

Aside from some of the more obvious difficulties related to the unproblematic application of concepts such as 'power' and 'claims to expert knowledge', this research proposal conflicted with CA's stated aim that analysis should always begin with what Psathas (1990: 45) has called 'unmotivated looking' (see Moira's discussion above). This is summed up by Sacks's assertion that 'when we start out with a piece of data, the question of what we are going to end up with, what kind of findings it will give, should not be a consideration' (1984b: 27). So, despite the stated aims (however limited) of the research proposal, at the start of the PhD course I struggled to come to the data 'anew', without the constraint of wondering where I was going to 'end up'.

Of course, the central issue of this struggle is one of discipline, not only in terms of focusing on one or two analytic concepts at a time, but also with regard to allowing the details of the talk to go where they will. As Sacks has pointed out, 'it ought never to be a matter of concern to anybody who's doing a piece of description which way it comes out, as long as it comes out some way' (1992: Vol. 1, 472).

Discipline was imposed by moving away from the consideration of individually interesting features, framing them instead with regard to the overall structural organization of the meetings. CA deals with and explicates 'patterns of stable, recurrent structural features' (Heritage, 1984: 241, and above) within talk. By examining the trajectory of the reportings on the child, fitted to both the search for parental response by the teacher and how the form of the response shaped the unfolding trajectory, a framework for the research began to become clearer.

3.4.8 Some implications of Simon's story

The experience of writing an undergraduate dissertation had given Simon an understanding of the uses and limits of a key concept: 'social structure' (1). Once again, this underlines the point that true understanding comes by applying ideas one has learned in the library to new topics.

However, being aware of the deficiencies of a concept is not sufficient. One also needs to learn an analytic approach to data and then discover how to use it. Conversation analysis (CA) turned out to be Simon's key to the social world (2). Of course, ultimately such approaches cannot be true or false but only more or less useful (see my discussion of **models** in Chapter 7). For Simon, the usefulness of CA seemed to be twofold. First, it gave him a clear idea of what kind of data he wanted and of how to analyse it. Second, it made personal sense to him by according with his previous research experience and also, perhaps, by being aesthetically pleasing.

Yet the appeal of theory can be double edged. Aesthetic satisfaction can sometimes mean that you never can extricate yourself from the charms of the library to confront the external world (see my discussion of 'grand theory' in Chapter 6). Simon was aware of this danger from the outset and was

determined to combine his theoretical 'narrowness' with a concern for practical relevance (3).

At this point, like Sally, Simon had a lucky break. His partner was a primary school teacher prepared to give him access to her work. A Parent-Teachers' Evening was looming and this appeared to be a setting which was problematic to its participants and under-researched (4). Needing to tape his data (a requirement of CA), Simon drew upon his own fortuitous association with the school and received permission from the head teacher.

However, achieving access brought its own worry. Simon was now troubled about the small size of his sample. While studying one teacher's work seemed to be enough for his MA thesis, would it be sufficient for a PhD? As it turned out, Simon came to the conclusion that a small sample will do if you have thought through its limitations (5) and if the quality of the analysis is sufficient.

Indeed, when it came to the stage of data analysis, Simon was confronted by multiple, emergent research problems. This created an initial tension between the inductive approach he was using and his funding body's demand for an initial hypothesis. For a while, he could not see the wood for the trees. Fortunately, in time, an overall unifying theme became clearer as his various observations revealed a sequential structure to the parents' meetings (6). So Simon's thesis became organized around the trajectory of reportings of 'news' to parents by their class teacher.

3.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Obviously, there are many different stories that research students can tell about their experience and I do not pretend that what you have read was typical or representative. Nonetheless, there are several clear messages in these stories that are worth listening to.

I set these out below as a *fifteen-point guide*. Obviously, like any recipe, you will, of course, need to apply it to your own circumstances. Nevertheless, I believe the points below apply to *all levels* of student research from BA and MA dissertations through to the PhD.

- 1 *Begin in familiar territory*: if you can, work with data that is close to hand and readily accessible. For instance, if, as in Moira's case, you have data from another study which you can (re)analyse, grab the opportunity. There are no 'brownie points' to be obtained for gathering your data in difficult circumstances. Make it easy on yourself at this stage so that you can concentrate your energies on the infinitely more important task of data analysis.
- 2 *Find a settled theoretical orientation*: as I stress throughout this book, research is never just about techniques. All three stories refer to finding a theoretical approach which made sense to them and then could provide a settled basis for inference and data analysis.

- 3 *Narrow down your topic:* strive to find a topic that is appropriate to your theory and data and is workable (this issue is discussed at length in Chapter 6). Later, if you wish, like Moira, Sally and Simon, you can use your research to make contributions to a substantive area (e.g. health and illness, education), to a methodology (e.g. interview research, ethnography, CA) and to reflect upon issues of social policy.
- 4 *Don't try to reinvent the wheel:* in Chapter 5, I discuss what 'originality' might mean in research. For the moment, it is worth recalling that Moira used an earlier study as a model for her research and that both she and Simon used a well-established method of transcribing their audiotapes. So, at the outset, look at previous successful dissertations in your university library or departmental files and, where possible, focus on work directed by your supervisor.
- 5 *Keep writing:* commit your ideas to paper. Don't worry how short or draft your papers are. Indeed, in some way, it makes more sense, initially at least, to submit 500-word pieces so that you can be guided in the right direction before you have expended too much time and effort.
- 6 *Begin data analysis early:* don't be deflected away from early data analysis by literature reviews and the exigencies of data gathering. If you haven't got any data yourself at an early stage, try analysing someone else's data—published data, your supervisor's data, etc. (see Chapter 11).
- 7 *Think critically about data:* when you start to identify a pattern in your data, don't rush to conclusions. See how robust this pattern is by working comparatively with different parts of your data (as Moira did) and by trying to identify deviant cases (like Sally).
- 8 *Use your supervisor:* to test out your ideas and give you confidence.
- 9 *Use other resources and opportunities:* graduate students should take every opportunity to attend relevant conferences and, better still, to give conference papers, and to take appropriate training courses. Find out if there are study groups of research students working on similar topics. If not, try to establish such a group.
- 10 *Do not expect a steady learning curve:* be prepared for the sequence of highs and lows that will inevitably happen. For instance, Sally found that her early ideas about how her MHT made decisions were too simplistic and Simon puzzled over how to integrate his apparently diverse findings. Treat setbacks as opportunities: Sally came up with a better explanatory model and Simon eventually saw an overall pattern.
- 11 *Keep a research diary:* Moira, Sally and Simon kept a file of their current ideas, hopes and worries. This file is an invaluable resource which, as I suggest in Chapter 22, can be used, in edited form, in your methodology chapter.
- 12 *Earmark blocks of working time:* if you are researching part time, it is crucial to find blocks of time in which you can focus solely on your research. Use this time for intensive data analysis and writing.

