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# 1 A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

## 1.1 WHAT IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

We will start this book on qualitative interviewing with a short introduction about qualitative research because to us, 'qualitative interviewing' is part of a research endeavour; more specifically it is part of a qualitative research project. Therefore, it is important to indicate what we mean by qualitative research.

From the nineties onwards, according to Mulderij (1999:292), qualitative research has been booming. A considerable number of books about the methodology of qualitative research have appeared, often specified for a certain discipline or a specific method. For example, books were published about qualitative research in anthropology (Bryman, 2001; Schensul et al., 1999), nursing science (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002), social sciences (Creswell, 2007; Maso & Smaling, 2004), physical and occupational therapy (Whalley, Hammell, Carpenter & Dyck, 2002), or psychology (Mey & Mruck, 2010). Regarding qualitative research methods, books are divided into subcategories as well, e.g. books on qualitative data analysis (Grbich, 2007, Saldañañ, 2009; Dey, 2005; Boeije, 2010 and Heaton, 2004), on the use of software for analysis (Kelle, 1995; Bazeley, 2007; Friese, 2012), or on interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Fielding, 2003; Gorden, 1992 and Bogner, Littig & Menz, 2009). On the other hand, some books offer a general introduction to the methodology of social science research. Here, both qualitative and quantitative research methods are discussed (Bryman, 2004; 't Hartje, Boeije & Hox, 2005). In all of these books qualitative research is discussed and the authors usually adopt their own description of this methodological approach. In the next box, some of these descriptions have been arranged alphabetically by author.

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**Definitions of qualitative research**

To Boeije (2005b:27), the research question in qualitative research aims at topics that can help understand how people give meaning to their social environment and how they act as a result of that. The research methods chosen enable the researcher to describe and – if possible – explain the topic from the perspective of the individuals studied.

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According to Bogdan and Knopp Biklen (2007:2), stemming from educational research, qualitative research is an umbrella term for research that has the following features: 'The data collection have been termed *soft*, that is rich in description of people, places, and conversations and not easily handled by statistical procedures. Research questions are not framed by operationalizing variables; rather, they are formulated to investigate topics in all their complexity, in context. While people conducting qualitative research develop focus as they collect data, they do not approach the research with specific questions to answer or hypotheses to test. They also are concerned with understanding behaviour from the informant's own frame of reference. External causes are of secondary importance. They tend to collect their data through sustained contact with people in settings where subjects normally spend their time – classrooms, cafeteria's, teachers' lounges, dormitories, street corners'.

Creswell (2007: 37) describes qualitative research as: 'Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a world view, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and it extends the literature or signals a call for action.'
Creswell states that this definition emphasizes qualitative research as a process, starting from philosophical presumptions in which a procedure is determined to investigate the topic. This procedure consists of a certain framework, i.e. a certain research approach and he assumes a research(er) will place himself within a certain movement.

To Maso and Smaling (2004:9-10), qualitative research is a form of empirical research that is characterized by the data collection method, the research design, the kind of analyses done and the role of the researcher. According to them, features of qualitative research are: (a) the data collection is open and flexible, (b) the analysis is done in ordinary language, (c) within the research design, data collection and analysis alternate in a typical cyclical-interactive manner, (d) the research design aims at everyday meaningfulness and the denotation of relationships between phenomena. Thereby, importance is given to all meaning, which is created in interaction between subjects. Finally then, (e) qualitative researchers use themselves as an instrument to gain insight into their subjects' lives.

According to Wester and Peters (2004:16-17), qualitative research is featured by: (a) its orientation on describing the meaning giving of the subjects of research, (b) demonstrating a relationship between accumulated data and concepts, which is an open process resulting from the research, (c) a situation in which the researcher has extended contact with the reality under investigation and the topic under scrutiny allows him to learn about all the aspects of that reality.

From the box above it is obvious that there are several definitions available, each with their own emphasis.


## 1.2 Features of qualitative research

If the common elements are deduced from the descriptions in the box above, it is possible to discern six features of qualitative research.

*Direct observation in a natural setting*
In qualitative research, data are collected in their natural setting. The researcher is interested in the natural environment of respondents and if possible, resides there for longer periods of time. He is in close touch with respondents. There is no resemblance at all with a laboratory situation which is created by the researcher and in which he controls the environment and tries to exclude variables that could influence the research context.

*The researcher is pointedly present during data collection*
The researcher resides in the field, observes, interviews respondents, determines the length of his stay and the number of interviews, makes a choice of respondents and determines the subject of the interview. The amount of data is not emphasized; the researcher is present in the field to 'learn', to enter a new domain, to understand what is happening there and what is going on. In short, he absorbs all the information from the local environment surrounding him. He can thereby assume the role of the outsider or of the participant. So, the essence is that the researcher travels to the vicinity he would like to investigate in order to learn about it in any way possible.

