit of the methodologist of psychology Donald Campbell. My seat was the one next to him. Exciting times.

I have never worked in an environment with just a single academic discipline – always there have been sociologists, psychologists and a smattering of others. My first academic job was at the Centre for Mass Communications Research at the University of Leicester. Now it is remarkable just how important the

field of mass communications research has been in the development of qualitative research methods. For example, the focus group, participant observation, audience studies, narrative/life histories and so forth either began in that field or were substantially advanced by it. More than anything, it was a field where psychologists and sociologists collectively contributed. Of course, the styles of research varied from the deeply quantitative to the equally deeply qualitative. Different problems called for different methods. I also remember some radical figures visiting, such as Aaron Cicourel, a cognitive sociologist influenced by Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel. Cicourel was a pioneer in the use of video in his research. During a seminar in which he agonised over the issues of coding and categorisation I remember asking Cicourel why he did not simply publish his videotapes. There was a several seconds' delay but eventually the reply came. But it still seems to me an interesting issue – that ethnographic methods are the methods of ordinary people so why bother with the researcher?

Paradoxically, I have always been involved in teaching quantitative methods – I was paid to do so as a postgraduate and from then on. Nevertheless, in academic life you are what you teach for some curious reason. The opposition of qualitative and quantitative is not inevitable; many researchers do both. Aaron Cicourel went along a similar route:

I am NOT opposed to quantification or formalization or modeling, but do not want to pursue quantitative methods that are not commensurate with the research phenomena addressed. (Cicourel interviewed by Andreas Witzel and Günter Mey, 2004, p. 1)

He spent a lot of time as a postgraduate student learning mathematics and quantitative methods:

. . . if I criticized such methods, I would have to show that my concern about their use was not based on an inability to know and use them, but was due to a genuine interest in finding methods that were congruent or in correspondence with the phenomena we call social interaction and the ethnographic conditions associated with routine language use in informal and formal everyday life settings. (Witzel and Mey, 2004, p. 1)

There is another reason which Cicourel overlooks. Quantitative methods can have a compelling effect on government and general social policy. Being able to speak and write on equal terms with quantitative researchers is important in the type of policy areas upon which my research was based.

By concentrating on the problem, rather than the method, a researcher makes choices which are more to do with getting the best possible answer to the question than getting a particular sort of answer to the question. For that reason, qualitative approaches are just part of my research. However, where the question demands contextualised, detailed data then the method became little more than me, my participants and my recording machine. Some of my favourites among my own research involved just these.

Qualitative methods in psychology are becoming diverse. Nevertheless, there is not quite the spread of different styles of research or *epistemologies* for research that one finds in other disciplines. Ethnographic methods, for example, have not been common in the history of psychology – a situation which persists to date. But discourse analytic approaches, in contrast, have become relatively common. This is not to encourage the adoption of either of these methods (or any other for that matter) unless they help address one's research

question. This may not please all qualitative researchers but any *hegemony* in terms of method in psychology to my mind has to be a retrograde step. So this book takes a broad-brush approach to qualitative methods in psychology. First of all, it invites readers to understand better how to gather qualitative data. These are seriously difficult ways of collecting data if properly considered and there is little excuse ever for sloppy and inappropriate data collection methods. They are simply counterproductive. It is all too easy to take the view that an in-depth interview or a focus group is an easy approach to data collection simply because they might appear to involve little other than conversational skills. But one has only to look at some of the transcripts of such data published in journal articles to realise that the researcher has not put on a skilled performance. It needs time, practice, discussion and training to do qualitative data collection well. Secondly, I have covered some very different forms of qualitative data analysis methods in this book. These are not all mutually compatible approaches in every respect. Their roots lie in very different spheres. *Grounded theory* derives from the sociology of the 1960s as does *conversation analysis*. *Discourse analysis* not only has its roots in the ideas of the French philosopher Michel Foucault but also in the sociology of science of the 1970s. *Interpretative phenomenological analysis* is dependent on phenomenology with its roots in philosophy and psychology. *Narrative analysis* has a multitude of roots but primarily in the *narrative psychology* of the 1990s. And *thematic analysis*? Well – it all depends what you mean by thematic analysis as we shall see.