- 13 *Do not reproach yourself:* if you experience a setback, it may be best to take some time out to relax before you return to your research.
- 14 *Treat field relations as data:* how others treat you in the field is never a technical matter. Like Moira and Sally, reflect upon how your interaction with your subjects is shaping your data.
- 15 *Understand that there is no 'perfect' model of research design:* practical contingencies (e.g. access or the lack of it; the time you have available) are always likely to affect any piece of research. Don't be afraid of working with what you happen to have. Your examiners will not be comparing your research with some 'perfect' model but they will expect you to have thought through the limitations of your data and your analysis (see Chapter 5).

KEY POINTS

- It helps to begin your research in familiar territory.
- Find a settled theoretical orientation that works for you.
- Once you get a feel of your field, narrow down your topic as soon as you can.
- Don't try to reinvent the wheel – find what has worked for others and follow them.
- Keep writing.
- Begin data analysis immediately.
- Think critically about your data – don't rush to conclusions.
- Test out your ideas with your supervisor – don't worry if, in the early stages, you are often wide of the mark.
- Use other resources and opportunities inside and outside your own department.
- Do not expect a steady learning curve – no research study is without some disasters.
- Keep a research diary.
- Earmark blocks of working time to complete different activities.
- Do not reproach yourself about setbacks.
- Treat your relations within the field as data.
- Understand that there is no perfect model of research design.

NOTES

- 1 Although many examples could be cited, this brief quotation from an article by Will Buckley (Oxford University, 30 May 1999) serves as a case in point:

Here we go again. Yet more supposed research (this time from the sociology department at Edinburgh University) claiming that men are lousy parents, incapable of spending more than

15 minutes a day with their children Crap dads are back on the agenda because yet another bored sociologist has made a few phone calls and cobbled together some stats.

- 2 Items 12 and 13 were suggested by Vicki Taylor after reading an earlier draft of this chapter.

Further reading

The best place to look for similar research histories is in the writings of students at your own university. BA students should seek to obtain past successful undergraduate dissertations from their department. Graduate students should study MA and PhD theses in the library, focusing particularly on the work of people who had the same supervisor as you. If the methodology chapter does not include an autobiographical account, try to contact their authors and discuss what lessons they draw from their experience.

Judith Bell's *Doing Your Research Project* (2nd edn, Open University Press, 1993) is a good introduction to research at the undergraduate level. Estelle Phillips and Derek Pugh's *How to Get a PhD* (2nd edn, Open University Press, 1994) is the best British account of the practical issues involved in writing a PhD. For an American guide, see Kjell Rudestam and Rae Newton's *Surviving Your Dissertation* (Sage, 1992).

Exercise 3.1

Keep a research diary for a given period (one month for an undergraduate dissertation, three months for an MA project, at least six months for a PhD). Record:

- changes in your ideas about topic, data, theory and method
- new ideas from the literature or from lectures and talk
- meetings with your supervisor and their consequences
- life-events and their consequences for your work.

At the end of your chosen period, reread your research diary and assess:

- What you have achieved in that period.
- What would be required for you to do better in future.
- Your achievement targets for the next equivalent period.

4

The Research Experience II

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

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

- Think about the theoretical basis of your research.
- Understand what data and methods are relevant to your research topic.
- Grasp the elements of qualitative data analysis.
- See what is involved in designing a practical, achievable research study.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this part of the book, I have been attempting to set out the context in which qualitative research dissertations are written. We began with a brief overview of qualitative research. Then, in Chapter 3, we considered the lessons that could be drawn from three completed research dissertations.

Yet, for many readers of this book, their own completed graduate or undergraduate dissertation is a distant, desired object. So, in this chapter, we draw upon the accounts of research students at an early stage of their research. Through these accounts, we examine the analytical, methodological and practical problems that confront the beginning researcher.

In some senses, the beginning researcher has far less to prove than established scholars. If you imagine a sliding scale of levels of achievement, then journal articles, as the stock in trade of established scholars, are (or should be) at the pinnacle of scholarly accomplishment. Somewhat surprisingly, books are a little further down the scale since they do not depend on the same degree of independent review. Further down the scale are completed research dissertations which, I suggest, are properly viewed as displays of successful apprenticeship.

However, my sense of a sliding scale in research is intended simply to mark a stage of a research career – it is not a moral category. Although it is more than thirty years since I was at that stage, I do not look down upon the work of first-year

research students. Indeed, frankly, I sometimes come across more exciting ideas in a first-year graduate seminar than in many journal articles!

What follows is by no means a representative survey of qualitative research at its early stages. Instead, the material below has been drawn from research students in my own department and in various social science and humanities departments of Finnish universities.¹

While the range of research covered below is limited, I hope you will eventually agree that it is not narrow. In other words, I hope and expect that readers will find at least some echo of their own ideas and interests represented below.

In collating these presentations for this chapter, I had to decide upon an organizing principle. In particular, I had to choose whether to organize the material by topic, theory or methodology. I reasoned that grouping by topic would be lively but might appear to exclude readers working on different topics. By contrast, a theory grouping might be too abstract and, perhaps, confusing for an audience coming from a disparate range of disciplines. By taking a methodological perspective, I hope to be more inclusive by encompassing many of the methods used (and contemplated) by qualitative researchers.

The discussion below is thus organized by method, with sections on interview studies, **ethnographies**, textual analysis, work with video- and audiotapes, and multiple methods. However, such a focus on method is not narrowly technical. As I make clear below, methods only acquire meaning and vitality by their embeddedness in particular theoretical perspectives.

As in Chapter 3, I will proceed case by case, offering some comments with each example and then summarizing the points that emerge from each methodology. The chapter concludes with some suggestions about managing the early stages of research.

After each topic below, I have noted the social science discipline in which the student is working as well as the student's name.

