Introduction

The discourse of problems

Focusing on problems in qualitative research might seem an odd way to end a textbook promoting qualitative research in psychology. Clearly each of the qualitative approaches discussed in this book have their own specific domains of inquiry with associated strengths and weaknesses, which each chapter has discussed. In this chapter we take up some of the more general, supposed limitations of qualitative research that are commonly encountered across a range of health, education, policy and practice arenas to which psychological research contributes. But rather than accepting this discourse of ‘problems’, which would already be to concede too much to the discursive terrain of quantitative research by which – as we will argue – qualitative research is too often evaluated, our approach instead is to explore these ‘problems’ as problems: that is, as topics and resources for further investigation. Hence in this chapter we explore why and how these problems arise, rather than seeking to ‘solve’ them, and in so doing to arrive at a better understanding of the contexts of and for our work, and the nature of our interventions. This invites a more considered response instead of becoming absorbed in a defensive posturing that occludes the vibrant debates taking place between and amongst qualitative researchers. In line with their various philosophies of reflection and inquiry, we prefer to engage with these
‘problems’ as incitements to further conceptual elaboration that will strengthen understanding of what research is and does, the claims that can be made for specific approaches, and indeed the terms on which such claims could be warranted.

To arrive at the structure of this chapter we have drawn on the debates circulating within the qualitative research community and attempted also to address the kinds of concerns that qualitative researchers are faced with in convincing wider audiences of the value of their work. Hence we deal with not only questions of conceptual frameworks but also questions of epistemology, legitimacy, ethics, power relations and justification. While we are mindful of how helpful specific examples can be, we have decided not to single out particular studies as illustrative of the problems we describe. In part this choice arises out of ethical-political concerns, since it would seem invidious to target specific culpable authors or studies, especially as these are commonly encountered issues. Moreover, to identify specific examples would be to imply that these problems are individual matters, whereas the key point we want to make is that these questions of theoretical and political framing and rhetorical address – which structure the problems of justification, credibility, interpretation and application qualitative researchers deal with – are in fact general, relational and institutional matters faced by all researchers in communicating their work. (This issue does also face quantitative researchers, although they are less frequently obliged to account for themselves in this way.) For significant reasons (and with significant consequences) that we address below, too much energy is being devoted to defending the legitimacy of qualitative research at the expense of promoting discussion about precisely what it is about such work that is inspiring, distinctive or valuable in other ways. There is a further problem posed by the focus on ‘problems’, which is the danger of getting lost in a spiral of navel-gazing and legitimacy claims and so forgetting the ethical and political commitments that motivated us to engage with qualitative research in the first place. The point is not (or not just) that all these problems exist but rather how we acknowledge and navigate them in our research practice.

Problems of epistemology

The title of this book, *Qualitative Methods in Psychology*, draws our attention to the ‘how’ of psychological research. However, a focus on methods or methodology in qualitative research can sometimes work to obscure epistemological positions so that how we conduct our research begins to seem more important to us than the consequences of what we do. Psychology has a long disciplinary history of ignoring epistemological issues and this ‘epistemophobia’ (Chamberlain 2000) has resulted in a discipline where epistemological assumptions are often furtively embedded into research projects without any serious consideration of their appropriateness or function. There should be an alarm bell ringing here because we know that implicit assumptions in psychology have been among the most dangerous problems of the discipline. It is similarly hazardous to believe that we can avoid adopting some kind of epistemological position altogether. Epistemological inquiry involves the philosophy of the nature of knowledge (involving such questions as: Who is a knower? What counts as knowledge?), while all research adopts a position on politics, power, values and truth, even if that adoption sneaks into the research unannounced. Put simply, no research operates in an epistemological vacuum and we do have a problem if we think we can conduct our research without addressing epistemological questions.
The obscuring of epistemological commitments is a problem in academic research in many fields, but there are also specific reasons why we should be particularly attuned to this problem within the discipline of psychology. The perpetual agonising over methodological issues that has occurred in psychology almost since its inception (Danziger 1985) has often given rise to a prioritisation of methodological concerns over more basic questions of epistemology. This preoccupation with methodology has also frequently descended into ‘methodolatry’ where researchers have come to worship a method so completely that they have lost sight of the purpose and politics behind their research (Chamberlain 2000). The research then becomes one where the ‘tail of methodology wags the dog of inquiry’ (Lather 2006: 47). Qualitative psychologists are not exempt from falling into this little trap and it is frequently the case that qualitative psychologists begin their research by choosing a method of inquiry rather than engaging in a thorough consideration of the underlying epistemological framework (Salmon 2003).