There is an important issue to raise. Perhaps it is best raised by quoting from Kenneth J. Gergen, one of the key original figures in the move towards qualitative methods in psychology. In the following he describes his early experience as a psychological researcher:

My early training was in scientific psychology, that is, a psychology based on the promise that through the application of empirical methods, sound measures, and statistical analysis we would begin to approach the truth of mental functioning . . . I learned my lessons well, how to produce from the messy confines of laboratory life the kinds of clear and compelling ‘facts’ acceptable to the professional journals. A few tricks of the trade: pre-test the experimental manipulations so to ensure that the desired effects are obtained; use multiple measures so to ensure that at least one will demonstrate the effects; if the first statistical test doesn’t yield a reliable difference, try others that will; if there are subjects who dramatically contradict the desired effect, even the smallest effect can reach significance; be sure to cite early research to express historical depth; cite recent research to demonstrate ‘up-to-date’ knowledge; do not cite Freud, Jung or any other ‘pre-scientific’ psychologist; cite the research of scientists who are supported by the findings as they are likely to be asked for evaluations by the journal. Nor was it simply that mastering the craft of research management allowed me to ‘generate facts’ in the scientific journals; success also meant research grants, reputation, and higher status jobs. (Gergen, 1999, p. 58)

Quite what Gergen hoped to achieve by this ‘confession’ is difficult to fathom. As a joking pastiche of mainstream psychology it fails to amuse. In writing this book, I hope to share some of the very positive things that qualitative psychologists can achieve and important ideas which can inform the research of all psychologists irrespective of their point of balance on the qualitative – quantitative dimension. Making research better, then, is an important objective

of this book – deriding the work of researchers struggling, as we all do, to understand the world they live in is not on my agenda. Research is about knowing in the best way possible – which is not an issue of the general superiority of one method over others.

This book has a modular structure. It is not designed to be read cover to cover but, instead, it can be used as a resource and read in any order as need demands. To this end, the following pedagogic features should be noted:

- There is a glossary covering both the key terms in qualitative analysis in this book and the field of qualitative research in general.
- Most of the chapters have a common structure wherever possible. So the chapters on data collection methods have a common structure and the data analysis chapters have a common structure.
- Material is carefully organised in sections permitting unwanted sections to be ignored, perhaps to be read some time later.
- Each chapter includes a variety of boxes in which key concepts are discussed, examples of relevant studies described, and special topics introduced.
- Each chapter begins with a summary of the major points in the chapter.
- Each chapter ends with recommended resources for further study including books, journal articles and web pages as appropriate.

This third edition provides a welcome opportunity to provide separate chapters for each of the main types of discourse analysis – social constructionist and Foucauldian discourse analysis. Furthermore, examples showing how to write up qualitative research have been provided in the final chapter. These are annotated with comments concerning each of the reports. You should be able to find more problems and issues than have been identified in the text and, of course, your ideas may well be better than mine.

Dennis Howitt

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Author's acknowledgements

A lot of people have contributed their talents and skills to turning my manuscript into this highly polished product. My debt to them is enormous and I would like to mention at least some of them:

Lina, Aboujieb (Editor): Lina's stay at Pearson was short but working with her on projects was a pleasure. She contributed a fresh perspective on things.
Kevin Ancient (Design Manager): Kevin did the text design which makes the book so attractively structured.

Kelly Miller (Senior Designer) did the excellent cover design.

Carole Drummond (Senior Project Editor): Carole did amazing work overseeing the progress of the book from manuscript to book.

Jen Hinchcliffe (Proof reader): Jen is a formidable proof reader but helpful in so many ways.

Phyllis Van Reenen (Indexer): A book without an index is hard to use. Phyllis has skilfully produced first class indexes.

Ros Woodward (Copy editor): It is always a joy to work on a manuscript with Ros. She is so good at spotting problems and keeping me on my toes.

The advice of academic colleagues is always welcome. Their advice greatly improved the contents of the book. So I am extremely grateful to the following for their constructive and supportive comments:

Dr Darren Ellis, University of East London

Dr Naomi Ellis, Staffordshire University

Dr Alexandra Lamont, Keele University

Dr Jane Montague, University of Derby

Dr Dennis Nigbur, Canterbury Christ Church University

Finally, the most special of thanks in appreciation of their very special support at a difficult time for me to Carole Drummond, Dr Jane Montague and Janey Webb (Publisher).

Dennis Howitt

Publisher's acknowledgements

We are grateful to the following for permission to reproduce copyright material:

Text

Sage Journals for extract (on page 145) from 'Mothers, single women and sluts: gender, morality and membership', *Feminism and Psychology*, 13(3), 326 (Stokoe, E.H., 2003).