4.2 INTERVIEWS

4.2.1 *Living and coping in a community of elderly people*

(Information Studies/Sociology) [Tippi]

Tippi writes about her joint research: 'We wanted to ask how the inhabitants feel about living in the community where they have lived for many years.' Her study is based upon thematic interviews with a random sample of eight elderly people from the community. As she puts it, the aim of this study 'is to (clarify) ... the basic meaning of living (in this community)'. This is how she describes her interviews: 'the elderly people were asked about their daily schedules, their attitudes to relatives, services, neighborhood and environment, their interests and their opinions about society today compared with their earlier life-experiences'.

Preliminary findings suggest two things. First, members of the community told the same kinds of lifestories. Second, such people described themselves as more independent than she had thought. They described 'coping' by attempting to keep control of four issues: financial, social, health-related and security.

An analytic issue potentially arises in such studies where interviews are used to elicit respondents' perceptions. How far is it appropriate to think that people attach a single meaning to their experiences? In this case, may not there be multiple meanings of living in the community, represented by what people say to the researcher, to each other, to carers and so on (Gubrium, 1997)?

This raises the important methodological issue about whether interview responses are to be treated as giving direct access to 'experience' or as actively constructed **narratives** (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). Both positions are entirely legitimate but the position taken will need to be justified and explained.

4.2.2 *Students' views of evaluation and feedback*

(Behavioural Sciences) [Laura]

Laura is examining students' responses to the assessment of their Distance Education essays. Her research question is: 'does it deliver the feedback that is needed and when it is needed?'. Her data is derived from thematic interviews with eleven students chosen from four different localities. Her preliminary findings suggest that students want more detailed, critical feedback on their essays so that they can know what are the gaps in their knowledge and what they can do about them.

Laura describes the theoretical basis of her research as a **hermeneutic** method based on how researcher and subjects interpret the world and attempt to merge their horizons of meaning. This is ambitious and its value will need to be demonstrated in the data analysis. Indeed, it might be simpler to settle on presenting her research as a descriptive study based upon a clear social problem. Either way, the issues about the status of interview data, also raised in Tippi's project, will need to be engaged.

4.2.3 *Football and masculinity*

(Sociology) [Steven]

Steven's approach is based upon theories of masculinity within the general area of gender studies. More specifically, his work is concerned with football supporters and masculinity. He is particularly interested in understanding the experience of football supporters as opposed to the way in which their behaviour is represented (for instance, in the media).

Care needs to be taken in how such appeals to 'experience' are described. This is one way of 'slicing the cake' and other approaches (e.g. studies of media representations of sport), using other forms of data, are not directly competitive.

The data he is using derives from interviews with football supporters. As Steven acknowledges, he still needs to sort out tricky methodological issues relating to his sampling procedure, his involvement with his interviewees and how he analyses his data. A possible resource is Cornwell's study of health, gender and poverty, *Hard Eamed Lives* (1981), an interview study which shares some of his ambitions.

It is always sensible, in this situation, to familiarize yourself more deeply with the methodological literature on analysing interview data. Even if you choose to take a position opposed to such texts, you will need to be able to justify it. Without doing this, you are in danger of trying to reinvent the wheel.

4.2.4 Text processing in foreign-language classrooms

(English) [Pia]

In Finland, foreign languages are primarily taught through textbooks. Yet textbook-based learning is often defined as monotonous or boring by students. Pia's topic is whether there are different ways of talking about foreign-language teaching and is there a conflict between them? Her broader concern is with what hinders change in classroom practices.

Her data consists of twelve interviews (half with teachers and half with students). She also has five 'think aloud' sessions in which students were asked to do an exercise from a text and think aloud at the same time. This is an interesting idea because it attempts to relate what people say to a particular task they are doing – although it has to cope with the likelihood that people's practical skills are far more complicated than they could tell you in so many words (Garfinkel, 1967).

Pia describes her analytical approach as **discourse analysis** (DA). This implies that she is more interested in identifying different ways of *talking* about foreign-language reading than in addressing the actual experiences of learning a foreign language through a textbook. Given that the latter can be seen as a social problem, there may be a mismatch between DA, which assumes that issues of social definition are paramount, and a direct address of social problems. This might suggest either dropping DA or reconceptualizing the problem.

If we are interested in what happens in the classroom, there is a further issue about the appropriateness of interview data. Shouldn't we observe what people do there instead of asking them what they think about it? Is how we talk about schooling directly related to what happens in schooling?

4.2.5 The family grief and recovery process as narratives

(Psychiatry) [Katarin]

Katarin is analysing interviews with couples after the loss of their baby. She is interested in how family members construct stories about their grief and recovery processes after such a loss. She has identified three discourses at work here:

- a religious discourse ('everything is clear ... I think my faith is strengthened')
- a medical discourse ('our baby did not have a chance to live, this is better, the lungs were undeveloped')
- a protest discourse ('who can decide who is allowed to live and who isn't?').

Katarin calls her work narrative analysis. By treating her respondents' accounts as skilfully structured stories, she gets a lively, theoretically informed grip on her data.

Only two cautions are appropriate here. First, the mere identification of different discourses in respondents' talk can lead to a simple, reductive list. At some stage, it is analytically productive to move beyond such a list in order to attempt to map the skilful way in which such discourses are laminated on one another (see Silverman, 2001; 198–202).

Second, the assembly of **narratives** in interviews (or conversations) is always a two-way process. Therefore, we must treat the interviewer's questions not as (possibly distorted) gateways to the authentic account but as part of the process through which a narrative is collectively assembled (see Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

4.2.6 Narratives by bereaved relatives

(Sociology) [Moira]

We first came across Moira's research in Chapter 3. Here I describe her early thoughts on her project in a presentation at a graduate workshop. Using interview data drawn from an earlier study, Moira, like Katarin, is concerned with how bereaved relatives organize their initial stories of their bereavement. Moira's approach is drawn from **ethnomethodology's** concern with how people demonstrate the rationality and moral accountability of their talk. In their stories, people show that they hear (and pre-emptively manage) possible charges against them. By doing this, the analysis can fully show how people are not 'judgemental dopes' but rather display a lively concern for the maintenance and repair of the moral order.