*An inductive procedure usually prevails*
The information obtained from the field forms the most important data resource: it is the starting point for the analysis that leads to the final results. The researcher analyzes the data transparently and this leads to a clear overview and interpretation of social reality. He might find a new, and sometimes largely reduced, classification scheme for the data, which is an abstraction of the accumulated information. This could possibly lead to a theory. This then is termed working inductively, which means that the broad information collected in the field, is the groundwork to reach a specific image of the context, with a matching classification or some core category (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). This working procedure is contrary to the deductive method, in which the researcher departs from an existing theory, derives one or more hypotheses from it, collects the necessary data and verifies if these data can confirm the theory. We do not mean to say that a deductive procedure cannot be used to design qualitative research; compare the framework analysis (Maso & Smaling, 2004). Nevertheless, an inductive approach

is mostly used in qualitative research. Especially during the starting phase of data analysis, the inductive method is used to find concepts that resemble the social reality observed. In the following phases of the analysis newly collected data may be used to verify the formulated concepts. This might be seen as a deductive approach, as the developed conceptual framework will be tested against the newly collected data. This approach is termed constant comparison.

*The respondents' perspective is at centre*
The aim of the research endeavour is to find and understand how respondents interpret their surroundings and how they act upon their interpretations. Respondents can have different or contrary perspectives, which might be unknown to the researcher. The researcher is interested in this 'inside' world, the private interpretations of the respondent and will, therefore, place his own perspective on matters between brackets while learning about this inside world of the respondent.

*Holistic or contextual approach*
The researcher is interested in the entire context of the respondent as it occurs while in the field. In a research project concerning illness, for example, this implies the way the illness is experienced with regard to all the aspects of life that it influences. For example, how the illness has changed life for the respondents, what they did before they were ill and how much of that still is possible now, whether their identity has changed as a result of the illness, how their relationship with their partner is now, how they experience being dependent on others and how their perception of the future is.

*Results are often in a narrative form*
In his reproduction of the respondents' narratives or results from his research, the researcher emphasizes patterns, concepts, themes, meanings, perspectives or strategies of the respondent. Often citations from the interviews are used to underpin his findings. It is not about numbers, percentages, or statistical relations between variables. Instead, the results give a detailed and surveyable image of social reality as it was encountered in the field. For example: respondents are found to have different definitions of 'expensive' when they talk about purchasing something. What they consider 'expensive' is related to how they describe their spending patterns. The researcher tries to relate this finding to a theory or he relates it to other research concerning the same topic. Finally, he tries to relate the significance of the result to the research goal. Let us assume the aim of this fictitious example was to discover what causes people to overestimate their financial position so that they owe more than they could ever pay. In this example, the result described above would be very relevant. Debt counsellors could use the results of this research; they might take this concept of 'expensive' as a starting point for their assistance and discuss specific aspects of spending behaviour with their clients.

Besides these features, qualitative research will mostly be guided by some philosophical viewpoint as well which determines the questions asked and the way they are answered. This aspect, which belongs to epistemology or philosophy of science will be dealt with in the next paragraph, which explains some approaches in qualitative research.

1.3     Qualitative approaches: movements and methods

Since the1960s, 'qualitative research' has become an umbrella term for a range of research types that are connected to what Mulderij (1999) also calls movements.[1] He uses the term movements as a common denominator for different perspectives from which qualitative research can be done, in other words their epistemological foundation.[2] According to Smaling (1987:247), these perspectives can be traced back to two groups of approaches, the 'paradigmatic' and the 'pragmatic' approach. The **paradigmatic movement**[3] can be subdivided into firstly the **empirical-analytic approach**, based on a (neo) positivist view of science, in which reality is objectively recognizable, systematically organized and is considered verifiable and predictable. The second group is the **hermeneutic-interpretative approaches**,[4] which derive from the hermeneutic notion of *'Verstehen'*. These approaches originated as resistance to the empirical-analytic ones, because it was felt that especially social reality cannot be known objectively and is not so predictable and systematic. Followers of this movement aimed for greater recognition of the subjective experience of reality and the desire to understand reality from the perspective of the person who experiences it. Thirdly, the **critical**

1.  A principal solution for this forest of terms has not been found yet. Many terms are being used, such as: approaches, method, movement, strategy or viewpoint, to refer to the procedure and the philosophical background of research. The point is that different backgrounds and sources of inspiration (have) exist(ed) for qualitative research. For example, the word 'method' is being used in a very philosophical sense, 'the phenomenological method', in a theoretical sense, 'the Marxist method', and in a technical sense, 'the Q-sort method'. The same happens with the term 'technique' or 'approach'.
2.  Epistemology is defined as the theory of knowledge: what is the essence of knowledge, how is it attained and what are its limits? In short: what reason can we have for a certain conviction or why do we believe in something? (Craig, 2002; Van Dale, 14th edition). In contrast, ontology is the theory of being; it deals with the general properties of things, for example the view that observable reality is independent of human knowledge. (Van Dale, 14th edition, Wikipedia).
3.  A paradigm is primarily 'an exemplary, normative example' that indicates which kind of problem has to be investigated and how this should be done. This can only be learned under supervision of experienced persons. In a broader definition by De Vries (1995; 102-103), paradigm stands for: 'the whole of convictions, symbolic generalisations, metaphysical assumptions and values that a researcher implicitly adopts by emulating these normative examples'.
4.  Examples are: phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and ethnography.