Splitting methodology off from epistemological assumptions is a dangerous move because it supports the fiction that psychological research can operate outside politics (St. Pierre 2004). Explicitly engaging with epistemological issues allows us to clarify our position on the key questions of values, politics, power and truth and the implications of the positions we adopt. This forces us to realise that we cannot have any meaningful debate about methodology without understanding the philosophy behind it (St. Pierre 2000). We must consider what can be known (epistemology) before thinking about how we can come to know it (methodology). Avoiding epistemological questions yields even further confusion when incommensurable concepts are muddled together and where we find, in research reports for example, positivist notions of bias and replicability interspersed with interpretivist rejections of objectivity and universal truths.

Despite the modest resurgence of qualitative methods within Anglo-US psychology, qualitative methods often operate in politically hostile conditions, where the ‘gold standards’ of research remain firmly weighted with evidence-based practice and randomised controlled trials. There is then some cause for celebration when qualitative methods are adopted and recognised, but we need to be careful not to fall into the essentialist trap of believing that all qualitative methods are necessarily a good thing. The celebration should be about what we can achieve using qualitative methods – by developing strategies to tackle oppressive psychological practice, for example – rather than simply paying homage to the fact that we are ‘using’ qualitative methods or because of their increasing popularity.

There is a free bonus in attending to epistemology in qualitative psychology and this takes the form of discovering the epistemological legacy of inspiring radical research within psychology that operated from marginal positions (e.g. feminist and queer research). Addressing epistemological questions reminds us that qualitative research ‘carries on its strong, supple back the epistemologies of the Other’ (St. Pierre and Roulston 2006: 678). This radical legacy foregrounds the political potential of qualitative research and the ethical commitments that should underpin our qualitative work. We need to avoid becoming deterministic about the relation between methods and politics and recognise that the separation of epistemology from methodology threatens to undermine our ethical-political commitments. To prevent drowning in methodological nuances, we have to leave breathing space for crucial epistemological questions around power, values, truth and politics.
Problems of legitimacy

Another key problem that qualitative researchers often encounter is how to justify their methodological orientation. This problem is particularly pertinent because of the currently favoured position of conducting qualitative research in applications for state research funds. In part this development is a reflection of the increasing acceptability and even mainstreaming of (some varieties of) qualitative research – a shift that is perhaps a matter for some celebration – as indicated by the fact that the British Psychological Society Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section established in 2006 is now the biggest section in the organisation; while within the American Psychological Association the proposal to create a new division on Qualitative Inquiry gave rise in August 2010 to a ‘Qualitative Inquiry’ section being established within APA’s Division 5. Quite what this section – which was formerly named ‘Evaluation, Measurement and Statistics’ – will be called remains a matter of debate, but the fact of this incorporation seems important.

A related development has been that the British Psychological Society demands a qualitative research component for accredited degrees, giving rise to the need for detailed texts addressing the forms of qualitative research undertaken within specific areas of psychology (see e.g. Willig and Stainton Rogers 2008). The problems of legitimacy take particular form within the discipline of psychology and we now turn to explore the problem of ‘mixing methods’.

One strategy to further the legitimacy of qualitative research has been to use it alongside quantitative approaches. Yet the current popularity of ‘mixed methods’ is in our view something of a mixed blessing for qualitative researchers. This is because any such ‘mixture’ tends to revert to dominant (quantitative) models for its criteria for legitimation. While also a reflection of wider political pressures – the rise and rise of demands for evidence-based practice and the definition of randomised control trials as the ‘gold standard’ of ('scientific') research has never been stronger – this reversion arises because mixed methods derive from classical experimentalism (Denzin et al. 2006) which enforces a simple, orderly view of the world and marginalises particular forms of qualitative work (e.g. feminist, critical race, queer theory) while merrily ignoring key epistemological differences (see previous section above). Moreover, the combination of quantitative and qualitative research leads to a watering down of the rationale for and claims of qualitative research, where qualitative research gets thrust into a purely technocratic role of ‘what works’ (St Pierre 2000, 2004; Maclure 2005). The rationale for qualitative research becomes one of exploration that quantitative work then ‘confirms’. Significantly, this contrived separation typically works to exclude the participants from any meaningful role in the research, rendering the work, contrary to the aspirations of much qualitative research, neither democratic nor dialogical (Denzin et al. 2006).

