

# Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods in Psychology

Putting theory into practice

Dennis Howitt

Fourth  
Edition

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INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS IN PSYCHOLOGY:  
PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE



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# INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS IN PSYCHOLOGY

## *PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE*

Fourth Edition

Dennis Howitt

Loughborough University



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# PREFACE

Before the 1980s, mainstream psychology was a quantitative monolith smothering all other approaches to psychology. Around this time, qualitative analytic methods emerged which grew in strength. This is not entirely a fiction, but it is a creation myth and not a precise historically accurate account of the dark days before qualitative psychology emerged. My experience is probably 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). 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 innovative 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 – there have always 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 research. During a seminar in which he agonised over the issues of coding and categorisation I recall 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.

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 fourth edition adopted the jazz musician's axiom – 'less is more'. That is, fewer musical notes lead to better music. So I have shortened nearly every chapter quite substantially while at the same time trying to improve clarity. Very little has been omitted – it has just been explained more succinctly. Hopefully this will result in a quicker and easier read for those using the book.

Dennis Howitt

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# PART 1

## Background to qualitative methods in psychology

It is a common suggestion that prior to the 1980s, qualitative methods were virtually excluded from mainstream psychology. This is not entirely true since, for example, the field of marketing psychology turned to qualitative approaches somewhat earlier (Bailey, 2014). Nevertheless, for social psychology, health psychology, psychotherapy and counselling psychology, among others, the growth in the acceptance of qualitative methods can be dated back to that time. In the 1980s the sea change was that theoretically and philosophically based approaches gathered force involving a significant research base. Equally significant was that the new qualitative approaches were also practical with many applications. Despite this, a longer tradition of qualitative research in psychology warrants acknowledgement. However, no one would seriously claim any other than that mainstream psychology has been predominantly quantitative throughout most of its modern history and is likely to remain so for now. Mainstream psychology justifies the appellation 'quantitative' in just about every way. Numbers, measuring and counting have been paramount. At the same time, on occasion qualitative approaches significantly impacted mainstream psychology in the past. Indeed, qualitative methods hark back to the dawn of modern psychology in the late nineteenth century. But qualitative research in the past was generally fragmentary and did not amount to a qualitative tradition within the mainstream discipline.

Surprisingly, some big hitters in the history of psychology have emphasised qualitative thinking over quantitative. These include 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 (Wertz, 2014). And there are more. Some are primarily regarded as quantitative researchers but nevertheless included qualitative perspectives within their research output. With good reason, psychologists of European origin are disproportionate in this list despite American psychologists' traditional dominance in mainstream psychology. Interestingly, Wertz (2014) points out that two psychologists, Herbert Simon and Daniel Kahneman, have been awarded Nobel prizes (in economics). Their work involved verbal descriptions and qualitative analyses of everyday problem solving on



the basis of which they developed formal mathematical models. In brief, adopting qualitative methods has not altogether barred researchers from research success in psychology.

The desire of psychologists to emulate the achievements of natural science (particularly physics) is the commonplace explanation of the dominance of quantitative approaches in the field. More difficult to explain is why psychology should have been so steadfast in its allegiance to quantitative methods when closely related disciplines such as sociology and anthropology embraced qualitative approaches way before any turn towards qualitative methods within psychology. The almost perverse antagonism of the psychological mainstream to qualitative methods in the past requires explanation. The two chapters which constitute Part 1 of this book have the following major objectives:

- To provide a broad understanding of how qualitative and quantitative psychology differ.
- To understand the slow emergence of qualitative methods within psychology.
- To describe the eventual emergence of qualitative psychology within mainstream psychology due to the influence of related disciplines such as sociology and disillusionment with the methods of mainstream psychology.

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

Histories of qualitative psychological research are mostly incomplete and fragmentary and qualitative research is largely ignored by histories of mainstream psychology. They are partial in both meanings of the word. Re-examining the vast backlog of psychological research and theory seeking qualitative work is a near impossibility. Different histories have different starting and end points. 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. Generally laboratory work dominates histories of psychology and for American historians of psychology the starting point of modern psychology is often the work of William James (Howitt, 1991). In contrast, for some qualitative psychologists the story of qualitative psychology barely pre-dates the 1980s.

Just what are the characteristics of mainstream psychology which resulted in the smothering of qualitative psychology? Usually the foundation of mainstream psychology in *positivism* is held responsible. Positivism essentially describes the assumptions and characteristics of the natural sciences such as physics and chemistry. These are characterised by the search for universal laws, quantification and empirical investigation. Many have argued that psychology rushed to emulate the model of science offered by physics to the detriment of psychology. Numerous repetitions of this claim have led to its widespread acceptance. However, it is questionable, as we shall see, whether qualitative methods are invariably incompatible with positivism. 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.