**approaches**,[5] are similar to the interpretive approach in terms of their scientific view but add a political dimension to this, i.e. a social ideal. Therefore, these approaches are sometimes described as emancipatory (Smaling, 1987, 1994; Grbich 2007). The last approach, **constructivism**,[6] is more recent and founded on the assumption that multiple interpretations of reality co-exist and that reality is actively constructed and as such are always 'partial, situated and embodied' (Abma, 1996:18).

**Pragmatic approaches** do not depart from a theoretical movement to shape their research but use the research question as a guide to methodological and technical choices (Smaling, 1987:265). As such, they might use research methods in a more eclectic manner.

Generally, university-affiliated (PhD-)research is mostly designed according to some paradigm or method. In particular, the hermeneutic-interpretive approaches, the critical approaches and the constructivist approaches can be found here. On the other hand, in applied qualitative research there is generally less space for a paradigmatic approach. This is related to time constraints, costs, and sometimes reluctance to be associated with certain movements. These grounds lead commissioned research to a more pragmatic approach. In some policy circles though, the constructivist approach is booming (Frissen, 1996, Abma, 2002).

Some of these approaches[7] will be considered in the box below. Subsequently, a number of methods that resulted will be discussed in connection to the role of the qualitative interview.

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**Approaches in qualitative research**

Many qualitative approaches are based on an ontological starting point, known from **phenomenology**: the pre-interpreted reality (Bogdan & Biklen Knopp, 2007:24 ff.). Phenomenology is not so much interested in bare facts and causes of the problem, but in the experience and interpretation of the world by people. In tracing that, the researcher puts his experience of the world 'in brackets', i.e. bracketing. He approaches the phenomenon under investigation, i.e. the perception and experience of the respondent, open-mindedly, or at least attempts to do so. 'The' reality does not exist according to the phenomenologist, but is created by people's interpretation of it. The subjective experience and the interpretation thereof by the respondent is the scientific subject, not

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5.  Examples are: feminism, Marxist anthropology and action research.
6.  Postmodernism is an example of this.
7.  The distinction made between movement, approach and method is historically founded: many methods have emerged from a movement or approach. The grounded theory method is a well-known example and was developed by converting the ideas behind symbolic interactionism to a real research context. Meanwhile, various methods have become more acclaimed than the approach they originated from and sometimes they even were separated from that movement. This, for example, applies to the form of grounded theory, advocated by Strauss and Corbin (oral information by F. Wester).

the factualness of the event. Thus, several interpretations of the same event are possible and can co-exist. This emphasis on the respondents' perspective as a research goal is the essence of all forms of qualitative research. In addition, it is often assumed that besides the respondents' interpretation, there is also a reality that can be observed: what a respondent says during an interview is not 'the truth' but it is a statement, which can be recorded, interpreted, and compared to other statements. The recording method is important to ascertain the authenticity of the statement. Ethnomethodology for example, stems from the phenomenological sociology and the theory of T. Parsons.

Another important approach, **symbolic interactionism**, just like phenomenology, departs from the idea that human experience derives its meaning from the interpretation of it. However, in symbolic interaction the emphasis is on action, in particular interaction with others and their reaction, and how this influences the construction and interpretation of the world. Meaning is negotiable and people construct shared meanings in their interactions. The self, i.e. the own identity, is formulated as well in interaction with the environment (Bogdan & Biklen Knopp, 2007:29). The principles of the grounded theory method are founded on symbolic interactionism.

**Ethnomethodology** examines the construction of social order through the design and definition of situations by actors. In this context, it is not the actors' perspective that is emphasized, as in phenomenology and symbolic interactionism, but rather the way people handle, develop or change rules in interaction with one another. In short: how people manage to live with each other. For example, the founder Garfinkel investigated this by ordering his students to act differently from the social code in some situation and observed what happened.

Additionally, some (newer) approaches like for instance cultural studies, feminism, postmodernism, institutional ethnography and narrative research are sometimes interpreted as movement. Currently, **feminism**, **critical theory** and **postmodernism** have in common that they believe that there is no 'reality' which can be observed directly. Invisible power issues often determine the interpretation of the world by respondents, as well as the interpretation by researchers. This should be included in the analysis to a far greater extent as it is now. In addition, each research study is determined by (theoretical) assumptions made explicit in varying degrees, which are influenced by the contact with respondents as well. These processes should be made more explicit, but even then the concept of 'reality' remains questionable for supporters of these movements. **Institutional ethnography** is interested in the relationships between the macro-level of institutions and the way in which these affect the micro-level of respondents. Finally, **narrative research** investigates the way people use stories to represent them and give meaning to their life and surrounding world.