In Chamberlain’s (2000) typology of methodolatry in qualitative research, ‘mixed method’ researchers fall into the category of ‘agnostics’ – that is, people who ‘do not really understand what qualitative research is, and have little or no interest in finding out’ (p. 288). They are recognisable by claims of having ‘also’ conducted qualitative research, supplementing questionnaires with open-ended questions or with interviews conducted with a small number of participants. Typically the analysis of this qualitative material is rather descriptive and atheoretical, accompanied by claims of adding depth, richness or context. As Chamberlain notes: ‘Qualitative research is more than this, but the term is used so broadly that it is possible to include also anything under this heading that does not involve the statistical analysis of numbers’ (2000: 288).
One problem with mixing quantitative and qualitative work concerns evaluations of size in relation to quality, or the scope of the claims that can be made from the research. Qualitative researchers often focus on seemingly localised topics and frequently work with small numbers of research participants (at least relative to much quantitative research), which cannot be reconciled with the positivism and quantitative preoccupations of much of psychology. This ‘small’ work is sometimes motivated by the need to attend to issues that would otherwise fall off the political agenda (the so-called ‘statistical outliers’) and we might be reminded here that part of the motivation behind the resurgence of qualitative research in psychology was to meaningfully engage with marginalised voices. Beyond the ethical impetus to attend to these ‘small issues’, it often emerges during the course of our research that these initially marginal-seeming concerns resonate with much larger issues and the insights gained from our ‘small, localised’ projects have far greater implications and applications than we could have predicted before we embarked on our research journey. In contexts where we are called upon to justify our recourse to qualitative methods, we need to beware methodological objections to ‘small sample sizes’ or ‘small issues’ because these typically either code for political objections, or represent fundamental misunderstandings of the epistemological basis of the work that we do (St. Pierre 2004). Size-related quality assessments are inherently problematic because they belong to a quantitative evaluative framework that is incommensurable with qualitative research.

A related problem arising from the mixing of methodological approaches concerns the model mobilised of how these approaches relate to each other. A realist model of ‘triangulation’ predominates that takes different methodological approaches as generating perspectives on the ‘same’ phenomenon, without appreciating how these frameworks in fact constitute their problem in radically divergent ways. Failure to do this not only strips qualitative research of its constructionist commitment to viewing its phenomenon or topic from its specific analytical framework, but actually juxtaposes different representations as if they could all be set alongside each other on the same topological plane. If such a plane exists it is only within a quantitative paradigm. As Mason (1996: 149) notes:

It implies a view of the social world which says there is one, objective, and knowable reality, and all that social researchers have to do is work out which are the appropriate triangulation points to measure it by.

We need to move away from this model to treat all approaches as generating distinct perspectives or representations that cannot be combined, since they are incommensurable. This point also goes for combinations of qualitative approaches, which cannot be compared and contrasted except from a particular perspective, whose assumptions and implications would need to be declared and open to evaluation. Hence while researching a topic from a variety of methodological frameworks may well enrich the understanding of the phenomenon at issue, there is no easy way to move across the different representations generated. There are implications for the kinds of truth claims that can be made from such inquiries – as multiple and diverse rather than unitary and consensual. As Mason continues:

You are highly unlikely, therefore, to be able to straightforwardly use the ‘products’ of different research methods or sources to corroborate (or otherwise) each other. If you are expecting to use triangulation
in this sense, you are likely to become very confused about matters of validity, because you will have
more than one data set which will seem to inexplicably point in different directions.

(Mason 1996: 149)

The point in combining different methodological approaches should be to open up interpretations rather than to close them off, as is the case in realist models of mixing methods.

