An Introduction to Qualitative Market Research

Mike Imms & Gill Ereaut

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QMR
QUALITATIVE MARKET RESEARCH

The seven volumes of *Qualitative Market Research: Principle and Practice* provide complete coverage of qualitative market research practice. It offers commercial practitioners authoritative source texts for training and professional development, and provides academic students and researchers an account of qualitative research theory and practice in use today. Each book cross-references others in the series, but can also be used as a stand-alone resource on a key topic.

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Geraldine Lillis

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With 25 years' industry experience, **Mike Imms** has worked extensively for the Association for Qualitative Research and is a Fellow of Market Research Society. He runs a training organisation for commercial qualitative researchers.

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A Background to the Series

Gill Ereaut, Mike Imms and Martin Callingham

This series of books explains the theory and practice of qualitative market research, or commercial qualitative research. There is no single agreed definition of qualitative market research but we can paraphrase some key definitions and describe it thus:

> A form of market research that seeks to explore and understand people's attitudes, motivations and behaviours – the 'why' and 'how' behind the 'what' – using methods that seek to reach understanding through dialogue and evocation (rather than measurement). Qualitative research generally attempts to make sense of and interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

In UK practice, which forms the focus of this series, the most common form of qualitative market research employs the group discussion (or 'focus group') and depth interview as its major field methods, although many other methods can be and are increasingly used, such as observational approaches.

Common to all methods is the aim of getting beyond public, conscious factors – those things that people can and will say in response to simple questions. Qualitative market research provides effective ways of exploring such issues as private thoughts and feelings, pre-conscious factors (such as intuitive associations, the taken-for-granted, habitual and culturally derived attitudes and behaviours), and the important issue of emotions. Also used within qualitative market research are techniques that enable researchers to overcome the limitations of the verbal.

The main objectives of qualitative market research usually involve one or more of the following:

- **Diagnosis** – providing depth of understanding of a current situation, of why things are the way they are.
- **Prognosis** – providing guidance on likely responses to options, plans or proposals.

- **Creativity** – using respondents in qualitative market research as a source of ideas, innovation and inspiration.

What users of qualitative market research have in common is a need for *understanding and sense-making*.

- It aims to reveal deep and specific understanding of activities, choices and attitudes relevant to client concerns across a range of stakeholders. These stakeholders are not simply consumers and customers, users of the goods and services of commercial organisations – increasingly qualitative market research is used by a wide range of not-for-profit organisations.
- The insights generated include an understanding of the interrelationships of issues, as well as the detail of individual issues.
- Qualitative market research offers a conceptual and not just descriptive view of these issues.
- It may also serve to codify tacit and informal knowledge of the external world and make it accessible to organisations.

It is hard to pinpoint the exact date and place of birth of commercial qualitative research but essentially it is a phenomenon of the post-Second World War era and arose in response to changing information needs of organisations. Initially it was marketers who began to recognise that meeting consumer wants and needs required a level of understanding of people's motivations, usage and attitudes that went beyond measurement of the 'simple, hard facts' accessible to survey methods.

The qualitative market research profession has undoubtedly 'come of age' – with an established and respected role within the decision-making procedures of a wide and diverse variety of commercial, not-for-profit and public sector organisations across the globe. It is hard to find any *commercial* organisation that does *not* now use qualitative market research, but within the past decade or so the range of organisations using commercial qualitative market research to aid organisational decision-making has broadened considerably. Qualitative market research has become a valuable tool for anyone who needs to take account of any 'stakeholder' groups – not just consumers and customers but also staff, users of public services, supporters, voters, inmates and so on.

The evolution of the qualitative market research profession has several distinctive characteristics.

- It has apparently evolved in parallel with, but completely separately from, the academic qualitative research community which exists today across many disciplines in the social sciences and humanities.
- Relatively few textbooks have been written about qualitative market research and many external commentators have noted that the

profession has a sparse literature, and limited discussion of issues that concern academic researchers, such as epistemology.

- The early qualitative market researchers drew on a body of theory that came principally from psychology, but over the decades this has broadened to include other social sciences disciplines and methods (anthropology, sociology, cultural analysis, semiotics etc.), as well as continuing to develop methodology from emergent trends in psychology.
- Theory has tended to be incorporated and used in qualitative market research in a 'serendipitous' way. Few qualitative market researchers have been interested in theory for its own sake, but only for its utility value, applicability and usefulness in meeting clients' needs for relevant information and insights. A key characteristic of commercial qualitative market research is its eclecticism and important benefits arise from this *absence* of theoretical or methodological purism.

Why has this series been created? First, the industry has an essentially 'oral' tradition and a major aim of this series has been to record this tradition in written form. Simply setting down what is common practice, along with beliefs about why things are done like this, has not been done before in such a comprehensive way. Like all oral traditions, that of the qualitative research industry sometimes lacks consistency and its 'narrators' do not always agree on its origins. We make no apology for the fact that the reader will find evidence of this in slightly differing accounts and differing attributions of key principles. One of the benefits of creating this series is that such differences become manifest and can be debated and perhaps reconciled by future writers on commercial qualitative market research.

Secondly, as the industry has grown in size and matured, and as its body of (largely tacit) knowledge has grown and broadened, the link between the theories originally informing it and day-to-day practice has tended to weaken. The limited interest in questions of methodology and theory for their own sake warrants comment – and there are probably two main reasons for this.

- First, the nature of clients' demand for commercial qualitative market research means that its value rests solely on the value of the *findings themselves* – rather than the detailed means of reaching those findings.
- Secondly, client organisations have, for the same reason, consistently shown little interest in theory – it has restricted commercial value in commercial qualitative market research.

This is in contrast to much academic qualitative research, where the contributions of a study to methodological and theoretical knowledge may be regarded as at least as valuable as the substantive findings themselves, and certainly need to be reported. There is now more interest within qualitative market research in understanding the roots of everyday practice in order to enhance training and professional development.

Thus a second key aim of this series is to attempt to re-connect practice to theory.

Commercial qualitative market research has until very recently focused almost, though not entirely, on interview-based methods – 'groups and depths'. This is quite different from much academic qualitative research, which draws on a far broader range of methods. Here again, the reasons have to do with the nature of the demand for commercial qualitative market research. In short, the commercial qualitative market research industry has very effectively 'systematised' interview-based qualitative procedures. In consequence there is a large and established market *and* a commercially viable established 'going rate' for interview-based commercial qualitative research that simply does not exist, at least at present, for other methods.

Within the limitations of interviewing methods, commercial qualitative market research has been incredibly creative. This creativity ranges from the application of sophisticated projective and enabling techniques and extensive use of stimulus material, to differing moderating styles, interview lengths, structures and procedures to extend the boundaries of what can be explored and captured within 'groups and depths'.

The qualitative market research business has developed specialisms, involving specific theories, methods and ideas of best practice:

- relating to particular types of respondents – children, business-to-business, staff etc.
- relating to particular types of topic – social policy, advertising development, new product development, packaging design, design and layout of stores, branch offices and websites etc.
- relating to specific business sectors – for example the pharmaceutical industry makes extensive use of qualitative market research, but tends to use quite tailored interview procedures and sampling methods, and specialist moderators.

Representing the full range of practice across all these fields is beyond the scope of this series, which aims to cover the primary research processes within mainstream practice, and two of the major applications of qualitative market research – the development of brands and the development of advertising. To the extent that many general principles, and certain aspects of practice, are shared across many varieties of qualitative market research, it will nevertheless be of relevance to many of these specialists.

The series has been written for the benefit of four main types of reader.

- First, **practitioners** (including those new to the profession) constitute a major audience for the series. By spelling out the key theories and principles that underpin good practice we hope practitioners can use this knowledge to train future generations of qualitative researchers – and also to make more informed choices of methodology and practice. By tracing back relevant theory and linking it to current practice, we aim to raise the conscious competence of current and future practitioners.

- Secondly we hope **users** of qualitative market research will find the series interesting and that it will enable them to make more informed assessments about the kind of contribution qualitative market research can make to organisational decision-making. It should also help them assess the quality of qualitative market research provided by their agencies and to recognise *good* qualitative market research.
- Thirdly, **students** of business and related disciplines may find it a helpful aid to understanding the role and value of qualitative market research in decision-making and how it works in real life practice.
- Finally, **academic qualitative researchers** may find the insight into commercial qualitative market research informative, given that so little is published about it. Commercial confidentiality means that the findings of few commercial qualitative market research projects will ever be made available, but this series at least exposes the principles and practice of qualitative market research in general terms.

In a more general sense, we hope that by being more explicit about what we do and why we do it, we can encourage constructive criticism. Specifically we hope to stimulate debate and to challenge others to identify better and different methods and practices.

All the books in this series have been written by respected qualitative market research practitioners, and as editors we are pleased that an unexpected benefit has arisen. The act of creating this series often involved analysing and setting down current practice for the first time. In so doing, a level of understanding of our business has emerged which was not evident to any of us before undertaking this comprehensive task. This emergent theory is described within several of the books in the series.

THE SCOPE OF THIS SERIES

The series comprises seven books, covering three broad categories. All the books are written primarily from a UK perspective, but where appropriate, authors have drawn comparisons with other markets, especially the USA.

- Book 1 provides an **introduction to qualitative market research** which contextualises the rest of the series. It also explores why it is that organisations might need qualitative market research and how it fits with their information needs and decision-making processes. This book, in addition, explores important issues not specifically addressed in other volumes, including the detail of project design, and the ethics and professional codes which underpin practice.
- Four other volumes describe the theory and methods of the key **processes** of commercial qualitative market research: interview-based fieldwork (Book 2); other forms of data collection (Book 3); analysis

and interpretation of findings (Book 4); and the development and 'delivery' of recommendations to clients (Book 7).
- Two further volumes – Books 5 and 6 – describe the theory and methods of two of the most significant **applications** of commercial qualitative market research – brand and advertising development.

Before going on to outline the scope and role of this particular book in the series, we would like to acknowledge the many people who helped in different ways to make this series a reality. We would particularly like to thank David Silverman for introducing us to Sage and for encouragement at the early stages; and the team at Sage, especially Michael Carmichael and Vanessa Harwood, for their support.

About this Book

The purpose of this volume is to provide a descriptive 'overture' to the rest of the series. It forms an introduction to the whole series and provides a contextual description of qualitative market research. Detailed analysis and description of current practice, and of the theory that does or could underpin that practice, is provided in the other volumes of the series.

In the following chapters the reader will find a 'big picture' introduction to that which will be found in greater detail in the other books, including:

- Definitions of qualitative market research, indications of its theoretical roots, comparisons with academic qualitative research and exploration of its relationship with other forms of market research.
- A descriptive overview of the qualitative market research business in the UK – how it works, the kinds of business or organisational questions it deals with, how in practice projects are designed and run.

This volume also raises some issues that are not made explicit in any of the other books, specifically discussion of:

- **An organisational perspective on qualitative market research:** Whilst the rest of the series focuses on the activities of commercial qualitative market researchers, this volume includes some contextual detail as to *why* organisations might use qualitative market research and its role within organisational decision-making.
- **Planning and designing projects:** This book looks specifically at the processes whereby client and supplier work together to define the research problem and design a suitable qualitative research project, along with detailed coverage of the factors that have to be considered.
- **'The life of a project':** For those who have no first-hand experience of commercial qualitative market research, this volume includes an illustrative description of typical qualitative market research projects – who does what, when and how.
- **Ethics and professionalism:** These are issues that underpin all aspects and all stages of qualitative market research. This volume includes a discussion and description of ethical and professional issues from both a respondent/social ethical perspective and the different perspectives of commercial ethics and professional standards.

This volume has been written for all readers of the series, to provide a general reference and orientation for qualitative market research. It is perhaps of

particular interest to those without first-hand experience of the practice of commercial qualitative market research – students, those new to the industry and academics. However, some of the issues raised, such as distinctions between commercial qualitative market research and other forms of market research, and between commercial qualitative market research and other forms of qualitative research may well also provide fresh insights for practitioners.

This volume is somewhat different from the other books in the series in both style and approach, having an emphasis on description rather than theorising of practice. Quite complex issues have had to be simplified in order to give this overview; these are explored in depth in the other volumes. The book draws in a general way on the few existing texts about qualitative market research described in the Appendix, but the material in this volume is experience-based and reflects what we believe to be current mainstream practice in the UK. It is informed by the authors' own experience but also by the thinking, skills and knowledge of the many practitioners and clients with whom they have worked.

Finally, we draw your attention to the Appendix to this volume, which sets out additional information sources for those who want to find out more about qualitative market research.

1

Introduction: What is Qualitative Market Research?

In this chapter we set the scene with some basic facts and insights to introduce the reader to our subject, and clarify what we mean by commercial qualitative market research. We consider definitions of qualitative market research taken from a variety of perspectives. There are important implications arising from the fact that qualitative market research exists to fulfil quite specific aims and objectives, and is conducted as a business.

A SENSE OF THE SCALE AND NATURE OF THE SUBJECT

This book seeks to provide an introductory overview of qualitative market research, and as such we begin it with some very simple facts and insights to give a sense of the nature and scale of our subject. In simple terms, qualitative market research is one part of the *market research* industry, but a part that uses *qualitative* methods. That is, it uses methods different from the questionnaire or survey techniques most often associated with that industry and it produces different but complementary forms of information. The nature of these methods, the precise ways in which qualitative market research operates and the kind of information it thus provides within this industry, are explained in detail in this book.

The qualitative market research industry is large and well established. Whilst accurate statistics on industry size are difficult to come by, qualitative market research accounts for perhaps $2–3 billion of the $15 billion world-wide market research industry.[1]

This means that every day, in all parts of the world, thousands of ordinary members of the public are taking part in qualitative market research – most commonly at present as participants in group discussions (sometimes known as focus groups). A large-scale study by research agency BMRB (Bowden 2000) indicated that perhaps 5 per cent of all UK adults have taken part in such group discussions at some stage, and in a typical week perhaps 1,000 group discussions take place at hundreds of locations across Great Britain.

The next two sections explain two issues that are key to understanding qualitative market research. First, we look at its conceptual relationship with

both other forms of market research, and with other forms of qualitative enquiry. Second, we outline the activities of qualitative market research in order to ground these concepts in real everyday practice.

DEFINING THE FIELD OF QUALITATIVE MARKET RESEARCH

We have already noted that qualitative market research is a part of the field known as *market research.* In common-sense terms, market research is a way by which organisations learn about relevant aspects of the world outside, in order to guide their decisions and activities. However, qualitative market research is also part of the field of *qualitative enquiry,* which is a way of going about research that has application well beyond market research.

   So qualitative market research is where market research and qualitative methodologies overlap (see Figure 1.1). This means that in order to define and clarify the nature of qualitative market research throughout this book, we are often making two kinds of comparison:

- Comparing qualitative market research with other forms of market research that are not qualitative.
- Comparing qualitative market research with other forms of qualitative enquiry that are not market research.
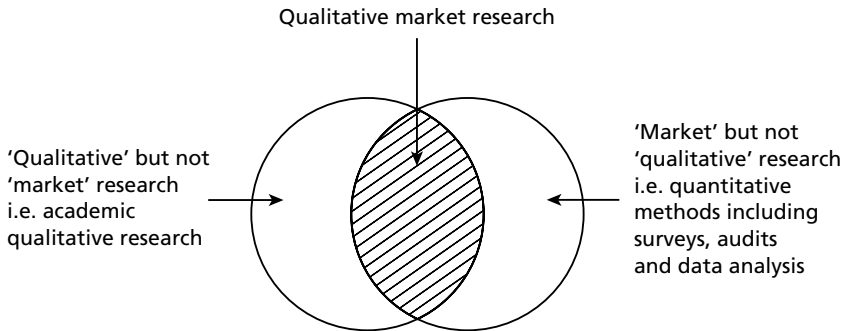
FIGURE 1.1 *The field of qualitative market research*

Comparing Qualitative Market Research With Other Forms of Market Research that are not Qualitative

The term '*qualitative* market research' inevitably demands comparisons with other forms of market research – notably *quantitative* market research. The latter commonly includes ad hoc survey research, but also involves other forms of data generation and analysis. These would include continuous data gathering and analysis, and 'data mining' or the synthesis and re-analysis of data drawn from different sources.

It is a fact that, as the 'second discipline' within market research, qualitative market research is often described and defined in terms of how it differs from quantitative market research. This has had two unfortunate effects that it would be naïve to ignore, and which are both revisited at various points in this book and in the series.

First, such comparisons can degenerate into an unhelpful and irrelevant 'competition' between the two methodologies, rather than recognising that they offer different and complementary forms of knowledge. We aim in this book to make clear the very different ways in which qualitative research is (increasingly) useful to today's organisations.

Secondly, and equally unhelpfully, there has been a tacit tendency to evaluate qualitative market research against the criteria of quantitative research (i.e. statistical validity) rather than develop more relevant criteria. Again, the books of this series will indicate some different criteria of evaluation which are more usefully applied to qualitative market research.

Although we make this 'qual–quant' distinction for the sake of clarity, note that many market research projects today are actually qual–quant hybrid or combined projects, which at their best use the strengths of both methods to develop solutions to complex research problems.

Comparing Qualitative Market Research With Other Forms of Qualitative Enquiry that are not Market Research

The term 'qualitative *market* research' is by no means the same as the broader term 'qualitative research'. There are huge areas of qualitative research, mostly in the academic field, that have nothing to do with *market* research. They include using qualitative methods and ways of thinking to investigate a wide range of phenomena, and spanning a diverse range of disciplines within social science and the humanities. (Interestingly, academic qualitative practitioners seem to have suffered many of the same adverse comparisons with quantitative methods as those noted above.) Chapter 2 looks at how qualitative market research specifically differs from research in this broader qualitative tradition.

We need to make one further point here. By 'market' research we mean qualitative research that is conducted as a commercial activity by specialist qualitative market research practitioners. It does not include 'commercial' research carried out by university research units for external clients for a fee. But nor does it *necessarily* mean research carried out *for* commercial organisations (businesses, marketing and advertising agencies). The 'qualitative market research' we refer to throughout includes research work conducted by professional researchers on behalf of all manner of oragnisations, including commercial businesses but also non-commercial, not-for-profit organisations (such as local and central government, public bodies, charities, voluntary organisations, broadcasters and so on). This issue is explained in more detail later in this chapter.

THE ACTIVITIES OF QUALITATIVE MARKET RESEARCH

The precise methods favoured by qualitative market researchers in different parts of the world vary. With our UK focus, we generally use the term 'qualitative market research' to mean projects involving interview-based fieldwork, since this is at the time of writing the most common type of project. Major changes are afoot, however, especially a sharp and significant rise in interest in observational or ethnographic methods across European and US markets.

That said,we can look at what actually happens in qualitative market research. What are the key activities and who are the key players? Here we can introduce some basic terms found in this book and throughout the series.

Essentially, a qualitative market research **project** in the UK usually involves the following.

- An organisation – known as the **client** – identifies a need for information about an external group such as its customers or users of a product or service, where it is believed that the relevant information can be gained by **interviewing** and/or **observational** or **ethnographic** methods.
- A **qualitative researcher** or team of researchers, usually specialists from outside the organisation, is introduced to the client's issue or problem, generally at a face-to-face meeting known as a **briefing**. The researchers and client together may refine the problem definition and will agree a project **design**, including a costing and time scale for the project.
- In **interview-based** work, the researcher(s) will arrange for suitable people to be **recruited** and will personally go out and interview a number of people drawn from the relevant group – this is known as **fieldwork** and those interviewed are called **respondents.** Observational or other field methods may also be used alongside interviewing (see below).
- Researchers will follow some kind of **topic guide** or outline, but this is **unstructured interviewing** and researchers are free to amend and refine their lines of enquiry as they discover more about the issue throughout the fieldwork. Their focus is on eliciting relevant and useful information for the client, not on eliciting responses to standardised questions.
- For **observational** or **ethnographic** work, the researcher will undertake detailed observation of people or situations agreed with the client. This might be combined with unstructured interviews with people within these situations before, during or after relevant activities. This is also known as **fieldwork**.
- The resulting material in the form of audio tapes, videos and notes, is subjected to **analysis and interpretation**, processes conducted

personally by the researchers who carried out the fieldwork. It will be analysed for its overall meaning and for its relevance to the client's concerns.
- The researcher then presents findings, conclusions and recommendations back to the client by means of a personal **presentation** or **debrief** and/or written **report**.

Five of the seven books in this series map onto this outline of stages or processes; the others do not, but tackle two of the major applications of qualitative market research – developing **brands** and developing **advertising**. Readers will find cross-references to all the volumes of the series as appropriate throughout this book. In addition, Chapter 6 offers a more detailed explanation of the stages and processes that are involved in a typical qualitative market research project.

This description is, of course, a gross oversimplification (of processes, types of project and applications), as should become apparent. Moreover, a procedural description does not fully define qualitative market research; later we will look in several other ways at what qualitative market research is and what it does.

THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF QUALITATIVE MARKET RESEARCH

Another way to describe qualitative market research would be to look at the kinds of functions it performs for those commissioning it – what it sets out to do. The nature and range of organisational issues and questions addressed by qualitative market research has been indicated in the Editorial Introduction (p. viii) and further detail is given in Chapter 3. Broadly, applications of qualitative market research cover issues of diagnosis, prognosis and the creative generation of ideas or solutions to problems.

The range of organisational types using qualitative market research has increased in the past few years, as noted above. Clients are not restricted to commercial companies and advertising agencies but include central and local government and many other public sector and non-profit-making bodies. What these clients have in common and what they seek from qualitative market research is *understanding and sense-making*. Again, this is covered fully in Chapter 3.

DEFINITIONS OF QUALITATIVE MARKET RESEARCH

Here we will look at a number of ways that people have tried to define qualitative market research. Perhaps unsurprisingly there is no single agreed definition and those that do exist approach the task from rather different perspectives. These definitions reflect the position of qualitative

market research described earlier in occupying the overlap between 'qualitative enquiry' and 'market research'.