Psychologists adopted a somewhat idiosyncratic version of the natural science approach with good reason. Science, especially physics, had achieved remarkable success in the nineteenth century which psychology attempted to copy by using much the same methods. So psychology took from the natural sciences things like experimentation, universalism, measurement and *reductionist* thinking and clung to them even when the natural sciences did not. Psychology, however, eschewed the more observational methods characteristic of other scientific disciplines such as biology and astronomy. Disciplines such as sociology which are closely related to psychology were, in the end, less bound by the strictures of positivism though not entirely so. Sociology, however, turned to qualitative methods far sooner than psychology but even then not until the 1950s and 1960s was the supremacy of quantitative methods in sociology effectively challenged. Positivism alone, then, is insufficient to explain the late emergence of qualitative methods in psychology. In that respect, psychology took at least three decades to catch up with the qualitative



upsurge in sociology. When it did, psychology adopted several of the most significant qualitative methods from sociology such as grounded theory, conversation analysis, and discourse analysis. The explanation for the delay is probably simple – positivistic psychology effectively serviced many problems faced by governments as well as commercial interests. We can see this in fields such as clinical psychology, educational psychology, forensic psychology, prison psychology, marketing psychology and industrial psychology. Positivism helped psychology to expand in universities and elsewhere to an extent which did not happen for closely related disciplines with the possible exception of criminology.

So positivism dominated much of the history of modern psychology but not entirely to the exclusion of everything else. The heroic struggle of qualitative psychology to emerge out of a battle with positivism is not entirely correct. The familiarity of the work of psychologists such as Piaget, Kohlberg and Maslow to generations of psychologists suggests that the story is rather more complex. So some psychologists managed to free themselves from the straitjacket of mainstream psychology but they failed to fundamentally change the discipline. Attributing the late emergence of qualitative psychology to the stifling influence of positivism amounts to a ‘creation myth’ of qualitative psychology, not a totally convincing description. Numbers and measurement have dominated and still do dominate psychology. Yes, of course, there have been changes to the discipline and new hot topics have emerged but, in the end, if one got the measurements and numbers right then science and psychology was being done. Psychologists have become more questioning of their discipline and it is freely asked whether mainstream psychology’s way of doing things is the only way or the right way. This leads to consideration of the philosophical/epistemological basis of the parent discipline. 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 it rarely was in quantitative psychology. The positivist philosophy underlying mainstream psychology 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. Qualitative researchers question many sacred cows like these in mainstream research. Qualitative research papers still devote space to justifying the choice of method employed.

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 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 are unclear.

There is no single monolithic form of qualitative research – the different methods vary enormously one from another. They do not share the same epistemological foundations and, some, particularly thematic analysis, lack clear epistemological foundations. Qualitative research is different from quantitative research but the different qualitative methods can share little in common. The differences need to be understood.

There are other reasons for the late emergence of qualitative research as an important component of psychological research. Changes in the institutional basis of psychology may be as important as intellectual developments. For example, the numbers of psychology students graduating today are massive compared with the early days of the discipline or even 40 years ago. 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. 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. When psychology had few personnel, then exerting control on what psychology should be like may have been much easier than now. 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. 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 qualitative methods gained strength.

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.

Chapter 2 considers qualitative research in psychology in an historical context. Also, the chapter attempts to identify the beginnings of qualitative psychology both within psychology and in related disciplines. The following seem clear:

- There is evidence that qualitative research has been a minor but significant part of mainstream psychology for most of its development.
- Some early examples of qualitative research have become ‘classics’ in psychology but others have become ‘lost’.
- Most early qualitative research in psychology involved distinctly qualitative data collection methods. Distinctive methods of carrying out qualitative data analyses only emerged in the 1950s and 1960s in related disciplines and, probably, not until the 1980s and later in psychology.
- Qualitative psychology has now established a base in the institutions of psychology (learned societies, conferences, specialised journals, etc.) which were largely absent in its early history.

# CHAPTER 1

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

### Overview

- Qualitative research has emerged as an important but specialised focus in psychology over the last 40 years. Progress has been unevenly spread geographically and within different sub-fields of psychology. However, the story is not the same in every sub-field of psychology.
- Most qualitative research is based on data rich in description, a belief that reality is constructed socially, and an emphasis that research is about interpretation and not hypothesis testing.
- Historically, psychology has been construed as a science but one in which numbers and quantification dominated. This may be a misinterpretation of science.
- Positivism (the way physical science is/was seen to be done) is frequently held responsible for psychology's distorted conception of science. However, both Comte's positivism and logical positivism were more conducive to qualitative methods than mainstream psychologists recognised.
- The dominant psychologies since the 'birth' of psychology in the 1870s have been introspectionism, behaviourism and cognitivism.
- The 'quantitative imperative' has ancient roots in psychology since the work of Pythagoras. The imperative involves the fundamental belief that quantification is an essential feature of science. Early psychologists, with physics as their ideal model, 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 including statistical methods served psychology particularly well when seeking research monies to grow the discipline.