Figure

Routledge/Taylor & Francis (for Figure 8.3) Strandmark and Hallberg's model of the process of rejection and expulsion from the workplace from 'Being rejected and expelled from the workplace: experiences of bullying in the public service sector', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 4(1-2), 1-14 (Strandmark, M. and Hallberg, L.R-M., 2007).

PART 1

Background to qualitative methods in psychology

Qualitative methods have gained ground in psychology in recent years. It is common to suggest that, for the most part, the growth of qualitative psychology began in the 1980s at the earliest. This means that qualitative methods fared poorly in the early years of psychology. Qualitative methods had found popularity in the field of marketing psychology somewhat earlier (Bailey, 2014). Nevertheless, for social psychology, health psychology, psychotherapy and counselling psychology, among others, the 1980s marked the start of the period of growth. At this time, theoretically based and philosophical approaches to qualitative psychology began to be developed in some force. They were also practicable and applicable. Despite this, there is a much longer qualitative tradition which needs to be acknowledged. Without doubt, though, mainstream psychology overall has been a predominantly quantitative discipline for much of its history and is likely to remain so into the foreseeable future. Mainstream psychology justifies the description 'quantitative' in just about every respect. Throughout the history of psychology, numbers and counting have been paramount. Despite this, from time to time, qualitative approaches have made a significant impact on psychology. Indeed, qualitative methods hark back to the dawn of modern psychology in the late nineteenth century. Qualitative research was generally somewhat fragmentary and scarcely amounted to a qualitative tradition in psychology.

Surprisingly, qualitative methods in psychology have involved such major figures as Frederic Bartlett, Alfred Binet, John Dollard, Leon Festinger, Anna Freud, Sigmund Freud, Carol Gilligan, Karen Horney, William James, Carl Jung, Laurence Kohlberg, Kurt Lewin, Abraham Maslow, Jean Piaget, David Rosenhan, Stanley Schacter, Wilhelm Stern, E.B. Titchener, Lev Vygotsky, John Watson, Max Wertheimer and Philip Zimbardo according to Wertz (2014). And there are more. Some are primarily regarded as quantitative researchers but nevertheless included qualitative approaches in their research output. A notable feature of the list is the number of psychologists of European origin given America's traditional dominance in psychology. There are good reasons for this as we shall see. Furthermore, again according to Wertz, it is notable that two psychologists have been awarded Nobel prizes (in Economics) for their work. These are Herbert Simon and Daniel Kahneman. Their prize-winning research was based on verbal descriptions and qualitative analyses of everyday problem solving. From this they developed mathematical models.

So there is nothing incompatible between the adoption of qualitative methods in psychology and research success in psychology.

The usual explanation of the dominance of quantitative methods in psychology is that the discipline sought to emulate the achievements of the natural sciences – particularly physics. What is perhaps a little more difficult to explain is why psychology resisted the move to qualitative research so steadfastly despite changes in closely related disciplines such as sociology and anthropology. Just why psychology has been perversely antagonistic to qualitative methods in its past needs explanation. The two chapters which constitute Part 1 of this book have the following major objectives:

- To provide a broad understanding of how qualitative psychology differs from quantitative psychology.
- To provide a review of the history of psychology which explains just why qualitative methods emerged so slowly in most of psychology compared to related disciplines.
- To provide a picture of the development of qualitative psychology from within the discipline, under the influence of related disciplines such as sociology and, as a consequence, of some disillusionment with the methods of mainstream psychology.

The philosophical (epistemological) foundations of qualitative psychology are very different from those of quantitative psychology. Psychology has been so resolutely quantitative that many psychologists may experience something of a culture shock when first exposed to qualitative methods. In that sense qualitative and quantitative research can be seen as two different cultures. Some newcomers may well find their appetites whetted for new research challenges. Qualitative psychology rejects, questions and even turns on its head much which is held sacrosanct by mainstream psychologists.

To date, histories of qualitative research in psychology tend to be fragmentary and, at best, incomplete. They are partial histories – partial in both meanings of the word. Histories of psychology usually take a broad sweep approach so that undervalued research is lost to future scholars. Re-examining the vast backlog of psychological research and theory seeking qualitative work is a major undertaking. Different histories have different starting and end points. For American historians of psychology the starting point is often the work of William James – a likely starting point of virtually any American history of modern psychology (Howitt, 1991). For some qualitative psychologists the story barely pre-dates the 1980s. Each of these is discussed in more detail later. Histories, like most accounts, tend to be self-serving in some way. Furthermore, it has to be remembered that even within the field of qualitative psychology different interest groups vie for dominance. Qualitative methods are not necessarily any more compatible with each other than they are with mainstream psychology.