Scientific disciplines using qualitative research methods are, for example, cultural anthropology with the ethnographic method as main working procedure, sociology with the well-known grounded theory method, as well as biography research and discourse analysis, philosophy with the phenomenological method and finally, humanities with methods such as biography or narrative research, or discourse analysis. Additionally, case study research might be mentioned here as well, whose roots lie in social demography and social geography. In the meantime though, it has become an interdisciplinary method, particularly used in organizational and policy-oriented research (Braster, 2000).

In all of these approaches and methods the qualitative interview, as a means of collecting data, can play a role. The interpretation of the interview, the way it is conducted and the relationship between researcher and respondent will differentiate, depending on the approach or method that forms the starting point for the research project.

In the next section, the position of the qualitative interview within the most dominant methods is characterized.

In the **grounded theory** method (GT), based inter alia on the ideas of symbolic interactionism, the interview is often used. In a research project, conducted according to the principles of GT, the first interviews have an 'open' and 'exploring' nature. The researcher is interested in everything the respondent would like to share about the phenomenon under investigation. Once several interviews are held, data-analysis will commence as well as reflection on the first analytic results. The next interviews might even be less open in nature because the interviewer would like to explore certain themes which resulted from the first interviews. On the other hand, he might still aim to explore the phenomenon further and as such keep his interviews open and exploratory. In a following cycle of interviews the researcher might focus more in-depth on certain themes which resulted from the first cycle. The interviews will be more structured and might even be done in accordance with the tree-and-branches model, cf. Chapter 3. In a next cycle of interviews, the researcher might investigate whether themes that resulted from previous analyses also apply to different types of respondents. He might then again either choose for an explorative interview or a more structured one.

In the **ethnographic method**, stemming from cultural anthropology, the researcher often stays in the field for longer periods of time and participates in the daily life of respondents. This method is based on the idea that different cultures can only be understood in-depth, if one resides there for extended periods of time to collect all the information that is present, i.e. 'fieldwork'. Typical of this approach is the use of different data collection strategies such as observation, participation, interviewing, photographing or video filming and collection of other information. In doing so, a distinction can be made between 'formal' and 'informal' inter-

views. In formal interviews the researcher makes an appointment and questions are designed beforehand. If possible, the interview is recorded and the researcher will transcribe it as literally as possible. Informal interviews are interviews conducted during fieldwork or during participant observation. They are often not prepared but arise spontaneously during interaction between the researcher and the person(s) in the field. If possible, the researcher takes notes on these interviews in short keywords and transforms these into elaborated fieldnotes afterwards. Otherwise, he will make his fieldnotes purely from recollection. These informal interviews can either be of a very open character or the researcher might ask very specific questions regarding matters that are currently happening or happened earlier. As such, the investigator often does not have a recording or verbatim reproduction of the informal interviews conducted.

In **phenomenology** as a method, originating from a movement within philosophy, the emphasis is on the individual's environment and his experience. The aim is to understand the essence of an experience; in philosophy typically done through a thought experiment. In empirical research, the attempt is to find this experience through the use of interviews and the writing out of the experience (Maso in Evers, 2007). The aim is to highlight multiple layers of an experience, if possible starting from the pre-reflexive, that is to say, the part of the experience which is not conscious yet, and surface each layer into the whole conscious experience. Within phenomenology, different traditions appear, such as transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutical phenomenology and existential phenomenology (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002:170-178). Each of them has different accents in the research methodology[8]. For example, an existential-phenomenological research on solitude focuses on defining the essence of loneliness in relation to the responsibility of the self, while a transcendental-phenomenological approach is interested in tracing different meanings of the experience of solitude. A very open interview in a familiar environment with attention to the equality of the relationship with the respondent and much room for elaboration are essential in this approach.

In the **narrative method**[9] the open interview plays a crucial role. The emphasis is not so much on the experience of a feeling or phenomenon; instead the emphasis is on the display, on the configuration of a story, or on an event within a certain context. For instance, someone can start with the occasion that resulted in the event, followed by the elements that are of interest for the subject matter, how

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8. The concept 'methodology' is used to indicate the primary logic and theoretical assumptions that guide a research endeavour. This concept is to be differentiated from the concept 'method', which indicates the working procedures used in a research endeavour, i.e. interviews, participant observation, document analysis, etc. Method then, is considered to be stemming from methodology (Bogdan & Knopp Biklen, 2007:35).
9. The biographical method is part of the narrative method.

matters evolved, and finally, outlines the present situation. Perception certainly plays a role as architect of the story but it is not the most important drive of the interview. The interview can be structured by using the respondent's' chronology as a focus, e.g. from toddler to infant, teen-ager, adult, or senior, or by taking a certain event during the respondent's life and investigate this in-depth.