## 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 that ‘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) similarly suggest that the introduction of the qualitative method of discourse analysis into social psychology in the 1980s amounted to a paradigm shift. None explain what they mean by a paradigm shift. Classically, a paradigm shift involves a radically new way of thinking about a topic which replaces older ways of thinking. Since the first edition of this book, various qualitative methods have gained more than a toe-hold in psychology. The situation varies geographically but education and training in qualitative methods is increasingly available for psychology students. In the UK, for example, few psychology students escape such training (Parker, 2014) and doubtless fewer will in future. This does not signal the imminent or eventual demise of mainstream psychology. Mainstream psychology has achieved a great deal 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. It is undeniable that psychology has prospered with little input from qualitative research, yet it can only benefit from incorporating new ways of doing research. Psychological research in general has greatly expanded over time and the knowledge-based society will continue to make demands on the discipline. 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. It is probably only a matter of time before qualitative methods become incorporated throughout psychology. 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.

According to Hammersley (1996), there is a view among qualitative researchers that qualitative and quantitative research can be regarded as distinct research paradigms. The idea of scientific paradigms originated in Thomas Kuhn’s book *The structure of scientific revolutions* (1962). Kuhn (1922–1996) argued that science does not progress gradually through a steady accumulation of knowledge. Instead, the process involves revolutionary shifts in the way science looks at its subject matter. A paradigm shift describes when one view becomes untenable and is replaced by something radically different. A paradigm is a sort of worldview – a comprehensive way of looking at things which is more extensive than, say, a theory is. It is a sort of overarching theory which holds together vast swathes of a discipline or the entire discipline itself. So a paradigm shift is a fundamental change in the ways in which scientists view their subject matter.

As scientists become aware of anomalies thrown up by the current paradigm then this eventually leads to a crisis in the discipline. Consequently, the development of new ways of understanding becomes crucial. Arguably, perhaps, the move from behaviourism to cognitivism in psychology was a paradigm shift. Kuhn's book was a milestone and particularly notable for promoting the idea that science is socially constructed. Again this is an important view of science for qualitative researchers (not least because some see the replacement of quantitative with qualitative methods in terms of paradigm shift). But be very careful since Kuhn did not write about the social sciences, let alone psychology, in his book. A paradigm shift requires a radical change in the way we go about understanding the world. Simply choosing to study a different aspect of the world does not imply a paradigm shift. So, for example, studying people's responses to painful stimuli under various laboratory conditions (i.e. the mainstream approach) may be perfectly compatible with also studying how people talk about their experience of pain (the qualitative approach). Since both approaches may viably coexist, then one cannot speak of a paradigm shift in this case.

It seems unlikely that we are on the cusp of a paradigm shift in psychology in which a failing quantitative paradigm is being replaced by a newer qualitative one. For one, as we have seen, mainstream psychology is a demonstrably successful enterprise in all sorts of walks of life and in a whole variety of research areas. That could not be taken away overnight. Psychology has never at any point in its modern history been monolithically quantitative in nature – alternative voices have regularly been heard both criticising and offering alternatives to quantification as well as qualitative data-based findings. Although qualitative research was never dominant in the history of psychology, nevertheless qualitative and quantitative research have coexisted and this can be illustrated in various significant research studies throughout psychology's history. The authors of some of this work we have listed earlier. Whether this coexistence has always been one of happy bedfellows is quite a different question.

Definitions are never easy in psychology. Identifying precisely what constitutes qualitative research is hard. The heterogeneous nature of qualitative methods is part of the problem. Qualitative research is not a single method, objectives vary as do epistemological foundations, different things are considered important, and roots in psychology and other social sciences can be markedly different. Madill and Gough (2008) argue against trying to define qualitative methods in terms of common characteristics. To do so does the diverse qualitative methods a disservice. 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. Defining qualitative research in terms of an absence of numbers is of limited value – though it may be what attracts some to qualitative research. No single characteristic defines qualitative research. 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. Similarly, there are clearly qualitative studies which include at least some numbers and counting or even statistics.