Her method derives from Sacks's **membership categorization analysis**, using Baruch's work on the 'moral tales' of mothers of handicapped children as an example. As we saw in the previous chapter, basing your work on an earlier study deriving from a clear-cut theoretical approach can be a shortcut to a successful research dissertation (see also Chapter 6).

In her presentation, Moira showed how she had started to analyse five data extracts using this method. At a later point, in line with her theoretical approach, the analysis can be deepened by working more intensively with small pieces of data to delineate precisely how particular descriptions serve to support particular activities like 'doing a complaint', 'excusing oneself' and so on. In this way, like Katarin, she can avoid the temptation simply to *list* different categories.

4.2.7 Interviews: summary

Common themes have emerged from our six interview studies which I summarize below. For the sake of simplicity, I present this summary in the form of a list of questions that you need to think about if you are planning to do an interview study.

It should be apparent that here, as elsewhere, I am concerned with data *analysis* rather than the mechanics of data gathering. I strongly believe that to provide recipes for data gathering is to risk either gross oversimplification or utter triteness. Moreover, in qualitative research, what happens in the *field* as you attempt to gather your data is itself a source of data rather than just a technical problem in need of a solution (see Chapter 17).

What status do you attach to your data?

Many interview studies are used to elicit respondents' perceptions. How far is it appropriate to think that people attach a single meaning to their experiences? May there not be multiple meanings of a situation (e.g. living in a community home) or of an activity (e.g. being a male football fan) represented by what people say to the researcher, to each other, to carers and so on (Gubrium, 1997)?

This raises the important methodological issue about whether interview responses are to be treated as giving direct access to 'experience' or as actively constructed 'narratives' involving activities which themselves demand analysis (Silverman, 2001; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). Both positions are entirely legitimate but the position you take will need to be justified and explained.

Is your analytic position appropriate to your practical concerns?

Some ambitious analytic positions (e.g. hermeneutics, discourse analysis) may actually cloud the issue if your aim is simply to respond to a given social problem (e.g. living and coping in a community of elderly people, students' views of evaluation and feedback). If so, it might be simpler to acknowledge that there are more complex ways of addressing your data but to settle on presenting your research as a *descriptive* study based upon a clear social problem.

Does interview data really help in addressing your topic?

If you are interested in, say, what happens in school classrooms, should you be using interviews as your major source of data? Think about exactly why you have settled on an interview study. Certainly, it can be relatively quick to gather interview data but not as quick as, say, texts and documents. How far are you being influenced by the prominence of interviews in the media (see Atkinson and Silverman, 1997)?

In the case of the classroom, couldn't you observe what people *do* there instead of asking them what they *think* about it? Or gather documents that routinely arise in schools, e.g. pupils' reports, mission statements and so on?

Of course, you *must* do an interview. But, whatever your method you will need to sift it by *care* through the practical and analytical issues involved *your* *loc*.

Are you making too intense a pursuit?

It always helps to make *intense* *research*. Grandiose claims about originality, scope and *research* are all hostages to fortune. Be careful in *how* you *research* your approach. Show that you understand that it *isn't* *the* *cake* and that other approaches, using other *data* *are* *also* *competitive*.

Proper analysis goes beyond

Identifying the main *research* *code* *some* theoretical scheme should only be the first *step* *for* *analysis* *by* *examining* how these elements are linked together, *the* *work* of both interviewer and interviewee and, *to* *be* *original*.

We now turn to *ethnographic* *element* of observation. As we shall see, these *issues* *are* *also* *methodological* and analytic issues.

4.3 ETHNOGRAPHIES

Ethnographies are based *on* *real* *settings*. The initial thrust in favour of *ethnographic* *research*. Anthropologists argue that, if one is really to understand *the* *stage* in an extended period of observation. *Anthropology* *involves* immersion in a *culture* over a period *of* *time* *and* *participating* in social events with them.

By contrast, non-*anthropological* *research* *particular* milieux or *sub-cultures* in their *own* *right*. *One* *type* of this latter approach in the studies discussed *below* *are* *schools*, hospitals and the Internet become objects *of* *research*.

4.3.1 The analysis of *communal* *interaction*

(Education) [Caroline]

Working in small groups *is* *an* *important* *part* of modern education. The exact nature of such 'learning' *is* *an* *important* *under-researched* topic tied to a recognizable *research* *area*: 'the ways in which knowledge is constructed *in* *the* *small* *group* *work* *learning* without direct *teaching* *is* *an* *important* *research*'.

Caroline has gathered data from children aged from 10 to 12 in small classroom groups working on mathematics, science and language. Her focus is on 'the socio-cognitive and interpersonal dynamics of peer interaction' using categories 'based on the communicative functions identified in the interactions'.

This is a theoretically defined topic which nonetheless might have a clear practical input. It uses a clearly defined method derived from certain forms of discourse analysis. However, Caroline's study also raises a more general issue about how a researcher goes about identifying features in the data.

Caroline's use of the passive voice in her reference to 'the communicative functions identified in the interactions' draws attention to a neglected issue in social research: that is, how does the analyst go about 'identifying features' in the data? One common answer is to claim to follow proper procedural rules. For instance, coders of data are usually trained in procedures with the aim of ensuring a uniform approach.

This is a tried and trusted method designed to improve the **reliability** of a research method. However, it is sensible to be conscious that **coding** is not the preserve of research scientists. In some sense, these students, like all of us, 'code' what they hear and see in the world around them. Moreover, this 'coding' has been shown to be mutual and interactive (Sacks, 1992; Silverman, 1998).

Of course, as I said earlier, the research 'cake' can be legitimately sliced in many ways. So I am *not* suggesting that the vast mass of researchers who treat 'coding' as purely an analyst's problem abandon their work. Instead, my minimalist suggestion is that they mention and respond to this well-established critique (for an example, see Clavarino et al., 1995).

4.3.2 Analysing how radiologists work

(Information Processing Science) [Julia]

Radiology, like many health professions, has recently experienced a sea change of technologies with the conventional X-ray image being complemented by computer-based, digitized images. As Julia points out, any new technology creates new constraints as well as new possibilities. Her focus is on such technologically mediated interaction in workplace settings.

Using videotapes, observation and interviews, Julia has gathered data about radiological image interpretation conferences. By examining actual workplace interaction she hopes to contribute to the growing body of knowledge about human-computer interaction and to inform future technological design (see Suchman, 1987; Heath, 2004).