Just what are the characteristics of mainstream psychology? Qualitative psychologists often allude to the idea that mainstream psychology smothered qualitative psychology due to its foundations in *positivism*. Positivism is essentially a description of the assumptions and characteristics of the natural sciences such as physics and chemistry. For example, these sciences are characterised by the search for universal laws, quantification and empirical investigation. It is often argued by qualitative researchers that psychology rushed to adopt the model of science offered by physics to the detriment of psychology. Through numerous repetitions this sort of claim has become accepted as the truth. However, it is questionable, as we shall see, whether qualitative approaches to psychology are truly anathema to positivism. So use of the term positivism should be somewhat guarded. What does seem clear though is that the majority of psychologists for most of the history of modern psychology adopted research practices based on quantification.

There are good reasons why psychologists emulated an idiosyncratic version of the natural science approach. It hardly has to be said that science had achieved remarkable success in the nineteenth century, especially physics. Similar successes would ensure the future of the fledgling discipline of psychology. So psychology stole from the natural sciences things like experimentation, universalism, measurement and *reductionist* thinking and clung to them even when the natural sciences did not. What psychology failed to take on board were the more observational methods characteristic of other scientific disciplines such as biology and astronomy. Some closely related disciplines

such as sociology were in the long term less handicapped by the strictures of positivism, although not entirely so. Sociology, however, turned to qualitative methods rather sooner. Nevertheless, only in the 1950s and 1960s did qualitative methods develop sufficiently in sociology to effectively challenge the supremacy of quantitative methods. So the positivistic orientation that dominated psychology cannot alone account for the late emergence of qualitative methods in that discipline. It took psychology at least three decades to catch up with the qualitative upsurge in sociology from which it adopted several qualitative approaches from the 1980s onwards. In other words, psychology was in the grip of positivism for longer than related disciplines. The explanation is probably simple – positivistic psychology was able to service many of the areas which the State was responsible for as well as commercial interests. We only have to consider clinical psychology, educational psychology, forensic psychology, prison psychology, marketing psychology and industrial psychology to see this. Positivism helped psychology to expand in universities and elsewhere in a way that simply did not happen for closely related disciplines (with the possible exception of criminology within sociology).

So a form of positivism did dominate for a long time in the history of modern psychology but not entirely to the exclusion of everything else. The idea of qualitative psychology being repressed by but eventually overcoming the dragon of positivism is a heroic view of the history of qualitative psychology but not entirely correct. One only has to consider how familiar the work of psychologists such as Piaget, Kohlberg and Maslow has been to generations of psychologists to realise that the story is somewhat more complex. Attributing the late emergence of qualitative psychology to the stifling influence of positivism amounts to a 'creation myth' of qualitative psychology rather than a totally convincing explanation. But numbers and measurement have dominated and still do dominate psychology for most of its modern history. Critics have frequently pointed to the failings of mainstream psychology but have never effectively delivered a knockout blow. Some psychologists freed themselves from the straitjacket of mainstream psychology often with great effect. They never, however, managed to effect a major and permanent change. There would be changes in the hot topics of psychology and some measuring instruments replaced others as dish of the day but, in the end, if one got the measurements and numbers right then science and psychology was being done. But we have now reached a stage where it is freely questioned whether mainstream psychology's way of doing things is the only way or the right way. This is important as it ensures that more attention is being paid to the philosophical/epistemological basis of the parent discipline. Method rather than detailed procedures have to be justified in qualitative research in a way that they rarely, if ever, were in quantitative psychology. Quantitative researchers had no such need for self-justification. The positivist philosophy underlying their work is built into the discipline, adopted usually unquestioningly, and to all intents and purposes is largely still taught as if it were the natural and unchallengeable way of doing psychology. Few outside qualitative psychology question the importance of reliability and validity checks for example. All of these things and more are questioned when it comes to qualitative psychology. Any textbook on qualitative methods has to go into detail about the epistemological foundations of the method employed. Still, after qualitative methods have become increasingly accepted in journals, qualitative journal articles frequently enter some form of philosophical discussion about the methods employed.

One problem for newcomers to qualitative research is that qualitative research methods vary enormously among themselves. Most have complex epistemological foundations whereas some, especially thematic analysis, lack any substantial epistemological roots. Therefore, although qualitative research is clearly different from quantitative research, so too are many of the qualitative methods different from or even alien to each other. A practical implication of this is that qualitative researchers need to understand these matters to carry out their work.