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. Their preferred data collection methods require detailed, descriptive data such as that produced by using in-depth interviewing methods, focus groups and the taking of detailed field notes. This is referred to as thick description. In contrast, a little stereotypically, quantitative researchers restrict and structure the information gathered from their research participants. So simple rating scales or multiple-choice questionnaires are often used by quantitative researchers. Concern with the richness of description is characteristic of qualitative methods such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (see Chapter 13) but it is not necessary for conversation analysis (see Chapter 10).
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. Capturing the individual's perspective is not typically a feature of conversation analysis.
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*). Both qualitative and quantitative researchers 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 visions of reality. Relatively few qualitative researchers believe that the purpose of research is the creation of generalisable knowledge. Generalisability is a key feature of quantitative research and sometimes it is assumed that findings can be universally applied. Positivism is discussed in detail in Box 1.1 and later in this chapter.
4. ***Adherence to the postmodern sensibility*** The *postmodern* sensibility reveals itself in the way that qualitative researchers choose methods which get them close to the real-life experiences of people (in-depth interviews, for instance). Quantitative researchers are often content with a degree of artificiality such as when using laboratory studies. Verisimilitude seems much more important to qualitative researchers as a whole and less so to many quantitative researchers. Qualitative researchers are often portrayed as having a caring ethic in their research and they may undertake 'political' action conjointly with their participants as well as engaging in extensive dialogue with them. The sense of personal responsibility for the well-being of their research participants is often promoted as a feature of qualitative research. A familiar example of this is when researchers do not merely identify women's experiences but seek to effect social change on the basis of research. For instance, in feminist research on pornography (e.g. Ciclitira, 2004; Itzin, 1993) researchers and activists have often been indistinguishable (i.e. they are one and the same person). Other good examples of this in feminist research are child abuse, rape, domestic violence and so forth.
5. ***Examination of the constraints of everyday life*** Some argue that quantitative researchers overlook characteristics of the everyday social world which have



important bearing to the experiences of their research participants. Qualitative researchers tend to have their feet more firmly planted in this social world, it is argued. So, for instance, in qualitative research reports much greater detail is often found about the lives of individual research participants than would be characteristic of quantitative research reports.

### Box 1.1

## KEY CONCEPT

### Auguste Comte's positivism

The term 'positivism' features heavily in critiques of mainstream psychology. Indeed, the terms positivism and positivist appear to be pejorative terms when used by qualitative researchers. Given the problems in defining positivism (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 was the important historical period which dominated eighteenth-century European thinking.

The idea of positivism was systematised in France by Auguste Comte (1798–1857) – he also coined the term *sociologie* or sociology (it was previously social physics!).

In his writings, Comte proposed a social progression – 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 link between the terms science and positivism. The theological phase is the earliest. In it, 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 their beliefs in the theological phase are the ones that their ancestors previously held. The

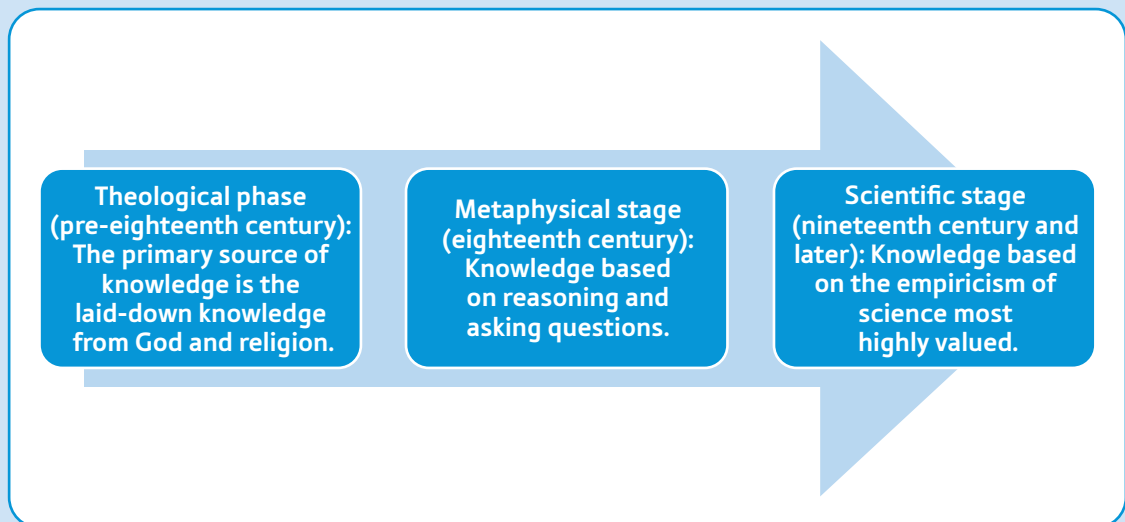


FIGURE 1.1 Comte's stages of social evolution