In a **case study**, the qualitative interview is used in addition to other methods of data collection, comparable to ethnographic research. Here, one case is under scrutiny, both in-depth and widthwise. This could either be a department, an incident or a specific group. The researcher would like to learn as much as possible of this case in order to understand how matters work, how processes progress, how interaction takes place, and so on. For example, in policy research case studies are commonly deployed to evaluate the execution or implementation of a policy measure. In such a case study, key informants are often contacted for an interview: the initiator about the occasion, the implementer about the development and execution of the process, and a participant about whether or not an actual change has occurred. In addition to the case study that deals with one case, there are also multiple case studies compiled. In a multiple case study, several cases are either compared or contrasted to each other.

## 1.4       Methods of collecting data in qualitative research

As was previously stated, interviewing in this book is regarded within the context of qualitative research. An important feature of data collection in qualitative research is its open and flexible nature (Maso & Smaling, 2004). The researcher is attuned to what occurs in the field. In doing so, he might choose to start in a totally open manner. If so, he starts with a period in which he 'learns' and is exploring the environment. Only after this first phase will he explore matters more in-depth, or design his tproblem statement in more detail. On the other hand, he might structure his research project immediately after the start and describe in advance what information he would like to obtain and how he will approach the fieldwork. Such a strategy is often taken in commissioned research because of the tight schedule. In all modes of qualitative data collection, the emphasis is to do justice to the examined subjects as much as possible (Smaling, 1990). In doing so it is important to let the subject speak and not to distort the data, so valid and reliable results[10] can be

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10. Internal validity, a widely used quality concept in qualitative research in brief implies that the interviewer and the respondent are talking about the same thing, and that the topic that is discussed is what the researcher would like to know according to his problem statement. On the other hand, internal reliability implies that members of the research team agree intersubjectively on the interpretation of concepts and results and that these are used in a consistent manner. For further details on procedures to increase internal "validity and reliability see Maso and Smaling (2004:68-73) and Seale (2000).

obtained. To achieve this, the researcher might 'keep book' in some kind of log, that is to say, a report in which all the choices made with regard to data collection and the investigation process are kept up-to-date. Subsequently, parts of this report might be included in the official publication, to ensure transparency on how decisions were taken, how data were interpreted, and how important concepts were obtained. At the end of this chapter we will elaborate on the validity and reliability of data.

There are various methods and techniques available in qualitative research to collect empirical[11] data. They are successively:
- Participant observation;
- Interviewing;
- Collection of documents, i.e. letters, diaries, notes, reports, newspaper articles, etc.;
- Collecting visual material, i.e. photos of objects, persons or situations, video-shots;
- Collecting of sound recordings, i.e. radio and television broadcasts, tape recordings of conversations or interactions.

In using the first two methods, the researcher directs to a great extent the nature of the data he collects. He influences both type and content of the data. In the other methods mentioned, the researcher does not always determine the content, as they may already exist. Thus, he selects texts, audio files, or images that others have put together in terms of content. In addition to existing photos, videos and tape recordings he can also capture such data himself. Of course, the method of selection is of crucial importance in such cases. We will not elaborate on this for now. The most important thing is that information is gathered about a specific part of social reality and that this information is the starting point for analysis and reconstruction of that social reality.
Below, these different methods of data collection are discussed briefly to delineate the position and context of qualitative interviews with regard to them.

**Participant observation** is often called the oldest form of qualitative research. Researchers use their own body, specifically their senses, and mind as the main resources to observe. They themselves are the research instruments. Participant observation means the researcher participates in the everyday life of his subjects and captures his observations in some form. Participation may take different forms and depends on the role the investigator chooses on location. In general,

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11. We use the term 'empirical' to indicate systematic observations, whether or not done through the senses, in the empirical or social reality ('t Hart, Boeije & Hox, 2005), or a reproduction of them. In qualitative research it is habitual to gather information on a phenomenon in its natural surroundings.

four roles are distinguished: (a) complete participant, (b) observing as a partici-
pant, (c) participating as an observer, and (d) complete observer (Gold in McCall
& Simmons, 1969).

While participating to a larger or lesser extent in the life of the people examined,
the researcher needs to document his observations, including conversations, in
order not to forget what he heard and saw. This is done in so-called field notes
(Bogdan & Knopp Biklen, 2007; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). It will prove diffi-
cult to write down all you have heard and observed and, therefore, parts of so-
cial reality will be disregarded. For this reason the advice is to complement field-
notes with other methods of data collection, such as interviews and the collection
of existing information. Roughly, fieldnotes can be divided into two types:

- Jottings: (fast) notes to yourself; reminder notes made during or after short ob-
  servation sessions of 15-30 minutes. The researcher records broadly what hap-
  pened. These notes are created in such a way that they provide guidance to
  work them out more elaborately at a later time. An observation session can
  take more than half an hour but all that happened in that stretch of time can-
  not be remembered in detail. Therefore, it is advisable if it is not possible to
  write down keywords while observing, to withdraw from time to time from
  the scene, record some details in keywords and then continue with the obser-
  vation.
- Descriptive fieldnotes: these are the real fieldnotes. This is the detailed report
  of the observation session, which was jotted down in keywords earlier. Some-
  one relatively unfamiliar with the research setting is able to comprehend these
  notes. These fieldnotes are produced shortly after the event observed, prefer-
  ably the same day, otherwise the following day, by using previously created
  jottings. This report is an extensive account of what happened, how it went
  about and what was communicated, sometimes with additional pictures,
  maps and drawings for better comprehension. It is best to use a chronological
  order in fieldnotes. Between [ ] or in a different textual colour, the researcher
  will add his thoughts, assumptions or prejudices about the event or persons
  participating and what struck him during the session. These additions are
  sometimes recorded in so-called reflective notes and as such form a third cate-
  gory of notes.

**Interviews** are the most commonly used method of data collection in qualitative
research. They can be done in several ways. Interviewing may also be less time
consuming than participant observation, depending on the type of interview
used. In comparison with participant observation, interviewing is somewhat
more structured and delineated. The researcher might determine the data slightly
more as compared to participant observation but this depends on the extent to
which he would like to steer the interview. The qualitative interview will not be
dealt with extensively here; in Chapters two to six and in part II of Evers (2007),
many aspects of it are discussed. Before an interview can be conducted though,

some necessary preparations should be made first. These are discussed in detail in section 1.5 and Chapters three to six.

Nowadays, a large part of communication is done through **(digitalized) documents**. The Internet can be consulted on almost any topic. Through the Internet a large number of text files, written on a wide variety of topics, is accessible. For example, the search engine Lexis Nexis enables researchers to collect newspaper articles on a particular topic in a defined period. The same applies to documents of a different nature. An important difference with participant observation and interviews is that other people write these documents and that the researcher has no influence on their content. As the information is almost infinite and each definition has an element of randomness in itself, it is important to clearly justify the selection criteria for the documents.
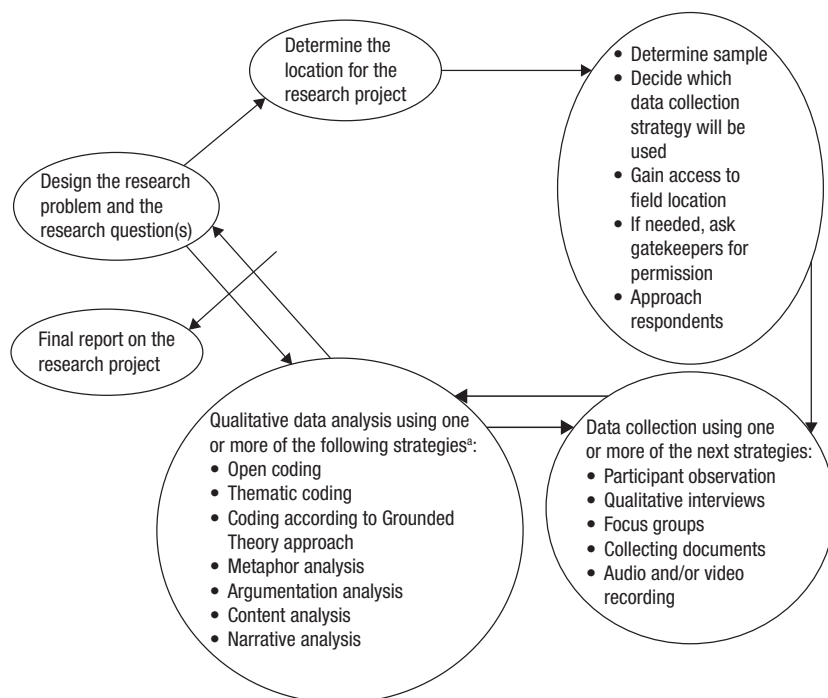
Depending on the research problem, documents can be collected as independent data or as supplementary material to observations or interviews. For example, complementary to an interview, the minutes of a meeting might be collected, or a nursing file on a patient. Sometimes they are really complementary to the information obtained in the interview, but on the other hand these data might confirm or contradict the interview data which contributes to the validity of the dataset. These documents are often not analyzed in the same detail as the interviews. They are used to supplement and to verify, so are a form of data triangulation.

A next strategy for data collection might be **sound or video recordings**. This can both apply to existing recordings or recordings the researcher creates or lets someone else create in the context of a research project. In most cases this will entail a combination of audio and video recordings, e.g. a video registration of a situation that is examined, an audio recording of interviews, educational films, television programs, or documentaries. These might all be analyzed separately or in relation to each other. In addition, it is possible to analyze sound recordings only. This may be a recording of interviews, telephone calls or other types of conversations: radio interviews on a delicate subject, recordings of meetings or conversations in a doctor's office. For example, we asked workers at eight mental care-settings in the Netherlands whether they wanted to record the intake interviews that they have in their own practice for us (De Boer, 1994). These data were collected in 'naturally occurring situations' (Silverman, 2006). For such data it is also necessary to develop a selection and analysis strategy beforehand, otherwise the researcher runs the risk of collecting data which are not suitable for the selected analytical methods.