Merely dismissing mainstream quantitative psychology because of its weaknesses is no way forward since, like it or not, quantitative research has provided an effective and rewarding model for doing at least some kinds of psychology. It is a very bad way of answering some sorts of research questions and makes other research questions just about impossible to address. Nevertheless, mainstream psychology has achieved an influential position in the

institutions of the State because it is seen as doing some things right. This proven track record is undeniable in fields such as mental health, medicine, education, work, consumer behaviour, sport, training and so forth even if one wishes to challenge the nature of these achievements. But psychology could be better and qualitative psychologists have identified many of its weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Histories of psychology are written with hindsight and read with hindsight. It is impossible – albeit desirable – to understand historical events as they were experienced. So the story of qualitative psychology that can be written at this time suffers from our incomplete perspective on what psychology was like in the past – as a discipline and institution as well as a corpus of knowledge. Neither are we sure where qualitative research is heading so the end points of our histories is unclear.

We should, then, not simply overlook non-intellectual reasons why qualitative psychology emerged any more than we should overlook them in terms of the mainstream discipline. For example, the numbers of psychology students graduating today are massive compared with the early days of the discipline or even 30 years ago. Furthermore, psychological research was once almost entirely based in university departments. Over the decades, research by practitioners in non-university settings has greatly increased as the practical fields of psychology have increasingly adopted a knowledge-based approach. Academic research would need to be more socially contextualised and probing if it were to be of immediate use to practitioners. It may well have been easy to patrol psychology to promote quantitative approaches when modern psychology was in its infancy. With the expansion in the numbers of psychologists which increased enormously following the Second World War, this sort of control inevitably, if gradually, weakened. The permeation of qualitative methods into health psychology is perhaps an example of these processes at work. Health psychology simply needed the sorts of answers to research questions which qualitative methods provide. Histories of qualitative psychology have not yet begun to seriously address the broader context of psychological research as a stimulus to qualitative research in psychology. Increases in the number of psychological personnel, especially given the growth in practitioner research, may have allowed the changes which fuelled the expansion of qualitative methods in psychology. Other fields of psychology, besides qualitative methods, began to flourish in the 1980s and 1990s – these include largely non-qualitative sub-fields of psychology such as forensic psychology. Forensic psychology had lain largely dormant from the early 1900s only to begin to prosper in the 1980s – exactly the same time that some researchers see qualitative methods emerging with some force in psychology. The point is, of course, that as psychology approached a critical mass and developed an increasingly diverse organisational structure, it gained greater potential to embrace a wider variety of interests. Indeed, some might say that the critical mass encouraged these changes.

Chapter 1 concentrates on two things:

- Describing the essential characteristics of qualitative methods in psychology.
- Discussing the origins of quantification in psychology, including statistical thinking.

The chapter demonstrates something of the subtlety of the philosophical underpinnings of the quantitative–qualitative debate.

Chapter 2 looks at the varied contributions of an essentially qualitative nature that psychologists have made throughout the discipline's history. At the same time, the chapter tries to explain the roots of these approaches in psychology and related disciplines. The following seem clear:

- Qualitative approaches have been part of psychology throughout its modern history though numerically in a minor way.
- Many of the early examples of qualitative research in psychology have become 'classics' but it is hard to find a clear legacy of many of them in the history of modern psychology.
- Most of the early examples of qualitative research in psychology involve distinctly qualitative data collection methods although distinct and frequently used methods of qualitative data analysis did not really emerge until the 1950s and 1960s in related disciplines and, probably, not until the 1980s in psychology.
- Qualitative psychology has developed a basis in the institutions of psychology (learned societies, conferences, specialised journals, etc.) which largely eluded it in its early history.

CHAPTER 1

What is qualitative research in psychology and was it really hidden?

Overview

- The evidence is that qualitative research in psychology has emerged as an important but minority focus in psychology during the last 30 or 40 years. This progress has not been spread evenly geographically or in terms of the sub-fields of psychology. Although there is a long history of qualitative methods in psychology, it is mainly since the 1980s that qualitative methods are generally acknowledged to have made significant inroads. However, the story is not the same in every sub-field of psychology.
- Among the distinguishing features of most qualitative research is the preference for data rich in description, the belief that reality is constructed socially, and that research is about interpretation and not about hypothesis testing, for example.
- Psychology has historically constructed itself as a science but, then, largely identified the characteristics of science in terms of numbers and quantification which, arguably, are not essential features of science.
- Positivism (the way physical science is/was seen to be done) has frequently been blamed for the distorted nature of psychology's conception of science. This, however, tends to overlook that both Comte's positivism and logical positivism were more conducive to qualitative methods than mainstream practitioners of psychology ever permitted.
- The dominant psychologies since the 'birth' of psychology in the 1870s have been introspectionism, behaviourism and cognitivism.

