

AN INTRODUCTION TO  
**QUALITATIVE  
RESEARCH**  
**UWE FLICK**  
EDITION 5



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC

# 2

## Qualitative Research: Why and How to Do It

### CONTENTS

The Relevance of Qualitative Research	11
Research Questions as a Starting Point	12
Limitations of Quantitative Research	13
Essential Features	14
A Brief History of Qualitative Research	17
Qualitative Research at the End of Modernity	22
Landmarks in Qualitative Research	22

### CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter is designed to help you

- understand the main characteristics of qualitative research against the background of its history and background;
- identify common features of qualitative research;
- see why qualitative research is pertinent and necessary in contemporary social research.

### The Relevance of Qualitative Research

Why use qualitative research? Is there any particular need for such an approach in the current situation? As a first step, I outline why interest in qualitative research has grown considerably over the last few decades. Due to a development that has become known as the **pluralization of life worlds**, qualitative research is of specific relevance to the study of social relations. This phrase, associated with

what Habermas terms the “new obscurity” (Habermas 1996), seeks to capture the growing “individualisation of ways of living and biographical patterns” (Beck 1992), and the dissolution of “old” social inequalities into the new diversity of milieus, subcultures, lifestyles, and ways of living.

This pluralization requires on the part of social researchers a new sensitivity to the empirical study of issues. Advocates of **postmodernism** have argued that the era of big narratives and theories is over: locally, temporally, and situationally limited narratives are now required. In this context, the following statement by Blumer becomes relevant once again, with fresh implications: “The initial position of the social scientist and the psychologist is practically always one of lack of familiarity with what is actually taking place in the sphere of life chosen for study” (1969, p. 33).

Rapid social change and the resulting diversification of life worlds increasingly confront social researchers with new social contexts and perspectives. As a result, their traditional deductive methodologies—deriving research questions and hypotheses from theoretical models and testing them against empirical evidence—are failing, due to the differentiation of objects. Instead of starting from theories and then testing them, research is increasingly forced to make use of inductive strategies: in the process, “**sensitizing concepts**” are required for approaching the social contexts to be studied. But here, theories are developed from empirical studies. Thus knowledge and practice are studied as *local* knowledge and practices (Geertz 1983).

## Research Questions as a Starting Point

The main reason for using qualitative research should be that a research question *requires* the use of this sort of approach and not a different one. Let us illustrate this with an example (we will come back to this in more detail in Chapter 11). In an ongoing research project we address the following problem. Addiction to drugs and alcohol is the third most frequent mental illness. Young Russian-speaking migrants in Germany are reported to often have particularly strong patterns of alcohol and drug consumption. Thus they have a high risk of drug-associated diseases. At the same time, they are a target group which is largely under- or unserved by existing health services. This study pursues the question of how Russian-speaking migrants perceive their use of substance and possible consecutive diseases, such as hepatitis, and how they cope with them. Of particular interest are conditions of their utilization of professional help and their connected expectations and experiences, and why they may refrain from utilization.

Why should qualitative research be used for such a study? This is an example of a pluralization of life worlds mentioned above. Our knowledge about this life world (migration, Russian background, addiction) is too limited for starting from a hypothesis to test in our research. Instead we need sensitizing concepts for exploring and understanding this life world and the individual (and social) biographical processes that have led to the current situation of our participants. This social

group is for several reasons a “hard-to-reach” group (which will fall out of more general studies and may refuse to fill in a questionnaire, for example). For understanding how and why the participants with hepatitis make use of social and health services or refrain from using these services, we need to understand their personal experiences with the health system, the meanings they link to such experiences, and the discourses and practices concerning these issues in their contexts. Thus we approach the issue and our target group by using qualitative methods—interviews and participant observations, for example (see Chapters 16 and 20 for details).

