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Conclusion

In the opening chapter of this book I highlighted some of the complexities involved in answering the question 'What is qualitative research?'. My aim was to show the uncertain and contested nature of any answer to that question. This is true even of attempts to provide a conventional definition – concerned with how the term is currently used, or with the sorts of work generally included under this heading. It is even more true of ideas about how 'qualitative inquiry' *ought to be* defined.

We saw that while it is possible to identify a number of features that studies which are typically classified as qualitative usually share, as contrasted with quantitative work, it is impossible to identify a set of *essential* characteristics. It is also important to note that many of these shared features are matters of degree: such as the *extent* to which the data are structured at the point of collection, and the *number* of cases investigated. This should warn us that trying to draw a very sharp line, *at the level of practice*, between qualitative and quantitative work is problematic, even though the degree of variation is considerable.

At the same time there are major differences in terms of methodological philosophy. To one degree or another, qualitative research is shaped by very different ideas – about the nature of social phenomena and how they can be understood – from quantitative work. But later chapters also revealed that conflicting methodological philosophies have generated divergent modes of inquiry, and major disputes, *within* qualitative research. Indeed, these divisions are today probably deeper and more intractable than any between qualitative and quantitative work.

In part, the diversity in orientation has arisen simply from expansion of the social sciences over the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. During this period there has been: a huge increase in the number of social scientists, and in the amount of research, across the world; a proliferation of substantive fields of investigation, along with the development of distinctive theoretical and methodological ideas within

them; the emergence of new disciplines, such as cultural studies and childhood studies, and a migration of some parts of existing ones – including from history, geography, and psychology – into a broader interdisciplinary field of sociocultural research; the re-emergence of social theory as relatively autonomous from empirical research, but at the same time very influential upon it; the impact of social movements of various kinds, from feminism to disability activism; and increased pressures for public and practical engagement of social scientific work deriving from governments and commercial sources. The effect of these factors has been to produce a massively expanded, highly complex, and only very loosely structured terrain, in which different parts of social science have developed and devolved in many different directions. To some degree, the heterogeneous forms that qualitative work now takes reflects this process of diversification in the social sciences more generally, and perhaps also the weakness of its boundaries with forms of social and political practice.

As is often the case when there is rapid differentiation, there have also been some moves towards reintegration, though these are necessarily partial in character. For example, some influential commentators have sought to define ‘qualitative research’ as a ‘field of inquiry in its own right’ (Denzin and Lincoln 2011: 3). It is presented as a trans-disciplinary movement that draws on a *mélange* of interpretivist, ‘critical’, and constructionist ideas, in which ‘new forms’ of research presentation are to be employed in the promotion of ‘social justice’. Thus Denzin and Lincoln report that:

the qualitative research community consists of groups of globally dispersed persons who are attempting to implement a critical interpretive approach that will help them (and others) make sense of the terrifying conditions that define daily life at the first decade of this new century. These individuals employ constructivist, critical theory, feminist, queer, and critical race theory, as well as cultural studies models of interpretation. (Denzin and Lincoln 2011: xii)

Whether its aim is formulated as promoting ‘arts-based research’ or a ‘sacred science’ (Denzin and Lincoln 1994: 582–3) this movement brings together many qualitative researchers from different fields. At the same time, it also excludes or marginalizes a great deal of what I have included in this book under the heading of ‘qualitative research’.

A very different integrative approach is the ‘mixed methods’ movement, which stresses the complementarity of qualitative and quantitative

methods and the benefits of combining them within particular research projects. Yet, it should be clear from earlier chapters that the discrepant forms that qualitative research now takes, and the rationales associated with these, cannot be easily reconciled with one another, nor with the predominant orientation of quantitative researchers. 'Mixing' quantitative and qualitative methods frequently involves abandoning key assumptions associated with many sorts of qualitative work. There is nothing wrong with this, in principle, but there is little agreement within the mixed methods movement about what methodological philosophy ought to underpin it (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2010). Furthermore, in practice, there is a tendency in mixed methods work to assimilate the use of qualitative methods into the framework of assumptions characteristic of quantitative work – yet these require just as much careful scrutiny (see Hammersley 2012a).