Before we move on, we might note that just because qualitative research is now regarded in
some contexts as acceptable, this does not mean that it should be valued as somehow intrinsically a good thing or (morally) superior to quantitative research. To do this would be to commit
another kind of methodolatry, one of mistaking the methodological approach for the politics. Indeed, qualitative research is still subject to many of the same (as well as different) ethical-political
problems that characterise research in general – of colonising people’s experiences (Morgan 1981),
still worse rendering their survival or resistance strategies visible and so legible and surveillable
by the dominant where these may have arisen precisely because of their hidden or ambiguous
character (Scott 2008). Indeed, we might note that qualitative research can all too easily be
co-opted to perpetuate precisely the kind of exclusions that it was introduced to overcome. One
way this can happen is when the reification or fetishising of particular methods displaces the
social justice motivations of qualitative research and results in the stigmatising of particular
groups of people (e.g. in the deployment of qualitative methods to further oppressive corporate
marketing campaigns).

A further danger of the popularity of qualitative research in service policy-related research is
that it might be preferred because it is seen as a cheap option (Craig 1996); doing a small-scale
study is usually less resource intensive than a larger one (and this is of course a good reason
too!). Yet concerns have been noted by qualitative health researchers that such economic priorities underestimate the time and analytical resources required to complete a coherent, viable and
valuable study, with the result that a qualitative study is designed as merely a small-scale version
of or for a quantitative investigation – not only subordinating the qualitative to the quantitative
but overlooking the key differences of claims and strengths of each (Yardley and Bishop 2008).

There are two possible strategies open to qualitative researchers in dealing with legitimacy
problems. The first is one of refusing the discourse of ‘science’ that renders qualitative research
deficient or inferior. On this point we might note that those working in the natural sciences
typically dismiss the idea that any kind of psychology is scientific anyway (Derksen 1997), while
quantitative psychologists have rarely engaged with philosophical questions of science (Michell
1997; Trendler 2009). Instead qualitative researchers have embraced new discursive registers, for
example, emphasising distinctive features of qualitative inquiry such as ‘fidelity’ or ‘authenticity’,
‘meaning-in-context’ that extend to ‘a prophetic, feminist postpragmatism that embraces an ethics
of truth grounded in love, care, hope and forgiveness’ (Denzin et al. 2006). Other strategies have
included reclaiming or redefining what ‘science’ is (mobilising examples from the history of science,
especially of psychology, which of course started from a qualitative tradition of introspection with
Willhem Wundt); whilst also highlighting specific cultural assumptions structured into particular
discourses of science, so that, for example, the French word for ‘experiment’ is ‘experience’ –
highlighting specifically anglophone binaries/agendas at work (Chalmers 1999).

On the other hand, in relation to the charge of being ‘unscientific’, we might note that there are
also claims that there is nothing intrinsically unscientific about the use of qualitative methods
in psychology, as far as the traditional realist understanding of science is concerned (Michell 2004), so rejecting the ‘narrow scientism’ that prioritises evidence-based practice and randomised control trials (RCTs), rather than science per se. Criticisms can also be levelled at the spurious claims to science fostered by new methodologies of neoliberal governance such as ‘systematic review’ which disguise what may be a very unsystematic process by couching it in pseudoscientific terms (Maclure 2005).

There are also disciplinary, rather than specifically, political confusions that are played out via methodological disputes, as where there are problems of ‘scaling up’. Qualitative research deals in specificities and particularities, while the demands of policy agendas for large-scale applications and interventions can make the research topics taken as the focus for qualitative researchers appear ‘too small’ or not relevant for wider populations. ‘Why should we design our services around the needs of this (numerically small) group?’ is a refrain often heard in relation to designing provision for people from minority ethnic backgrounds or people with disabilities. Yet the point here is not that all groups share all these features (as the quantitative discourse of ‘scale’ would presume), but that in taking up the recommendations arising from the research to make services accessible to these groups they become accessible to many more. Hence, while qualitative research may address some unique or exceptional topics or arenas, this does not mean that its analyses have no application to others (while equally there is a key political point of principle that lack of wider relevance or applicability should not become a criterion to reject or criticise qualitative research). Rather what is important is to recognise that a key strength of qualitative research is its specificity and corresponding depth of focus, which allows for the documentation of particular constellations of contexts and relationships that might not become apparent using other approaches. The art of designing a good piece of qualitative research is to find a way to research that is small enough to be explored in depth, that somehow exemplifies wider issues, so (as the poet William Blake put it) ‘seeing the world in a grain of sand’. Tiny as the grain of sand may be to the naked eye, it nevertheless exquisitely encapsulates a host of wider structures and relationships. Maintaining the analogy, dismissing analysis of that sand grain as not having relevance to beaches, mineral stocks, water levels, land masses and associated practices of agriculture, tourism or disaster management is to miss a key opportunity to build a picture of delicate but important systemic links.