## Limitations of Quantitative Research

Beyond the general developments and examples like the one outlined above, the limitations of quantitative approaches have always been taken as a starting point for developing more general reasons why qualitative research should be used. Traditionally, psychology and social sciences have taken the natural sciences and their exactness as a model, paying particular attention to developing quantitative and standardized methods. Guiding principles of research and of planning research have been used for the following purposes: to clearly isolate causes and effects; to properly operationalize theoretical relations; to measure and to quantify phenomena; to create research designs allowing the **generalization** of findings; and to formulate general laws. For example, random samples of populations are selected in order to conduct a survey representative of that population. *General statements* are made as independently as possible about the concrete cases that have been studied. *Observed phenomena* are classified according to their frequency and distribution. In order to classify causal relations and their **validity** as clearly as possible, the conditions under which the phenomena and relations under study occur are controlled as far as possible. Studies are designed in such a way that the researcher’s (as well as the interviewer’s, observer’s, and so on) influence can be excluded as far as possible. This should guarantee the objectivity of the study, whereby the subjective views of the researcher as well as those of the individuals under study are largely eliminated. General obligatory standards for carrying out and evaluating empirical social research have been formulated. Procedures such as how to construct a questionnaire, how to design an experiment, and how to statistically analyze data have become increasingly refined.

For a long time, psychological research has almost exclusively used experimental designs. These have produced vast quantities of data and results, which demonstrate and test psychological relations of variables and the conditions under which they are valid. For the reasons mentioned above, for a long time empirical social research was mainly based on standardized surveys. The aim was to document and analyze the frequency and distribution of social phenomena in the population (e.g., certain attitudes). To a lesser extent, standards and procedures of quantitative research have been examined fundamentally in order to clarify the research objects and questions they are appropriate to or not.

Negative results abound when the targets previously mentioned are balanced. Some time ago Weber (1919) proclaimed that the sciences' task is the **disenchantment of the world** by providing analysis and explanations through the research they do. Bonß and Hartmann (1985) have stated the increasing disenchantment of the sciences—their methods and their findings. In the case of the social sciences, the low degree of applicability of results and the problems of connecting them to theory and societal developments are taken as indicators of this disenchantment. Less widely than expected—and above all in a very different way—the findings of social research have found their way into political and everyday contexts. **Utilization research** (Beck and Bonß 1989) has demonstrated that scientific findings are not carried over into political and institutional practices as much as expected. When they are taken up, they are obviously reinterpreted and picked to pieces: “Science no longer produces ‘absolute truths,’ which can uncritically be adopted. It furnishes limited offers for interpretation, which reach further than everyday theories but can be used in practice comparatively flexibly” (Beck and Bonß 1989, p. 31). In summary, the ideals of objectivity of sciences and their findings are largely disenchanting because of the problems just stated.

It has also become clear that social science results are rarely used in everyday life. In order to meet methodological standards, their investigations and findings often remain too far removed from everyday questions and problems. On the other hand, analyses of research practice have demonstrated that the (abstract) ideals of objectivity formulated by methodologists can only be met in part in conducting concrete research. Despite all the methodological controls, influences from specific interests and social and cultural backgrounds are difficult to avoid in research and its findings. These factors influence the formulation of research questions and hypotheses as well as the interpretation of data and relations.

Finally, the disenchantment that Bonß and Hartmann discussed has consequences for what kind of knowledge the social sciences or psychology can strive for and above all are able to produce:

**On the condition of the disenchantment of ideals of objectivism, we can no longer unreflectively start from the notion of objectively true sentences. What remains is the possibility of statements which are related to subjects and situations, and which a sociologically articulated concept of knowledge would have to establish. (1985, p. 21)**

To formulate such subject- and situation-related statements, which are empirically well founded, is a goal that can be attained with qualitative research.

## Essential Features

The central ideas guiding qualitative research are different from those in quantitative research. The essential features of qualitative research (Box 2.1) are the correct choice of appropriate methods and theories (see Chapter 7); the recognition and analysis of different perspectives; the researchers' reflections on their

research as part of the process of knowledge production ('reflexivity'); and the variety of approaches and methods.