All this raises some very difficult questions:

- Is the label 'qualitative research' helpful any longer? Does it pick out a reasonably coherent set of practices and/or methodological ideas that are sound? In short, does it make a distinction that is of value?
- What attitude should be taken towards the heterogeneity of qualitative research today? Should we be tolerant of approaches that are discrepant with our own, or should the boundaries of what is legitimate be policed, and if so how?
- What should be the operational goal of qualitative researchers, and for what should they be held accountable? Should the aim be to bring about socio-political change, as proposed by 'critical' approaches, or to subvert claims to expert knowledge and recover subjugated voices, as some constructionists suggest? Or is the task solely to produce knowledge? If knowledge is the goal, should this be idiographic or more general in character? Should the aim of research be to capture embodied 'lived experience' or to produce objective answers to research questions?
- In the face of constructionist arguments, can any claim to produce scientific knowledge about the social world be warranted? If so, what forms of such knowledge are viable? And how do they differ from journalism, literature, or art?
- Is social science *desirable*, as a specialized source of knowledge about the world? Or is it inevitably an oppressive disciplinary technology?

Qualitative researchers today would, of course, give conflicting answers to these questions. I can only sketch my own response in what remains of this Conclusion.

For me, qualitative research is nothing if it is not social science. And this implies that it is distinctive as a form of activity precisely in being directed exclusively at the operational goal of producing propositional knowledge (answers to specific, factual questions), albeit knowledge that has some value, either in terms of being relevant to important issues to do with policy or practice in some field or in relation to general human concerns (Hammersley 2011).

Adopting this position means dismissing some elements of all the methodological philosophies introduced in Chapter 2, while retaining others. One element that must be excluded is the idea, central to a 'critical' approach, that research should be designed to challenge the *status quo* or to bring about social change. These tasks are no more a proper part of the responsibility of researchers than is seeking to preserve the status quo or to serve national or religious interests.

Equally problematic, in my view, is the notion, at the heart of some kinds of interpretivism, that the goal of social research is to understand unique individuals and to present accounts of their lives and experience. This is the task of biography and fictional writing, and there is an important difference between this and the proper use that social scientists can make of biographical materials, life histories, or fictional depictions. The sole aim of social science must be to produce knowledge about social institutions, policies, and/or processes, their character, sources, or consequences.

Similarly, those elements of constructionism that question the very possibility of knowledge – in general, or about the social world in particular – must be rejected, simply on the grounds that they are incompatible with a commitment to research. After all, we cannot engage in that activity without assuming the possibility and desirability of knowledge. It may be legitimate to challenge these assumptions, but this cannot be done *as part of* social science. And attempts to do this via appeal to the model of the humanities and arts are misguided, since that complex field is itself divided between those areas of work that are committed to the production of knowledge – such as most historical work and much philosophy – and those that have very different and internally diverse orientations – such as creating artistic or literary works. My point is not that there is anything wrong with these other activities, far from it, only that they have

a different character and purpose from research; and we should be clear about which activity we are engaged in, since if we are not we will very likely do neither of them well.

Finally, given that, in practical terms, the difference between qualitative and quantitative methods is a matter of degree, I do not believe that 'qualitative research' is a genuine or useful category – any more than is 'quantitative research'. While, at present, we cannot avoid reliance upon this distinction, we need to move towards a more adequate typology, exploring the various options open to social researchers as regards how they formulate research questions, engage in research design, collect and produce data, analyze it, and report their findings. The qualitative-quantitative divide reifies what is variable, and obscures the scope for combining strategies that can be employed to deal with these different aspects of the research process. In short, we need to find a way of overcoming the quantitative-qualitative divide, of replacing it with a more subtle and realistic set of distinctions that capture variation in research practice better.

Of course, the position I have just sketched is not one that would be accepted by many qualitative researchers today. The issues remain unresolved; so you, dear reader, will have to come to your own conclusions about them.

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