One definition of qualitative market research comes from within the mainstream UK market research industry, and appears in an appendix to the Market Research Society Code of Conduct. Perhaps inevitably it defines qualitative in relation to something more widely understood within that industry and probably within the wider world: quantitative or survey research. This does also make sense, in that both arms of the business share certain business practices and indeed both are guided by the principles of the Code. Within this, the MRS Qualitative Guidelines define qualitative market research as:

> ... marketing research conducted whereby:
>
> a. the basic methodology involves techniques which seek to reach under-standing through dialogue and evocation (rather than measurement), and
> b. where the data-collection process involves open-ended non-directive techniques (NOT structured questionnaires), and
> c. where the data analysis output is descriptive (rather than statistical). (MRS 1998: 2)

The tendency to define qualitative market research in terms of what it is not, i.e. not quantitative market research, reflects the origins of the market research business in the UK and the continuing dominance of quantitative methods. It tends to focus on the *procedures* of qualitative market research and how they differ from those of quantitative research. The Chair of AQR, the UK industry body specifically for commercial qualitative practitioners, describes qualitative market research a little more broadly, in this way:

> ... the study of the relationship that people have with products, brands, services and environments in order to help in commercial and social decision-making. (Ormrod 2001: 51)

She goes on to further describe qualitative market research in terms of its objectives, outcomes, methods and interviewing style. Its **objectives** are 'to explore and understand people's attitudes, motivations and behaviour', its ideal **outcomes** are 'the "how" and the "why" behind the "what"'. Its **methods** are based on in-depth examination of small samples, and its **interviewing style** entails 'a casual, conversational, non-directive approach.' (2001: 51–2)

It is also worth here looking briefly at an academic definition of qualitative research. Denzin and Lincoln, introducing an important text on academic qualitative research, state that

> Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. ... qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic

approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (2000: 3)

As will be seen, academic research takes a much broader view of qualitative methods than commercial research and includes a very wide range of activity within this term. In comparison, commercial market researchers, primarily using interviewing methods and focus groups in particular, are using a very small proportion of possible qualitative research methods.

Another definition of the nature of qualitative market research is provided by UK practitioner Chris Barnham (Barnham 2000). He sees quantitative research as 'grid-like' and concerned with coincidence (of attitude with demographics, for example) to create meaning. But he suggests that qualitative market research is 'triangular' or tree-like and is concerned with 'essence' or the *nature* of phenomena, and the way in which their constituent meanings are interrelated. He suggests that the qualitative research enterprise within market research is essentially one of interrogating notions by splitting them into ever-smaller component parts, asking each time 'what kind of …?'. The task is one of understanding the precise distinctions people use to make sense of their world and make it meaningful – and the implications of such distinctions for the client's business.

A related conception of qualitative market research comes from practitioner Virginia Valentine, who uses theory drawn from semiotics, structural linguistics and cultural anthropology and who defines qualitative market research as a process of code-breaking (1995). There are apparent parallels between these two conceptualisations, though Barnham arrives at his description not via semiotics but by adding practical commercial experience to academic research in medieval philosophy – a good example of the intellectual resourcefulness which characterises the industry and which is discussed again later.

Whatever philosophical angle is taken, it is clear by now that there are critical differences between qualitative and quantitative methods of enquiry. Looking across several definitions, the following things seem fundamental to qualitative enquiry in general and are certainly relevant to understanding the practice of qualitative market research.

- Where people are observed or interviewed, there is **direct face-to-face involvement** of the researcher with the researched – there is no mediating 'other' such as an interviewer administering a questionnaire. (Some qualitative methods do not involve people at all but analyse documents, images or other texts.)
- **Small-scale samples** or **small numbers of cases** are used, and are examined in **depth**.

- The approach uses **unstructured and reactive research methods**, methods that evolve throughout the period of study in response to what is emerging in the study itself.
- The role of **the researcher** and of **interpretative** practices is central to the process.
- The focus is on **meaning and understanding** as outcomes; on the **nature** of phenomena rather than their incidence or spread.
- **Validity and authority** is not derived through the classic methods of positivist science, but from multiple sources, including phenomenology and interpretivism (see Chapter 2).

These characteristics, effectively the intertwining of method, researcher, hypothesis and outcome, result in what we have come to refer to as the '*all-at-once-ness*' of qualitative market research.[2] A key feature of qualitative methods in market research is the direct involvement of the same researcher or small research team in virtually all stages of a project. So the same individuals who have been briefed directly by the client will write a proposal and design a research approach, conduct interviewing or observation, analyse and interpret the research data, think about their implications for the client, and present findings and conclusions back to the client. Generally the only parts of the process sub-contracted to others are recruitment of respondents and sometimes transcription of taped interviews.

This contrasts, for example, with quantitative market research where the research executive running the project designs a sample and a standard questionnaire to be administered by a team of interviewers who rarely meet the client (nor indeed the executive). The project effectively disappears into 'the field' for a period, then into data processing, and analysis of the *meaning* of what emerges can only begin when the data has been processed, nowadays usually by computer. The process is one of relatively discrete stages, where different operations are carried out by the researcher, each at the appropriate time.

Qualitative researchers, on the other hand, are effectively working on and thinking about the project through *all* of its stages, and effectively performing many operations at the same time. For example, the activity of 'problem definition', although clearly addressed at the outset of a project, may be revisited throughout the fieldwork (as data is gathered) and certainly through periods of formal analysis and interpretation. Re-defining or re-framing the client's presenting problem can often turn out to be a critical part of the findings of the study. Or it may be that during fieldwork, when working at the immediate level of thinking about the next question to ask or response to follow up, the researcher is suddenly struck with a 'big thought' about a critical issue or implication for the client of what has so far emerged.

So, while for the purposes of thinking and writing about practice it is useful to distinguish different processes, it has to be stressed that

qualitative market research is an integrated, holistic approach, with the *researcher* or research team and the problem itself at the centre.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AS 'COMMERCIAL' RESEARCH

We will continue in later chapters to draw distinctions between qualitative and quantitative methodologies, as seen within market research. This is one important 'frame' within which to understand what qualitative market research is about. The other 'frame' – a comparison with non-commercial forms of qualitative research – is the focus for the chapter which follows this.

First, though, we return to the idea of what we mean by 'commercial' and what it is that defines qualitative *market* research. In particular, there is a distinction that needs emphasis between:

- a **commercial** (or market) **researcher**, defined as someone making a professional living by carrying out research projects on behalf of various organisations; and
- a **commercial user**, commissioning research to further profit-making aims.

This series is concerned with the activities and research practices of the former, but does not assume that these activities are carried out exclusively for the latter. (Some organisations do employ qualitative researchers in-house, but these are in the minority compared with independent agencies and operators.)

Very roughly speaking, qualitative methods in general might be used within three kinds of field or application:

1 **Academic enquiry:** research carried out to add to the store of knowledge in a field and where the desired outcome is likely to be highly theorised (such research may turn out to have some practical application but this is not a central aim). Usually carried out within a university and funded by academic institutions, or academic funding bodies (such as the ESRC in the UK).
2 **Applied social or policy research:** research carried out with the intention of assessing and improving social policies or conditions. Funded largely by central or local government agencies, charitable foundations, other public sector organisations, or by academic funding bodies as above.
3 **'Market' research:** research done to help further the aims of an organisation, whether this is to enhance its profitability or some other objective. Funded by that organisation itself, whether it is a manufacturing company, retailer, political party, charity and so on.

Traditionally, market researchers have conducted projects primarily within the last of these categories, and have done so primarily for profit-making organisations. Applied social or policy research has tended to be the province of academic or quasi-academic research institutions. Two trends have altered the nature of the work actually carried out by professional qualitative market researchers.

- Professional research services are increasingly sought by **organisations previously uninvolved in 'marketing'** or consultation activities but who now see these as necessary to their aims. So the number of types of organisation using 'market' research as defined above has increased. Marks (2000) illustrates this range of users of commercial research services – it includes museums and galleries, educational institutions, producers of television and other media, political parties and even organised religion.
- There has also been a huge expansion of consultation and research in many areas of the **public sector**, especially local government. So the amount of work in category 2 above has increased and some of this is being undertaken by those with a background in commercial market research. (See Book 3 in the series for discussion of this trend and the kinds of work undertaken.)

So while it is true that a great deal of qualitative market research remains involved with profit-making clients, especially in the areas of brands, advertising and other consumer marketing activities, we cannot assume that professional market researchers are involved only in consumer research, nor even only with commercial research clients.

The series and this book therefore focus on the research tradition, skills and practice of those making a living as professional researchers, often with a background in research with marketing or commercial aims. The heritage in supplying 'market' research for profit-making organisations accounts for many of the distinctive characteristics of qualitative market research practice, even though these skills are in practice applied far more widely than before. This character, explored in more detail in the next chapter, especially reflects the compromises made between commercial pressures to systematise and standardise, and a desire to retain the flexibility and responsiveness that defines qualitative enquiry.

KEY POINTS

- Qualitative market research represents a substantial part of the market research industry but is distinct in using qualitative methods of enquiry. It must be recognised that there are huge areas of 'qualitative research' that have nothing to do with market

research, just as there are huge areas of 'market research' that do not make use of qualitative methods. Qualitative market research is the place where the need for market research overlaps with the kinds of insight, information and knowledge that qualitative methodologies can provide.

- The task of writing about the detail of qualitative market research is complicated by the fact that all elements are inter-connected. It is important to acknowledge the 'all-at-onceness' of qualitative market research and in order to understand the principles of qualitative market research it is necessary to have a basic understanding of the activities – and vice versa. An overview of the key principles and the key activities is outlined above and readers might familiarise themselves with these before progressing with this book and the rest of the series.

- Most commercial qualitative market research is carried out using interview-based methods, although other methods are known and the use of observational and ethnographic techniques in particular is growing rapidly.

- The aims of qualitative market research principally concern understanding and sense-making. Applications broadly concern issues of diagnosis (understanding current situations), prognosis (evaluations of possible outcomes from plans and options) and the creative generation of ideas or solutions.

- Users of qualitative market research include not just commercial and marketing organisations but also an ever-widening range of organisations including central and local government, public sector and non-profit-making organisations.

- Qualitative market research concerns not just consumers and customers but any 'stakeholder' group – including staff, suppliers, supporters, voters, patients, inmates etc.

NOTES

1 Estimates for 2000 based on ESOMAR data and in conversation with John Samuels.
2 We are grateful to Philly Desai for offering us this useful phrase.

②

Characteristics of Qualitative Market Research as a Commercial Practice

In this chapter we summarise and describe the distinctive features of commercial qualitative market research, including key ways in which commercial practice differs from other forms of qualitative research (notably in academic fields). We also describe some of the differing styles and approaches that exist within commercial practice.

In this chapter the distinctive nature of qualitative market research practice is described in detail. This both gives a flavour of its major concerns and methods, and at the same time serves to distinguish it from other forms of qualitative research, primarily within academia. Where explicit comparisons with academic research are drawn, these generally refer to the use of qualitative approaches in 'basic' academic research.

Despite seeming similarities, the worlds of academic and commercial qualitative research have existed as if in parallel universes. Researchers in these fields are now showing more interest in each other's methods and the gulf is perhaps being further narrowed by the tendency for researchers from both traditions to carry out the increasing amount of research in the fields of social and applied policy (see Chapter 1).

There are key differences between the conditions within which qualitative market research and academic qualitative research are conducted and these have a significant effect on practice within the qualitative market research industry. They concern:

- specific issues that arise when qualitative research is carried out for a third party – i.e. where the researcher does not originate or 'own' the research problem;
- the tensions inherent in operating qualitative research as a business; and
- the pragmatic, applied and experience-based nature of current practice.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF QUALITATIVE MARKET RESEARCH

The distinctive features of qualitative market research can be summarised as follows:

1 Researchers have a 'dual role' – they have accountability to research standards *and* accountability to the client's objectives.
2 Qualitative market research projects are defined as, and constrained by being, commercial contracts.
3 Commercial qualitative market research projects are clearly defined and relatively narrow in scope.
4 There is a tension between the inherent flexibility and responsiveness of qualitative methods and the need for business processes.
5 Qualitative market research has been dominated by interview-based methods, though this is changing.
6 The qualitative market research industry has an infrastructure that facilitates fieldwork and other processes.
7 Qualitative market research is an *experience-based* practice, with a number of effects and linked features:

   o The apprenticeship/journeyman characteristic of qualitative market research
   o The sector has an essentially 'oral' tradition.
   o Accumulated knowledge

8 Qualitative market research displays pragmatism and eclecticism regarding theory.

Each of these features is described in more detail below.

The 'Dual Role'

As suppliers of a commercial activity undertaken in response to client requests, market research practitioners are accountable to their clients. This has major implications. Primarily, it introduces the requirement to consider two distinct sets of responsibilities. The qualitative market research practitioner has to consider

• **not only** the efficacy and validity of the project from a 'pure research' point of view;
• but **also** efficacy and validity from the point of view of providing the client with a cost-effective, timely, insightful and relevant contribution to their decision-making.

There is a profound difference between academic and commercial research concerning the purposes for which the research is being done and the consequent role that must be played by the researcher throughout the whole process.

- Commercial research is not done out of interest, or to further knowledge in general, or for the direct benefit of the researched group; it is always done for the **benefit of the client**.
- However, the researcher also has a role as a **researcher** – with its implications of impartiality and judgement, and with ethical responsibilities towards respondents (see Chapter 7).

Whenever a piece of qualitative research is commissioned, it is usually because a decision is at stake. The research has to be conducted ethically, and analysed as impartially as possible, but its findings have to be made to address the issue of this decision and actually help it to be made, or the project will have failed.

We have used the term 'committed independence' to characterise the position taken by qualitative market research in relation to clients. The ways in which this fine balance is supported by aspects of how the business is organised are explored in Chapter 4. Essentially, the need to be both impartial *and* partial results in a tension or duality of responsibility that we have termed the 'dual role'. Clients want researchers to be 'objective' in the sense of honestly reporting what they see, find and believe, *but* also expect them to be committed to the client's business or organisation, occupying two apparently incongruous roles simultaneously. This split role means that the usefulness of the *output* of the research is necessarily given as much attention as the robustness of the research methodology and research process itself.

The Research Project as a Commercial Contract

Qualitative market research projects are defined and effectively constrained by agreements made between client and supplier concerning method, size, costs and timescale. The researcher often plays a key role in defining and designing the project but, once contracted, has limited autonomy over certain features such as scope and timing, and significant changes have to be negotiated. There are also conventions concerning what is negotiable and what is not once the contract is agreed. Later chapters describe the process of negotiations through which the details of a research contract are agreed.

One of the effects of this contract system, for example, is that it is rare for commercial projects to allow the researcher to adopt an open-ended multi-stage approach seen in academic spheres (where initial fieldwork is followed by provisional analysis, forming the basis for defining the

scope and content of further fieldwork and so on until some conclusion is reached). Another effect is the non-negotiability of time frames. Once agreed, it is extremely rare for schedules to be slipped and for more time to be allowed for the project. The presentation of findings will have been scheduled into many other organisational processes and decisions and actions will be resting on it. Commercial researchers are constantly working to tight deadlines, and in many cases these are getting even tighter – a theme which recurs throughout the books of this series.

The Clear Definition and Scope of Qualitative Market Research Projects

One of the effects of the commercial framework is that qualitative market research projects tend to have quite well-defined objectives and to begin with clear definitions of questions and problems, either presented as such by the client or jointly worked through and agreed between client and research supplier. This can contrast sharply with academic qualitative work, where the scope and objectives of a study may initially be quite loosely defined, only being clarified throughout the early stages of the project itself.

One of the reasons for this is that commercial qualitative research is usually employed specifically to fill gaps of a certain nature in the organisation's knowledge, a subject explored in more detail in Chapter 3. Client organisations, and researchers themselves, build up considerable tacit and explicit knowledge of areas of interest, and actively use this as a starting point and context for what is needed from a specific project. So a qualitative job will rarely be required to provide a full or definitive picture of a field – its contribution will generally be to mesh with data drawn at various times from many other sources in providing and developing that full picture.

Academic researchers also of course use existing knowledge, but in this case it will be derived largely from academic literature and reports of others' academic research. In some cases this means that such researchers might be working relatively 'blind' in previously un-researched fields.

The tendency for quite a narrow focus of objectives within commercial research also means that the amount of fieldwork conducted and the time allowed for it are much tighter than in many academic fields. A typical single-country project of the type outlined in Chapter 6 may, for example, consist of six to ten group discussions (focus groups) and be completed within four to eight weeks (although much larger projects are known, especially in the public sector). In contrast, an academic project using qualitative research may include extensive ethnographic and/or interview-based fieldwork, as well as analysis of documents or other materials, and might span many months or even years.

A Tension between Qualitative Methods and Business Processes

The juxtaposition of qualitative enquiry and commerce creates a specific tension which is taken for granted and managed on a daily basis by those involved, but is worth making explicit. The very value of qualitative enquiry is commonly seen to be its flexibility and sensitivity to context; qualitative research in general is loose, interpretative, unstructured and reactive to the specific context of the problem, the researcher and the field. When qualitative research operates within a business or organisational arena, however, it encounters two pressures which run counter to this nature.

- Organisations buying things from outside need to know and itemise what they are buying. They need, for management and accounting purposes, to describe the 'deliverable' of a commercial contract, so what is being bought has in some way to be named, seen and counted. Service businesses thus have to find a 'unit' of service – a chargeable unit of some kind – in order to make and fulfil contracts with organisations. Some, such as lawyers, do this by keeping timesheets and charging clients for hours spent. The qualitative market research business, however, has generally done this by making units of fieldwork – in practice, group discussions and depth interviews – the countable unit of the contract. This has had considerable methodological ramifications – a heavy reliance on *visible* units of fieldwork, like group discussions and interviews – which are only recently being realised and challenged, an issue discussed more below.
- On the supply side too, there is some pressure to systematise and standardise. In order to build a business from qualitative research, it is necessary to define processes and thus manage people and costs. Qualitative businesses therefore have constantly to balance the flexibility of qualitative methods against a business drive towards standardisation, processes and systems.

What happens in practice might be described as 'contained flexibility'. Although some larger agencies do produce relatively standardised products as part of what they do, the business remains one in which the majority of work is entirely bespoke. It is also one where significant amounts of business, even that for large and significant clients, is carried out by individual freelancers or very small companies (see Chapter 4). Smaller operators can apply flexibility to their own businesses and may thus deal better with the amorphous and relatively unpredictable nature of qualitative work.

So there is some 'commodification' of qualitative research, but even in its commercial form qualitative research *is* flexible and is flexibly applied. Qualitative market research *does* generally resist standardisation and produces bespoke and customised knowledge, tailor-made information,

specific understanding and conceptualisation for a specific applied task. Each client problem and each brief is treated differently and leads to a customised research design, analysis and conceptualisation. A key component remains the individual knowledge, skill and experience of the researcher.

The Dominance of Interview-Based Methods

Broader methodologies and ethnographic methods are known and are increasingly used, but it is true that qualitative market research has been dominated by interview-based methods. Most qualitative market research at the time of writing uses the following methods and data sources:

- **Group discussions:** Data from ESOMAR indicates that typically groups account for perhaps 80 per cent of qualitative market research. There is a notional 'standard' focus group in the UK, consisting of between six and nine respondents and lasting around 1½ hours. Size and duration of groups is more variable in other European countries, and is becoming more so in the UK.
- **Depth interviews:** One-to-one face-to-face interviews, each usually lasting between 1 and 2 hours.
- **Variations on these:** e.g. paired depth interviews, mini groups (three or four respondents), re-convened group discussions, extended groups (2–4 hours), 'situated' interviews, e.g. accompanied shopping (see Chapter 5). The variations are increasing; in particular some forms of observation are being added and more interviewing is carried out in situ (for example in pubs or clubs, or in a specific retail environment) (see Book 3).

This is in sharp contrast to academic qualitative research, where a far broader range of methods is recognised within 'standard' qualitative research methods. Mason, for example, in *Qualitative Researching* (1996), discusses all of the following as data sources:

- Interviews, group discussions
- Conversations
- Observations
- Documents
- Photos/film
- Diagrams and maps
- Stories, myths
- Media products
- Art and cultural products
- Laws, statutes, rules and regulations

- Policies
- Groups, clubs, collectives
- Organisations
- Events
- Social and geographic locations

Whilst this list clearly *includes* interview data, it also defines numerous other things that can be regarded as 'texts' amenable to qualitative analysis and interpretation. An academic book about qualitative research is likely to have a chapter or two on interviewing, but will not necessarily have this as its major focus (e.g. Mason 1996; Silverman 1997). This wider definition of the scope of qualitative research methods often comes as a surprise – and an interesting one – to commercial practitioners.

In practice, however, commercial researchers *do* make informal use of many non-interview sources. They will often look at relevant popular culture, look at and 'read' retail spaces and merchandising, or simply watch people in relevant settings – but they do not specifically itemise or explicitly charge for this work. This does not (as yet) officially fit into accepted definitions of what constitutes a commercial qualitative research project, but falls into the area of 'added value'.

Some of the reasons for this concentration on interview-based methods in qualitative market research probably arise from the historical conditions and commercial realities within which it operates.

- Qualitative market research has traditionally existed in relation to, and somewhat in the shadow of, quantitative market research or survey research, which uses the survey interview as its major method. Perhaps the focus on *interviewing* as a primary method stems at least in part from this parallel. Whatever the limitations of asking people questions, interviewing has in general proved itself a useful and valuable tool for many organisations and forms the backbone of market research methods.
- 'Groups and depths' have 'invoice validity'. As indicated in the previous section, they represent a clearly describable product that can be seen, counted and bought. Moreover, they self-evidently involve tasks and require skills that managers in organisations are not expected to do or possess. In short, most organisations have market research budgets, which are expected to be applied to projects consisting of 'groups and depths', but such budgets simply do not (easily) exist for other less easily defined methods of qualitative enquiry.

  Thus, let us take an example from Mason's broader definition of qualitative data sources – 'media products'. It would probably prove difficult, in the current market for qualitative market research, to persuade clients to pay the qualitative market research practitioner specifically to 'read the papers'. Moreover, most organisations would expect that if it was important and provided insight, then their own staff would

do it. Breaking this mould will undoubtedly require the joint efforts of both clients and suppliers and there is evidence that this is already happening (Desai, Book 3).

- There has been an established market for group discussions and individual depth interviews – 'groups and depths' – *and* a commercially viable market rate for their conduct. It has been common practice in the UK for researchers to be asked to quote their 'group rate', or the fee they would charge for a 'standard' group discussion, regardless of the complexity of the problem to be addressed by the research. It must be stressed that this is increasingly resisted by many practitioners in favour of a costing structure that more realistically reflects the amount and nature of the work involved in a specific project.

Having said all this, it is also true that the standard group discussion in particular has actually proved itself to be a flexible, effective and efficient method for answering many of the questions that clients ask. It is sound and economical – and commercial researchers have also developed creative ways of enhancing its usefulness and squeezing the maximum informational value from it.

A feature of qualitative market research interviewing, and especially in groups, is the *active* elicitation of material. Certainly, respondents are engaged in conversation and asked for 'opinions', but they are also routinely asked to engage in many other tasks, activities and exercises designed to elicit other forms and levels of contribution. Although it is moving in this direction, with increasing use of observation and ethnography, qualitative market research rarely meets the 'naturalistic' criterion of some definitions of qualitative research. Commercial researchers relatively rarely 'study things in their natural settings' as described by Denzin and Lincoln (2000) but have evolved their own methodological mix to suit the conditions within which they operate.