— BOX 2.1 —

### A Preliminary List of Qualitative Research Features

- Appropriateness of methods and theories
- Perspectives of the participants and their diversity
- **Reflexivity** of the researcher and the research
- Variety of approaches and methods in qualitative research

### Appropriateness of Methods and Theories

Scientific disciplines have used defining methodological standards to distinguish themselves from other disciplines. Examples include the use of experiments as the method of psychology or of survey research as the key method of sociology. As a scientific discipline becomes established, its methods become the point of reference for deciding the suitability of ideas and issues for empirical investigations. This has sometimes led to suggestions to refrain from studying those phenomena to which the usual methods—experimentation, say, or surveys—cannot be applied. For example, it may be that variables cannot be effectively identified or isolated, in which case experimental design will not be applicable.

Of course it makes sense to reflect on whether a research question can be studied empirically (see Chapter 11). Most phenomena cannot be explained in isolation—a result of their complexity in reality. If all empirical studies were exclusively designed according to the model of clear cause–effect relations, all complex objects would have to be excluded. Sometimes it is suggested that, in the case of complex and rare phenomena, the best solution is simply not to study them. A second solution is to take contextual conditions into account in complex quantitative research designs (e.g., multi-level analyses) and to understand complex models empirically and statistically. The necessary methodological abstraction makes it more difficult to reintroduce findings in the everyday situation under study. The basic problem—the study can only show what the underlying model of reality represents—is not solved in this way.

Another way to study complex issues with qualitative research is to design methods that are sufficiently open to the complexity of a study's subject. In such cases the object under study is the determining factor for choosing a method and not the other way round. Here objects are not reduced to single variables: rather, they are represented in their entirety in their everyday context. Thus the fields of study are not artificial situations in the laboratory but the practices and interactions of the subjects in everyday life. Exceptional situations and people are frequently studied in this way (see Chapter 13). In order to do

justice to the diversity of everyday life, methods are characterized by openness towards their objects, which may be guaranteed in various ways (see Chapters 16–22).

The goal of research then is less to test what is already known (e.g., theories already formulated in advance): rather it is to discover and explore the new and to develop empirically grounded theories. Here the validity of the study does not exclusively follow abstract academic criteria of science as in quantitative research: rather it is assessed with reference to the object under study. Thus qualitative research's central criteria depend on whether findings are grounded in empirical material or whether the methods are appropriately selected and applied, as well as the relevance of findings and the reflexivity of proceedings (see Chapter 29).

### Perspectives of the Participants

The example of mental disorders allows us to explain another feature of qualitative research. Epidemiological studies show the frequency of schizophrenia in the population and furthermore how its distribution varies: in lower social classes, serious mental disorders like schizophrenia occur much more frequently than in higher classes. Such a correlation was found by Hollingshead and Redlich (1958) in the 1950s and has been confirmed repeatedly since then. However, the direction of the correlation could not be clarified. Do the conditions of living in a lower social class promote the occurrence and outbreak of mental disorders? Or do people with mental problems slide into the lower classes?

Moreover, these findings do not tell us anything about what it means to live with mental illness. Neither is the subjective meaning of this illness (or of health) for those directly concerned made clear, nor is the diversity of perspectives on the illness in their context grasped. What is the subjective meaning of schizophrenia for the patient, and what is it for his or her relatives? How do the various people involved deal with the disease in their day-to-day lives? What has led to the outbreak of the disease in the course of the patient's life, and what has made it a chronic disease? How did earlier treatments influence the patient's life? Which ideas, goals, and routines guide the concrete handling of this case?

Qualitative research on a topic like mental illness concentrates on questions like these. It demonstrates the variety of perspectives (those of the patient, of his or her relatives, of professionals) on the object and starts from the subjective and social meanings related to it. Qualitative researchers study participants' knowledge and practices. They analyze interactions about and ways of dealing with mental illness in a particular field. Interrelations are described in the concrete context of the case and explained in relation to it. Qualitative research takes into account that viewpoints and practices in the field are different because of the different subjective perspectives and social backgrounds related to them.