Problems of selection, interpretation and reflexivity

Conducting qualitative research always involves demarcating our field of inquiry and selecting research material to include in the representation of our research. In the social sciences, ‘representation’ combines political and pictorial senses of the term so that how we speak or act on behalf of particular groups and how we register our academic opinions is intimately bound up with how we describe and present our research. Alongside negotiating problems of selection, we need to address problems of interpretation and ensure that we neither indulge in convoluted over-analysis nor, conversely, that we merely summarise our research material. We stumble into a related problem if, in ruminating on whether we should accept our participants’ stories as irrefutably authoritative or disregard them as cases of ‘false consciousness’, we forget to situate our analysis (and our participants’ material) within prevailing structures and ideologies (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1997). Problems of selection and interpretation are unavoidable in
any qualitative analysis and as we make our way through these issues, problems of reflexivity necessarily emerge.

In qualitative research, problems of selection include the decisions we make about how to circumscribe our field of research as well as how we choose particular material to include in the representation of our analysis. We might also note how the term ‘selection’ has particularly unfortunate historical connotations (with Nazi genocide) that should at least invite reflection on the relationships between psychological research, racism and war (see Wexler 1983; Terre Blanche et al. 2006). A ‘selection’ problem we often encounter involves debunking the idea that qualitative analysis is really only a case of researchers ‘cherry-picking’ material to support their own favourite arguments or positions (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). Responding to this problem typically involves pointing out that all researchers (qualitative and quantitative) are implicated in the selection of their material and to pretend that this is not the case is to fall prey to an untenable case of the neutral observer. Rather than submit to this kind of positivist delusion that vanishes the producer from the research product, qualitative researchers justify the production and selection of material via recourse to the rigour of their respective methodological frameworks as well as committing to processes of reflexivity and ethical accountability. Charges of ‘cherry-picking’ material can generally be read as political distractions from the more important issue of what it is we do with the material that we have selected, but we also need to ensure that we explicitly account for the ‘selections’ we have made along the way. Staying with problems of selection, we also need to beware the issue of ‘relevance’, or more specifically, who defines what is relevant and how we accept or challenge these definitions. While we may aspire to make our research socially relevant, we need to avoid fawning on dominant social policy agendas or simply shaping our research to comply with external pressures to be ‘socially useful’ (pressures which too often merely translate into calls to be lucrative).

The presentation of research is central to our response to problems of selection, with this assuming a particular shape within the discipline of psychology. Professional psychologists are often considered to be mere regurgitators of common sense, while academic psychologists are sometimes thought to spend their time converting everyday banalities into obscure theories. As qualitative researchers in psychology operating across these two arenas, one of the problems we face is how to present our work in such a way that we convince our audiences of its value. Writing about our research is, in this sense, a craft activity and we aspire to keep our readers convinced and interested. Navigating this problem of choosing material that represents our analysis as well as keeping our research narrative alive should not lead us to a position where we are using our interview transcripts in ways that will individualise or trivialise issues nor simply feed a prevailing popular appetite for personal misery or heroic survival stories. Our task is rather to enliven, as well as enlighten, our research to keep our readers awake, while simultaneously curbing our enthusiasm for delivering the kind of sensational material so beloved of policymakers, who despite claims to validate only quantitative material, are eager for case exemplars.

Of course, presenting our research is bound up with how we interpret and analyse our research material. Problems of interpretation usually fall into one of two categories: either we are accused of making too much of our research material (over-interpreting) or conversely we are accused of not making enough (under-interpreting). Under-interpreting happens when instead of analysing our material, we merely redescribe it. On the other hand, and although it is a strength of qualitative research to develop rich analyses from ‘small sample sizes’ (relative to
much quantitative work), over-interpreting can happen if our line of argument becomes obscured in the weaving of intricate analytical tales. A related problem involves justifying our corpus of material – whether our analysis has drawn on indicative material or on our most diverse or atypical examples. Decisions about how we begin and end our process of analysis are tied not only to the methodological framework we espouse, as you will have read about in the other chapters, but also to our research purposes and aims. Alongside these decisions, we will encounter problems of interpretation if we neglect to contextualise, historicise and connect to material realities and this is one of the reasons why Foucault’s work has been so useful for qualitative researchers (e.g. Parker 1992, 2007). It is to the closely related process of reflexivity, which deals with connecting our analysis to structural and ideological issues, that we now turn.