The particular benefits of group vs. individual interviewing are further examined in Chapter 5, while Book 2 gives detail of the complex ways market researchers use basic interviewing vehicles to address different issues and to generate different kinds of material (see also Books 5 and 6). Reasons for the gradual loosening of this methodological convention are examined in Book 3, where Desai looks at ways in which other methods such as observation and ethnography are being integrated into the qualitative market research repertoire.

The Existence of an Established Support Infrastructure

Returning to the idea of systemisation and business processes discussed above, one of the things available to commercial qualitative researchers is a comprehensive infrastructure that facilitates the conduct of qualitative

market research fieldwork. This is a set of subsidiary commercial services designed to facilitate interview-based qualitative fieldwork. These services are generally operated as independent businesses and thus in theory are also available to academic or social researchers, although their use may be precluded by cost. The services available are those which, although crucial to the process, it is accepted the researcher does not have to do personally in order to retain the integrity of the research.

- There is a national network of experienced qualitative **recruiters**, who are able to recruit respondents to specified descriptions or quotas. (Almost as importantly, they are experienced in ensuring respondents turn up!) This means that commercial research is done amongst relatively 'real people' (relatively in that some will never come even when asked, and some in marginalised groups will never be invited), rather than being forced, through lack of viable alternatives, to rely on a restricted group such as students or inhabitants of one area (see comments on sampling in Chapter 5).
- There is a network of **venues** in which to conduct qualitative market research fieldwork, consisting of specialist viewing facilities (with one-way mirror and video facilities as standard) and hostess homes.
- There are established and specialist **tape transcription** services, offering high levels of accuracy and very fast turnaround times.

In addition, there is the direction provided by a practice-based industry Code of Conduct which provides specific guidance on matters of ethics with regard to both respondents and client responsibilities and how these might translate into actual practice in the field (see Chapter 7).

There are two effects of this.

1 The existence of the infrastructure undoubtedly helps make commercial qualitative research both viable and profitable as a business; without this support system it would be impossible to deliver to current timescale expectations, for example.
2 The slightly more negative effect is that it may be more difficult to do something outside the range and capability of this infrastructure, since client expectations (say, in regard to cost and timing) have been based on using these systems. Desai (Book 3), for example, discusses how researchers carrying out observation and ethnographic-style research have had to invent their own infrastructure to recruit respondents. The MRS Code of Conduct (see Chapter 7) is similarly having to be reviewed in the light of changes to fieldwork practices. Ironically, the existence of a good efficient system to support mainstream practice may provide a barrier to experimentation.

Qualitative Market Research as an Experience-Based Practice

The practice of qualitative market research is learned, taught and developed by *doing*. Although we have not dealt with this point in our list of distinctive features until now, we cannot emphasise enough its significance, and that of the details of practice which flow from it. There are a number of aspects to this.

The Apprenticeship/Journeyman Characteristic of Qualitative Market Research Training

An important characteristic of qualitative market research is the manner in which practitioners learn their craft; this is in the manner of an apprentice (learning the basic skills by watching and doing under guidance) and journeyman (continuing to learn by practising alongside more experienced researchers). There are currently no formal qualifications or examinations required to become a qualitative market research practitioner, although this may change as the market research industry as a whole attempts to professionalise (Jackson 1997).

This experientially based training is augmented by some more formal training (industry courses) and coaching from colleagues, but there is no 'core course' or accepted body of literature or knowledge. Chapter 4 examines the forms of training given in a little more detail.

The Sector has an Essentially 'Oral' Tradition

Relatively little of qualitative market research sector knowledge is written down (unlike academic qualitative research). There are a few monographs by experienced practitioners (for example Gordon 1999; Gordon and Langmaid 1988; Robson and Foster 1989) and a number of papers appear in industry journals and conferences, but in comparison with academic qualitative research, the literature is very sparse. The series of which this book is a part aims to fill this gap by systematically capturing and exploring the roots of the full range of practice, at least within the UK.

Discussion of qualitative market research can also often be at the level of 'how to do it' rather than being conceptual or theorised. Links to any theoretical underpinning or justification for practice can be tenuous, incomplete and sometimes ill-informed. Indeed, a crucial objective of this series has been to write down this oral tradition and endeavour, as far as is possible, to link current practice back to theory. One consequence will be to make deficiencies and misconceptions in this matter more transparent, but it will also allow informed discussion about the differing perspectives taken.

Accumulated Knowledge

Commercial practitioners who are qualitative specialists have considerable first-hand experience of the qualitative process – even experienced

researchers who manage companies continue to be directly involved in projects. A busy practitioner in the UK may moderate 150 group discussions in a year, and as many as six in a week. Qualitative market researchers work very long hours, often routinely working two or three evenings a week in addition to a regular office week; it is also common for a researcher to have several projects at various stages in progress at the same time.

Through this continued exposure to project after project, practical experience accumulates in several ways, existing largely as tacit rather than explicit or codified knowledge:

- Experience of what works to produce effective knowledge for clients (which feeds back into effective design of projects and groups/ interviews).
- Experience of how to handle practical fieldwork (especially competence in moderating groups).
- Experience of 'people in interviews' and 'people in groups' (which provides a validity filter in analysis).
- Experience of the norms and issues around specific areas (for example, of product or business fields, or areas of everyday life).

This experience and knowledge is quite explicitly acknowledged, valued and paid for by clients. The importance of experience and the way it is used in practice is a theme addressed in several of the books in this series, especially Book 4.

A Pragmatic and Eclectic View of Theory

Qualitative market research is a commercial activity reflecting clients' demands and their information needs and in consequence practitioners apply *relevant* theory and method to develop custom-designed research projects to meet the individual needs of their clients. Commercial practice reflects a very wide variety of theoretical sources, but it is possible to trace obvious sources of influence, and the most important of these are:

- Psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theory
- Social psychology
- Sociology
- Social anthropology
- Cultural analysis and semiotics
- Marketing theory
- Consumer behaviour theory and consumption psychology.

The influences of these traditions on aspects of qualitative market research practice are explicitly explored, often for the first time, in many of the books in this series.

There is perhaps a common misconception amongst academic researchers that market researchers take a simplistic, realist view of what they do and the data they gather – that they simply collect, summarise and report 'opinions', assuming that they reflect a stable 'reality' out there in an unproblematic way. This is just not so, and the list of influences given above, along with the detail within each of the books in the series, shows how dramatically actual practice differs from this picture.

However, there are (at least) three ways to think about the role of 'theory' in qualitative market research, and it is important to distinguish them because commercial researchers take a quite different view of each.

The first is **methodological theory**, the theory of what we do and how we do it – the implications of assumptions made and epistemological positions taken, or the theory of what we can know and how we can know. Traditionally, commercial researchers in the UK have not been particularly concerned with this aspect of theory, and 'theory' *per se* has consistently been demonstrated to have limited commercial value (Imms 1999). There are some researchers who are more obviously driven by a specific paradigm, but most are eclectic at this level and many are not fully aware of the range of assumptions they make (Catterall 2001). There is now more interest in understanding methodology and epistemology, but this is not driven by any desire to reach a consensus or orthodoxy, nor to allow individual researchers to adopt one 'pure' position or another, but rather to understand better the range of possible positions and assumptions, in order better to mix them.

Some could (and do) argue that the lack of any strong methodological theory or epistemology is a serious weakness of qualitative market research (for example Valentine 1994). This judgement depends, of course, at least in part, on how its outcomes are to be evaluated. Lack of theoretical consistency – or constraint – has facilitated a strong creative freedom to explore method and technique in an eclectic way. The industry has as a result developed pragmatic and highly effective research methods suited to its own purposes. In this sense it can be said to have benefited from *not* being bound by theory.

Secondly, there is **'theorising'** – the creation of abstractions, conceptualisations and theoretical models from data gathered. This is a core part of what many commercial qualitative researchers do and it is done in two ways. First, researchers often create 'mini models' – ad hoc abstractions and conceptual frameworks – to frame and explain a set of findings from a particular project. Secondly, over time, they develop general models or theories of certain aspects of everyday life (feeding a family, managing money, encountering popular media), through repeated engagement with these, project after project. These models are a major resource in the analysis and interpretation of individual projects (Ereaut, Book 4). This is not 'high' social theory, but it is empirically based social theory of a kind.

Thirdly, qualitative market research **borrows theory and models from social science**. Models of thinking or explanation drawn from a wide range of sources are actively used to address specific research needs.

Market research in this way takes a 'magpie' approach to formal theory, especially that within social science, business, marketing and consumer fields. Experienced researchers often have a very wide knowledge of models and concepts which they apply to their work. Again, this is done eclectically and pragmatically; what works in helping produce useful outcomes for clients is deemed useful and appropriate (unfettered by concern for methodological or theoretic purity) and what does not work or is not useful is dropped. There is no pressure to justify or even explain the use of models or methods for any other audience. One can regard this as intellectually reckless and audacious, or as intelligent and creative – but it is, in fact, what happens.

CLASSIFICATIONS OF APPROACHES WITHIN QUALITATIVE MARKET RESEARCH

Trying to define qualitative market research as a form of qualitative activity also raises the issue of the vastly different styles and approaches that exist both within and between commercial qualitative research communities. Here a number of different classifications are outlined, not because it is possible to produce a definitive taxonomy of approaches, but to give a flavour of the dimensions and issues which arise.

Broadly speaking, there are very many different *possible* approaches to the qualitative market research task; here are a few examples.

- There is what might be called a **clinical** approach – drawing on models of psychotherapy or psychoanalysis to structure interactions with respondents and to draw inferences from data.
- It is possible to take a broadly **positivist** approach to qualitative research, drawing parallels with natural science – here it is assumed that there is a stable reality that can be accessed fairly unproblematically in research, say through questioning respondents.
- A broadly **interpretivist** stance would focus on the meanings given by participants themselves to phenomena and to aspects of their daily life.
- A **sociocultural** approach positions the respondent primarily as a vehicle of culture, through which that culture can be explored and understood.

It is tempting to try to label current practice or individuals in these terms. Again it must be stressed that, above all, individual researchers are eclectic and pragmatic – it is rare to find a researcher whose approach does not contain a mix of assumptions, beliefs and practices that could be traced to any of these theoretically distinct styles. The researcher will apply these as appropriate to specific projects and for specific clients (Catterall 2001).

In the following sections we outline three ways in which a number of writers have attempted to categorise what goes on under the broad umbrella of 'qualitative market research'. Each serves to give a perspective on the issues involved.

Calder's Classification of Qualitative Knowledge

We begin with an academic researcher writing about qualitative market research practice. Calder wrote specifically about focus groups – and although qualitative market research is not *simply* group discussions, groups still make up the bulk of qualitative market research activity, for reasons suggested above. We discuss it here because, although written in 1977 (subsequently revised by Calder and Tybout in 1987), his description is still widely referred to, especially by some academic qualitative researchers (Catterall 2001).

Calder originally described interview-based qualitative market research as providing different sorts of classification of knowledge based on a distinction between

- **exploratory knowledge:** 'first degree constructs' comprising the everyday comments of research subjects, i.e. a summary of the content of interviews etc. (this effectively describes a 'cognitive' model of qualitative market research, which is prevalent today in the USA: see below); and
- **scientific knowledge:** 'second degree constructs' or theoretical constructs *based* upon the everyday comments of research subjects.

Calder suggests that the 'scientific' knowledge generated in the latter classification is not, however, subject to scientific *testing.* Indeed, it is probably incapable of being tested and as such is quasi-scientific. He saw different theoretical approaches as underpinning such quasi-scientific enquiry:

- The **clinical approach:** In this model, the interviewer is probably a clinical psychologist applying psychoanalytic theory as a problem-solving framework.
- The **phenomenological approach:** This assumes that attitudes and beliefs are a function of social and cultural context – and as such the purpose of qualitative market research is to experience and understand things from the point of view of the respondents in the research, and to describe those experiences in the respondent's own terms.

Calder's classification ended with these categories, but ten years later, in collaboration with Tybout (1987), a new category was added:

- **Interpretative knowledge:** This describes the creation of new knowledge by applying an existing body of theory or theoretical concepts to the *interpretation* of the data generated from groups and interviews.

These different classifications of the types of knowledge being sought have important implications for qualitative market research practice. Each approach clearly calls for different questioning techniques and interview processes, as well as quite different approaches to analysis. Can they be seen in practice?

Historically, the 'clinical' model was used by the early Motivational Researchers (and continues to be used by a few European practitioners, especially in France), but it is *not* in common use today, at least not in this pure form. Chrzanowska (Book 2), however, does explore in detail the *legacy* of this approach within current qualitative market research interviewing practice.

In our view, elements of a 'phenomenological' approach continue to be evident and are highly relevant to clients. It is still the case, as Calder says, that 'reality in the executive suite differs drastically from that in most kitchens' (1977: 359), and bridging that kind of gap is an important role of qualitative market research.

Similarly, the 'interpretative' description of qualitative market research is probably closest to current practice in the UK and in the rest of Europe; see Ereaut (Book 4) for a discussion of the wide range of theories and frameworks in common use in analysis and interpretation.

'Cognitive' and 'Conative' Models of Qualitative Market Research

Practitioners themselves tend to distinguish between two broad and rather different models of qualitative market research, which map very generally onto a division between 'positivist' and 'interpretivist' philosophies. Here we use Goodyear's (1998) distinction between 'cognitive' and 'conative' styles, but this has parallels in Smith and Fletcher's (2001) distinction between 'rational/non-participatory' and 'emotional/participatory' research, as well as in Gordon's (2000) 'cognitive' vs. 'humanistic' approaches. It also encapsulates a key distinction made in Peter Cooper's seminal paper entitled 'The New Qualitative Technology'(1987).

The 'cognitive' or 'descriptive' model of qualitative market research (Goodyear 1998; Sampson 1987) assumes that respondents' comments can be taken largely at face value – and simply need to be classified, summarised and reported. (This relates closely to Calder's 'exploratory' classification and 'first degree constructs'.)

The 'conative' model of qualitative market research, however, places great importance on *meaning* and on interpretative, 'second degree' activity by the researcher. Sampson (1987) notes that this term reflects the

TABLE 2.1 *Comparison of Cognitive and Conative Models of Qualitative Market Research*

Characteristics	Cognitive (USA)	Conative (Europe)
Purpose	Demonstration	Exploration
Sample size	10–12 persons	6–8 persons
Duration	1½ hours	1½–4 hours
Interviewing	Logical sequence	Opportunistic
Questions	Closed	Open
Techniques	Straight questions	Probing
	Questionnaires	Facilitation
	Hand shows	Projectives
	Counting	Describing
Response required	Give answers	Debate issues
Interviewer	Moderator	Researcher
Observer's role	To get proof	To understand
Transcripts	Rarely necessary	Usually full
Analysis	On-the-spot	Time-consuming
Focus of time	Pre planning	Post fieldwork
Accusations of other style	'Over-controlling'	'Formless'
Type of problem suited for	Behavioural	Attitudinal
	Confirmatory	Exploratory
	Evaluating	Creative
Output	Information	Understanding

Source: Goodyear, 1996: 109

'conative' inference that is made in this style. (Crucially, theorising and conceptualising are key tasks which must be done in a way that is based firmly in the research data but which *also* addresses the clients' problems in an insightful and relevant way.) Key practitioners involved in developing this approach to research in the UK, which now informs many accepted ideas of 'good practice', have included Bill Schlackman, Peter Cooper, Wendy Gordon and Mary Goodyear.

One of the most detailed comparisons of the cognitive and conative models of qualitative market research is provided by Mary Goodyear (1996) and is summarised in Table 2.1. Note that although she sought to compare common practice in the USA and Europe, it is by no means true that all qualitative market research in the USA follows the cognitive model, nor that all qualitative market research in Europe follows the conative model.

As might be clear by now, this book is primarily concerned with research following the 'conative' model, this reflecting the bulk of mainstream practice in the UK, and we continue to use this term throughout. The term 'focus group' was coined in the USA but has become widely used, even by UK practitioners who in the past described their group-based fieldwork method as 'group discussions'. This historical distinction, now disappearing, has perhaps meant that academics looking for work on qualitative market research, defined in terms of 'focus groups', have not come across this distinctly different European style of research.

Whilst at one level the merging of these two terms could not matter less, a consequence has been the loss of a useful linguistic distinction between these two quite different models of group-based qualitative market research methods.

The 'Evolution' of Qualitative Market Research Approaches

Amongst other analyses of qualitative market research, one in particular provides additional insights into the evolution of approaches within the practice of qualitative market research. Chandler and Owen (1989), in an influential paper, describe three approaches or paradigms which they see as representing stages in an evolutionary process.

- The **discursive paradigm:** where respondents are seen as able to tell the researcher all that is needed. This assumes that questions can elicit conscious verbal responses which in an unproblematic way give access to material relevant to the research problem. This has clear parallels with Calder's 'exploratory' model and with Goodyear's 'cognitive' style of qualitative market research described above.
- The **creative paradigm:** a psychological model, whereby respondents are seen to need 'techniques' to access hidden but useful information. Again, this is related to Calder's 'clinical' or psychoanalytic model, but is different. This version describes a research approach which assumes the existence of a 'psyche', but which uses collaborative interviewer–respondent approaches based on humanistic psychology to access this, not a pure 'clinical' analytic position (see Book 2 for further discussion of this distinction).
- The **analytic paradigm:** a sociocultural model, which is concerned with what respondents can help the researcher discover about shared meanings and cultural norms. This paradigm has become increasingly important and visible in UK qualitative market research. Chandler and Owen themselves, along with Virginia Valentine who pioneered the use of semiotic and cultural analysis in marketing in the UK, have undoubtedly contributed to this shift.

Chandler and Owen suggest that this progression has not meant the abandonment of earlier models, but rather that the theoretical repertoire has expanded. Certainly, current practice in the UK seems to contain elements of all three paradigms, although there is very clear emphasis on the last two. There is certainly a cultural rejection of the 'simple reportage' which characterises research that remains at the level of the discursive.

This section has covered a variety of theories of models and concepts – not to mention a great many terms. A summary may help focus on key themes.

- Qualitative market research *can* play a simple descriptive role – describing behaviours, 'cognitive' factors and limiting itself to 'first-degree' summaries and categorisations of respondents' own descriptions of their world, their views and opinions. This model of qualitative market research is prevalent in the USA, although it does not account for all practice there. It very roughly corresponds to a positivist approach to qualitative research and a 'realist' approach to data.
- In the UK and Europe, however, it is more common for a different philosophical position to be taken, roughly corresponding to an inter-pretivist stance, where meaning and understanding rather than description and 'information' are the key outcomes. An alternative 'conative' model of qualitative market research involves the researcher in a far more interpretative role – using material from respondents to create 'second degree' understanding. The theoretical bases used within this interpretative role are many and varied, reflecting the eclectic nature of qualitative market research practitioners and the applied nature of the work. It is also likely to avoid simple 'realist' assumptions and does not take responses at face value.
- In its broadest manifestation, contemporary practice in qualitative market research draws on a wide range of theory, including that from psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theory, social psychology, socio-logy, social anthropology, cultural analysis and semiotics, marketing theory, theories of consumer behaviour and consumption psychology.

KEY POINTS

- Qualitative market research practitioners play a dual role – they have accountability not only to research standards, but also to their clients' objectives.
- Each qualitative market research project is a 'contract' – and once contracted, the practitioner has limited autonomy over such factors as the scale and nature of the enquiry, timing and fees. Similarly, the scope of the project is specified by the client.
- A key characteristic of commercial qualitative market research is that it has been largely 'systematised' into a unit of service that can be bought and sold. This unit of service tends to be a unit of fieldwork (groups and depths). Moreover, there is an established support infra-structure (recruiters, venues etc.) designed to facilitate interview-based fieldwork.
- At the time of writing, however, there are clear signs of expansion in the use of observational and ethnographic qualitative methods.
- Compared to academic qualitative research, commercial qualitative market research is still dominated by group discussions (focus

groups) and depth interviews but these have proved to be flexible, effective and efficient methods for answering many questions that clients ask.

- Qualitative market research is an experienced-based practice and most learn their craft in the manner of an apprentice or journeyman. The sector has an essentially 'oral' tradition – but also considerable accumulated knowledge, with extensive experience in the process of undertaking practical qualitative enquiry.

- Practitioners take a pragmatic and eclectic view of theory, using a very wide variety of theoretical sources – including psychology and other social sciences as well as marketing and consumer theory. 'Theory' in qualitative market research needs careful consideration. Practitioners are not 'purists' bound or constrained by any one methodological theory, and they take a 'magpie' approach in actively using models of thinking or explanations (drawn from the wide range of sources already mentioned) in order to address specific research needs. However, a core activity within qualitative market research projects is *theorising* – using the data collected from field-work to create for clients bespoke abstractions, conceptualisations and theoretical models.

- Within qualitative market research there are inevitably different approaches. At its simplest level, qualitative market research *can* play a simple descriptive role – based on 'first degree' summaries and categorisations of respondents' own descriptions. More commonly (certainly in the UK and Europe), qualitative market research fulfils an 'interpretative' role, where 'second degree' levels of meaning and understanding rather than descriptions and 'information' are the key outcomes. Here again, the theoretical bases for this interpretation come from many and varied sources.

③

What Do Organisations Get from Qualitative Market Research?

Why would organisations buy qualitative research? What kinds of knowledge or information do they expect to get from it? What other factors might enter the decision to use it? In this chapter, we will suggest that organisations do have 'qualitative questions' – they need forms of knowledge which cannot easily be accessed or generated in any other way. But the decision as to what constitutes a 'qualitative question' is not a simple one and there is often more than one way to address an issue. In addition, there are many other reasons in practice why qualitative research gets commissioned. The chapter also looks briefly at the environment within which qualitative research operates, at the level both of the general cultural 'climate' and of decision-making cultures within organisations.

The question as to why organisations need, want and buy qualitative market research is not only important, but also a potentially huge and complex topic. Of course, in everyday practice few clients and practitioners will debate the question at length – they merely get on and do it, and both parties find it beneficial. In this chapter, though, we examine *in general terms* why organisations might want and need qualitative market research, by exploring some conceptual frameworks for thinking about what qualitative market research might offer.

The aim of this chapter is to set the existence of 'qualitative market research' (as a service that is now bought by a variety of organisations) into some kind of context. The chains of events and decisions that lead to the commissioning of qualitative research is long and complex and will vary enormously between organisations. It will be affected by the aims of the organisation, its culture and way of operating, its ways of thinking and treating information, and the individual people within it as well as by more obvious things such as the nature of the organisational activity, aims, size, structure etc.