- The 'quantitative imperative' in psychology has ancient roots in psychology and first emerges in the work of Pythagoras. The imperative involves the belief that science is about quantification. Early psychologists, with their eyes cast firmly in the direction of physics as the best model to follow, imbued modern psychology with the spirit of quantification from the start.
- Statistical methods, although part of the ethos of quantification, were largely fairly late introductions into psychology. That is, psychology was dominated by quantification long before statistical analysis became central to much research.
- Quantification in psychology, including statistical methods, provided part of a highly successful 'shop front' for psychology which served it particularly well in the market for research monies that developed in the United States especially in the second half of the twentieth century.

What is qualitative research?

According to Smith (2008), 'We are witnessing an explosion of interest in qualitative psychology. This is a significant shift in a discipline which has hitherto emphasized the importance of quantitative psychology' (p. 1). More extravagantly it has been written: 'qualitative inquiry has now been seated at the table of the discipline, representing perhaps a paradigm shift – or at least a pendular swing – within psychology' (Josselson, 2014, p. 1). Augoustinos and Tileaga (2012) are in no doubt that the introduction of the qualitative method of discourse analysis into social psychology in the 1980s amounted to a paradigm shift, though they do not explain precisely what they mean by this. A discipline may incorporate new paradigms without older paradigms being toppled. The history of qualitative research in psychology is somewhat enigmatic but there is a history nonetheless. Even since the first edition of this book, it has become clear that various forms of qualitative psychology have gained rather more than a toe-hold in the discipline of psychology. The situation varies geographically but education and training in qualitative methods is at last seemingly common among psychology programmes in some parts. In the UK, for example, few psychology students fail to achieve such training (Parker, 2014) and doubtless fewer will in future. It is no longer possible to ignore qualitative methods in psychology. This does not signal the imminent or eventual demise of mainstream psychology. Mainstream psychology has achieved a great deal of worth despite its flaws. Qualitative research is not the best answer in every case to every sort of research question any more than quantitative research is. Of course, psychology can benefit by incorporating new ways of doing research but mainstream psychology has prospered and no doubt will continue to prosper into the foreseeable future. Psychological research in general has greatly expanded over time and this is likely to continue with the expansion of the knowledge-based society. Researchers need to be increasingly sophisticated as new demands are placed on the discipline for research to guide practice and to inform change. Qualitative methods are decidedly part of the future of psychology and they may become increasingly integrated with other forms of methodology. The customers for psychological research have become increasingly sophisticated about research and more inclined to demand innovation in the methodologies employed. Developments may seem slower in some countries than others but the impression is that it is only a matter of time before they will catch up. We may expect that the research careers of many psychologists in the future will show movement to and from qualitative and quantitative research as well as mixed research. Some may doggedly remain quantitative researchers and others, equally, tie themselves solely to qualitative approaches.

Definitions are never easy in psychology. Even granted this, identifying precisely what constitutes qualitative research in psychology is difficult. One reason for this is the heterogeneous nature of qualitative methods. They are not a single method, they do not all share the same objectives, they have different epistemological foundations, they differ in terms of what is considered important, and they have different roots in psychology and other social sciences. These are complex issues but they need to be understood. Of course, for some students, at least, things can be put simply – qualitative research equates to freedom from the tyranny of numbers and statistics which they feel mars their psychology studies. Unfortunately, qualitative research defined as the absence of numbers does not get us very far, though it may be what attracts some to qualitative research. Qualitative research is impossible to define by a single characteristic like this. Qualitative methods tend to draw from a similar set of assumptions and characteristics, although the same ones are not always equally important to every qualitative method. Sometimes a method may reject key features of other qualitative methods. That is, there is a pool of qualitative characteristics which do not apply always to every qualitative method but there is a substantial degree of overlap across methods. There are studies which may lack numbers but in all other respects are no different from the typical positivistic mainstream psychology study. For example, if the study assumes that its findings are universally applicable or presupposes the analytic categories to be employed then this study is quantitative in nature rather than qualitative – no matter how much the absence of numbers may please students, the fundamental assumptions of qualitative methodology have been violated. So the idea of qualitative research being entirely a statistics-free zone does not effectively distinguish qualitative from quantitative research. Similarly, there are clearly qualitative studies which include at least some numbers and counting or even statistics.