Reflexivity has a pivotal role to play in accounting for the production of our qualitative analysis, as you will have read about in the preceding chapters. However, there are problems associated with reflexivity too and we need to be aware of these so that we can successfully orient our way around them. The first problem occurs when the concept of reflexivity collapses into a self-involved kind of confession so that a catharsis of self-disclosures becomes the end point of our reflexive account. This is a problem nurtured by the co-option of reflexivity to further neoliberal political agendas where – in a familiar de-reradicalising move – quasi-feminist rhetoric is deployed to further old-style individualism (Burman 2006, 2009). In extending cautions about how to employ reflexive analyses, we need to be careful that our approaches to reflexivity do not slip into a narcissistic recentring of the subjectivity of the researcher – the kind of project so endorsed by the neoliberal exhortation to work on ourselves and an incitement notably encouraged at the expense of wider social political considerations (Rose 1985; Burman 2006). We often deploy reflexive strategies to explore ‘what went wrong’ with our research and this can usefully expose the limitations of our research practices, but reflexivity is also about exploring why things worked (in contrast to why they did not), as well as questioning why things worked in the ways that they did. Another problem with reflexivity which you may have noticed as you read through the previous chapters is that different modes of qualitative inquiry can espouse different models of reflexivity. Of course this is not really a problem at all (unless we have been duped into believing that all qualitative methods are aspiring to achieve the ‘same results’ – in which case, see the problem of ‘mixing methods’ above). Indeed, multiple perspectives can offer fruitful opportunities for engaging with the strengths and weaknesses of respective qualitative approaches to reflexivity (Parker 2005; Burman 2006). On a final reflexive point, we should note that almost all qualitative research practice has derived from the social sciences of Europe and North America (Preissle 2006) and this should encourage us to be on our critical toes by reflecting on the colonial tendencies that such a geographical emergence might entail.

Problems of ethics

All research involves ethical problems – the question is how these are engaged with and addressed. The ethics committee checklist bureaucracy ushers in the fantasy that ethical issues can be administered away, but this is only at the cost of sanitising and dehumanising what must always be in some sense a risky encounter, if it is an encounter at all. The responsibilities for and of the researcher are onerous, including to themselves. The current balance of practice towards risk aversion simply works to deny ethical engagement. Questions of informed consent cannot be
Problems in/of Qualitative research determined absolutely, or in advance, even with the most robust participant groups (i.e. not those considered ‘vulnerable’), but have to be understood as constantly in process as part of the ongoing negotiation of research relationships. Similarly the researcher cannot be entirely responsible for the meanings and associations generated by their questions or interventions – though they can certainly do their best to alert participants so that areas of sensitivity can be managed together in a co-operative and consultative manner. Submissions for ethical approval often require us to work with predefined categories (e.g. ‘vulnerable groups’, ‘sensitive issues’), thus perpetuating the illusion that these are clear-cut, static, easily identifiable and manageable things. In much the same way that the discipline of psychology sometimes reduces people to diagnostic labels, the process of ethical clearance can create a further problem if we are tricked into believing that our participants are nothing more than the descriptive categories we are obliged to box them into for our ethics committee submissions.

Ethical responsibilities are not only generated in contexts where a seemingly ‘direct’ encounter is taking place, for example, between an interviewer and interviewee. Equivalent considerations arise in the responsibilities incurred by analysing text – including the selection of text, and the meanings subscribed to or reproduced in analysing it and reporting on this analysis (e.g. analysing racist text and so running the risk of legitimising it by reproducing it). There are strategies we can engage with for limiting such consequences, including clearly situating the analysis within a narrative that clarifies the ethical-political rationale and explicitly challenging unwanted readings. Obviously undesirable readings cannot absolutely be prevented, for as researchers we cannot legislate the readings made of our material – we can only indicate why and how particular readings are preferred.

Different research contexts can also give rise to different, as well as the same, ethical problems. We might encounter ethical issues around the disclosure of sensitive material in face-to-face contexts, for example, but these might evolve differently or be differently textured in online environments. We need also to be aware of the dangers of romanticising about the subversive potential of particular contexts, taking into account, for example, how feminist scientists have shown that the much lauded possibilities of cyberspace for transcending traditional embodied hierarchies have been greatly overblown (Wajcman 2007). Analysis of online material also raises particular ethical issues around the identification of participants, who although writing in a public forum might not wish their material to be used for research purposes. Issues of participant anonymity with respect to complex questions around identification and tracing are particularly pertinent here.