Looking at how organisations work and how they use knowledge is obviously a huge task and full treatment of these theoretical and practical issues is not possible or appropriate here. The business and organisational

literature is vast and conceptualisations of relevant processes like decision-making and information use are many. We have therefore selectively explored a few diverse perspectives which in our view offer useful ways of looking at the practice of qualitative market research.

We have also set some limits by taking as our starting point the moment at which an organisation recognises a *need for information* from *outside the commissioning organisation* concerning some *external group*, however defined – customers, voters, citizens and so on.

Within these specific objectives and limitations, we have approached the question of why organisations want and need qualitative market research from four different but complementary perspectives. These can be summarised as:

- **A market research perspective:** Here we consider what types of information market research can offer in general, how and why qualitative methodologies are increasingly needed, and what they offer within market research.
- **A knowledge perspective:** Here we consider the broad organisational need for 'knowledge' – and the type of knowledge that qualitative market research represents. In this we have used frameworks provided by the discipline of Knowledge Management to underpin our discussion.
- **A perspective from organisational cultures:** We need to recognise that part of the appeal of qualitative market research is that it meets the needs of certain types of organisational cultures and the way some organisations make decisions. We have drawn selectively upon specific models of decision-making that appear to us to be illuminating for this book.
- **Some non-methodological perspectives:** It is clear that *sometimes* organisations use qualitative market research for reasons that have little or nothing to do with the technical relevance of the discipline. We outline these.

The rest of this chapter is concerned with these four broad perspectives.

A MARKET RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

For the sake of differentiation we have used the word 'information' in this section to make it deliberately different from 'knowledge', used in the context of 'Knowledge Management' in the next.

In order to look at why organisations buy qualitative market research, we start by asking why they would buy market research at all. This is a subject covered in many business or marketing textbooks; here we summarise a common-sense view of the role of market research in general, then go on to look in much greater detail at qualitative research itself. So

having explained why organisations need market research, we then consider why *qualitative* methods are needed within this. This aspect of the subject is less often covered in existing literature.

It seems obvious that organisations use information sources such as market research to inform themselves about aspects of the world outside, and that they do this in order to help them make decisions and to manage risk. One way to look at this is to use the classic 'planning cycle' which asks (at the micro level of a brand, or at the meta level of the business as a whole):

- Where are we? (and why are we here?)
- Where could we be?
- How could we get there?
- Are we getting there?

Essentially, organisations whose profitability or existence depends on delivering some kind of product or service are likely to be asking the following questions about the population(s) of interest to them – whether these are consumers of a product, users of local services, voters, visitors to a museum or whatever group is of relevance:

- What do people currently do (in relation to our field of operation)?
- Why do they do it?
- What might they do differently?
- How can we influence this?

These ways of thinking and managing a business or organisation involve questions of diagnosis (what is happening and why) and prognosis (what might happen in the future). These are the classic functions of market research, providing a key input – from the consumer him or herself – into answering these questions. In addition, organisations might want help with creating ideas – about what to make, for example – and they may look to forms of research to help inspire these ideas.

There are two discernible trends within the demand for market research, a business which has traditionally been largely characterised by ad hoc projects, and especially by survey research.[1]

First, there is a move towards 'data mining'. This involves making finer use of new and existing data from internal and external sources, combining data sets and using complex analysis techniques to extract very precise forms of information about markets.

Secondly, there is a clear move towards existing and new forms of qualitative work and the kind of holistic, responsive and 'soft' information it provides. These forms would include interviewing and ethnographic research but also emergent activities like direct client–consumer contact and collaborative problem-solving (see Desai, Book 3). This move is reflected in the way in which words such as 'intuition', 'vision' and

'insight' are now common in business discourse, as they were not a decade ago.

As markets become more fragmented, they arguably need both of these – data mining to identify small or dispersed 'brand communities' (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), and qualitative research to understand how to address them.

There are two primary ways to gather information about customers or other relevant groups: ask them questions, or observe them and their behaviour and draw conclusions from this.

- **Asking people** about their relevant behaviour, attitudes and reasons for what they do, and what they might do in response to different future scenarios, are the standard approaches in market research, as commonly defined, and account for the vast bulk of the business. There are two major approaches to doing this, involving different field methods, analysis methods and philosophies – known as *qualitative* and *quantitative* interviewing.
- **Observing behaviour** and inferring knowledge from it also occurs in both quantitative and qualitative forms. *Quantitative* observation might include collecting point of sale data, or collecting usage data for a government agency, or recording traffic flows through a retail space. Some of this will be collected by the organisation itself, some may be collected by a specialist market research agency, such as one selling retail audit data. *Qualitative* observation may involve the deliberate observation of customers' behaviour (without necessarily interviewing them), or watching and making sense of an activity in a certain setting, or even living with people in their own homes for a while. This may be done by professional researchers or by those from the client organisation itself. Both these latter options are covered in detail in Book 3 of the series.

As noted above, there are many forms of research other than ad hoc projects which are provided by market research or indeed other suppliers, such as re-analysis of existing data or knowledge, continuous market monitoring and desk research using published or other sources. We will, however, follow what has been the pattern of the industry and concentrate now on research based on *interviewing* methods – whilst acknowledging the important and growing role of these other approaches.

Looking at ad hoc work, it is inevitable that qualitative market research is discussed in relation to quantitative; the comparison is highly relevant. We recognise that practitioners may complain at this; qualitative market research has lived to some extent in the shadow of quantitative research, and has long suffered criticism of its methods and philosophies (Jackson 1997). Many will feel the 'qual–quant debate' is a sterile one, but the comparison does serve a useful purpose here in exploring how and why qualitative research is used.

What qualitative and quantitative interview research methods *share* is the idea of using interaction with people as an indicator, from which reasons for certain behaviour and predictions about future behaviour might be derived. That is, both qualitative and quantitative interviewing methods – by definition – rely on asking people about something. The *differences* between the use in practice of these methods really lie in the following areas.

- The kind of information produced.
- How far one must know in advance what the relevant questions might be.
- How far one believes that the relevant answers are easily accessible and verbalised by respondents themselves, along with beliefs about the social conditions under which people might be prepared to answer these questions.
- Timing and budgetary factors.
- Infrastructure and logistic issues – how feasible it is practically to carry out particular research activities (especially relevant in emerging markets or minority fields).
- The use, or not, of statistics in assessing the validity and generalizability of the findings.
- Cultural and personal factors within the commissioning organisation.

There are strong indicators that would favour qualitative or quantitative approaches. Thus the 'ideal' indicators for a **quantitative** ad hoc survey would be where:

- 'hard' measurement-based data are clearly required;
- there is a strong proven link between reported behaviour and attitudes and actual or future behaviour;
- the relevant attitudes are unproblematic and easily accessed and articulated by respondents;
- the relevant attitudes are likely to be willingly expressed to a stranger on the street or at the front door;
- statistical significance is an essential or highly desirable aspect of the outcome.

While **qualitative** research of some kind would be strongly indicated where:

- 'soft' knowledge concerning understanding, meaning and context is clearly required;
- there is a need to *elicit* relevant issues or questions, or there is doubt about how to express these meaningfully to respondents;
- there is a belief that respondents may not know or easily access relevant material without time or help to do so;

- the subject matter indicates people will be unwilling to talk meaning-fully about it under normal survey conditions;
- statistical validity is irrelevant to an assessment of the value of the research.

In real life, of course, such ideal or clear-cut conditions rarely occur and every decision about research methods to address a specific problem will be a compromise between the demands raised by these questions. This is why, despite the tribal clashes occasionally occurring between practition-ers on each side, qualitative and quantitative research methods are widely seen to be complementary, rather than competitive. Indeed almost all client organisations use *both*, and some of the most potent market research projects are a hybrid of both 'qual' and 'quant'.

The reader may have noticed that some of the reasons to use qualitative market research are positive ones (the need for a certain kind of knowl-edge), but that some are negative (where conditions would *not* favour quantitative approaches). In reality, both kinds of factor are often involved in the complex trade-off that is research design.

From the above discussion, it seems that even *within* the broad per-spective of market research we can address the role of qualitative research via three sub-themes.

- From an 'information' perspective, there are certain types of informa-tion need that benefit from qualitative methods of enquiry. Essentially, this arises where the dominant need is for depth of understanding.
- From a 'respondent' perspective, we need to recognise there are clear limitations to what people can and will reveal in answer to simple questions in conventional market research interviews. Qualitative market research provides methodologies to overcome this, and to elicit vital information that is outside public, conscious factors.
- From a 'pragmatic' perspective, qualitative market research can offer practical ways of researching topics where it is not feasible or appro-priate to use other market research methods.

Each of these themes is now explored.

Qualitative Information: When Organisations Need Depth of Understanding

Having said that there are some market research information needs that are inherently 'qualitative', what characterises 'qualitative' information? Marketing texts dealing with market research offer explanations of the different nature and applications of quantitative and qualitative methods (see for example Kotler 1997), although the latter tend to be relegated to a minor role and are rarely given thorough coverage (Catterall 1998).

Broadly, the different kinds of information or knowledge created by qualitative and quantitative approaches can be summarised thus:

- **Quantitative: counting and measuring** – focusing on questions of 'how many', 'who', 'when' (and 'why' through processes of mathematical correlation and deduction). Relies on principles of statistics and positivist scientific method for its authority.
- **Qualitative: understanding, meaning and context** – focusing on questions of 'why' through creating a holistic understanding of the subject's viewpoint. Relies on quite different sources of authority such as interpretivist, phenomenological or cultural models.

It must be stressed here that, *at the extremes*, certain organisational questions clearly need a qualitative or quantitative approach. For example, it is hard to imagine a reason for trying to collect retail audit data (what was bought, from where and when) qualitatively – it would simply be less accurate and less meaningful. Similarly, the insight and understanding produced by a perceptive piece of qualitative advertising development research would be very difficult to replicate using standard quantitative questionnaire methods. But there are very many organisational questions which would lend themselves to *either* qualitative or quantitative methods, or to a hybrid approach using both. Again, note that many market research projects today are actually qual–quant hybrids or combined projects, using the strengths of both methods (see Smith and Fletcher 2001).

What we will do here is show some of the factors that would tip the balance in favour of using qualitative research, emphasising that this decision will always be one of balance and judgement, and will only rarely be clear-cut.

Significantly, much of what has traditionally been recognised as knowledge within organisations is actually numerical or quantitative. Traditional business management rests on hard data and accounting tools – financial data, sales figures, measures such as return on assets and so on. Quantitative data collection about customers or other relevant groups is likely to be an important and valued part of an organisation's information store, and many organisational cultures will favour quantitative approaches. But users of qualitative research recognise that certain forms of knowledge vital to the organisation may not come in this form: for example, *understanding* a situation, looking for ways to *appeal to* and *communicate* with customers or stakeholders, or for ways to *develop* and *innovate.* These are the kinds of need that qualitative market research is often called upon to fill.

We return to the questions outlined in the first section: What do people currently do (in relation to our field of operation)? Why do they do it? What might they do differently? How can we influence this? The qualitative contribution to answering these questions translates into research objectives that would include the words 'holistic', 'understand', 'explore',

'gain insight into', 'set in the context of' and so on. Looking also at the role and function of market research in diagnosis and prognosis, qualitative market research again makes a specific kind of contribution.

- **Diagnosis:** providing *understanding* of the current situation and *why* things are the way they are. The organisational benefits of diagnostic qualitative market research concern better understanding of the situation and the target market/stakeholder group in terms of complex and relatively intangible factors such as the ways issues interrelate, and the effects of context on the way people act and make relevant decisions.
- **Prognosis:** providing *insight* into people's likely response to potential plans. The organisational benefits of 'prognostic' qualitative market research concern better understanding and thus management of risks. Clearly people do not always know what they will do, nor do what they say they will, so qualitative prognosis works by trying to understand the contingencies and factors that are likely to affect future actions. Prognosis is an issue of judgement and is a major experience-based skill of researchers. (Desai (Book 3) also explores the nature of more generally defined 'future work' involving attempts to predict trends and innovate ahead of them.)

Both diagnostic and prognostic qualitative market research can concern different levels of decision – from guidance on specific operational or tactical choices to providing context and input to strategic planning at the highest level. Diagnosis and prognosis account in very general terms for a great deal of qualitative market research activity.

Increasingly, though, qualitative market research projects are being commissioned to create ideas – but note that different methodologies and processes are required for such projects. This is an area in which qualitative methods are far more likely to be used than quantitative.

- **Creativity:** contemporary qualitative market research also includes capturing the creative capabilities of those taking part in research. Book 3 provides a detailed discussion of this kind of use of qualitative market research methods and researchers.

In Chapter 5 some typical objectives for qualitative market research projects are illustrated in more detail, while examples of the kinds of project concerning developing brands and advertising – which account for much qualitative market research work – can be found in the volumes in this series by Chandler and Owen (Book 5) and Wardle (Book 6).

This gives some idea of how qualitative techniques offer a different kind of market research information that clients can utilise alongside other forms. Another way to look at it is to consider the way in which it does this – effectively by using respondents as a different kind of resource from survey methods.

Using Respondents Differently: Methodologies to Overcome Limitations to What People Will Say

Thus far, we have explored the issue of why organisations use qualitative market research from the perspective of the types of information required by organisations: 'What kinds of things do we need to know?'. We have identified that certain types of information are inherently qualitative in their nature. However, we have also touched on the fact that we need to consider practical issues and the feasibility of asking respondents in market research to answer our questions. If we consider 'What kinds of things can respondents tell us in research?', we will, once again, demonstrate that qualitative methods are essential in eliciting certain categories of information.

To understand people fully, their motivations, wants, needs and cultural perspectives, we need to explore beyond hard 'facts', and beyond the conscious issues people are willing and immediately able to say. Thus, we need research methods and techniques that go beyond that which people can, and will, say in response to simple, direct questions.

One of the simpler ways of considering this is embodied in the 'Johari Window'[2] – a conceptual model for describing, evaluating and predicting aspects of interpersonal communication (for example, as in our case, a market research interview).

The axes of this model distinguish between those things people are, or are not, aware of about themselves, and the things they will, and will not, say (see Figure 3.1).
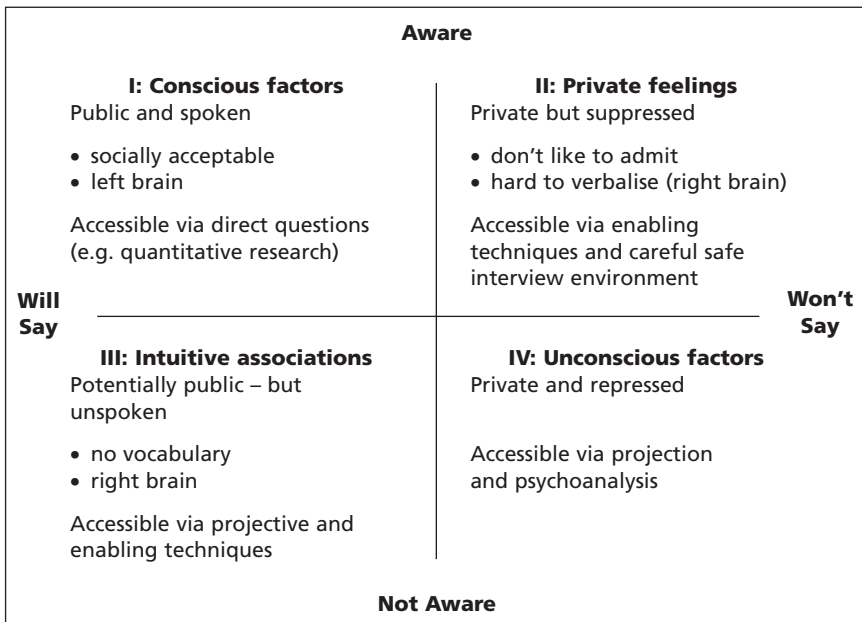

Aware

I: Conscious factors
Public and spoken

- socially acceptable
- left brain

Accessible via direct questions
(e.g. quantitative research)

II: Private feelings
Private but suppressed

- don't like to admit
- hard to verbalise (right brain)

Accessible via enabling
techniques and careful safe
interview environment

Will Say   **Won't Say**

III: Intuitive associations
Potentially public – but
unspoken

- no vocabulary
- right brain

Accessible via projective and
enabling techniques

IV: Unconscious factors
Private and repressed

Accessible via projection
and psychoanalysis

Not Aware

FIGURE 3.1 *The 'Johari Window' in qualitative market research*

It is useful to start with some observations about the top left-hand quadrant – **conscious factors:** 'aware and will say'. This is very much the domain of conventional survey research, i.e. ask a direct question and elicit a direct response.

The dilemma is that people will tend to express views that can be categorised in two ways:

- *Socially acceptable.* This incudes things they do not mean but feel is 'the right thing to say', such as 'We only watch nature documentaries on TV.' Moreover, it excludes things they do mean, but believe to be unacceptable to say, such as 'I chose this car because I loved the statement it makes about me.'
- *Linked to 'left-brain' mental processes.* Seminal work by Sperry (1968) demonstrated that the left and right hemispheres of the brain process different sorts of thoughts. The left hemisphere includes verbal processes – and market research interviewing is of course predominantly a verbal medium. This gives it an inherent bias to the left-brain mental processes, which, as well as being verbal *also* include analytic processes of rationality, logic and deduction. In contrast, right-brain mental processes exhibit two important and different characteristics:

  (a) they are non-verbal – and this means people often do not have the *words* to express right-brain thoughts and feelings, however powerful and influential these may be;
  (b) they include feelings, emotions and intuitive associations – and exploration of such factors perforce means developing techniques to elicit right-brain, non-verbal mental processes.

Whilst things of which people are 'aware and will say' is of course a wholly legitimate area of enquiry for market research, the importance of the Johari Window is that it maps out important dimensions *beyond this* that are not generally accessible through conventional survey techniques.

Although **unconscious factors** – the private and repressed – are *not* generally regarded as a legitimate area for market research, qualitative market research methods and techniques *are* designed to go beyond conscious factors and explore two further quadrants of the Johari Window:

- to create an interview environment and adopt techniques that encourage respondents to feel safe and comfortable enough to reveal **private feelings** (top right quadrant: 'aware but won't say');
- to adopt interview styles and methodologies that allow respondents to express **intuitive associations** – things they may never have thought about before, and things they have no vocabulary to express in words (bottom left quadrant: 'will say – but not aware').

In Book 2, on qualitative interviewing skills, Chrzanowska outlines the key methodologies used to explore both quadrants, including non-directive, open question techniques, active listening, and projective and enabling techniques.

So qualitative market research offers a particular form of information within 'market research', and does so by eliciting particular kinds of contribution from informants. It has another role within market research methods, though, which is in overcoming some practical problems.

Pragmatic Issues: Practical Ways of Researching Topics Where Other Methods are not Feasible

There are a variety of circumstances where certain market research techniques may, theoretically, be relevant, but are not practical. In such circumstances qualitative market research often provides an achievable solution to a real-life problem.

Setting up a useful quantitative research project requires a greater level of knowledge or confidence than a qualitative project in several areas: who to talk to, how to define and find them, what issues to address, which questions to ask and exactly how to ask them. So it can be that these and other practical factors provide the reason why, for a given problem, a qualitative rather than quantitative approach is taken.

In order to commission meaningful quantitative research using a standardised questionnaire, one needs to know or be reasonably confident:

- what the relevant questions might be;
- that the relevant answers will be easily accessed and verbalised by respondents;
- that people will be prepared to answer these questions under quantitative conditions; i.e. on the street or doorstep, to a stranger with a pre-set questionnaire;
- that the relevant population can be defined, located and sampled in a statistically robust way.

Thus there are various circumstances where *in principle* a quantitative survey might be appropriate and indeed be the better way to address client objectives – but in practice it is not achievable. If the conditions above are not met, qualitative market research can provide a practical and credible alternative, even when not the method of first choice. It is simply more flexible and more able to deal with difficulties (for example, the risk of questions proving to be irrelevant) on the ground. So qualitative market research can prove *necessary* for the following projects.

- Effective exploration of topics where **the key consumer/stakeholder questions and/or vocabulary are unknown**. It is self-evident that to create a structured questionnaire for use in a quantitative survey

you have to know what the right questions are. This involves needing to know not only the nature of the questions, but also the right vocabulary. Clearly in many cases this detail is unknown and qualitative market research enables the definition of questions and identification of vocabulary as well as offering some answers to them. An important use of qualitative market research concerns 'pre-survey' projects that seek to help in the creation of effective questionnaires for use in quantitative studies, but it should be stressed that today's qualitative market research projects rarely have this as their sole objective.

- Effective exploration of topics where **the nature of the issues is likely to cause difficulties in questionnaire research**. It can be anticipated (through prior knowledge or common sense) that some subject areas might pose problems for questionnaire research, or that some issues might evoke only superficial responses without sensitive interviewing and probing. Here a qualitative approach may be used in preference to a quantitative method.

- Effective exploration of topics where **the 'universe' of consumers/ stakeholders is unknown or inaccessible to statistically valid sampling**. The stratification of a reliable sample for quantitative studies requires reasonably detailed and reliable knowledge of the population or universe being sampled. Yet this information is sometimes unknown, typically in three very different types of situation.

  o Socially excluded groups or groups engaged in clandestine or illegal activity: examples might include drug users, burglars, members of the 'black economy'.
  o Emergent or fast-changing groups: examples might include 'leading edge' consumers, or those in emergent markets (e.g. newly urbanised industrial workers who have recently moved from the countryside, say in China).
  o Members of unquantified groups: examples might include any pre-industrial societies without detailed population statistics or, say, the homeless in the UK.

Qualitative market research provides a practical way of beginning to study such groups, by interviewing 'typical' members of such populations, defined by principles of judgemental or purposive sampling (see Chapter 5).

Practical and Logistic Issues

Apart from the differences between qualitative and quantitative approaches in terms of the information they produce, or information needed before they can be carried out, there are also practical differences between them.

Cost and Timing
Qualitative market research can often provide quicker results, and at less cost, than alternative information sources. Generally speaking, a qualitative project designed to answer a set of objectives will take less time and cost less than the quantitative alternative, and in some circumstances this is a real reason for choosing qualitative research. Whilst one may frown disapprovingly at the idea of 'a few quick groups' the reality is that, however incomplete the knowledge gained from such expediency, it is almost always better than doing nothing, or guessing – which can often be the only real alternative.

Infrastructure
Occasionally, qualitative research might be carried out where a quantitative survey 'infrastructure' does not exist. We can recall Mary Goodyear describing how she conducted informative and valuable research amongst groups of West Africans, sitting on a beach on the Gold Coast, in a situation where the infrastructure to carry out a quantitative study simply did not exist.

Population Size
The target research population may be known but small. In this case it may well be most productive to interview fewer people qualitatively, making maximum use of each contact made.