I hope you will agree with me that this is an exciting combination of a theoretically defined approach with clear practical relevance. However, Julia writes that she is concerned about what is *missing* from both her interviews and videos. As she puts it:

Thus far in my research it has become clear that there are aspects of work which I can't 'reach' through interviews (people can't readily articulate aspects that are so familiar to them as to be unremarkable) or through observation and interactional analysis of video recordings (those aspects of work that are not evident in what people can actually be seen to do).

In a sophisticated way, Julia raises a problem that often troubles research students: the necessarily 'partial' character of any data source. I believe this problem is potentially huge yet, in a practical sense, easily resolved. One simply avoids trying to find the 'whole picture'. Instead, one analyses different kinds of data separately, aware that all the data is partial.

So make do with what you have and understand that there are multiple phenomena available in any research setting. If you must go beyond any particular data set, save that until you have completed smaller-scale analyses. Worrying about the 'whole picture' at the outset is, in my view, a recipe for stalling your research (see Silverman and Gubrium, 1994).

4.3.3 Newsgroups on the Internet

(Sociology) [Danny]

Danny's topic is the Internet. He is concerned with how people assemble themselves as a community via the Net, without recourse to speech inflections or body language. Broader issues relate to how the Net is regulated, how it developed and what is exchanged on it. He proposes to focus on newsgroups on the Net since their messages are publicly available and offer an interesting way to look at how a 'community' is assembled and develops.

Danny's approach derives from his interest in the Net as a possible new locus of power and, to this end, he plans to draw upon the German critical theorist Jurgen Habermas's conception of distorted communication. In this way, he will compare how people actually communicate with Habermas's **normative** theory.

Danny's study shows the implications of making theoretical choices. Using Habermas's concept of 'distorted communication' will give a particular thrust to his study very different from other kinds of theory.

Even if you decide to eschew such grand theories, that itself is a theoretical choice! In this sense, there is no escape (nor should there be) from theory. At the same time, however, there is nothing wrong with a descriptive study providing that the researcher is conscious about the choice that is being made.

4.3.4 Ethnographies: summary

Once more, I have been concerned with how you analyse your data. I deal below with three issues that have arisen above.

What is involved in coding data?

As we have seen, coders of data are usually trained in procedures with the aim of ensuring a uniform approach. Later in this book, we examine how computer-aided qualitative data analysis can help in such coding (see Chapter 13).

However, as I pointed out, it is sensible to be conscious that 'coding' is not the preserve of research scientists. All of us 'code' what we hear and see in the world around us.

One response is to make this everyday 'coding' (or 'interpretive practice') the object of enquiry. Alternatively, we can proceed in a more conventional manner but mention and respond to this well-established critique.

Is my data 'partial'?

Of course it is. But this is not a problem – unless you make the impossible claim to give 'the whole picture'. So celebrate the partiality of your data and delight in the particular phenomena that it allows you to inspect (hopefully in detail).

Is my theory appropriate?

Your theory must be appropriate to the research questions in which you are interested. Indeed, rather than being a constraint, a theory should generate a series of directions for your research.

4.4 TEXTS

To introduce a separate section on 'texts' can look a little artificial. After all, aren't people on the Internet constructing texts? Again, if we treat an interview as a narrative, this can mean looking for the same textual features as researchers working with printed material. Indeed, the mere act of transcription of an interview turns it into a written text.

In this section, I use 'text' as a heuristic device to identify data consisting of words and images which have become recorded without the intervention of a researcher (e.g. through an interview). Below I examine five studies of texts.

4.4.1 Analysing classroom religious textbooks

(Teacher Education) [Pertti]

Since 1985 Finnish schools have had a religious instruction syllabus mainly based on three textbooks deriving from the Finnish Lutheran Church. Pertti's approach treats such textbooks as a form of literary genre (see Silverman, 2001: 198–200) which filters certain values into the school. He is examining such features as tables of contents in order to ask 'how is otherness constructed in these texts through particular methods of classification?' His analysis derives from Michel Foucault's (1977, 1979) discussion of the construction of subjects and disciplines.

This study benefits from a manageable body of data – three textbooks are more than enough to carry out the analysis Pertti proposes. The analysis derives from a clearly defined theoretical approach, although it may be uneconomical to work with both Foucauldian ideas and writers on literary genre. In particular, from a Foucauldian position, one would want to study education in its own right, not in terms of ideas developed to study literature.

4.4.2 The form of Japanese 'modernity'

(Sociology) [Yoji]

Yoji is interested in how far Japanese modernity depends upon concepts and practices deriving from the West (e.g. the assumption that history involves 'progress') and how far it is a feature of Western colonialization. His data will be drawn from representations of urban space in Tokyo. Although a major focus will be on the family, Yoji is also interested in other institutions including prisons, the police, the hospital, the school and the factory.

Yoji's approach derives from Foucault's (1977) account of the micropolitics of space. From this perspective, he is concerned with how space is racialized, colonized and gendered. It also leads to a concern with how space constructs 'modern' subjects (e.g. 'us' and 'them') and the 'inside' and 'outside' (for instance, the inner city, the ghetto, etc.).

Like Pertti, Yoji is working with a clear analytic approach. However, he might learn from Pertti's limited database by focusing on one archive or body of data. He is currently working with historical data from around the Meiji Restoration and it may be fruitful just to focus on one such period and/or to limit the material to visual images or certain texts.

4.4.3 The medicalization of the middle-aged female body in the twentieth century

(Sociology) [Greta]

Greta is interested in the way in which middle-aged women have become a topic for medicine and the 'psy' sciences. Like Pertti and Yoji, Greta's analysis is based upon a Foucauldian discourse analytic approach, concerned with the construction of subjects within various forms of power/knowledge. Using this approach, she is able to chart how the medical gaze has moved from a biomedical model to medico-psy models and, most recently, a medico-psycho-social model.

Her data derives from the *British Medical Journal*, medical textbooks and a history of menopause clinics in the 1970s. Simple keyword analysis has proved fruitful in the early stages of her research, illustrating for instance how the clinical type of 'the chronic pelvic woman' emerged into discourse.

As Greta's research develops, like Katarin and Moira's interview studies (discussed above), she will want to map how different discourses are laminated on

each other. She will also have to decide whether to look for yet more sources of data (e.g. articles and letters on advice pages in women's magazines) or to narrow down the amount of data she has already collected.