Redressing the long history of abhorrent manipulation and control of participants in psychology was part of the moral-political impetus behind the resurgence of qualitative research in psychology. However, we encounter another qualitative research problem if we think that we are engaging in good ethical research merely by ‘being nice to people’ (Parker 2005: 13) and then come to accept or support morally reprehensible ideas simply to avoid offending our participants. Our ethical commitments in qualitative research involve adopting an explicit political stance and assuming the responsibility of our research positions and actions, which, for the purposes of our research, may mean that it is unethical to accept our participants’ views. If our participants are prominent agents of oppressive practices, for example, the ethical impetus of our research would be to challenge their accounts (Burman 2003). Our research always involves determining our ethical accountability, which inevitably extends beyond our immediate academic community, just as
our ethical commitments frequently extend beyond the official academic timelines of our research activities.

**Problems of power**

Although we have not explicitly engaged with issues of power so far, implicit throughout all qualitative research is the importance of the researcher assuming their authority and authorial responsibilities. There is a double sense here that draws attention to the question of writing and representation. The model of power in qualitative research is not like weightlifting or a pendulum. Power is not a possession or a unilinear force, but a set of multiple, complex (and contested) relationships that modulate and shift during the research process. Power relations are inevitable and not all determined by the micropolitics of the research encounter. While improving our interview techniques or creating cosier physical research settings might assist us in our research practice and increase the comfort of our participants, the micropolitics of research cannot be magically disappeared away with these kinds of manoeuvres or strategies. Indeed, promoting research encounters as democratic spaces often disguises pernicious forms of covert regulation and control (Burman 2003).

Power considerations should always go beyond the micro level and recognise that power operates at multiple levels. A significant feature of feminist research has been to consistently draw attention to the institutional power dynamics that structure research, including publishing gatekeepers, research council agendas, government policies and so on, and this provides a wealth of material to draw on for exploring power in qualitative research (e.g. Stanley and Wise 1980; Ribbens and Edwards 1998). What is important is to acknowledge and be aware (or as aware as we can be and make this explicit in our accounts) of the varieties and vicissitudes of power relations as they have entered into the formulation, generation, conduct, analysis and reporting of our research. We also need to attend to the difficult questions of who benefits materially and symbolically from the research.

The main problems of power in qualitative research occur when power is ignored. We might expect that ‘where there is power, there is resistance’ so if we render power invisible it makes it more difficult for strategies of resistance to be seen. While it might not always be ethical for these strategies of resistance to be made too visible (and so render them subject to further policing), we do have a problem if we neglect to attend to the role of power or ignore its constraining and enabling effects on our research practices.

**Not a conclusion**

As we have seen in previous chapters, different research methods adhere to different evaluative criteria and their respective languages of justification may be incommensurable. As qualitative inquirers we recognise the impossibility of static, predefined, universally applicable quality criteria and we reject the rigid definitions of generalisability, validity, reliability and rigour that psychologists have historically held so dear. Being flexible and open in developing new modes to evaluate our qualitative research, however, does not mean that we cast aside the concept of academic scholarship (Parker 2004). As researchers, we need to determine and clearly articulate which principles and priorities we are aiming for and to present plausible, theoretically congruent and grounded arguments to support and situate our qualitative work.
Qualitative research is hardly renowned for resulting in internationally acclaimed artistic masterpieces but Leonardo da Vinci’s well-known declaration that ‘art is never finished, only abandoned’ seems to resonate with the inexhaustibility of the analytic task. There is no such thing as a ‘complete’ analysis and we need to focus instead on the fruitfulness of our research – we are more concerned with ‘where our research goes and what it does there’ (St Pierre 2000: 27) than judging our research on a myopic kind of methodological merit. Unlike quantitative psychology, we do not work with fixed quality criteria or rigid definitions of validity, rigour, generalisability, reliability and so on, and at the very least these concepts require redefinition within a qualitative framework. Rigour and validity can no longer be achieved simply by methodical allegiance to a list of technical procedures because in qualitative research these criteria cease to exist purely as epistemic concepts and instead become bound to the ethics of relational research practice (Lincoln 2001; Lather 2007). The traditional psychological concept of reliability – the idea that we can consistently reproduce the same results – becomes antiquated in qualitative research that specifically aims to drive positive change (Parker 2004). The robotic regularity of human beings assumed in the crudest forms of positivist generalisability is at odds with most kinds of qualitative research, as is the idea that individual life trajectories can be straightforwardly scripted by statistical projections developed from so-called ‘random’ samples. The qualitative challenge is to develop our own composition and definition of evaluative criteria and to elaborate these criteria with and through the generation of our material, starting with the initial stages of formulating our research questions.