Number and Nature of Research Materials
Other practical factors that can favour the use of qualitative approaches include apparently trivial but effectively crucial factors such as the number of copies of any prototypes or advertising ideas that are to be researched (a quantitative project may require these in considerable numbers if it is not to take a very long time to complete whereas qualitative research can usually get away with one or two sets). Finally, it may be judged that the form of the material to be researched means that it will need careful explanation or introduction if meaningful results are to be gained. The quality of quantitative interviewers is generally very high, but they are trained to use only agreed question wording and introductions in order to ensure a standardised interview, and there are limits to what can be achieved in these terms via a scripted introduction.

In summary, some of the key comparisons of qualitative market research with other forms of ad hoc market research are charted in Table 3.1. These factors are covered here and/or in other parts of this book.

This section has looked at qualitative market research from a number of angles, but all within the broad field of market research. Now we will change the perspective within which we are considering what organisations might get from qualitative market research and look more generally at the idea of knowledge within organisations.

Table 3.1 *Comparison of qualitative and quantitative market research*

Qualitative	Quantitative

Understanding
  Why?
	Measurement
	  Who, What, When, How, Where?

Conceptual	Statistical
Interpretivist/phenomenological	Scientific/positivist

Little prior knowledge of
  research field needed
	Requires known questions as basis for
	  questionnaire design + known universe
	  as basis for sample design

Can operate with limited research
  infrastructure
	Dependent on extensive research
	  infrastructure

Left and right brain	Left brain
Verbal +	Verbal only
Complex questions and detailed probes	Simple questions and probes

Must use 'qualitative' measures of reliability
  and validity (see Ereaut, Book 4)
	Uses traditional scientific measures of
	  reliability and validity

Conscious *and* pre-conscious factors (private and intuitive factors)	Conscious factors
Codify tacit knowledge and reveal and fill 'unknown knowledge gaps'	Measure explicit and known knowledge gaps

A KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

Here we look at what qualitative research offers using concepts from the new but rapidly growing field of Knowledge Management (KM) and the related idea of 'intellectual capital'. Readers unfamiliar with these concepts are referred to, for example, Little et al. (2002) or Beckman (1999) for an introduction to KM, and to Stewart (1998) or Sveiby (1997) regarding intellectual capital. The concepts discussed below are selected from these recent and apparently influential movements within organisational and management thinking. There is always the risk that such movements prove to be management fads, a possibility recognised (but generally refuted) by many writers. However, they are included here because some of these ideas are of particular relevance to those involved in qualitative market research, as will become clear.

The ideas that now coalesce into Knowledge Management seem to have first appeared in a few academic papers in the early 1990s, but activity erupted in the mid-1990s and the principles of KM are now widely known and manifest in a number of ways, both academically and within organisations (see Beckman 1999 for a detailed review). Broadly, KM appears as:

- A way of thinking – recognising the value of knowledge in today's world and of 'intellectual capital' as a vital asset of a business, with particular implications for information and human resources management.
- The establishment of certain key concepts, including ideas of explicit and tacit knowledge and the ways that these interrelate.

- A consulting opportunity – creating a niche for a form of business consulting which helps companies capture, organise and make use of their knowledge.
- A software/IT opportunity – linked to the consulting opportunity above.

It is the first two of these that are of most interest to us in this section, although later in the chapter we also look at KM as encouraging a business climate likely to favour both old and new forms of qualitative research consultancy.

Stewart (1998) identifies three forms of 'intellectual capital' (note he talks only about for-profit businesses, but a version of these ideas could be applied to many not-for-profit organisations), the last of which is of particular relevance to qualitative market research.

- **Human capital:** the value residing within the people in the organisation; their knowledge, skills and abilities which add value to the activities of the organisation (in businesses, the knowledge that creates wealth).
- **Structural capital:** knowledge lodged in the structure of the organisation itself; its technologies and inventions but also its strategies, culture, routine and systems.
- **Customer capital:** a company's on-going relationships with the people or organisations to which it sells and the knowledge that flows between them. It may be measured by things like market share, customer retention and individual customer profitability, but it also comprises intangible factors like loyalty, trust and mutual benefit.

Qualitative market research has always been closely involved with the last of these (although in employee studies it can be involved in understanding and assessing the first two). It is uniquely placed to offer knowledge about those intangibles such as the nature and dynamics of relationships between suppliers and consumers, or between organisations and stakeholders.

On a related issue, in recent years the financial value of brands has become recognised, to the point where they now figure in the accounts and balance sheets of companies as assets. It is evident from the way it is bought by organisations that qualitative research has proved itself very useful in understanding advertising and brands – and for this reason there is a book devoted to each of these applications within this series. As the value of customer capital is more widely recognised and valued (and as organisations such as universities and government agencies move towards seeing themselves as owning 'brands'), the need for understanding such 'soft' assets has become even more important to a wider range of organisations.

Another way in which the thinking within KM is of relevance to qualitative market research is the additional perspective it gives on what *kind*

of knowledge such research offers. A major strand of thought within KM concerns recognising different forms of knowledge, specifically the difference between explicit and tacit knowledge.

- **Explicit** knowledge is that which is codified and transmittable in some kind of agreed language.
- **Tacit** knowledge is personal, dependent on context and difficult to communicate.

In a number of highly influential papers and books (for example Nonaka 1991; Nonaka et al. 1996), Japanese academic Nonaka and his associates suggest that knowledge is created in organisations through a spiral of exchange of tacit and explicit knowledge. They look at the four logical possibilities of exchange between these two and give each process a name:

- tacit to tacit (socialisation)
- tacit to explicit (externalisation)
- explicit to explicit (combination)
- explicit to tacit (internalisation).

So, for example, as we have already described, qualitative market research professional knowledge tends to be tacit and has traditionally been passed on largely as 'socialisation', through apprenticeship – but this series of books is attempting to make at least some of this knowledge explicit, through the process of 'externalising'.

Many qualitative market research projects are centrally concerned with 'externalising' the tacit knowledge of consumers of other relevant groups – exploring and mapping the taken-for-granted in everyday life which is relevant to buying a certain object, or taking part in a particular activity, or responding to a particular advertisement. The fact that this knowledge, belief or logic is taken-for-granted by the target group – *and* is often quite invisible to the client organisation – means that the only way to access it is through unstructured, responsive research.

The recognition of tacit and explicit knowledge within KM is thus potentially interesting for those involved in qualitative market research, although full treatment of this concept is beyond the scope of this book. (It should also be stressed that the above, though influential, is far from the only categorisation of knowledge in use – see Beckman 1999 for an extensive list of such categorisations.)

The tacit/explicit idea is also interesting, though, because it suggests the complex nature of 'knowing' and 'not knowing', something of clear relevance to a business involved in filling knowledge gaps for clients. An important set of factors involved in understanding why organisations use qualitative market research concerns not just where the client organisation is trying to get to in terms of knowledge (what is *not* known), but where it already is (what *is* known).

TABLE 3.2   *Organisational knowledge: 'knowing' and 'not knowing'*

	Know	**Don't know**
Know	Knowledge that you know you have (**Explicit knowledge**)	Knowledge that you know you don't have (**Known gaps**)
	Role for qualitative market research: refining explicit knowledge	*Role for qualitative market: filling known gaps*
Don't know	Knowledge that you don't know you have (**Tacit knowledge**)	Knowledge that you don't know you don't have (**Unknown gaps**)
	Role for qualitative market research: externalising tacit knowledge	*Role for qualitative market research: identifying unknown gaps*

Source: Adapted from Fahey (quoted in Stewart 1998)

Fahey offers a simple but effective way to look further at tacit and explicit knowledge, examining not only what is known, but also what is *known* to be known – or not (see Table 3.2). This provides a useful way to look at what market research in general, and qualitative in particular, offers organisations. Market research of all kinds potentially provides knowledge fitting into all four of Fahey's quadrants, but qualitative research is uniquely placed to fill one of them – that of 'unknown gaps'.

(Filling) 'Known Gaps'

This is the stuff of the client's brief for many market research projects, qual or quant: 'We need to know how people choose between brands of soap'; or 'We need to know what the response might be to this local government initiative.' Clients have identified a piece of knowledge that they believe they need and they also believe they do not have.

Much qualitative (and quantitative) research reporting will of course aim to fill this gap as comprehensively and accurately as possible. Occasionally, for qualitative research the known gap will be knowledge that is required actually to facilitate another phase of market research: 'We don't know how people talk about insurance and we need to design a questionnaire that uses appropriate language.'

(Refining) 'Explicit Knowledge'

Qualitative and quantitative research can serve to confirm or challenge the client's existing explicit knowledge, even when this was not the specific objective of the project. Clearly, when it challenges, client and researcher need to work together to review and deal with the conflict (see Smith and Fletcher (2001) for a discussion of how pieces of 'the information jigsaw' faced by organisations may be assessed and fitted together).

In qualitative research in particular, the challenge may not be in overturning but in subtly re-framing or re-phrasing that knowledge – where,

for example, the organisation is using quite different terminology from its customers, or assuming a quite different set of priorities, and closing that gap will improve the quality of the existing knowledge.

(Externalising) 'Tacit Knowledge'

A key role for qualitative market research in particular is to reveal and codify the informal and implicit *as well as* the formal and explicit. This applies in behavioural patterns of all kinds – consumers, organisations, specific groups, cultures – and is inherent in attitudes of all kinds (towards products, services, brands, leaders, organisations etc.).

But it is also the case that qualitative research can identify, clarify and in fact make explicit knowledge which, in the form of 'gut feel' or beliefs or hunches, *already existed within the client organisation*. One kind of positive outcome from a qualitative market research presentation occurs when recipients comment, 'We kind of already knew that, but never thought of it or talked about it in that way before – now we can use it.' The research makes this knowledge more usable because it codifies it and makes it communicable (as well as validating it from outside).

(Identifying) 'Unknown Gaps'

This is a key strength of qualitative enquiry and is one of the reasons it is so valuable to organisations in *growing* their knowledge; it is difficult for quantitative research to do this. Generally, qualitative market research projects will begin with some kind of 'known gap' – *but* the flexibility and responsiveness of the qualitative process allows the researcher who has been briefed on this 'gap' *and* on the reasons for the client's interest in this gap (see Lillis, Book 7) to spot and follow up on something unpredicted but relevant to that interest. So the research can report on issues, say attitudes or behaviours or values, which the client did not know were there, did not know they needed to know about, but which are actually important to them. This is virtually impossible to do quantitatively since all the key components of the project, including detailed areas of enquiry and question wording, must be specified and kept standard throughout. Telling clients 'what they didn't know they didn't know' forms an important part of the role of the commercial researcher.

The third lens through which we look at what organisations might gain from qualitative market research concerns the organisations themselves, and how certain cultures and ways of operating may encourage the use of qualitative market research.

A PERSPECTIVE FROM ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Here, we look at a range of cultural issues that affect how and why qualitative market research might function within organisations. There are

many dimensions on which organisations vary and some of these might make them use or evaluate the contribution of qualitative market research differently. These include different styles of decision-making and the cultural climate for 'soft' or qualitative knowledge. Again, this represents a large field of study and we are being highly selective here.

Styles of Organisational Decision-Making

Much externally commissioned qualitative market research is carried out to inform some kind of decision, whether this is at a tactical level ('what's the best colour for the pack?') or at the strategic level ('in what general direction should we be innovating?'), and whether the research is of immediate or long-term relevance to that decision. So what is this process of decision-making into which qualitative market research fits? It seems obvious that organisations will differ in how decisions are made and there is a significant academic literature on the subject; here we look at just two overviews, in order to give a flavour of the variables involved and their possible relationship to qualitative market research.

What emerges from both is, unsurprisingly, that qualitative market research is likely to be used within a decision-making style that has some structure, but is also flexible and not overly dependent on mathematical or formal models. This fits well with our earlier description of qualitative market research as displaying 'contained flexibility' (Chapter 2).

First, business academic Chun Wei Choo provides a very useful overview of organisational decision-making (Choo 1998). He suggests that in an ideal and impossible world, decisions would be made entirely rationally, based on a clear assessment of all the relevant information regarding the current situation, options for action and their consequences. This is impossible, not just because not all this information will actually be available, but because individuals and organisations would lack the adequate processing capacity to deal with it even if it was.

> In theory, this choice is to be made rationally, based on complete information about the organisation's goals, feasible alternatives, probable outcomes of these alternatives, and the values of these outcomes to the organisation. In practice, rational choice making is muddled by the jostling of interests among organisational stakeholders, bargaining and negotiation between powerful groups and individuals, the limitations and idiosyncracies of personal choice making, the lack of information and so on. Despite these complications, an organisation must keep up at least an appearance of rational, reasoned behaviour, both to sustain internal trust and to preserve external legitimacy. (1998: 2)

So a number of coping strategies or styles emerge. Choo outlines what he considers to be the 'four important models' of organisational decision-making (1998: 170): the **rational** mode; the **process** mode; the **political**

mode; and the **anarchic** mode. Two of these – the 'process' mode and the 'political' mode – are, in our view, especially relevant to understanding the context for qualitative market research. Here we briefly describe Choo's four models and suggest their possible relevance for placing qualitative market research in context.

The Rational Mode

This operates when goals or outcomes are clear, and where the means to reach these ends are also clear. Decisions are guided by standard procedures and rules which the organisation develops through experience. It is limited or 'bounded' rationality because the factors taken into account can never be complete – nevertheless, it provides a way to resolve problems and deal with everyday tasks.

Market research in general may fit into this model, but it is less likely that qualitative will. It is the case that 'action standards' may be set for quantitative projects: in a product test to evaluate a new formula for a food product, for example, the test formula might have to beat the current one by a margin of x on some pre-determined measure in order to be adopted. It is far harder to see how, given the acknowledged role of subjectivity and judgement of the researcher, such clear standards or procedures could be attached in any meaningful way to qualitative work.

The Process Mode

In this model, goals may be clear but the means by which to reach them are not. Decision-making is thus characterised by a dynamic and iterative process, with many interruptions and apparently false starts, but with a clear general structure. This structure involves:

- The recognition and diagnosis of a problem.
- The development of alternative solutions (looking both at ready-made and custom-built alternatives).
- The evaluation and selection of a preferred alternative.
- The authorisation or approval of the final choice.

This vision of organisational decision-making will sound quite familiar to anyone involved in qualitative market research and probably represents the most common context for its use. Especially for organisations involved in marketing or mass communications, it is indeed the case that goals are clear but the ways of reaching them are not. It is also easy to see how the different process elements described above (especially problem definition, the development of alternatives and the evaluation of alternatives) map onto the kinds of issues and objectives described in this book as typical of qualitative market research projects.

The iterative nature of the 'process' mode will also be familiar to qualitative practitioners and users. Throughout many of the books in this series readers will see references to the way in which qualitative methods

lend themselves to this iterative process. So, for example, it is quite normal for a project that was primarily commissioned to help evaluate options (new product ideas, for example) to throw up something vital to do with how the problem itself has been formulated. This may in fact usefully prompt a return to an earlier stage of thinking for the client. It is not that the process has 'gone wrong' in this case – this is actually how the process works.

The Political Mode

Here it is the goals which are unclear, but largely because they are contested by different parties or individuals within the organisation. Each faction will, however, have clear ideas about its favoured goal and about the ways in which that goal might be attained. Decisions and action will thus be like game playing; the result of bargaining and manipulation of agents or instruments of influence.

   This too will strike a familiar note with many professionally involved in qualitative market research. Certain situations (such as where different internal teams are competing for resources) or relationships (such as that between a business and its advertising agency) may well throw up this kind of decision-making scenario. Qualitative market research can then become subject to manipulative efforts by interested parties, as an 'instrument of influence'. It is perhaps particularly vulnerable to this since, compared with quantitative data, its findings are far more clearly open to interpretation. It is no coincidence that a chapter of Judith Wardle's book in this series, examining qualitative research in advertising, is entitled 'The Politics of Advertising Research'.

The Anarchic Mode

Here both the organisational goals and the means of reaching them are unclear; decisions come about by a serendipitous or random coincidence of problem, solution, participant and choice, and are heavily affected by chance and timing. This mode seems unlikely to involve use of market research of any kind and even though qualitative market research is relatively loose and unstructured, it still seems too deliberate and focused to fit well in this scenario. However, it may be worth noting that this mode of decision-making is linked with certain organisational types – especially public and educational institutions (Choo 1998: 184). These appear more regularly now in the broadening list of users of qualitative market research, so researchers may well find themselves operating within such a system.

A second useful overview of the cultural interface between organisational decision-making and market research is given by David Smith and Jonathan Fletcher, using both academic and practical market research experience. They distinguish the decision ethos of an organisation (the 'climate' within which decisions are made) from an organisation's approach to using information as part of the decision-making process (1999: 390).

Key elements and dimensions within the *decision ethos* of an organisation are suggested to be:

- the degree of risk acceptance vs. risk aversion;
- a 'fear' or 'reward' culture;
- a culture that is satisfied with broadly acceptable decisions vs. one that seeks optimal solutions;
- a 'follower' or 'leader' culture with reference to competitors;
- marketing-oriented (prepared to 'speculate to accumulate') vs. cost-oriented philosophies;
- the influence of 'sunk costs' (i.e. money already spent on a venture) on current decisions;
- and, finally, the role of power-playing within an organisation.

More specifically relevant here is Smith and Fletcher's discussion of the role of organisational culture in the approach to *using information* as part of the decision-making process. They outline a spectrum of approaches based primarily on the organisation's need for and comfort level with mathematics and statistics as part of its decision processes – and this is of obvious relevance to the use of qualitative market research.

- Some organisations are at the 'figure phobia' end (1999: 391), actively avoiding what are seen as complex and perhaps difficult mathematical forms of information.
- At the opposite extreme, other organisations will rely heavily on formal data and probability-based decision-making models.
- In the middle, those with 'an enlightened perspective' are likely to be making use of various forms of research; 'these companies may not necessarily approach the task of making decisions in a particularly mathematical way, but they will be reasonably well-disciplined' and will be 'nodding in the direction of making decisions in the … classic way: problem formulation; information search; option evaluation and choice; and evaluation' (1999: 392).

Again, qualitative market research can be seen as fitting into a common-place decision-making process that has *some* structure and form, but which also is not attempting to be totally rational and mathematically-driven.

This leads to the next element of cultural context for qualitative market research, that of the value placed on 'soft' information, and brings us back briefly to KM.

The Cultural Climate for 'Soft' Information

It is clear that certain organisations, and certain decisions, need the reassurance of statistically proven analysis to support them. This is likely to remain the case, but there are also indications that qualitative market research in general enjoys more comprehensive acceptance and credibility

than in the past. As noted earlier, there has been a distinct shift within organisational culture towards greater acceptance and valuing of 'soft' forms of information and knowledge, as well as increasingly specific roles for it within marketing.

Returning to the ideas of Knowledge Management outlined earlier, this cultural shift would seem to be potentially very useful to qualitative market research. Companies that have embraced KM might do a number of things: they might carry out a 'knowledge audit' to assess the knowledge assets of the organisation, they might appoint a 'Chief Knowledge Officer', they might look at ways in which knowledge is stored, communicated, created and accessed within the organisation – but they might also do three things directly relevant to qualitative market research.

- They generally begin to take the idea of knowledge as a business asset very seriously.
- They might more clearly distinguish 'knowledge' from 'information', and thus be more open to non-numerical input which, while not fitting traditional quantitative ideas of 'information', clearly enhances 'knowledge'.
- They might recognise and value *tacit* knowledge and other forms of 'soft' information.

Smith and Fletcher (1999) again note that 'right-brain' skills have gained greater recognition in problem-solving and decision-making processes. They strongly advocate the blending of 'hard' evidence with more intuitive or anecdotal sources, both for managers making organisational decisions and for researchers giving them advice. As this view becomes more widely shared, it has important implications for some of the past problems of qualitative market research. For example, their suggested motto 'believability in, validity out' (1999: 397) confronts qualitative market research's old difficulty in providing adequate measures of its truth and value, beyond its evident usefulness in practice, within a culture relying heavily on positivist scientific measures of 'truth' (see discussion of this in Ereaut, Book 4).

The final way in which we contextualise the use organisations make of qualitative market research is slightly different to the others and concerns what might loosely be termed 'human factors'.

SOME ADDITIONAL NON-METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Previous sections have described a number of reasons why organisations use qualitative market research: it provides a sound methodology to meet certain types of organisational information requirements, its use may be prompted by certain practical advantages it offers over quantitative

approaches in some situations, and it slots into key organisational decision processes and cultures. Yet it is also clear that *sometimes* organisations – and more importantly individuals within organisations – use qualitative market research for reasons that have little or nothing to do with its optimal relevance or appropriateness for a specific problem.

In short, qualitative market research has considerable appeal and value that gives it a broader 'usefulness' that is not strictly based on any methodological rationale, but on the preferences and cognitive style of the individuals who use it. This preference is based on:

- the accessibility and likeability of qualitative market research reporting; and
- qualitative market research's adaptability and familiarity.

Accessibility and Likeability of Qualitative Market Research Reporting

Whilst we have no hard evidence for this, it seems to us unquestionably true that some clients choose to commission qualitative market research because they find the nature and the reporting of qualitative research findings more accessible and easier to digest and disseminate than that provided by quantitative research. (It is, of course, not true that all quantitative research is inaccessible, but this perception persists for some users.) Key aspects of this appeal seem to be:

- the 'narrative style' of the reporting of qualitative market research findings (especially for the less numerate);
- the ability to 'question the questioner' – qualitative market research debriefs are typically delivered by researchers/moderators with *first hand* experience of having interviewed the respondents.

Adaptability, Familiarity and Trust

Experience has led many users of qualitative market research to develop a personal trust in its reliability and usefulness – and for many their continued use of it can be paraphrased as 'never mind the theory of qualitative market research – it works'. Note that this notion of trust applies at both a general level (trust in the methodology), and the personal level (trust in the individual researcher or research team). Qualitative market research is familiar and understood by a wide range of client organisations and by the individuals within those organisations. In short, they know how to organise qualitative market research, they know what to expect and they generally like what they get.

Qualitative market research is also extremely adaptable – it can be applied to and made useful for a vast range of different research questions. This adaptability and familiarity is a great asset in a real business world, but it can mean that qualitative market research gets used unthinkingly

and semi-automatically, even when other, perhaps less familiar techniques might be more relevant, informative or efficient. Being alert to the possible misuse of qualitative research and being prepared to have robust conversations with clients on this issue, whilst also recognising business pragmatics, is one of the professional skills that researchers have to acquire.