4.4.4 The representation of 'crime' in local newspapers

(Sociology) [Kay]

Analysis of newspapers in the UK has usually focused on the mass circulation press and has used theoretical models deriving from either Marxism or literary studies. Kay's work is distinctive in that it uses data drawn from small, local newspapers and draws on the small corpus of newspaper studies using Sacks's membership categorization analysis (see Silverman, 1998: Chapters 5 and 7). The research incorporates a nice comparative perspective as the two newspapers Kay is studying derive from different geographical locations: suburban London and a Northern Ireland city. The value of this comparison can be explored by examining the local categories that the newspapers use in their descriptions of crime (e.g. national and local boundaries).

Like Pertti, Kay has a manageable body of data. By limiting her data simply to two newspapers' headlines on 'crime' stories she is in a good position to say 'a lot about a little'. Like Greta, her clear analytic approach will pay off when used as more than a simple listing device in order to reveal the precise sets of relationships locally constructed in her data.

4.4.5 'Enterprise discourse' in higher education

(Sociology) [Neil]

Neil's research is concerned with strategic development documents from a higher education college arising from recent changes in the tertiary sector. He is focusing on what he calls 'enterprise discourse' and how it constitutes the professional's conception of identity.

Like Kay, Neil's original approach derives from **ethnomethodology** and was based on Sacks's membership categorization analysis. However, Neil acknowledges the attraction of the Foucauldian approach and aims to recast his concerns in terms of Foucault's conception of the 'architecture of the text'.

Neil's problem is that Foucault provides no clear methodology (but see Kendall and Wickham, 1998). He is attempting to find a usable method from the 'critical linguistics' of Norman Fairclough and from semiotics' concern with **syntagmatic** and **paradigmatic** relations (see Silverman, 2001: 198–200). Using these approaches, the aim is to analyse whole texts rather than a few extracts. The value of these approaches will be clearer when Neil presents an extensive piece of data analysis.

However, I feel there is less to worry about in relation to Neil's concerns that working on a single case might mean that he has too little data. As Mitchell (1983)

shows, the **validity** of qualitative analysis depends more on the quality of the analysis than on the size of the sample. Moreover, the comparative method can be used on a single case by isolating and comparing different elements.

4.4.6 Texts: summary

Limit your data

Like many other qualitative approaches, textual analysis depends upon very detailed data analysis. To make such analysis effective, it is imperative to have a limited body of data with which to work. So, while it may be useful initially to explore different kinds of data (e.g. newspaper reports, scientific textbooks, magazine advice pages), this should usually only be done to establish the data set with which you can most effectively work. Having chosen your data set, you should limit your material further by only taking a few texts or parts of texts (e.g. headlines).

Have a clear analytic approach

All the textual studies discussed above have recognized the value of working with a clearly defined approach. Even Neil who was unsure which approach to use was convinced that such a choice is crucial. Having chosen your approach (e.g. Foucauldian discourse analysis, Saussurian **semiotics**, Sacks's analysis of membership categorizations), treat it as a 'toolbox' providing a set of concepts and methods to select your data and to illuminate your analysis.

Recognize that proper analysis goes beyond a list

I make no apology for repeating a point that I made above in my discussion of interview studies. It seems to me that the distinctive contribution qualitative research can make is by utilizing its theoretical resources in the deep analysis of small bodies of publicly shareable data. This means that, unlike much quantitative research, we are not satisfied with a simple coding of data. Instead, we have to show how the (theoretically defined) elements identified are assembled or mutually laminated.

4.5 AUDIOTAPES

The three types of qualitative data discussed so far all end up in the form of some kind of text. For instance, in interviews, researchers usually work with written transcripts and in ethnographies one often records and analyses written field notes.

In the same way, audiotapes of **naturally occurring** interaction are usually transcribed prior to (and as part of) the analysis. The two main social science traditions which inform the analysis of transcripts of tapes are **conversation analysis (CA)** and **discourse analysis (DA)**. For an introduction to CA, see ten Have (1998); for DA, see Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Potter (2004). Both examples

below involve the use of CA (a further example is found in Simon's research, discussed in Chapter 2).

4.5.1 Team meetings at a hospice

(Sociology) [Anthony]

While studying for his MA, Anthony started to do voluntary work at a hospice in a London suburb. Staff at the hospice were later happy to grant him access to tape-record some of their work. He chose team meetings for two reasons. First, focusing on such data meant that he did not need to trouble patients. Second, team meetings in which patients were discussed were scheduled events so Anthony did not have to waste time waiting for 'relevant' data to appear. Moreover, another researcher had already tape recorded some team meetings at the hospice and was happy to lend him her good-quality tapes.

Anthony had used conversation analytic methods for his MA dissertation and applied the Jeffersonian CA transcription method to his new data (see the Appendix to this book). He then inspected his transcripts informed by CA's focus on the sequential organization of talk. After an initial series of discrete observations, he selected a number of sequences in which disagreements emerged and were resolved by team members. The management of agreements and disagreements has been extensively analysed within CA through the concept of **preference organization** (Heritage, 1984: 265–9). However, Anthony now realizes that his data allowed a new twist to be given to such analyses by looking at how 'third parties' manage disagreements by others. This looks likely to be both analytically interesting and practically relevant to medical staff concerned with effective decision making.

4.5.2 Asymmetry in interactions between native and non-native speakers of English

(English) [Marla]

Marla is working with taped naturally occurring conversations in English between native speakers of English and Finnish (both informal conversations and professional/client encounters). As she notes:

Research in pragmatics and sociolinguistics has shown that various forms of communicative trouble may arise where the linguistic and sociocultural resources of the participants are not shared.

However, she is taking a different approach. Rather than treat asymmetries as a 'trouble', her initial idea is to examine how the participants 'use emerging asymmetries as a resource through which they can renegotiate the current context of discourse and their interpersonal relationship'.

Like much good research, this is based on a nicely counter-intuitive idea which derives from a clear theoretical perspective (CA suggests that participants can treat apparent troubles as local resources). As in Anthony's case, Marla's data, method and analytical approach are elegantly intertwined.