## Reflexivity of the Researcher and the Research

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative methods take the researcher's communication with the field and its members as an explicit part of knowledge instead of deeming it an intervening variable. The subjectivity of the researcher *and* of those being studied becomes part of the research process. Researchers' reflections on their actions and observations in the field, their impressions, irritations, feelings, and so on, become data in their own right, forming part of the interpretation, and are documented in **research diaries** or context protocols (see Chapter 24).

## Variety of Approaches and Methods

Qualitative research is not based on a unified theoretical and methodological concept. Various theoretical approaches and their methods characterize the discussions and the research practice. Subjective viewpoints are a first starting point. A second string of research studies the making and course of interactions, while a third seeks to reconstruct the structures of the social field and the latent meaning of practices (see Chapter 7 for more details). This variety of approaches results from different developmental lines in the history of qualitative research, which evolved partly in parallel and partly in sequence.

## A Brief History of Qualitative Research

Why does it make sense to turn to the history of qualitative research at this point? Historical backgrounds of current methods and their diversity may explain this diversity and allow locating the single approach in the wider field of qualitative research. Such a look at the historical developments that happened in several contexts at the same time but in different ways may help to develop an understanding of why there are now different understandings of qualitative research, which manifest in varying concepts of epistemology, of methods, of data, and of research in general.

Here only a brief and rather cursory overview of the history of qualitative research can be given. Psychology and social sciences in general have a long tradition of using qualitative methods. In psychology, Wundt (1928) used methods of description and *verstehen* in his **folk psychology** alongside the experimental methods of his general psychology. Roughly at the same time, an argument between a more **monographic conception of science** and an empirical and statistical approach began in German sociology (Bonß 1982, p. 106). Monographic science was oriented towards induction and case studies and not so much towards using empirical or statistical methods systematically. Rather than doing representative studies referring to society as a whole, case studies were the empirical basis for analyzing a social problem in detail. In American sociology, biographical methods, case studies, and descriptive

methods were central for a long time (until the 1940s). This can be demonstrated by the importance of Thomas and Znaniecki's study *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–1920) and, more generally, with the influence of the **Chicago School** in sociology.

During the further establishment of both sciences, however, increasingly “hard,” experimental, standardizing, and quantifying approaches have asserted themselves against “soft” understanding, open, and qualitative descriptive strategies. It was not until the 1960s that in American sociology the critique of standardized, quantifying social research became relevant again (Cicourel 1964; Glaser and Strauss 1967). This critique was taken up in the 1970s in German discussions. Finally, this led to a renaissance of qualitative research in the social sciences and also (with some delay) in psychology (Banister et al. 1994; Willig and Stainton-Rogers 2007). The developments and discussions in the United States and for example in Germany not only took place at different times, but also are marked by differing phases.

## The United States

Denzin and Lincoln (2005b, pp. 14–20; 2011, p. 3) identify eight moments of qualitative research, as follows. The *traditional period* ranges from the early twentieth century to World War II. It is related to the research of Malinowski (1916) in ethnography and the Chicago School in sociology. During this period, qualitative research was interested in the other—the foreign or the strange—and in its more or less objective description and interpretation. For example, foreign cultures interested ethnography and a society's outsiders interested sociology.

The *modernist phase* lasts until the 1970s and is marked by attempts to formalize qualitative research. For this purpose, more and more textbooks were published in the United States. The attitude of this kind of research is still alive in the tradition of for example *Boys in White* by Becker et al. (1961), the *Discovery of Grounded Theory* by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Strauss (1987), and Strauss and Corbin (1990) as well as in Miles and Huberman (1994).

*Blurred genres* (Geertz 1983) characterize the developments up to the mid 1980s. Various theoretical models and understandings of the objects and methods stand side by side, from which researchers can choose and compare “alternative paradigms,” such as symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, **phenomenology**, semiotics, or feminism (see also Guba 1990; Jacob 1987; see here Chapter 6).