The Broadening 'Non-Research' Use of Qualitative Market Research Methods

Finally, while the vast majority of qualitative market research projects will address some combination of the information objectives listed earlier, it is evident that qualitative market research methods and researchers are sometimes used for purposes that are not strictly 'research'. These tend to apply more widely in non-marketing contexts. Qualitative market research *methods* may be used in the following ways.

- As a consultation process (e.g. creating an opportunity for staff and other stakeholders to be *seen* to 'have their say'). See Desai (2002) for discussion of consultation in the public sector.
- As an instrument in changing attitudes and behaviours (i.e. the process of discussion re-frames the way respondents think about and perceive a topic, leading to changed attitudes and behaviours). This is most common in staff or internal organisational projects.
- As an 'observable' process – either at first hand or via video. Qualitative market research can (within the bounds of ethical considerations) be used to gather information and material with which to educate others. For example:

  o to give managers experientially based ways of familiarising themselves with their customers/stakeholders etc.;
  o as empirical 'evidence' to show to sceptics.

Ethical considerations are vitally important here. Respondents may need to be asked for explicit consent for such non-research uses of their contribution where this does not fall within what might reasonably be called 'market research' (see Chapter 7).

In a general sense, then, the number and interlocking quality of the factors involved make the choice to use qualitative market research a complicated one. In many cases, the same problem might well be sensibly addressed in a broadly qualitative *or* quantitative way, but the balance will be tipped in one direction or the other by considering the *total* effect of these issues: how confident the client team is that they know the relevant issues, how vital it is to senior management to have statistically valid data, how long the client has to make the decision and how much they have to spend. Beyond this, there are some 'human' factors which also might result in the decision to use a qualitative approach.

KEY POINTS

- There are a number of reasons why qualitative market research might be *needed,* but there are also additional reasons why qualitative market research is *wanted*.
- Whilst what organisations might get from qualitative market research can be outlined in general terms, individual decisions to use it are the result of interactions between many factors.
- As a form of market research, qualitative market research provides depth of understanding for organisations, and addresses needs for types of 'qualitative' knowledge.
- Qualitative market research methods are needed to enable respondents in market research to express important thoughts and feelings and expose the meaning of things, events and activities that are not otherwise accessible.
- The need for certain types of knowledge – specifically tacit knowledge and the identification of unknown gaps – means that qualitative market research enquiry plays a vital part in meeting organisational knowledge requirements.
- Qualitative market research can also be used because it can be cheaper and quicker than other research methods. Many also find it accessible and likeable, and it is adaptable and familiar.
- It can fulfil other roles – such as a consultation process, or a demonstration tool for learning and change management.
- Whilst the dominant organisational philosophies remain inherently positivist – even if many are unconsciously so – and therefore quantitative, it seems that organisational cultures increasingly make use of 'soft' types of data, such as qualitative market research.

NOTES

1   We are especially grateful to Miriam Catterall for her most helpful discussion of these issues.
2   The Johari Window was originally devised by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingrams at the University of California Western Training Laboratory in 1955 (Catterall 2001), but the version used here is adapted from Schlackman (1984) and Imms (1999). A version is also discussed in Book 5.

④

What Does the Qualitative Market Research Industry Look Like?

Earlier chapters have described the theoretical and methodological basis of qualitative market research, and explored what clients might get from qualitative market research. This chapter explains how the industry is structured and organised to allow those theories and methods to be applied within the commercial marketplace. We describe how qualitative market research agencies go about meeting client needs. Being a commercial and service-based activity has certain significant implications, including what it is that practitioners actually do and what they 'deliver'. We consider some major trends: qualitative market research for marketing clients now addresses rather different sorts of questions and the discipline is being used by a wider range of clients (not just marketers).

THE NOTION OF 'COMMITTED INDEPENDENCE'

The commercial qualitative market research industry has already been described as involving a dual role (both pure research *and* business advice), and this is reflected in both the structure of the industry and the individuals within it. In short, qualitative market research practitioners need to be 'committed but independent'. By this we mean that the researcher is 'committed' to looking after the best interests of their client, but remains 'independent' and has no vested interest *other than* giving the best advice. (As an aside, this 'committed independence' explains why the criticism that researchers simply 'give clients the findings they want to hear' is unfounded. What clients want to hear is independently derived best advice.)

Committed independence has two important implications for the structure of the qualitative market research industry and the nature of agency–client relationships.

- By and large research practitioners remain independent by being 'external' to the client organisation and are commissioned on a project-by-project basis. This is quite different to other supplier agencies – such as advertising agencies and indeed market monitoring and tracking suppliers – where the *closeness* of relationship is deemed a significant benefit.

- External qualitative market research agencies often have on-going relationships with clients in order to maximise commitment and, most importantly, to build knowledge through experience from one project to another. However, becoming 'too close' to clients, and being too aligned or *too* committed to the current beliefs of the client, can too easily compromise independence.

There are, of course, some practitioners who operate within organisations, such as account planners in advertising agencies. There are other examples within the UK: many local authorities have chosen to train their own staff rather than use external agencies; many human resources departments use qualitative interviewing methods in staff consultation; and management consulting firms may have internal qualitative researchers. However, in this book we have largely been concerned with external or independent qualitative market research agencies and in this chapter we are describing the structure and organisation of this supply market.

Balancing 'commitment' with 'independence' is a constant and difficult task for external qualitative market research agencies, but one that is taken very seriously by practitioners. In a paper on researcher-as-marketing-consultant, Andy Turton suggests that many researchers feel

> ... genuine concern, that, in getting too close to a client, our faithful representation of 'the voice of the consumer' could become distorted. Accurately and fairly representing the consumer is one of the things that the industry takes great pride in, and to risk compromising this, for many practitioners, is simply not worth contemplating. The risk perceived is actually very high. There is a sense for many researchers that, by becoming too integrated with a client, they will lose their independence and impartiality. (1999: 414–15)

The issue of committed independence is not unique to qualitative market research – it applies to most 'advisers' – but it has particular significance for qualitative market research as it applies at both a methodological and personal level. In this context it is important to note that commercial qualitative market research is often described as a *people* business. In other words, client trust and loyalty is placed largely on the *individual*, rather than the qualitative market research agency (or indeed the methodology *per se*), although it may be less attached to the idea of the 'guru' than it was 20 years ago. This focus on the individual researcher has various facets, all of which relate to the nature of building trust that goes far beyond simple trust in qualitative market research methodology and practice. This topic is described more fully by Geraldine Lillis in Book 7, but the key issues include:

- Issues of 'cultural fit' and rapport between researchers and the people in the client organisation (i.e. do their 'faces fit').

- Issues of the individual's experience of the sector in which the client operates (i.e. do they already understand the issues and sector being researched).
- Issues of client experience of the individual researcher (i.e. has their previous work been found to be credible and useful to the organisation?).

THE STRUCTURE OF QUALITATIVE MARKET RESEARCH AGENCIES

Having said that most practitioners remain 'external' to the client organisation, they tend to operate in one of three main ways:

- as practitioners within specialist qualitative market research agencies;
- as researchers working on their own as sole-practitioners; or
- as qualitative specialists within full-service market research agencies.

Low barriers to entry and low capital requirements, along with the emotional and financial appeal of running one's own business, mean that traditionally it has been both easy and attractive to set up a qualitative market research agency. The industry is not without large agencies, but is characterised by many smaller independent agencies and sole practitioners, working alone or in ad hoc partnerships and teams put together for specific projects.

However, there are three market factors which mean that almost all large market research agencies *also* have thriving qualitative market research divisions.

- Agencies need to offer clients a full range of market research services (including qualitative).
- The complexities of international research and the need for consistent approaches in managing global brands have generated demand for larger agencies with international resources and networks (see Chapter 6).
- 'Hybrid' projects utilising both qualitative *and* quantitative methodologies might be beyond the scope of specialist qualitative market research agencies.

Despite this organisational distinction, the structure and size of both specialist qualitative market research agencies and qualitative divisions within large market research agencies are generally quite similar.

The profile of a typical qualitative market research agency or qualitative unit might be as follows:

- Usually run by between one and three senior partners/directors or managers. AQR membership data suggests most have ten or more years' experience. Their responsibilities include running the business,

'fronting' the company, but almost all still *practise* and carry out all parts of projects, including fieldwork.

- Supported by two to three managers/associate directors. Many of these have more than ten years' experience, and few have less than five. They are usually beginning to have their own clients, taking responsibility for whole projects.
- Two to three research executives whose primary responsibility is fieldwork, plus analysis under the guidance of seniors. Can include trainees.

In other words, a typical agency or division will consist of a team of perhaps six to ten practitioners, although there are larger examples of up to 75 researchers.

The practitioner team carries out all stages of the project except, usually, recruitment of respondents. In the UK and Europe recruitment tends to follow one of two models. In many agencies the practitioner team is supported by a field manager, whose primary responsibility is to manage recruitment of respondents. The field manager is usually a paid full-time member of staff who develops a network of regional recruiters – but this network of recruiters is typically employed on a casual basis on a project-by-project contract. Alternatively, some agencies 'outsource' all recruitment from independent specialist recruitment agencies. In the USA recruitment is usually managed and organised by viewing facilities.

Increasingly, qualitative market research agencies are arranged into international networks – of varying degrees of formality – and the management of multi-country international projects is quite different in both scale and process to single-country projects. This is described in the latter part of Chapter 6.

WHO DOES QUALITATIVE MARKET RESEARCH?

The Association for Qualitative Research in the UK has about 780 'practitioner' members and a simple analysis of the profile of these indicates the following:

- More than 50 per cent of practitioners have ten or more years of experience. The full breakdown is as follows: 0–2 years, 13 per cent; 2–5 years, 19 per cent; 5–10 years, 15 per cent; 10 + years, 53 per cent.
- Overall, 70 per cent of UK qualitative practitioners are women.
- About one-quarter of UK qualitative market researchers operate as independent practitioners. It should be added that size of supplier organisation does not correspond to size of client company served. Since clients commonly buy the skills of individuals whom they know and trust, it is common practice even for independent operators to conduct work for large client organisations on major projects.

QUALIFICATIONS AND TRAINING

Training tends to follow the 'journeyman' model, whereby junior researchers learn from working alongside more senior people. Trainees are usually recruited as graduates, and their development involves some initial training in core principles, followed by time accompanying more experienced colleagues. During this period they will observe and take notes during fieldwork, take part in initial analysis procedures and team analysis discussions and attend client meetings as an observer.

Over time, the journeyman is given some responsibility to carry out key tasks (closely monitored by experienced researchers) until he or she is deemed proficient enough to be let loose on clients' business. This experientially based training is augmented by some more formal training (industry or internal courses) and coaching from colleagues, but there is no professional qualification, 'core course' or accepted body of literature or knowledge.

QUALITATIVE MARKET RESEARCH AGENCIES AS SERVICE SECTOR SUPPLIERS

What do qualitative market research practitioners and agencies actually *do*? In this we can draw a useful distinction between what kind of **activities** researchers engage in and those **'deliverables'** or **benefits** to clients that they produce from these.

Activities

- Prepare research proposals and act as consultants in project design: described in Chapter 5 and in Book 7.
- Conduct fieldwork: 'groups and depths'. The most obvious and visible thing that qualitative market research practitioners and agencies do is 'conduct interviews and run groups' but these come in very many different types as described in Chapter 5 and Book 2 and represent only the most visible aspect of the activity of problem-solving and knowledge creation known as research.
- Conduct observation, ethnographic study and other non-interview-based fieldwork: as described in Chapter 5 and in Book 3.
- Carry out hybrid projects: combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to meet clients' information and knowledge requirements.
- Conduct interactive client–respondent sessions. These are becoming popular in the UK as clients seek to narrow the distance between themselves and their audiences (see Book 3).
- Perform analysis and interpretation and translate research findings into conclusions and recommendations for clients. Although rarely a

public activity, this crucially underpins the business activities described here (see Book 4 and Book 7).

- Give personal presentations of findings and, often, on-going discussion of their implications for clients (see Book 7).
- Provide reference records of findings (reports etc.). The provision of written records of research findings adds to the formal knowledge of the organisation (see Book 7).
- Provide internal consultancy, client workshops and creative sessions. The core skills involved in moderating are closely allied to those required in other forms of 'facilitation' – brainstorming, idea generation, eliciting tacit knowledge etc. Such activities are increasingly common services offered by qualitative market research agencies – although this is still very much a secondary activity (Desai, Book 3).
- Offer on-going consultancy as part of a client relationship. The knowledge derived from experience as a qualitative market researcher means that practitioners are increasingly able to offer experience-based consultancy – at the level of markets, sectors, brand or consumer type (Lillis, Book 7).

'Deliverables' – Benefits to Clients

- Translation of organisational questions into effective research projects. A key task for all qualitative market research practitioners and agencies is to translate organisational questions into researchable topics that represent value for money *and* are still good research – methodologically sound, ethical and so on. Clearly, this requires not simply knowledge of good research practice and method, but also judgements about the value of the knowledge to the organisation.
- Provision of *holistic* understanding of complex issues and multi-faceted topics by managing the 'all-at-onceness' of the qualitative process and using 'joined up thinking'. Qualitative market research involves the intelligent and simultaneous processing of many different forms of information – not least the client's needs, the findings of the research, knowledge of how research works and knowledge of how markets work.
- Conceptualisation of concrete issues and problems. A key outcome of proper analysis is the creation of interpretations that allow clients to understand and extrapolate from the specific – such that the findings have broader relevance and application. The intellectual skill involved in moving from 'what people said' to more conceptual and abstract descriptions is a powerful added-value of qualitative market research – but this skill is both difficult to acquire *and* often taken-for-granted by those practitioners who do so.
- Theorising: including creating bespoke theory and models. In effect, the outcome of good qualitative market research can be described as the creation of bespoke theory and models for clients. For example, a

project comparing brand X and Y can yield 'the theory of why Brand X outperforms Brand Y'; a study of bank customers and their relationships to the bank is more than just a description of 'what happens' but can yield 'the theory of successful bank/customer relationships'. Many projects include 'models' that have specifically been created to provide a practical and usable but conceptual interpretation of respondents' comments.

- Integration of new knowledge with existing experience and previous knowledge. A key benefit of longer-term (but still independent) relationships between practitioners and clients is the building of knowledge and experience – not only from qualitative market research project-to-project, but also integrating knowledge from other sources. The key benefits here concern

  o efficiency (not repeating that which is already known, and making it easier to identify that which is new or different from previous experience and knowledge); and

  o reliability (the ability to apply external checks on the reliability of findings – see Chapter 7).

- Effective communication and mediation between clients and stakeholders. The social and personal skills of the practitioner are very important. Much client–researcher contact is face-to-face and researchers benefit from a chameleon-like ability to build rapport not only with, say, drinkers of beer, but also the board of the brewery. The debrief is a powerful vehicle and its purpose is to describe to the client the outcome of the research project – and this embraces not only the research findings but also the interpretation of the meaning and implications of those findings for the client organisation. In other words, the debrief sees the personal enactment of the 'dual role', the committed but independent qualitative market research practitioner in action – using the independent 'pure research' findings to help advise the client.

The discursive style of the debrief, coupled with the above, means that the client has the opportunity to discuss and debate with the researcher, who acts as an intermediary link between the respondents who took part in the research and the client organisation. Unlike quantitative researchers (who use others as interviewers and who have rarely met and spoken to their research subjects), qualitative market research practitioners conducting the debrief have direct knowledge of the respondents and the interviews, groups or observations.

QUALITATIVE MARKET RESEARCH AS A DEMAND-LED BUSINESS

As a commercial enterprise, qualitative market research is both constrained and liberated by the need to meet existing and changing marketplace

demand. The constraint comes in the form of being limited by what clients will accept and pay for. However valuable a given methodology or process may be, it needs to fit with the demands of the marketplace.

Several obvious examples demonstrate such current constraints:

- **The status of analysis and interpretation**. Qualitative market research practitioners are under constant pressure to deliver results more quickly – ten working days is typically the maximum allowed. In effect this rules out some forms of analysis common in the academic world, and makes some activities (such as the detailed coding of transcripts for use with computer qualitative analysis packages) inappropriate in many commercial contexts (see Ereaut, Book 4).
- **Use of non-interview-based material** as 'texts' for analysis. It has already been noted that academic qualitative methodologies use data derived from all manner of sources, not just interviews. In practice, there is limited evidence that commercial research clients are currently willing to pay for such projects – although this may simply reflect the fact that the industry has yet to 'systematise' other forms of qualitative market research in the way that focus groups have been systematised.
- **'Rolling research'** – common in academic areas but more rare in the commercial world. Rolling research involves doing some initial field-work and analysis in order to clarify objectives and themes for exploration in later stages. In such projects it is common *at the outset* to have no real idea of (or commitment to) the scale, scope, timescale, or methodology that may be adopted before the project ends – nor indeed any notion of what the 'end' of the project might be.

Having said this, the 'liberation' of working practices that comes from working within the reality of marketplace demand includes new applications and the opportunity to develop new methodologies to explore new types of client questions (arising from business models and so on). Some recent examples are included in the next section on trends in the qualitative market research industry. The market environment also, of course, allows the theoretical eclecticism described earlier.

TRENDS

This section spells out some key trends in qualitative market research visible to us. These trends can be categorised as follows:

- Changing perceptions of 'the consumer'
- Changing structures of marketing
- Changing priorities and challenges for marketers
- New marketing thinking and conditions

- Structural changes in the way market research is bought and used within marketing organisations
- The application of qualitative market research beyond marketing.

Trends Reflecting Changing Perceptions of 'the Consumer'

Behind the early use of qualitative market research in marketing was the implicit belief that consumers were essentially 'passive' (and not context-dependent). This view is no longer prevalent, and the current orthodoxy recognises that

(a) consumers are 'marketing literate' – understand the games marketers play – and *choose* whether or not to engage; and
(b) rather than simply 'taking actions' the task of the marketer is to develop a credible and collaborative relationship with consumers. (A seminal paper on this theme was written by Lannon and Cooper in 1983, but the trend has continued since then.)

The notion of marketing-literate customers opens the opportunity to use 'people in research' as a different kind of resource – as creative, active *partners* – not simply reactive and passive subjects for study. This introduces notions of including both clients and 'people in research' to work together as problem-solving teams; of moderators abandoning some of the 'therapist' principles of not giving information or answering questions; and of idea generation and innovation as a primary objective, not simply 'data capture'. All of these have invited the development of different methods and skills.

Another emergent thought is that consumer behaviour, attitude and identity is increasingly 'context dependent'. By this we mean that the wants, needs, attitudes and interests of any individual vary materially, depending upon the context. So, for example, a man who likes both looking good and eating well can express quite different thoughts and feelings when shopping for clothes than when shopping for food. This is one of the factors leading to the development of observational or ethnographic methods to close the gap between the 'research context' and the 'real context' (see Desai, Book 3).

Trends Reflecting Changing Structures of Marketing

Globalisation and internationalism are well-documented trends. Common to the varying models of international business and brand management is the need to understand (via qualitative market research) the cultural context for marketing. More specifically, this concerns identifying

and understanding cultural commonalities and differences between international markets. Clearly, as well as resulting in cross-cultural research projects (Chapter 6), this increases the relevance of cultural analysis and more anthropological approaches within qualitative market research.

Trends Arising from Changing Priorities and Challenges

As markets become more competitive and the pace of change increases, a change in the outcomes of qualitative market research is being demanded – with far greater emphasis on help in generating new ideas, concepts and products. This involves a shift towards identifying good opportunities for the future, rather than better understanding of the present. Here again, simply interviewing normative respondents about their experiences is not enough. New approaches in this arena still use core qualitative research skills (moderating skills, analytic skills, conceptual thinking etc.) but apply them to the rather different methodologies required for brainstorming, creative thinking sessions and idea generation and evaluation.

As discussed in Chapter 3, as markets fragment, businesses increasingly need different forms of information, and qualitative or 'soft' knowledge is one form of which they need more.

Trends that Reflect New Marketing Thinking and Conditions

As marketing thinking and marketing conditions change, so the demand for qualitative market research changes – in terms of the *specific* types of issues it needs to address, and the market conditions it reflects.

Specific significant trends in marketing include:

- The emergence of e-commerce as a researchable topic. A major development has been techniques to help in the evaluation and development of web-sites, using online chat rooms and specialist 'wired' facilities.
- Using the Web as a new resource – providing methods of recruiting online, new methods of interviewing etc. that take advantage of the opportunity to set up 'virtual groups'.
- Category management. Category management involves a different, customer-led approach to space allocation and range offered within retail outlets. In short, the allocation of shelf space and the range and selection of products and brands is chosen by stores to reflect the pattern of consumer demand, logic and interest (not the pattern of supply and sales force negotiating power). This has led to new opportunities for qualitative market research to inform decisions on optimum range and selection, for both manufacturers and retailers.
- Changing advertising styles. The adoption of new advertising styles (e.g. Web-based, ambient media and 'stealth marketing') bring with them demand for new research approaches (Wardle, Book 6).

- At a broader level, as marketing organisations become knowledgeable *per se* (itself a function of several decades of accumulated qualitative knowledge), so their information needs shift from what has been described as 'big chunk' information to 'small chunk':

  o **big chunk** information concerns fundamentals (e.g. tell me the underlying strengths of my brand, why people choose to work in retail banking);
  o **small chunk** information concerns such issues as **trends** (e.g. which aspects of my brand are becoming weaker?) and **points of difference** (e.g. what is different about working for Bank A and Bank B; in what ways is my brand perceived differently in Spain versus France?).

Trends in the Client–Supplier Interface

We have already discussed the importance of client–practitioner relationships, but we should also note that those relationships, at least within marketing companies, increasingly involve a wider range of client-side people with different experience and needs.

Traditionally, within marketing organisations the supply of research was typically commissioned by specialist centralised Market Research departments within companies. Acting as both budget-holders and intermediaries, their role concerned:

- reacting to organisational information requirements;
- advising internal colleagues on appropriate methodologies;
- commissioning research agencies and project management;
- integrating and disseminating the information within the organisation; and
- monitoring the library of research knowledge.

Whilst this model still applies, several trends have occurred.

- **Decentralisation:** removal of the specialist department and relocation of specialists within 'information-using' departments.
- **Despecialisation:** others – 'information needers' – increasingly commission research. This has led to some concern about 'inexpert' use of research, but more certainly a growth in responsibility of research agencies to offer fundamental advice on methodology. It also increases the importance of 'provider partnerships'.
- **Integration** of market research and other forms of knowledge, including the formation of 'insight departments'.

This means that commercial research suppliers are now working with different kinds of people, some of whom are non-specialists in research, and are having to adapt their skills and business approaches accordingly.

Trends in Types of Organisation Using Qualitative Market Research
Demand for qualitative market research is by no means restricted to 'consumer research' and marketing. A crucial factor has been the change in thinking about accountability and the idea that managers of any organisation or department have *customers* or *stakeholders* whose needs they have to satisfy.