4.5.3 Audiotapes: summary

Choose a single concept or problem

Choosing a clear analytic approach is a help but is not everything. The danger is that you seek to apply too many findings or concepts deriving from that approach. This can make your analysis both confused and thin or a naive listing of observations consonant with each of these concepts. By narrowing down to a single issue (e.g. preference organization or troubles as a local resource), you may begin to make novel observations.

Give a problem a new twist

As the data analysis proceeds, you should aim to give your chosen concept or issue a new twist. In the studies above, we have seen this done by pursuing a counter-intuitive idea and by noting an additional feature little addressed in the literature.

Make data collection as easy as possible

There are no 'brownie points' given by most disciplines for having gathered your own data – perhaps with the exception of anthropology's expectation that most researchers will have spent their statutory year with their 'tribe'. Indeed, by choosing 'difficult' situations to gather data (either because nothing 'relevant' may happen or even because background noise may mean you have a poor-quality tape), you may condemn yourself to have less time to engage in the much more important activity of data analysis.

Marla and Anthony found practical ways of efficiently gathering data. Both chose to study scheduled encounters and Anthony was able to supplement his own data with tapes collected by somebody else. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, secondary analysis of other people's data is to be commended rather than condemned.

4.6 VIDEOTAPES

When people interact face to face, they do not use merely verbal cues – except if they are on the telephone. Researchers who work with videos have access to many of these cues. However, as we shall see, complicated data can often mean complicated analysis!

4.6.1 *Talk, text and visual communication in desktop video-conferencing environments*

(English) [Erkki]

Erkki is studying a one-month teaching experiment in which a university course was given on the Internet in two places in Finland and Sweden. Ideas and papers were regularly exchanged and weekly presentations and feedback sessions were held through video conferencing (Internet seminars). Recordings of the video-mediated sessions between the two centres were obtained and transcribed (see Heath, 2004).

Erkki is combining CA with ideas from Goffman (1974) about 'participation frameworks' adopted in particular settings. This setting is, of course, pretty unusual in that participants' sharing of time and space is technologically mediated. In some sessions, the camera positions were fixed. In others, the camera zoomed in and out on the participants. This is allowing Erkki to get a hold on how different use of video-conferencing technology affects interaction.

Erkki's work combines a manageable body of data and a clear theoretical approach ('participation frameworks') with a likely practical input for systems design. As she recognizes, however, it is very complex to work with video data since both transcription and analysis are more complex than is the case with audio data. Fortunately, there is a growing body of CA-inspired work on technologically mediated interaction which Erkki can use as a model (see Heath, 2004).

4.6.2 *The early interaction between a mother and a baby aged under 1*

(Finnish) [Suzanne]

This is a study of interaction between Suzanne's own baby, Sara, and others based on 9.5 hours of videos of twenty-two episodes up till Sara's first birthday. Suzanne's initial interest was at what age a baby begins to imitate other people. Consequently, she is attempting to describe what (and how) she says to her baby at different ages and what linguistic elements begin to emerge in the baby's vocalizations.

Like Erkki, she is using transcription methods and analytic ideas from CA. Based on this approach, she is treating mother-baby talk as interactional, e.g. how does the mother interpret the baby's utterances and behaviour in concrete situations and how does she act in response to them?

At the time of her presentation, Suzanne submitted a set of written questions which I set out below with my answers:

- *Is one baby (my own) enough data?* For qualitative work, one case study is sufficient. Obviously, there are issues to be thought through where you are yourself a principal actor. However, from a CA point of view, the complexity of

what all of us do is so great that we are unable to grasp it or indeed to change it significantly at the time.

- *Is one videocamera enough particularly as you don't always see mother and baby together?* This is not a major objection. Once you recognize that there can be no 'perfect' recording of interaction, it is always a case of making do with what you have.
- *How far can you reconstruct all aspects of the interaction between a baby and her family from ten hours of videotape?* Never attempt to reconstruct everything about an interaction! Not only is this an impossible task but it is likely to deflect you from establishing a clear focus on one manageable topic.
- *Does an analysis of interactional situations give any hints as to how the baby reciprocally interprets her mother's actions?* Who knows what baby (and mother) are thinking? CA instructs us to look at what each party does without speculating about what they are thinking.
- *Should imitations associated with gestures and expressions be analysed separately from vocal imitations?* No! Use your rich video data to examine the interweaving of talk, gesture and expression.
- *Should more approaches be used (e.g. *hermeneutics*)?* Don't even think about it! Once you have found an approach which suits you, stick with it. Using multiple approaches is uneconomical and likely to delay completion of your research.
- *How do we distinguish 'imitation' from other activities such as 'repetition'?* Look at how baby's utterances are treated by mother, e.g. praise. But be prepared to change topic. 'Imitation' may give you an early hold on the topic but detailed description may lead in different directions.

4.6.3 *The construction of ethnic identity among Spanish immigrants in London*

(Sociology) [Viviana]

Viviana's work focuses on styles of cultural consumption in relation to inter-generational differences within families of first- and second-generation immigrants. She has moved from an interview-based study to one based largely on observation and videotaping of Spanish families watching television together.

Viviana's research involves two overlapping areas – media studies and nationality. It is important for her to think through whether her main focus is on media reception or, as I think, on national identity, using the media as a case study. Again, although video data is potentially exciting material, it is notoriously difficult to analyse. Even though the analysis of interview data has all kinds of difficulties attached to it (see above), it may be more suited to her focus on ethnic identity. With a video, you have to infer identities. Through interviews, you can ask people to speak about their identity.

4.6.4 How 'female experience' is presented and problematized on television

(Sociology) [Nora]

Nora's research is concerned with 'confessional' television as represented by Oprah Winfrey and other 'chat' shows. She has a particular interest in how 'psychological health' is invoked in such programmes.

She argues that most existing research focuses on audience participation in terms of issues relating to democracy and resistance. As she points out, the problem with such studies is that they simply posit general structures of power, class and gender. Instead, Nora, following Foucault, wants to problematize subjectivity. In particular, she is interested in the productivity of power in relation to what it means to be a woman, the kind of ethical agent who might adopt this subject position and the forms of knowledge that have helped to construct it.

By its focus on media products from a Foucauldian perspective, her research promises to break new ground. Her major difficulty is the lack of any detailed direction for empirical work on media products within Foucault's work. Given this absence, I suggest that she speedily review methodologies deriving from other traditions to see if there are any useful points to be derived. In particular, CA offers a detailed way of transcribing video material and is beginning to address issues of **validity** and **reliability** in relation to single case studies (see Peräkylä, 2004).