In the mid 1980s, the *crisis of representation* discussions in artificial intelligence (Winograd and Flores 1986) and ethnography (Clifford and Marcus 1986) impact qualitative research as a whole. This makes the process of displaying knowledge and findings a substantial part of the research process. Qualitative research now becomes recognized as a continuous process of constructing versions of reality. After all, the version of themselves that people present in an interview does not necessarily correspond to the version they would have given to a different

researcher with a different research question: researchers, who interpret the interview and present it as part of their findings, produce a new version of the whole. Readers of a book, article, or report interpret the researchers' version differently. This means that further versions of the event emerge. Specific interests brought to the reading in each case play a central part. In this context, the evaluation of research and findings becomes a central topic in methodological discussions. This raises the question of whether traditional criteria are still valid and, if not, which other standards should be applied for assessing qualitative research (see here Chapter 29).

The situation in the 1990s is seen by Denzin and Lincoln as the *fifth moment*: narratives have replaced theories, or theories are read as narratives. But here (as in postmodernism in general) we learn about the end of grand narratives like Marxism or Parson's systems theory (Parsons and Shils 1951): the accent is shifted towards theories and narratives that fit specific, delimited, local, historical situations, and problems. Experimental writing includes approaches like autoethnographies (see Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011 for an overview), instead of theories, and tales from the field were the outcome of qualitative research (see Chapter 30 for more details on these approaches of writing about research).

The next stage (*sixth moment*) is characterized by postexperimental writing and linking issues of qualitative research to democratic policies. Denzin and Lincoln (2000b, p. 17) mention: "Fictional ethnographies, ethnographic poetry and multimedia texts are today taken for granted. Postexperimental writers seek to connect their writings to the needs of a free democratic society."

The *seventh moment* is characterized by further establishing qualitative research through various new journals such as *Qualitative Inquiry* or *Qualitative Research*.

Denzin and Lincoln's *eighth moment* in the development of qualitative research focused on the rise of **evidence-based practice** as the new criterion of relevance for social science and on the new conservatism in the United States. "Evidence-based" refers to a rather narrow understanding of which kind of research produces results that can be relevant for informing practices, for example, in medicine, nursing, or social work. According to this understanding, research designs have to be based on using a control group and randomized selection and allocation of participants in the study group and the control group. If this is taken as the only relevant social research type, qualitative research is difficult to locate in this context. Denzin and Giardina (2006) discuss this development in connection with a more general new conservatism in the United States in research politics but also in social welfare policy.

Denzin and Lincoln's outline of its history is often taken as a general reference for the development of qualitative research. However, as Alasuutari (2004) mentions, such a general "progress narrative" (p. 599) may obscure the fact that qualitative research has become a globalized phenomenon with different developments in various contexts. Thus he proposes a spatial, rather than temporal, view on the development of qualitative research. Therefore I will complement Denzin and Lincoln's

outline of a history of qualitative research by a sketch of the development of qualitative research in one particular region, namely German-speaking areas.

## German-Speaking Areas

In Germany, Habermas (1967) first recognized that a “different” tradition and discussion of research was developing in American sociology related to names like Goffman, Garfinkel, and Cicourel. After the translation of Cicourel’s (1964) methodological critique, a series of anthologies imported contributions from the American discussions. This has made basic texts on ethnomethodology or symbolic interactionism available for German discussions.

From the same period, the model of the research process created by Glaser and Strauss (1967) has attracted much attention. Discussions are motivated by the aim to do more justice to the objects of research than is possible in quantitative research, as Hoffmann-Riem’s (1980) argument for the **principle of openness** demonstrates. Kleining (1982, p. 233) has argued that it is necessary to understand the object of research as a preliminary until the end of the research, because the object “will present itself in its true colors only at the end.”