This can apply in such diverse areas as

- other departments in an organisation representing an 'internal customer' whose needs must be satisfied;
- donors to charities representing a 'customer base' whose loyalty needs to be nurtured and developed;
- colleges needing to attract students by creating the kinds of courses, facilities and environments they find appealing;
- political parties needing to win the votes of the electorate, who 'consume' manifestos, party messages and so on.

The reframing of such groups as a form of 'consumer' brings with it the notion of applying the principles of 'consumer research' to all manner of additional issues and fields. *Qualitative Research in Context* (Marks 2000) includes chapters on obvious uses of qualitative market research in marketing areas such as advertising, design and direct marketing, but also includes chapters on the following non-marketing fields:

- Development of TV programmes
- Development of higher education
- Social policy research
- Politics
- Religion.

Another key factor in the expansion of qualitative market research practice has been the commissioning of commercial practitioners to carry out projects in the area of applied social and policy research. In the public sector in the UK this has been formalised through the policy of 'Best Value' – which brings with it a requirement that public sector bodies need to consult 'stakeholders' both to identify priorities and set operational standards, and to monitor performance in terms of stakeholder satisfaction.

All of these factors have led to a need to understand stakeholders at a fundamental level – and with it a demand for qualitative market research. In Book 3 Philly Desai explores the different demands and conditions of this kind of work and explores how it relates to more traditional areas of operation for qualitative market research.

KEY POINTS

- The qualitative market research industry has matured into one that supplies an effective and viable commercial activity. Working practices and structures have been developed that enable qualitative market research practitioners to deliver results in a cost-effective and profitable way.
- The need for research to offer 'committed independence' has been highly influential in determining the way the industry works. Much research is thus supplied by external agencies or sole practitioners.
- A large body of experienced qualitative market researchers has developed the (multiple) skills to carry out commercial qualitative market research, and they have earned the trust, respect and loyalty of a broad range of client organisations. In this, personal skills and empathy remain important, not simply confidence in qualitative market research methods *per se*.
- The current 'journeyman' nature of training and the absence of formal qualifications for commercial qualitative market research mean that the qualitative market research industry *is* an 'industry' and not a 'profession' – albeit one in which steps towards professionalisation are being taken (certainly in the UK).
- The realities of the marketplace have wide-ranging and direct influence on the qualitative market research industry – both limiting the uptake of some academically familiar methodologies, but also creating additional opportunities and encouraging creativity and innovation within the industry (predominantly, so far, within interview-based methodologies).

Defining the Problem and Designing the Project

'Project design' is far from straightforward in qualitative market research. This chapter outlines the key issues that must be considered and the business mechanisms by which this is routinely done. It includes some vital but complex issues such as how researchers choose which methods to use, and how they define and select samples. The issue of sample design in particular is explained in some detail because it is a critical professional skill that is not explained elsewhere in the series.

THE PROCESS

How and when does problem definition and project design happen? This is not an easy question to answer definitively. The variation in practice arises because of a crucially important factor in the design of qualitative market research projects – namely that each project is custom-designed to take account of the following broad issues.

- The nature of the client's information needs (including constraints of time and budget etc.).
- The appropriateness of qualitative market research methods to answer the client information needs (including experience of what does and does not 'work' in qualitative market research).
- Ethical and professional concerns.

Note also that the design takes account of these issues both separately *and in combination*.

Deciding there is a Need for Qualitative Research

Where the in-house research or 'insight' function exists, there will be regular discussions and negotiations between internal managers or decision-makers and those occupying this buying function. As noted before, research-buying functions and information management structures are

currently in a state of flux and it is difficult now to generalise about this process.

Buyers may work *reactively* – responding to requests from internal users – and/or *proactively* – generating ideas for information gathering and management for the organisation. Either of these courses may eventually result in a perceived need for external market research. Some requests for research from internal users may *not* become research projects, either because this information is known to exist or be accessible in another way, or because organisational priorities will not allow budget to be spent on this particular project.

At the extremes, decisions about what kind of externally sourced market research information is needed may be obvious to an organisation or a researcher; some issues clearly demand a qualitative or a quantitative approach. Very many problems could, however, be addressed by either or both methods, and the broad reasons why a qualitative approach might be taken have been discussed in Chapter 3.

This chapter therefore starts from the point where a decision has been taken to use qualitative market research methods of some kind, whether alone or in conjunction with quantitative methods, and examines more closely specific design questions from this point onwards.

Project design (see below) is commonly a collaborative process since the project needs

(a) to meet the information needs of the organisation (which only the organisation itself can really identify); *but also*
(b) to be 'answerable' via commercial qualitative market research methods (for which the researchers take responsibility).

This means negotiating a fit between business (or organisational) objectives and research objectives. Depending on the technical experience and confidence of the buyer, at some point sooner or later in this process an external qualitative market research supplier may become involved.

Selecting a Research Supplier

Very few client organisations, apart from some advertising agencies, employ their own qualitative market research practitioners. So having decided there is a need for some qualitative market research, the next step for a client is usually to brief one or more specialist qualitative market researcher(s) – individuals or agencies.

In deciding which agency(ies) to brief, most experienced buyers of qualitative market research will have a 'roster' of preferred suppliers who will have undertaken projects for the organisation before.

- For smaller and tactical-level projects the organisation will probably simply brief one agency on the basis of trust, their perceived competence and their availability to do the project within the necessary timescale.
- For larger or more important projects, or where organisational rules dictate (such as in some government agencies) the client/commissioning organisation may well invite several qualitative market research agencies to prepare proposals, to be judged competitively. The decision on which proposal to accept is usually based upon demonstrating understanding of the organisational problem and information needs, and perhaps imaginativeness of project design and methodology – it is rarely based on cost alone.
- Choice of qualitative supplier may also be a subject for negotiation between the client organisation and its other agencies – advertising agencies in particular will want to be happy with the client's choice of researcher, since much may rest on this individual's skill and judgement (see Wardle, Book 6).

In the committed-but-independent relationships that suppliers establish with clients, *existing* client–researcher relationships are generally the context for any externally commissioned project. While of course clients will occasionally use a new researcher or agency, this is done with caution and often only through word-of-mouth recommendation from other research buyers. Qualitative market research researchers create strong relationships with clients based on:

- **Experiential factors:** proven usefulness on previous projects, credentials
- **Emotional factors:** trust, respect and loyalty
- **Personal factors:** individual and cultural 'fit'.

Researchers do vary in their 'style' and a buyer or user will have in mind both the perceived technical competence and the personal style of the individual. Will this person deliver painstakingly analysed, detailed information at the presentation, or are they more inclined to take a lateral or 'helicopter' view? Will they go about the project in a straightforward, no-nonsense way, or are they likely to use 'creative' or wildly unusual techniques? Different projects – and audiences – will have different requirements and buyers will do their best to ensure a degree of 'personal' fit, as well as ensuring that the approach taken is appropriate for the project.

Designing the Project

Project design, in terms of finally defining the problem to be addressed and translating this into a researchable set of objectives, might be done either by personnel from an in-house department, specialising in

managing information systems and commissioning research, *or* by the information-need 'owner' themselves (a marketing manager in a company, an account planner in an advertising agency, for example). At some point, though, a research supplier will become involved. Depending on how experienced and knowledgeable the client personnel are, the role of the research supplier in problem definition and project design will include anything from complete problem analysis and project design, through to simply approving and implementing a design already specified by the client.

The final design of the project, including items such as discussion guides and stimulus materials, is usually the result of negotiation – of how to define the problem and the research objectives, as well as methods, costs and timings, between research buyer/user and supplier. There is some interplay between defining a problem and trying to design a project to address it; it may be necessary to redefine the problem in order to make something researchable from it.

The instruments through which this negotiation is done usually include a client research brief, a briefing meeting and possibly a research proposal produced by the research supplier.

- A **research brief** is a document produced from within the client organisation. It outlines the background to the business problem or question that has been identified and indicates the kind of information required from the research. It may propose an outline or a detailed research design, and will give indications of the budget available and the timing or other constraints on the project. It may be sent to the research supplier before a briefing meeting, or given to them at it, or it may be sent out with a request for a formal research proposal.
- The **briefing meeting** gives client users and suppliers a chance to discuss and agree issues of research design (and where the researcher is not known to the user, a chance to see the researcher in action). Where there is another agency involved, such as a design or advertising agency, it will generally be represented at this meeting.
- A **research proposal** may be anything from a brief letter confirming what has been discussed, to a full proposal – effectively a selling document – giving the detail and rationale for a specific research project design. It will detail the organisational background and objectives for the project, and translate these into research objectives; it will give details of specific samples and of interviewing or other field methods which are suggested; it will give the credentials of those researchers who will be involved; and it will detail the proposed costs and schedule.

At the project design stage one can see the researcher's 'dual role' (Chapter 2) in action; he or she must not only ensure that the project meets research criteria, but also that it represents a good investment for the client organisation.

The research supplier's role in this process is:

- To give guidance on what can or cannot be done to address the particular set of organisational objectives with qualitative research or hybrid methods – technically *or* ethically. This might include reaching the conclusion that a qualitative approach is not the right one for these business objectives, or that this cannot be done ethically (see Chapter 7).
- To consider and advise on details of method (below).
- To apply professional skills and business awareness to ensure the project represents value for money on the client's behalf.
- To advise on research and stimulus materials that will help the research answer its objectives.

THE 'BIG QUESTIONS' OF PROJECT DESIGN

The rest of this chapter is concerned with how the details of a project are decided and how it is organised around the major issues or questions that have to be addressed (Box 5.1). A number of points should be emphasised:

- The same questions would need to be asked in designing *any* market research project; here we have necessarily focused on those most relevant where the project, at whatever stage, is identified as needing a qualitative approach, or a hybrid approach involving qualitative methods. Despite this emphasis, it should be noted that many qualitative researchers are experienced in quantitative methods, or at least are able to recognise when a client's needs might be better met by a quantitative or combined qual–quant approach.
- These are not simple questions to answer, and there are rarely textbook problems or standard solutions. There is also rarely a 'correct' solution to a given problem, but a 'best-fit' one.
- All these factors *interrelate* and design is thus itself a qualitative process involving judgement and informed compromise. Apart from the first one, these questions are not answered in a fixed order, and the final design will be the result of many iterations through these questions, looking for possible compromises between the demands they all make. For example:

  o the technically ideal research method for a problem (say, group discussions) may be impossible to organise because of the nature of the relevant respondents (geographically spread medical specialists, for example); or
  o timing factors may dictate the nature or size of a sample, resulting in a design that all know is not ideal, but which is judged to be better than making a decision on judgement or guesswork alone.

- All aspects of design are *purposeful*, that is, decisions are made such that the design represents the best approach for the specific research and organisational objectives in question. Other considerations, such as ethical ones are critical, but are likely to act as filters or limits rather than drivers to design. This purposiveness is especially relevant to sample selection and is discussed further later, but as a principle it permeates the whole process.

Box 5.1   Questions Informing Qualitative Market Research Project Design

- **What is the decision or action** that this external research is needed to inform? What does the research user need to be able to do as a result of having this research? What are the client's options for action and what are the limits on this? How important is this decision to the organisation and to the individuals involved? What kind of guidance is needed from research – for example, is this a 'disaster check' before going ahead with something virtually finished, or is it a fundamental piece of exploratory work guiding future investment?

- **What is the theoretically optimal research solution** – qualitative interviewing in groups or depth interviews, or some hybrid or combination of these? Would observation or ethnographic methods be appropriate? Would using 'expert' interviews, or bringing client and respondents together, or other non-standard approaches help? Are factors such as *where* and *when* to interview or observe relevant?

- **Who are the respondents** who can help address the issue? Are they people outside or inside the organisation itself, or both? What is the optimal sample size and design for the project?

- **What are the key issues or ideas** and how can these be explored with – or shown to – respondents? What materials (ads, products, retail environments, policy ideas and so on) are available and in what form?

- **What are the practical issues** – what are the timing, budget, legal or other constraining factors? What kinds of material are to be researched and how many copies are available?

- **What are the informal issues** – what is the existing knowledge or belief within the organisation on this issue; who are the personalities involved; what are the organisational politics?

The major questions around which design issues have to be considered are listed and briefly described in Box 5.1. Each is expanded upon in the sections that follow.

WHAT IS THE DECISION OR ACTION TO BE INFORMED BY THE RESEARCH?

Qualitative projects on the whole arise from an information need of the client organisation. Research will generally only be commissioned if it meets a need that cannot be met by other information sources, such as published information, simple observation, or straightforward common-sense. It is not unknown for the occasional project to be commissioned for other reasons, for example entirely in order that the individual may be *seen* to have done research (see the 'political' model of decision-making discussed in Chapter 3), but this is relatively rare.

In essence, qualitative market research fulfils a need for *depth* of under-standing of *people* who are important to the client – the meanings they give their lives and activities, their world-view, motivations, wants and needs. The need for qualitative insight may concern different levels of decision-making: for example, research may input into specific operational choices, or provide context for long-term strategic planning. It is a critical skill in qualitative market research to be able to grasp not just the problem or objectives as given by the client, but also *the use to which the research find-ings will be put*. This is not always obvious in initial conversations with the client and may need to be ascertained or clarified through the process of 'interviewing' the buyer, or preferably the ultimate user, at the briefing (see Book 7 for more about this process).

How does this translate into specific projects? Box 5.2 offers some typi-cal objectives that may be addressed by qualitative market research. Each project will comprise a unique mix of this kind of question or task.

Box 5.2   Typical Project Objectives for Qualitative Market Research

- **Screening:** checking respondents' likely understanding of terms and concepts prior to their use in quantitative research; collecting respondent vocabulary for use in later concept or questionnaire design; reducing a large number of ideas for products, packaging etc. before quantitative testing

- **Exploration:** mapping out the nature and dynamics of a market or subculture or other phenomenon; exploring and giving a coherent account

of the status quo (often extended to indicate potentially fruitful areas for further exploration and development by the client organisation)

- **Strategic development:** extending the 'exploratory' function to generate, refine and give direction to future strategic decisions. These might include, for example, how to develop products for a market, how to define an effective target audience for a product, or how to decide on an overall approach for marketing or advertising a product, service or programme

- **Diagnostic assessment:** offering an explanation for a particular state of affairs, such as accounting for a change in fortunes of a brand, or accounting for puzzling findings from other information sources

- **Creative development:** this term often applies to a specific kind of project used especially in advertising development to help nurture creative ideas from rough to finished executions (Wardle, Book 6). It can also apply to the development and refining of embryonic product or marketing ideas, especially where the potential of the underlying idea may need to be understood separately from the vehicle used to communicate it

- **Evaluation:** assessing the value of a past action or the potential of a future action; judging the potential of new product, policy or marketing ideas, for example

In describing qualitative market research as being linked with decisions or action, it is important to stress at this point that the aim is *not* to delegate decision-making to respondents. Two points are important here. First, it is important to remember they are, simply, 'respondents' – and it is up to the researcher and the organisation to decide how to make use of this response. Secondly, respondents in qualitative market research are experts, but there are clear limits to their expertise:

- They are experts in describing how they want their newly washed hair to look and feel – but not experts in formulating shampoo.
- Similarly, they may be experts in *using* local authority services, but not in devising and running those services.
- Likewise, they are expert watchers of TV commercials but not in creating or shooting commercials.

The danger is that it is perfectly feasible to ask people questions well beyond their area of expertise – and they will often happily give a reply, irrespective of their expertise. The key point is to value the *valid* expertise and recognise but give little credence to the invalid.

Although the scope of operation of market research has expanded in recent years (see Chapter 1), a great deal of qualitative market research still involves *brands* and/or *advertising*. The specific questions concerning brands and advertising which give rise to qualitative projects, and the design issues involved, are examined in the two books in this series which specifically address these areas – those by Chandler and Owen (Book 5) on brands and by Wardle (Book 6) on advertising.

WHAT IS THE THEORETICALLY OPTIMAL RESEARCH SOLUTION?

Most commonly in UK practice, as we have said, a commercial qualitative market research project consists of a series of group discussions and/or interviews. Clients will often approach a researcher or agency with a reasonable idea of what *in these terms* they want, and the scale of project required. Note, though:

- It is still the researcher's role and responsibility to check that this is an appropriate method for the decisions to be taken, or for the information need that is expressed by the client, and indeed to double-check that a qualitative approach in general is appropriate.
- Even if the client asks for 'groups and depths', researchers do increasingly propose other qualitative methods (often, it has to be said, in combination with these traditional ones), such as observation and ethnographic work. Book 3 in this series, by Philly Desai, is devoted to alternative fieldwork methodologies, only some of which are mentioned later in this section.

The following section looks at both interview-based and non-interview-based approaches.

Interview-Based Qualitative Methods

There is a basic accepted wisdom about the broad appropriateness of group or individual interviewing for different kinds of objectives; this is outlined here and explored in more detail below.

- Essentially, **groups** are considered to be best where rich contextual material is wanted, where a social and interactive context for the discussion will be a valuable source of data, and/or where respondents are required to be imaginative or creative in their contributions. All these factors make interviewing in groups preferable.
- On the other hand, **individual interviewing** will be preferred where individual stories are wanted, or where the social context of a group would be detrimental to good data (for example, where respondents

would be unwilling to talk about this subject in front of others, or where 'uncontaminated' individual responses are needed).

Groups

Whatever their drawbacks and limitations (some of which are discussed later), group discussions have proved themselves to be a consistently useful and cost-effective way of gathering knowledge within market research. The group as a forum for interviewing takes into account the post-Freudian notion that individuals are a function not just of their individual personal psychology, but also of sociocultural factors; including: Jung's notion of 'the collective unconscious'; the whole premise of social psychology and sociology; and anthropological and cultural models of human behaviour.

The way in which qualitative market research uses an eclectic mix of these paradigms has already been explained and is also explored in other books in this series. In all these instances the group becomes a potent way of exploring *shared* meanings and, moreover, a 'normative' member of any population (however defined) can exemplify and describe these shared meanings.

Beyond this philosophical relevance of the group, a number of practical advantages have also been described. A useful description is offered by Hess (1968), and is reproduced in Box 5.3 with comments regarding the current status of groups within qualitative market research in the UK.[1]

Box 5.3   Hess' Benefits of Focus Groups

Synergism: the combined effort of the group will produce a wider range of ideas, insight and information than the sum of responses obtained from an equivalent number interviewed individually

In qualitative market research: this is a primary reason that groups are used and why they are seen as so efficient in market research terms – this is the 'richness' of the discussion so often described

Snowballing: a comment from one respondent can initiate a chain of responses from others in the group

In qualitative market research: again, this is a key benefit both in generating responses but also in tracing the development of ideas or arguments in the social context, used as a source of data

Stimulation: as the discussion builds momentum and as the level of excitement over the topic increases, respondents become eager to express their opinions and feelings

In qualitative market research: this is the familiar 'warmed-up' group which readily produces ideas and insights (and may in fact need its enthusiasm gently channelled)

Security: in an individual interview a respondent may not wish to express views for fear of having to defend these. In the group, where the focus is on the group rather than the individual, an idea can be expressed without necessarily having to defend or elaborate on it

In qualitative market research: respondents are known to find the group situation less stressful than the individual interview, not least for this reason (see Chrzanowska, Book 2)

Spontaneity: since questions are directed not to individuals but to the group, responses can be more spontaneous and less conventional. Additionally, the respondent is under less pressure to provide an opinion on every issue, especially when they do not have one

In qualitative market research: again, this makes for more relaxed and potentially more 'authentic' responses from individuals

Serendipity: it is more likely that an idea will 'drop out of the blue' in a group than in an individual interview

In qualitative market research: this is a common experience – a group comes to a realisation or an insight and no one is quite sure where it came from, only that it is useful or pertinent

Specialisation: focus group research affords the opportunity to use a more highly trained interviewer since there will be fewer group interviews than individual interviews

In qualitative market research: this is reflected in practice, group moderation being seen as the toughest but most critical interviewing skill of the researcher. In some parts of the business requiring greater use of individual interviews (e.g. in pharmaceutical market research) more use is made of less highly trained researchers to conduct one-to-one interviews

Scientific scrutiny: the group session can be observed by several observers, thus there can be some check on consistency of interpretations between observers

In qualitative market research: this is more contentious; the role of client observers in 'validating' research conclusions is discussed by Chrzanowksa (Book 2) and Ereaut (Book 4)

Structure: the group moderator has more control with regard to topics covered and their depth since he or she can reopen topics that received too shallow a discussion when initially presented

In qualitative market research: this is routine practice in groups (though also within individual interviews). In market research the discussion is certainly guided to answer client objectives, though this is done flexibly

Speed: for a given number of respondents, group interviews can be undertaken more quickly than individual interviews

In qualitative market research: undoubtedly a big factor in the use of groups in qualitative market research. Although projects are not designed on a 'head-count' basis, one can certainly cover a broader range of people and thus of potential perspectives using groups than depth interviews in the same time and for the same cost.

Source: Adapted from Hess 1968

Like all groups, qualitative market research groups are subject to group processes and dynamics.

The most commonly identified factors in group process or dynamics include:

- Polarisation, i.e. adopting a more extreme attitudinal position (a shift in degree, but not in direction).
- Compliance, i.e. responding in ways believed to be expected by the questioner.
- 'Groupthink', i.e. highly cohesive groups tend to maintain consensus, even when differences of attitude exist.

A key skill in qualitative market research is noting and managing group *process* factors, as well as generating data at the level of discussion *content* (Book 2 offers a full discussion of this). Indeed, process factors become a crucial part of the 'data' used at the formal analysis stage (Ereaut, Book 4).

What exactly constitutes a 'group discussion' or 'focus group'? In the UK there has been a notion of the 'standard' group, though this is fast changing and far more variation is now evident. In other parts of Europe, such as France, this standard is less likely to be found. Boxes 5.4 and 5.5 offer a summary of some of the features of groups.