1.5    Designing qualitative research

Visually, a qualitative research project might resemble the diagram below:

**Diagram 1.1 The course of a qualitative research project**

Determine the location for the research project

- Determine sample
- Decide which data collection strategy will be used
- Gain access to field location
- If needed, ask gatekeepers for permission
- Approach respondents

Design the research problem and the research question(s)

Final report on the research project

Qualitative data analysis using one or more of the following strategies[a]:
- Open coding
- Thematic coding
- Coding according to Grounded Theory approach
- Metaphor analysis
- Argumentation analysis
- Content analysis
- Narrative analysis

Data collection using one or more of the next strategies:
- Participant observation
- Qualitative interviews
- Focus groups
- Collecting documents
- Audio and/or video recording

[a] For a description of some of these strategies see Evers and Van Staa (2011)

Next is a brief explanation of the various components of the design, preceding the data collection

*Research question and goal*
Any research project starts with a question, problem or topic that is interesting to the researcher. The first step then is a literature search, as he would not like to re-invent the wheel but wishes to build on knowledge already present on his subject. Depending on the time available and whether the objective for the investigation is practically-oriented, theoretically-oriented or both, the literature review will be more or less extensive. The literature review enables him to formulate his research question sharper and set the research objective.

The **research question(s)** formulate(s) the central query the project will deal with and as such provides the aim for the research. Typical for questions within qualitative research is that:

- An 'open' question line is guiding the research;
- It is often only possible to get to a more final wording of the research questions at the end of the investigation, as these questions are regularly adapted to interim results in the several cycles of data collection and analysis.

In this respect, qualitative research differs from quantitative research, in which the research question that was formulated beforehand is mostly final. In qualitative research this it is not possible, as the researcher would like to learn from the field while he is investigating. For example, the research might focus on a sub topic during the course of the investigation because it appears that this sub topic is more important than was foreseen. Or, the direction of the research might change slightly as findings indicate that unforeseen matters are quite important for the question in general. In such a case, the research question will be adjusted.

Qualitative research questions often appear as 'how' or 'what'-questions, they are 'holistically' oriented and search for information on processes, experiences, strategies, feelings, effects, behaviour, perceptions, motivations and so on.
Based on the main research question, some **sub-questions** might be formulated which are further elaborations of the main question. Similar to the main question in qualitative research, these sub-questions will be 'how' or 'what' questions but they might be more specific. For example: What strategies do people with multiple sclerosis apply in asking relatives for help?

The **research objective** differs from the research questions. In the research objective, the aim of the project is stated. This might be broader or might go further than the answer to the research question(s). A research project might aim for different goals. These may include:

- Obtaining knowledge or seeking information; the goal is knowledge acquisition;
- Contribute to theory or refine an existing theory; the goal is theory construction;
- Informing people; the goal then is spreading knowledge and educating people, for example about the consequences of a certain illness;
- Supporting people in making a choice; the goal is practice-oriented, for example to help people in making a choice for a certain treatment;
- Influencing a certain process (of change): the goal is action-oriented, for example during the refurbishment of an organization.

Once a research goal and matching research questions are formulated, the researcher might indicate which theoretical movement seems best to use in examin-

ing these questions. In choosing methods for data collection and analysis, it is best to be transparent about the paradigmatic or pragmatic position that guides the project.

*Determine the location*
Typical of qualitative research is that the researcher collects the data himself and thus will be present at the research location. It is important to think about where to find the desired respondents. Especially if participant observation is considered, this is an additional focal point during the design phase of the project. The choice of location is first and foremost determined by whether or not information which fits the research question can be obtained there, but secondly whether or not it is possible to get access to that location. This can sometimes be difficult and it is, therefore, recommended to think carefully about this in advance, especially if a location is considered with gatekeepers[12] present. The choice of location and its accessibility can to a certain degree determine the validity and reliability of the data. Often the gatekeeper determines whom the researcher can approach as respondent and this can affect the sample frame negatively. On the other hand, in choosing the location wrongly, people might be reluctant to participate and if the researcher has finally found someone willing to give an interview, this might be the wrong person or the question can no longer be appropriate for the available respondents. In both cases, the researcher reconsiders his sample frame, the research questions or both.

Once access is gained or granted to a certain location, this still does not imply that people within this site are prepared to participate in the research project. This again might require a great deal of effort from the investigator. The gatekeeper often claims that sufficient respondents are available but in practice they still might be reluctant to cooperate, or they prove to be wrongly selected by the gatekeeper. For example, there might be too much similarity between persons, or most people selected prove to assess the policy, which is under scrutiny, in a very positive way.