4.6.5 Videotapes: summary

All the points made above about audio data apply here, so I limit myself to a few additional observations arising from our four video studies.

Beware of complexity

Although video data is very attractive, it is very complex to work with since both transcription and analysis are more difficult than is the case with audio data. So think very carefully about whether you need video data for your research. For instance, unlike CA, neither Foucault nor theories of identity provide a clear template for video analysis.

Keep it simple

You are not making a feature film! One video camera is fine for most purposes. When you have your data, maintain a clear focus. Never attempt to reconstruct all aspects of the interaction from the videotape.

Stick with one approach

By all means test out different ways of analysing your data but always settle on one clear analytic approach. Draw on other approaches only for particular technical skills (e.g. in transcribing video data).

4.7 MULTIPLE METHODS

Researchers are often tempted to use multiple methods. For instance, ethnographers often seek to combine observation with the interviewing of 'key informants'. In the section below, I consider four examples of ethnographic work involving methods additional to observation.

4.7.1 How texts are reconstructed

(Sociology) [Anne]

Anne's research is concerned with how a text changes as it moves from a book to television or radio. She is also concerned with the effects of mediation on performance.

Her approach derives from an extensive literature on theories of mediation dealing with literary products, film, sound/music and art. This seems to form a good basis for her research, although perhaps more work needs to be done on distinguishing these theories from our everyday assumption that something is 'lost' when books are turned into mass media products.

Anne intends to study media practices during the process of production as well as to interview translators, scriptwriters and actors to try to understand the principles that inform mediators. This looks like an interesting project working with accessible data but I wonder if her data analysis might be simplified by focusing on media practice and products and leaving out any reference to the 'intentions' of those involved in the process and/or by just following through the transformation of one text.

4.7.2 Botswana women in public life (from 1800)

(Sociology) [Mercy]

This study is a development of Mercy's earlier research. It centres around questions of women, power and politics in the context of Botswana society and culture. Her research derives from a feminist focus on the factors limiting women's political influence in Botswana. This means concentrating on forms of patriarchy as expressed in the *kgotla* system and in women's fragile citizenship rights. The research questions that flow from this concern women's changing experiences, the limits to women's participation in political life and the role of outside influences.

To answer these questions, Mercy proposes to use three methods: interviews, **focus groups** and the analysis of archive material perhaps using ideas from Foucault. However, she may be limited by the need to obtain government approval for her research.

This is an ambitious project which may be made more manageable by considering using only one data set and not pursuing her reading of Foucault unless

she decides to make the textual data her primary focus. However, as in all field research, it makes sense to treat her dealings with official authorities as data rather than as a technical difficulty prior to data gathering (see Chapter 17).

4.7.3 American 'concert dance' in the post-war era

(Sociology) [Rita]

Rita's background is in dance studies and, more recently, sociology. After the Second World War, Rita found that the US government was building a new relationship with the dance community through sending out cultural 'ambassadors'. The period also coincided with the development of an American dance 'style' eschewing expressionism in favour of formalism.

Rita wants to explain both the politics of US support for dance and the emergence of a style which avoided seeking to express the 'self' or 'inner emotions'. She will focus on two groups of dance companies, as well as examining performances and texts by dance theorists.

Rita describes her approach as deriving from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, drawing upon his account of the body as a site in which agents struggle for domination. Bourdieu's work should help her achieve her ambitious aim to bring together history and social theory.

It remains to be seen whether it will be possible effectively to combine data deriving from different methods. Not only does this increase the scope of the research, but also it raises complicated issues about how to 'map' one set of data upon another (see my critique of **triangulation** in Chapter 14).

4.7.4 How women experience depression

(Sociology) [Philippa]

Philippa's research is concerned with how women, as user communities of psychiatry, experience depression, self and identity. Her interest in this topic arose partly from family and work experience and partly because of her curiosity about the statistics which seem to show that women are twice as likely as men to be diagnosed as 'depressives'.

Her approach derives from Foucauldian **genealogical** analysis and hence leads to a focus on how 'depression' is discursively constituted. This approach differs from feminist concerns with patriarchy and misogyny and from an interactionist focus on labelling by psychiatrists. The research questions that arise for her from this approach are: how do women speak of themselves as subjects who are 'depressed'? How do women position/speak about themselves compared to 'normal' gendered subjects? And how far do we find traces of a 'pharmacological culture' in how depression is constituted and treated?

Her data is drawn from women whom she meets through her work as a counsellor. Unusually, given her approach, Philippa has opted initially at least for a

questionnaire (partly this reflects her lack of confidence in interviewing women she also counsels). A pilot of this questionnaire showed a high rate of non-response. She is currently revising her questionnaire as well as planning to do some archive analysis.

Philippa is aware that there might be more fruitful research designs. In particular, the use of focus groups or of open-ended interviews based on a single question (such as, 'tell me your story') might overcome the problem of using leading or incomprehensible questions. Nonetheless, her project is ambitious and she might consider working entirely with available archives in the usual Foucauldian manner.

4.7.5 Multiple methods: summary

Keep it simple I

Like videotapes, multiple methods are tempting because they seem to give you a fuller picture. However, you need to be aware that multiple sources of data mean that you will have to learn many more data-analysis skills. You will need to avoid the temptation to move to another data set when you are having difficulties in analysing one set of material.

Keep it simple II

Often the desire to use multiple methods arises because you want to get at many different aspects of a phenomenon. However, this may mean that you have not yet sufficiently narrowed down your topic. Sometimes a better approach is to treat the analysis of different kinds of data as a 'dry run' for your main study. As such, it is a useful test of the kind of data which you can most easily gather and analyse.

Keep it simple III

'Mapping' one set of data upon another is a more or less complicated task depending on your analytic framework. In particular, if you treat social reality as constructed in different ways in different contexts, then you cannot appeal to a single 'phenomenon' which all your data apparently represents.

Research design should involve careful thought rather than seeking the most immediately attractive option. However, none of the points above exclude the possibility of using multiple means of gathering data. Ultimately, everything will depend on the quality of your data analysis rather than upon the quality of your data.

4.8 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter, we have examined the early stage of student research projects. The following suggestions have been made:

- Define your research problem analytically.
- Limit your data.