No one characteristic invariably, unassailably and essentially distinguishes qualitative from quantitative methods. Nevertheless, there is a range of things which typify qualitative methods. By no means are all of them characteristic of every type of qualitative research method. The following are the five features which Denzin and Lincoln (2000) list as major defining characteristics of qualitative research:

1. ***Concern with the richness of description*** Qualitative researchers value data which is rich in its descriptive attributes. So they tend to favour data collection methods which obtain detailed, descriptive data such as that produced by using in-depth interviewing methods, focus groups and the taking of detailed field notes. This sort of data is often referred to as thick description. In contrast, perhaps a little stereotypically, quantitative researchers obtain much more restricted and structured information from their research participants. This is inevitably the case when simple rating scales or multiple choice questionnaire methods are used. Concern with the richness of description may be a characteristic of a qualitative method such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (see Chapter 12) but it is difficult to apply as a characteristic of conversation analysis (see Chapter 10). Nevertheless, it is clear that the typical mainstream psychological study fails to collect rich data for analysis preferring to employ rather cryptic questionnaires instead.
2. ***Capturing the individual's perspective*** Qualitative methods emphasise the perspective of the individual and their individuality. The use of rich data-gathering methods such as the in-depth interview and focus groups encourages this emphasis on the individual's perspective. Quantitative researchers, to the extent that they deal with individuals, will tend to focus on comparisons of people on some sort of abstract dimension such as a personality dimension. Again this is not typically a feature of conversation analysis as a qualitative method.

3. *The rejection of positivism and the use of postmodern perspectives* Qualitative researchers tend to reject *positivist* approaches (i.e. those based on a conventional view of what science is – or *scientism*) though qualitative and quantitative researchers both rely on gathering empirical evidence which is an important feature of positivism. Quantitative researchers tend to retain the view that reality can be known despite the problems involved in knowing it. For example, the quantitative researcher mostly uses language data as if such data directly represent reality (i.e. the data refer to some sort of reality) whereas most modern qualitative researchers take the view that language may be a window onto reality but cannot represent reality. The post-positivist view argues that, irrespective of whether or not there is truly a real world, a researcher's knowledge of that reality can only be approximate and that there are multiple versions of reality. In qualitative research, relatively few researchers believe that the purpose of research is the creation of generalisable knowledge. This is a major objective of quantitative research, of course, and quantitative researchers are inclined to make generalisations on the basis of limited data – sometimes as if universally applicable principles have been identified. Positivism is discussed in detail in Box 1.1 and pages 8–9 of this chapter.
4. *Adherence to the postmodern sensibility* The *postmodern* sensibility, for example, reveals itself in the way that qualitative researchers are much more likely to use methods which get them close to the real-life experiences of people (in-depth interviews are an instance of this). Quantitative researchers are often content with a degree of artificiality such as that arising from the use of laboratory studies. Verisimilitude seems much more important to qualitative researchers as a whole and less so to many quantitative researchers in psychology. Qualitative researchers are often portrayed as having a caring ethic in their research and they may undertake 'political' action

Box 1.1

KEY CONCEPT

Auguste Comte's positivism

Perhaps more important than the notion of science in critiques of mainstream psychology are the numerous references to 'positivism'. Indeed, the terms positivism and positivist appear to be pejorative terms when used by qualitative researchers. Better to use a four-letter word than either of these. Given that positivism is not easily defined and that it is used as an 'emotive term' (Silverman, 1997, p. 12), its popularity as an abusive epithet may reveal a lack of understanding rather than an insightful analysis. Nevertheless, the term positivism refers to a major epistemological position in psychology and other related disciplines. Epistemology means the study of knowledge and is concerned with (a) how we can go about knowing things and (b) the validation of

knowledge (the value of what we know). Positivism is a philosophy of science which had its historical beginnings in the Enlightenment. This is the important historical period which dominated the eighteenth century in European thinking. The idea of positivism was systematised in the work of Auguste Comte (1798–1857) in France – he is also credited with coining the term *sociologie* or sociology (it was previously social physics!).