Discussions concerning **naturalistic sociology** (Schatzmann and Strauss 1973) and appropriate methods are determined by a similar assumption (initially implicit and, later, also explicit). Application of the principle of openness and the rules that Kleining proposes (e.g., to postpone a theoretical formulation of the research object) enables the researcher to avoid constituting the object by the very methods used for studying it. It then becomes possible “to take everyday life first and always again in the way it presents itself in each case” (Grathoff 1978; quoted in Hoffmann-Riem 1980, p. 362, who ends her article with this quotation).

At the end of the 1970s, a broader and more original discussion began in Germany, which no longer relied exclusively on the translation of American literature. This discussion dealt with interviews, how to apply and how to analyze them, and with methodological questions that have stimulated extensive research (see Flick, Kardorff, and Steinke 2004a for an overview). The main question for this period was whether these developments should be seen as a fashion, a trend, or a new beginning.

At the beginning of the 1980s, two original methods were crucial to the development of qualitative research in Germany: the **narrative interview** by Schütze (1977; Rosenthal and Fischer-Rosenthal 2004; see here Chapter 18) and **objective hermeneutics** by Oevermann, Allert, Konau, and Krambeck (1979; see also Reichertz 2004; Wernet 2014; see Chapter 27). These methods no longer represented simply an import of American developments (as had been the case in applying participant observation or interviews). Both methods have stimulated extensive research practice, mainly in biographical research (for overviews see Bertaux 1981; Rosenthal 2004). But at least as crucial as the results obtained from these methodologies has been their influence in the general discussion of qualitative methods.

In the mid 1980s, problems of validity and the generalizability of findings obtained with qualitative methods attracted broader attention. Related questions of presentation and the transparency of results were discussed. The quantity and, above all, the unstructured nature of the data required the use of computers in qualitative research too (Fielding and Lee 1991; Gibbs 2007; Kelle 1995; 2004; Richards and Richards 1998; Weitzman and Miles 1995), leading to the development of software programs like ATLAS.ti and MAXQDA.

Finally, in the 1990s the first textbooks or introductions on the background of the discussions in the German-speaking area were published. At that time also a number of specialized journals in qualitative research were established (e.g., ZQF (*Zeitschrift für Qualitative Forschung*), *Sozialer Sinn*, but also FQS, which was founded in Germany).

Using Table 2.1, we may contrast the lines of development in the United States and in Germany. In Germany, we find increasing methodological consolidation complemented by a concentration on procedural questions in a growing research practice in the country. In the United States, on the other hand, recent developments are characterized by a trend to question the apparent certainties provided by methods. The role of presentation in the research process, the crisis of representation, and the relativity of what is presented have been stressed, this has made the attempts to formalize and canonize methods (**canonization**) rather secondary. In American qualitative research the “correct” application of procedures of interviewing or interpretation has tended to count for less than the “practices and politics of interpretation” (Denzin 2000). Qualitative research therefore becomes, or is linked still more strongly with, a specific attitude based on the researcher’s openness and reflexivity.

**TABLE 2.1** Phases in the History of Qualitative Research

United States	Germany
Traditional period (1900 to 1945)	Early studies (end of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries)
Modernist phase (1945 to the 1970s)	Phase of import (early 1970s)
Blurred genres (until the mid 1980s)	Beginning of original discussions (late 1970s)
Crisis of representation (since the mid 1980s)	Developing original methods (1970s and 1980s)
Fifth moment (the 1990s)	Consolidation and procedural questions (late 1980s and 1990s)
Sixth moment (postexperimental writing)	Research practice (since the 1980s)
Seventh moment (establishing qualitative research through successful journals, 2000 to 2004)	Methodological proliferation and technological developments (since the 1990s)
Eighth moment (the future and new challenges – since 2005)	Establishing qualitative research (journals, book series, scientific societies—since the 1990s)

## Qualitative Research at the End of Modernity

At the beginning of this chapter, some changes to the potential objectives were mentioned in order to show the relevance of qualitative research. Recent diagnoses in the sciences result in more reasons to turn to qualitative research. In his discussion of the “hidden agenda of modernity,” Toulmin (1990) explains in great detail why he believes modern science is dysfunctional. He sees four tendencies for empirical social research in philosophy and science as a way forward:

- a return to the oral traditions—carried out by empirical studies in philosophy, linguistics, literature, and the social sciences by studying narratives, language, and communication;
- a return to the particular—carried out by empirical studies with the aim “not only to concentrate on abstract and universal questions but to treat again specific, concrete problems which do not arise generally but occur in specific types of situations” (p. 190);
- a return to the local—studied by systems of knowledge, practices, and experiences in the context of those (local) traditions and ways of living in which they are embedded, instead of assuming and attempting to test their universal validity;
- a return to the timely—problems are studied and solutions to be developed in their temporal or historical context and to describe them in this context and explain them from it.

Qualitative research is oriented towards analyzing concrete cases in their temporal and local particularity and starting from people’s expressions and activities in their local contexts. Therefore, qualitative research is in a position to design ways for social sciences, psychology, and other fields to make concrete the tendencies that Toulmin mentions, to transform them into research programs, and to maintain the necessary flexibility towards their objects and tasks:

Like buildings on a human scale, our intellectual and social procedures will do what we need in the years ahead, only if we take care to avoid irrelevant or excessive stability, and keep them operating in ways that are adaptable to unforeseen—or even unforeseeable—situations and functions. (1990, p. 186)

Concrete suggestions and methods for realizing such programs of research are outlined in the following chapters.

## Landmarks in Qualitative Research

Knowledge about qualitative research is helpful in two ways. It can provide the starting point and basis for doing your own empirical study, for example, in the context of a thesis or later as a professional in sociology, education, social work, etc. And it is also necessary for understanding and assessing existing qualitative research. For both purposes, Box 2.2 offers a number of guideline questions, which allow a basic assessment of research (in the planning of your own or in reading other researchers’ studies).

### Guideline Questions for an Orientation in the Field of Qualitative Research

- 1 What is the issue and what is the research question of a specific study?
- 2 How is the study planned; which design is applied or constructed?
- 3 How adequate is qualitative research as an approach for this study?
- 4 Is the way the study is done ethically sound?
- 5 What is the theoretical perspective of the study?
- 6 Does the presentation of results and of the ways they were produced make transparent for the reader how the results came about and how the researchers proceeded?
- 7 How appropriate are the design and methods to the issue under study?
- 8 Are there any claims of generalization made and how are they fulfilled?

These guideline questions can be asked regardless of the specific qualitative methodology that has been used. They can be applied to the various methodological alternatives.

### KEY POINTS

- Qualitative research has, for several reasons, a special relevance for contemporary research in many fields.
- Quantitative methods and qualitative research methods both have limitations.
- Qualitative research exhibits a variety of approaches.
- There are common features among the different approaches in qualitative research.
- Within qualitative research, different schools and trends may be distinguished by their **research perspectives**.
- Qualitative research has developed over time and there are differing developments in different areas (e.g., the United States and Germany).

### Exercise 2.1

Locate a qualitative study, (e.g., Joffe and Bettega 2003), read it, and answer the following questions:

- 1 How are essential features listed at the beginning of this chapter relevant to the example you chose?
- 2 How appropriate are the methods and approaches applied in this study to the issue under study?

## Exercise 2.2

- 1 If you plan your own study, reflect why qualitative research is adequate for the study.
- 2 Discuss the reasons for or against using quantitative methods in your study.

## Further Reading

These references extend the short overview given here of the American and German discussions:

Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds.) (2011) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (4th edn). London: Sage.

Flick, U. (2005) "Qualitative Research in Sociology in Germany and the US—State of the Art, Differences and Developments" [47 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(3), Art. 23, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0503230>.

Flick, U. (ed.) (2007a) *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit* (8 vols.). London: Sage.

Flick, U. (ed.) (2014a) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*. London: Sage.

Flick, U., Kardorff, E.v. and Steinke, I. (eds.) (2004) *A Companion to Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.