The renunciation of quantitative evaluative concepts, such as generalisability, and the abandonment of the positivist preoccupation with objectivity in research should not, however, lead us to a position where we feel we can say nothing about our research that might be relevant to other contexts (Fine and Torre 2004), or that – after a bout of peculiarly self-absorbed ‘reflexivity’ perhaps – we come to think that our analysis is nothing more than our own subjective opinion. We do have a problem if we are deploying quantitative quality criteria to evaluate our qualitative research, but the qualitative redeescription of these terms can also serve us well in contexts where our research comes under attack and where we need to justify the systematicity, ethics, relevance and importance of what we do (e.g. for qualitative debates on generalisability see Smaling 2003; Sandelowski 2004; Goodman 2008; for validity see Fine and Torre 2004; Lather 2007; for reliability see Parker 2005; for rigour see Guba and Lincoln 2005).

All this is alongside longstanding political priorities favouring research that makes claims to generalisability and replicability. Here we see how wider political agendas inform research design in the form of the resurgence of positivism (Lather 2006). This, however, institutes a related problem whereby a dispute that is apparently over method (technique) or methodology (research approach) actually codes for a political difference (over what the research is about, or who it is for). While a positivist framework encourages lack of acknowledgement of the ethical-political stance inevitably structured into any investigation, which is (or should be) made explicit in qualitative research, in some contexts making this more visible may render the research less politically acceptable. On the other hand, at least it is clear that the reasons why the research may be deemed inadequate are not to do with the rigour, creativity or commitment with which it was conducted but rather the political ‘lack of fit’ with prevailing priorities of the funders. Hence we raise this issue out of concern for the ways important political differences in agenda can be masked by methodological debates, with qualitative research sometimes spuriously rejected for reasons that are other than methodological.
This political manipulation of research practices, whether in the form of systematic review mechanisms (Maclure 2005) or other such forms of governmentality and technocracy raises a final related issue that we would like to address here. The recurrent problems of qualitative research can tell us something about the legacy of regulation and control that characterises the discipline of psychology (Burman 1998), particularly around challenges to legitimacy, credibility and justification. The best work in qualitative research has broken the rules and one of the keys to becoming a good researcher is learning to develop innovative approaches that can overthrow disciplinary norms (Parker 2004). Our discussion of problems here is necessarily incomplete and inconclusive because the temporal specificities and contextual particularities of qualitative research mean that problems are always emergent and in flux. Instead we have attempted to sketch the controversial parameters of our qualitative research activities.

Chapter summary

In this chapter we have explored problems in/of qualitative research as resources and topics that can help us understand the nature of qualitative research practice and the contexts within which this work takes place. Rather than positioning these problems as errors to be eliminated or whitewashed away, we explored how and why they arise out of specific political, disciplinary, relational, historical and institutional contexts. In exploring the conditions of legitimacy and justification within which qualitative research is held to account, we have specifically addressed problems of epistemology, selection, interpretation, reflexivity, ethics and power. Throughout the chapter, our aims were to identify strategies for convincing others of the value of qualitative research, as well as to signpost ways of navigating these problems.

Common to all the problems we discussed in this chapter is the key issue of political framing, which not only structures quality criteria that force qualitative research into a quantitative evaluative framework, but also permeates the more subtle micro-practices of research relations. By exploring how and why such problems occur in qualitative work, we elaborated the contexts within which our work takes place, as well as the kinds of institutional, disciplinary and relational dynamics that facilitate and constrain all kinds of psychological research. If your qualitative research seems threatened by political incursion, or mired in the conventional or the banal, then the cautionary tales outlined here might help you craft more creative research stories.

References


Problems in/of Qualitative research