In his writings, Comte proposed a social progression which he referred to as the *law of three phases* to describe the process of social evolution. The phases are the theological, the metaphysical and the scientific (Figure 1.1). Importantly, the scientific phase was also named by Comte the positive phase – hence the close

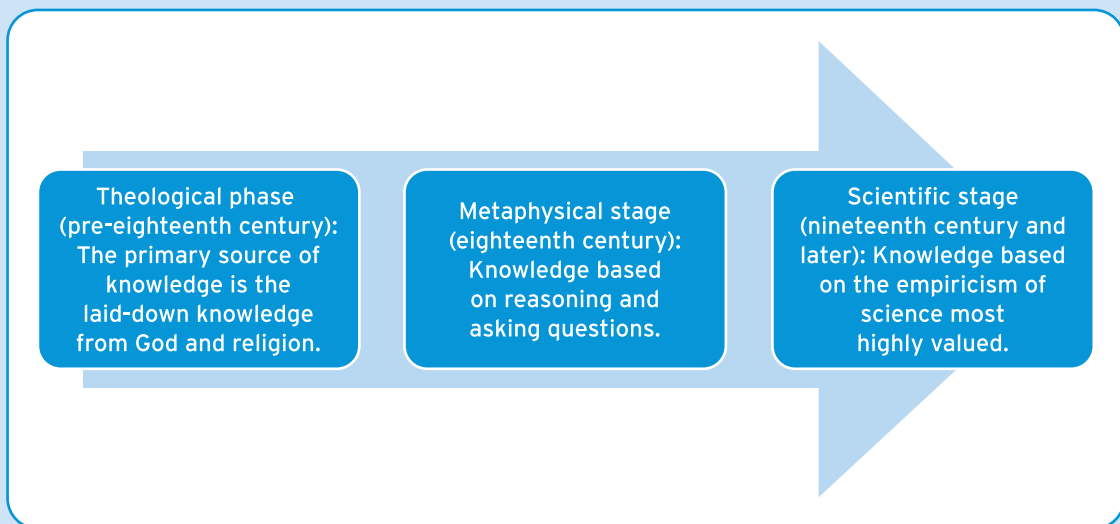


FIGURE 1.1 Comte's stages of social evolution

link to this day between the terms science and positivism. The theological phase is the earliest and in which, essentially, knowledge about society was achieved through reference to God and religion. Religion is a major factor in the continuity of people's beliefs so that people's beliefs in the theological phase are the ones that their ancestors previously held. The metaphysical phase is also known as the stage of investigation as it involved reasoning and the asking of questions rather than the reference to established theological given-knowledge. This phase is based on the idea that there are human rights beyond ones which could be countermanded by any human. The scientific phase involved ways of bringing change to society which are not based on theological arguments or human rights. Science was capable of answering the questions which society needed answers to. Historically, it is easy to see theism (belief in God as a source of knowledge in this context) as characterising Western societies such as France for most of their existence and the metaphysical stage as reflecting the period of the Enlightenment. Since then, society has been in the scientific period.

In Auguste Comte's writings, observable and observed facts have an important role in the accumulation of valid knowledge. So it is easy to see how 'positivistic' describes the mainstream of psychological research. Nevertheless, this orientation is also shared by qualitative researchers for the most part. So observable and observed 'facts' do not differentiate qualitative from quantitative research. Despite everything, Comte did not believe that quantification, if by quantification we mean mathematical analysis, was a realistic possibility beyond the physical sciences. We should be 'abstaining from introducing

considerations of quantities, and mathematical laws, which is beyond our power to apply' (Comte, 1975, p. 112). This quite clearly indicates that Comte's positivism was not antagonistic to qualitative research. Quite the reverse – he was against what qualitative researchers also rail against. Beyond the physical sciences such as physics and chemistry, quantification simply had no place and its relevance not assumed. In other words, mainstream psychology adopted a version of science which was not what Comte would have approved for a non-physical science discipline.

The problem with positivism is that it is best seen as a description or model of Victorian physics and chemistry rather than a definition of what should be meant by science. The characteristics which define science rather than the physical sciences alone may then be somewhat different. Josselson (2014), admittedly an advocate of qualitative methods in psychology, offers the following comment:

science, in its broadest definition and practice, is a sense-making activity. In accord with contemporary philosophy of science, scientific activity – that is, research – is a means of organizing, sifting, and making sense in relation to a phenomenon of interest. In qualitative psychology, our science is a collective effort to understand people in the contexts in which they live and function. Our hope is that the results of our shared work will promote people's well-being. (p. 1)

Such an approach brings together both quantitative and qualitative psychology under the umbrella of scientific psychology.