*Sample frame in qualitative research*
In qualitative research, the researcher will mostly look for participants in a targeted manner, the so-called **purposeful or purposive sampling**. Targeted sampling – as counterpart of at random sampling – means that respondents are selected deliberately and not randomly or through calculation of probability, as is

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12. The concept 'gatekeeper' is used for persons that determine access to potential respondents. For example, this might be a secretary in an organization if you would like to interview the manager, members of a board of directors if you would like to interview employees, committee members if you would like to interview the members of their association, parents if you would like to interview children, or doctors if you would like to interview patients.

usual in quantitative research. Purposeful sampling can be done based on certain premeditated criteria, criterion based sampling, or on the basis of interim analysis of collected data, which leads the researcher to search for respondents who can either confirm, complement or overcome these interim results. The latter is named theoretical sampling.

In a criterion-based sample certain criteria are set to be met by respondents that are to be interviewed. For example, women who are diagnosed with depression by a psychologist, who are between 35-40 years old, work four days a week and have two children at primary school. Formulated this way, the researcher is looking for a very specific group of people. If a group of respondents is searched for, who must meet certain criteria like the ones stated above, that sample is known as a homogeneous way of selecting people. If, however, the researcher is interested in all aspects of depression in a broad sense, he should search across people in a more heterogeneous manner. For example, he might try to include an older man, a young girl and a middle-aged woman, etc. What these people have in common is their experience of depression. In this way, the research will probably result in a larger variety of knowledge concerning the concept depression. It is a less in-depth, and more breadthwise approach in comparison with the first method of sample selection.

## 1.6 The role and importance of reflection in qualitative research

Qualitative research cannot be envisaged very well without reflection as an inextricable part of the entire research process. This surely is partly due to the fact that the researcher himself plays an important role in the entire investigation; he serves as a research tool in it. It is also related to the proximity to respondents and the continuous need to respond to what is occurring in the research process in which reflection is not only an aid, but also a necessity to keep track of the quality of the research. Below, a number of times when reflection on what is occurring is specifically important are mentioned.

First of all, at the start of the data collection and, more importantly, during and after the interview, **reflection** is important. Upon deciding to interview a certain group of respondents, it is important for the researcher to examine his **assumptions about this group**. It is essential to write these assumptions down and not just to remember them. Writing about them will make the researcher formulate them more precisely and this adds to his awareness of them. This thinking and writing about his assumptions might be repeated later on in the research process in order to describe any additions that surfaced later on surrounding the premises about the research group or topic. During data collection, the researcher would be wise to 'bracket' these assumptions, i.e. putting them aside consciously.

By doing so, he tries to prevent approaching the respondent based on his presumptions or prejudices. Placing one's assumptions in brackets should be done **before formulating the interview questions**, as these formulations may initially have been influenced by the assumptions of the researcher. In this reflection then, it is important for the researcher to note his implicit image of the people who will be interviewed.

Moreover, an openness to and reflection on comments of other people during the investigation process is habitual. These comments can both be received on a personal level and on a research level. During an intensive fieldwork period, the **balance between distance and involvement** might be seriously jeopardized. In (anthropological) technical literature the term used is 'going native', that is to say that the researcher identifies himself too much with the investigated group. The Dutch investigative journalist Stella Braam experienced this at first hand when she did undercover participant observation amongst addicted drifters in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. She became so involved in her fieldwork that she herself became addicted to drugs. At a conference in 2003 (Evers, 2004b) she reported that she should have organized guidance during her fieldwork period. She had needed someone to share her experiences with during fieldwork, such that they could have dissuaded her from over-commitment and might have drawn her attention to the use of drugs. This does not imply that the researcher will be restrained by such comment, but telling the story inevitably implies a step backwards, thinking and reflecting.

In addition, we believe that the balance between distance and involvement also is something that the researcher himself needs to give careful thought in his **reflective memos** and this not only applies to observation. It equally applies to , but the chance of intense involvement here is slightly less, as the contact is limited to one or a few face-to-face encounters. Intense involvement is much more an issue during participant observation and has to do with marking limits and at the same time being involved with respondents empathically.
In the quest for balance between distance and involvement, **ethics** play a role as well. Research is never unselfish, just as it is in the interest of the researcher to collect good information, the respondents have their own interests. They might try to use the researcher to work for them. In selecting respondents, in assessing the information they provide, and while reflecting on your performance in the research project, it is very useful to think about interests the various parties involved in the research might have, including your own (Evers, 2003).

## 1.7 CONCLUSION: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION STRATEGY

As was shown in the preceding paragraphs, designing a qualitative research project does not happen overnight and there are many aspects to consider. In practice, the design is often neglected and we, therefore, propose to give it much attention. The progress of the research project and the extent to which it answers the research question(s) is closely connected with the preliminary work at the beginning. Both words 'Art' and 'Skill' from the title of this book are very appropriate here: the Art is only possible if sufficient Skill is present and applied!