Box 5.4   The 'Standard' UK Group-Based Qualitative
Market Research Project

- Usually such projects consist of a minimum of four groups and typically six to ten groups

- Each group usually represents a specific geographic, demographic group (e.g. BC$_1$ men aged 35–45, married and living in London) with relevant behavioural or attitudinal commonalities appropriate for the project/ commissioning organisation (e.g. all buy sandwiches for lunch from a certain outlet at least once a week)

- Each group is typically made up of six to eight such 'homogenous' people, and lasts 1½–2 hours

- Inevitably, there are exceptions to every one of these illustrative typical items

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Box 5.5   Some Alternatives to 'Standard' Groups

- **Mini groups:** smaller numbers, may be shorter – useful when difficult recruitment makes full groups hard to achieve or where a more 'intimate' atmosphere is required

- **Extended groups:** longer than 1½ hours – to cover more topics, to dig deeper, to allow time for respondents' thoughts to develop, become clearer. Good for complex subjects, unfamiliar topics

- **Creativity groups:** using the group as a 'brainstorming' session to generate new ideas - exploring 'what *could* be', rather than 'what is'. Note these require different mood, energy, and quite different moderation skills and procedures

- **'Interactive' groups:** groups involving clients (e.g. marketing or production people, creative people from design or advertising) to learn together and/or feed back options/ideas/revisions based on respondent input

- **Sensitivity panels/recall groups:** recalling the same respondents two or more times to 'continue the discussion after further thought' or after carrying out certain tasks

- **'Obsessives' groups':** choosing respondents because they have an unusually high level of interest/enthusiasm in a topic/market/brand, i.e. they are not typical but they allow hot-housing and exploiting the ideas of those who have already thought a lot about the field or market (see section below on sampling)

Groups are such an ingrained part of qualitative market research practice that the reader will find references throughout the series to these and other aspects of groups. The other key method used in qualitative market research is the individual or 'depth' interview.

Depth Interviews

At a simple commercial level, depth interviews are more time-consuming and more costly on a per-head basis. At a practical level, however, they can represent the only feasible way of interviewing geographically dispersed samples, or hard-to-recruit individuals (such as specialist surgeons or senior politicians) who might not attend a group discussion.

More fundamentally, too, depth interviews can offer powerful methodological advantages over groups.

- They offer greater confidentiality, for example in business-to-business research where individuals will not want to disclose information to competitors in a group discussion.
- They offer greater respondent privacy, for example for some 'confidential' subjects (e.g. personal finance) or sensitive/embarrassing topics. (Note, though, that some 'sensitive' topics such as embarrassing medical conditions or menstruation may be *best* researched in groups, as long as all group members share the same experience.)
- It may be a more relevant forum in which to explore activities normally done alone, for example where there is a need to assess a 'solitary' activity/decision (e.g. reading a newspaper).
- They give greater opportunity to understand detailed individual decision-making processes where the respondent's specific circumstances are relevant, such as the decision to choose a particular insurance policy.
- They can be conducted in a location relevant to the topic of the research, such as in the respondent's own home or place of work, or they can be conducted while the respondent is engaged in a relevant activity such as shopping or going out in the evening.

Depth interviews, too, have variations:

- **Couple interviews:** it may be useful to interview a couple if the subject is one of a joint decision – for example, where to go on holiday, or which car to buy.

- **Friendship pairs:** two individuals (for example teenage friends) interviewed together may feel more relaxed and secure, whilst allowing some of the advantages of depth interviewing listed above.
- **Short interviews** (say 20–30 minutes) may be used to assess something very specific, such as the comprehension and communication of a TV commercial, where individual response may be contaminated by trying to do the same in a group.
- **'Expert' interviews** with relevant figures who are not typical respondents for this particular subject but who have specialist knowledge – including journalists, scientists, academics and so on.

Non-Interview-Based Methods: Observation and Ethnography

Limitations of Interview-Based Methodologies
A key criticism of interview data is, of course, that what people say in interviews is not necessarily what they do in practice. Three main categories of reasons for this gap between claimed and actual behaviour are identified and discussed in this series by Philly Desai in Book 3:

- The interview is a story – told by the person about themselves, and constructed retrospectively. It is not a transparent account of events, attitudes or feelings, and it provides no objective account of social facts external to the interview context.
- The interview is subject to social pressures and self-image.
- The interview is dependent upon self-awareness and memory. Commonly, interviewees fail to be aware of, or remember, such things as the habitual, the taken-for-granted (at both a personal and cultural level) and other actions carried out at the level of 'low involvement processing' (Book 2). These may need accessing in quite different ways.

Context-Dependent Behaviours and Attitudes
The notion of 'context-dependent' behaviour and attitudes is also relevant in considering interview-based methods. An increasingly common view in social theory holds that the same person not only acts but actually thinks differently and expresses a different identity in different contexts. For example:

- a working parent can display a quite different 'identity' and different sets of motivations, attitudes and behaviours about the same issue at home with children and at work with colleagues; or
- a man keen on both football and opera could well behave and think quite differently at the football stadium and the opera house.

The question arises, therefore, of whether an interview undertaken *out of context* can truly explore contextually dependent attitudes and

behaviours. And if an individual thinks and feels differently in different contexts, which of these many contexts is the interview addressing?

To add to this conundrum, the interview itself is also a quite specific 'context'. Any practising researcher develops an understanding of the expectations and roles collaboratively played out in the course of 'doing being interviewed' and in fact uses these possibilities both in interviewing and in analysing the resultant material (Ereaut, Book 4).

In some circumstances, though, observation or ethnographic methodologies can provide an alternative to overcome or reduce the overall impact of the limitations and difficulties of interview-based methodologies. For example:

- **Accompanied trips**, to, say, stores, museums, to learn in 'real time' what people do, think, feel (rather than rely on their memory).
- **Observational studies**, again in, say, stores, pubs etc. to watch how people behave. There is also an increasing amount of work being done observing everyday life in people's homes.

Within academic sociology and anthropology, the most common way of describing the range of levels of involvement with research subjects is a spectrum ranging from 'complete observer' through 'observer as participant', 'participant as observer' to 'complete participant'. Desai looks at these options in more detail in Book 3 and notes that, in practice, most ethnographic research, including market research versions, is conducted in the middle of this spectrum.

WHO SHOULD THE RESPONDENTS BE?

Who are the best respondents for this project?

This is a huge subject and we can only sketch its dimensions here. Qualitative sampling for market research – who and how many to interview – reflects three key design aspects: **purposefulness, group dynamics** and **recruitment issues.**

Purposive Sampling

One needs to structure market research projects and recruitment in a way that ensures that good quality, reliable and relevant data or information is produced from fieldwork. This is done quite differently in quantitative and in qualitative research; what Patton calls the 'different logics' of qualitative and quantitative sampling (1990: 169) are applied. Quantitative research relies in some way on statistical theory and random (or at least quota) sampling in order to produce results that will be generalisable to a wider population than that sampled. Qualitative research uses quite

different criteria and aims to capture different things, not by asking simple questions of lots of people but by asking complex questions of fewer, and by selecting these primarily for what they can offer to the project.

One of the difficulties in writing about this is that several everyday terms expressing relevant concepts, especially 'reliable', 'valid' and 'representative', have been given a very specific meaning within a quantitative paradigm. They thus tend to be heard with the word 'statistically' implicitly in front of them, the common-sense version having been somewhat hijacked. Even 'sampling' itself has come to have a specific statistical connotation. These terms are thus problematic in discussing the general principles involved in qualitative design. Issues of 'validity' and 'reliability' of the outcomes of qualitative market research are addressed by Ereaut (Book 4) and briefly later in this book; the conclusion is that the technical versions of these concepts are of limited relevance for qualitative research. Here we will attempt a description of how in practice qualitative market research sample designs come about, flagging where these 'loaded' terms are being used technically and where they are being used in a more general way. The word 'sample' is always used here to mean 'the selection of people interviewed for a specific project' and not in any statistical sense.

There are several ways in which qualitative samples vary from those used in quantitative market research: overall size; the way respondents are chosen; and the way they are structured to allow (or not) different groups to be compared.

What is an Appropriate Sample Size?

There is within qualitative market research a collective wisdom based entirely on experience and judgement concerning *minimum* sample sizes, and concerning '*good enough*' sample sizes. For example, most professional researchers would be unprepared to conduct just one group discussion on a subject, and many would be unwilling to carry out only two. This is not enough to produce anything meaningful. Four standard group discussions is considered an acceptable sample if the project has fairly straightforward objectives and the sample as a whole is quite homogenous (i.e. few major or relevant differences are expected between groups). This may seem very few people to interview, but experience indicates that useful and reasonably robust findings will emerge from such a project.

Researchers also develop experience-based views on possible *maximum* sample size. For example, in our view, when conducting depth interviews with a relatively homogenous population there is a point of diminishing returns – say after around 10–15 interviews – where little new will be learned, and certainly little in relation to the cost of each additional interview.

What qualitative research tries to do (discussed further below) is to understand the perspective or world-view of a specific set or sets of

people relevant to the client, focused around specific products, questions or issues. It needs to elicit and understand a range of *perspectives*. What is needed is enough people from each set (a) to ensure that the range of possible perspectives is elicited, (b) to ensure that each may be understood sufficiently and (c) to allow the researcher to assess how these different perspectives might interrelate.

It is also crucial to note that in qualitative market research the researcher and client are very rarely starting from scratch but will have accumulated knowledge of many relevant population groups (for example, how users of credit cards differ, not only in demographics but in perspective, from non-users) and this can dramatically cut down the size of sample needed to research a specific issue.

In a pragmatic but important way sample size is also affected by practical factors. There is a need to ensure that the project is extensive enough to ensure a degree of robustness, but also that it is of a manageable size, can be done within the time frame available *and is affordable.* This may mean some difficult compromises.

How are Qualitative 'Samples' Chosen?

In contrast to the large and highly structured samples seen in much survey research, qualitative market research samples will often seem very selective and quite unrepresentative in the statistical sense. This is true and is deliberate, since the primary aim of qualitative market research is not to attempt to produce generalisable data from statistically robust samples and designs, but to produce insight or understanding relevant to a client's problem or business. This is well expressed by Michael Quinn Patton, himself an applied researcher in social policy and programmes evaluation, who refers to the purposefulness and 'information rich' nature of qualitative samples (1990: 169; see also Mason 1996; Silverman 2000). Given that all projects, even the biggest ones, have constraints of time and budget, the ways in which qualitative market researchers have learned to make their samples 'information rich' are outlined in detail below.

Most importantly, respondents are needed who will productively inform the research. We need *relevant* people. In other words:

- There is often (though not always) a desire to make sure respondents are broadly 'typical' of the chosen target market or stakeholder group.
- This group will be defined primarily by project-specific criteria, such as usership of a brand, or involvement in an activity, rather by than general population measures such as region, age, social class or gender.
- There will be times when even this attempt at 'normativity' is not necessary, nor ideal for the particular project, and 'exceptional' respondents may be preferred. One might want to talk to rejectors of a brand, or to obsessive users of a category, in order to understand it better.

- A purposive sample may mean actively excluding some people from certain research tasks. For example:

  o Advertising 'rejectors' declare that advertising is a waste of time and money; to them *no* advertising is acceptable. However 'true' and valid this opinion is, clients are still going to advertise. The views of such people might help us understand the spread of attitudes to advertising – but they *don't* help us advise clients on how best to develop their advertising.
  o Similarly, vegetarians cannot contribute to the appraisal of meat products.
  o People who *hate* a particular product or service, or disapprove of a particular policy, could never say anything constructive about a re-design of packaging or literature about that product, service or policy (though they may be of key interest to a different project aiming to understand this product or policy more generally).

Market research samples need to include people who will inform us regarding the client's concerns, however defined. This may mean interviewing the client's target audience, existing or lapsed users, shareholders or employees, benefits claimants or users of state services, experts or opinion-leaders in a field, and so on. Guidance from the client is crucial in this aspect of sample design, and listed below are examples of ways in which clients and researchers might define the target market or stakeholder group.

- **Demographics**
  Age, sex, social class
  Life stage, existence of children and working status (often as important as the above in consumer work)
  Job-function and seniority (key in business-to-business research)
- **Geography**
  Are any particular regions worth noting as important or irrelevant – or 'typical' vs. atypical? (Some may also need to be avoided for commercial confidentiality, say the area around a competitor's factory)
- **Behavioural variables**
  Current users vs. lapsed users
  Loyalists vs. repertoire users
  Long-term users vs. recent converts
  Long-term employees vs. new recruits
- **Attitudinal variables specific to the product category, brand or research topic**
  Those 'in the market' for the category who have not yet bought
  Non-users who are none the less non-rejectors
  'Enthusiasts'

- **More general attitudinal variables based on current knowledge or belief**
  'Experimentalists' vs. 'traditionalists'
  'Opinion leaders' vs. 'followers'
  'Imaginative' respondents
  Lifestyle, e.g. 'shopaholics'

Note that the list includes a mixture of 'hard' and 'soft' variables. Patton (1990) distinguishes between two kinds of sampling variable. The first includes easily defined factors, such as the location of cases or the size of institutions. The second involves 'operational constructs' or theories and beliefs about how cases in a population might vary. In market research, this would be the difference between 'hard' factors such as demographics and buying or other behavioural variables, and more 'theoretical' variables such as hypothesised attitudinal or 'lifestyle' types. The former are more straightforward and reliable for recruitment purposes, but the latter may be very important, not only to focus on considerations important to the client, but also to ensure smooth groups dynamics (see below), and usually a mix of these factors is used.

Patton (1990: ch. 5) goes on to describe no less than 15 ways of structuring qualitative samples (in his case selecting cases for the evaluation of social programmes). While many of his categories are less relevant, some do reflect the way in which qualitative market research samples are generally structured and are useful since they help capture and codify what has until now been tacit working knowledge about 'how to do it' within the business. Note that qualitative market research samples will very often be a combination or mixture of these kinds of priorities (what Patton calls 'mixed purposeful sampling').

- Many samples avoid extreme cases and focus on the 'typical'. Understanding the perspective of the typical or majority target market or audience is often a key objective. (Patton's '**typical case sampling**')
- Where there is known major variation across a target audience – say users, non-users and lapsed users of a brand, or known differences between men and women – the project sample may reflect all these groups ('**stratified purposeful sampling**'). It may also be structured to allow some comparison between these groups (see below).
- Alternatively, it can be useful to look at extreme cases, perhaps obsessive users of a brand or category, or hostile rejectors, in order to understand the phenomenon better ('**extreme or deviant case sampling**').
- Samples may be built around theoretical or hypothetical differences – so those with different attitudes or lifestyle might be recruited into separate groups to allow comparison of these groups in relation to the client's issue. For example, young women who are regular 'clubbers' might be interviewed about fashion separately from those not

going out to clubs, in the expectation that their attitudes may differ ('**theory-based or operational construct sampling**').

- Note: what qualitative market research does *not* do is what Patton calls **'convenience sampling'**. Sample structures will, of course, reflect issues of cost and timing, but the research infrastructure described earlier ensures that there can be no real reason to recruit *only* on the basis of easy or inexpensive access. To do so would be considered bad practice.

Relevant judgements (about what is 'typical' or 'deviant', for example) will generally be made between client and supplier, using all available information. This often includes using the client's existing knowledge, say of the demographic profile of users, or the likely spread of certain behaviours amongst certain groups. This is done in order to *use* and *take into account* known aspects of the external world to make the qualitative sample more purposeful, not to 'represent' that world in a statistical sense.

So qualitative samples are heavily affected by the need to access relevant and information-rich samples. But information-richness alone is not enough. The outcomes of qualitative projects may best be seen not as 'truth' but as an 'informed perspective', but there is some sense in which the insight and understanding produced needs to be 'robust', i.e. reflect in some way an external reality (see Ereaut, Book 4). In practice, clients are usually using qualitative research to add to a store of knowledge and belief they have from many sources about the external world, including 'hard' sales data and quantitative survey data. In this context, real-life qualitative design is the result of:

- (primarily) a search for depth and richness of data;
- combined with judgements about, for a specific sample, how far and in what way findings might be extrapolated beyond it if it were structured in a certain way; *and*
- judgements about how far, for this specific project, this matters (concerns about incidence of behaviours, or the spread of a certain attitude within the population, will generally be tackled by other means).

In addition to structuring a sample around issues such as usership or eligibility in relation to the client's interests, steps are taken to avoid obvious or gratuitous sources of bias. This is done using professional knowledge of factors that might create bias – most commonly region, age, gender and social class, but also things like occupation, education or local factors.

- If demographics have not been part of the prior knowledge that has structured the sample, broad quotas may nevertheless be set on dimensions such as social class, location, age and lifestage – *not* to make the sample representative, but to attempt to 'spread the net' – to spread the sample away from an avoidable skew.

- As far as possible, respondents are recruited avoiding other sources of potential but avoidable bias. This means they will *not* for example all live in one particular place, nor all be students or in the same occupation, nor be the friends and neighbours of the recruiter, nor work in an industry connected to the research topic.

How do all these factors get put together to design a real sample? Box 5.6 offers an example of a project concerning new advertising for a certain brand of washing-up liquid.

Box 5.6   Design of a Sample for a
Project on Washing-Up Liquid: An Example

The client's brief and the advertising objectives contain this information:

- The company wants to make sure they don't alienate current users
- They'd quite like to attract back lapsed users
- They're worried the brand is getting a bit 'old' in terms of who is using it
- But regional differences and social class are not major issues of interest to them

So, we can begin to decide who might be most important and interesting to talk to. In theory, one could talk to a technically representative sample of anyone who might see the advertisement – men, women, young, old, users and non-users of washing-up liquid and so on. They could all tell us something about the ad – but only some of them would give us the *useful* perspective – the one that the client needs.

What is needed is a *purposive* sample – one that allows the key questions to be answered in depth. From the brief:

- It is clear that we will want to talk to fairly *typical users of washing-up liquid in general*, who might be expected to be the target of the advertising
- We might also want to be able to look at the response of '*our*' *brand users* compared with users of *competitive brands*
- It looks important to recruit *lapsed users*, i.e. those who have been users of 'our' brand but who are no longer
- It might also be useful to look at users and non-users of this brand belonging to *different age groups*

Some other questions will also need answering:

- Should we talk only to housewives (who we know, from other data, buy the stuff)?
- Or include other family members (who use it when it's their turn to wash up – and may actually use it more than the purchaser)?
- Does it matter if most of the household dishwashing is done in a dishwasher, with only occasional hand washing? If so, we might need separate 'dishwasher users' groups – or maybe a quota of dishwasher users in each group to ensure their voice is heard. (But if so, how might that affect dynamics, and how will we identify 'dishwasher users' within the group?)
- Do we want this project to go beyond the 'typical': would 'obsessive' or very heavy users tell us anything useful, for example?
- What do we *mean* by each term:

    o 'Brand users' – used for how long? At least six months?
    o Is that 'only ever use' – or 'use most often' – or 'ever use'?
    o Users of competitor brands – what competitors? Does this include retailer's own label?
    o 'Lapsed users' – how long since they last used? How loyal have they been in the past?
    o What do we mean by 'older users' and 'younger users'? What are the sensible age bands for the category?
    o and so on …

All of these are questions of judgement and of using the best available knowledge – a collaborative process between client and researcher.

Enabling Researchers to Analyse why Differences Between Groups Arise

There is an important sampling issue concerning the need to understand differences in response between different sub-groups or parts of the sample. The sample design is vital here: if middle-class users take a different stance on certain issues to working-class non-users is this a function of their usership, or their social grade? Qualitative researchers *cannot* pronounce definitively on sub-group differences in the way allowed by statistical significance testing. However, sometimes identifying and understanding differences between groups is a vital part of the brief, so the sample needs to allow at least some sensible comparison.

The key is to ensure that each sub-group is represented fully enough to allow the researcher to gain a reasonable, internally coherent understanding of its particular perspective or world-view, in order to understand its

responses within this context. If, as is increasingly the case, qualitative market researchers see individual respondents not just as individuals but as carriers of shared cultural meaning, this re-frames the function of a sample. Qualitative questioning allows us to a degree to ask respondents to generalise for us – to let us in on shared perspectives and meaning – and in this sense we can rely on relatively few respondents.

So how many groups or interviews are needed per sub-group? One would want at least two and preferably more groups for each discrete sub-group to be compared with another. This factor alone means that a qualitative project of fewer than four groups cannot really give any insights into differences between types of respondents. Again, this seems relatively few people, but recall that researchers and clients are often starting from a position of some knowledge and will have some benchmarks against which to evaluate and contextualise these specific discussions.

Even with two groups per sub-sample, however, there is a danger that with several variables the project will become impracticably large, and compromise is inevitable. Very often, the reality is that commercial imperatives mean there is insufficient time or budget to cover every segment, every variable, even at this level. So researchers need to consider these issues, which were raised before in looking at purposefulness:

- Which sampling variable is likely to be the most important? Priorities must be set.
- What is 'typical'? Where is the core or the bulk of the market/interest group? We often *have* to understand this, and 'extras' are exactly that.
- What are the extremes? How important are these? Very often key learning comes from contrasting them to core or typical consumers and understanding the boundaries, but this needs to be balanced with the need for typicality.
- And so on …

Box 5.7 returns to the washing-up liquid example. This is real-life sampling and entails pragmatic judgements about robustness and pur-posefulness. All clients and researchers know that, often, they work with samples that are too small or too compromised to be ideal – but they trade this off against other critical factors like cost and time and they focus always on appropriateness and purpose.

Once again, this is a key area in which long-term relationships between clients and suppliers are invaluable, where they jointly build up knowl-edge of a field or an issue. They can then use this context not only to struc-ture purposeful samples, but as an informal validity check of findings, effectively enhancing the robustness of any given sample.

Box 5.7   Design of a Sample: *cont.*

- The client wants to be able to compare responses between users and lapsed users, and between young and old respondents, but region and social class are less important
- The sample design offered below allows the comparison of six user groups with six non-user groups, half of which are lapsed users of the client's brand. This, by experience, will probably be enough to uncover any important differences, but keeps the sample manageable and affordable
- The quotas set on social class and region are not there to allow comparison (though any *gross* differences would probably also become evident) but serve to 'spread' the sample a little and avoid unnecessary concentration in one area or social group
- Notice the extremes of social class are excluded – it is a fact, even if a regrettable one, that research for mass market goods will tend to focus on 'mainstream' people

Possible sample design for washing-up liquid advertising development project

	25–40	40–55	55+
Brand users	BC_1 – North	C_2D – Mids	BC_1 – Mids
	C_2D – South	BC_1 – South	C_2D – North
Lapsed brand users	BC_1 – Mids	C_2D – North	BC_1 – South
Competitor users	C_2D – North	BC_1 – South	C_2D – Mids

Sampling and Group Dynamics

Appropriate sample design has a key function to play in helping ensure that groups 'go well'. It is the moderator's responsibility to control group dynamics, but design has a vital role to play. This is an area in which qualitative market research has much practical experience and accepted wisdom. One can learn from bitter experience that 'sensible' marketing definitions of a coherent and sensible target market or stakeholder group can in reality include wildly diverse people who have nothing in common.

The design for groups must bring together not only relevant individuals but also those who will actually *talk* together. Researchers will advise on this for each individual project, but some general principles apply. Here are some examples:

- **Mixing men and women** in groups needs to be done with care:
  - Whatever we may feel about it, it is still true that women, especially older women, will tend to defer to men in group discussions, and men will tend to assume control.

- o There is also the issue of gender-related 'expertise'; so men will tend to assume they have superior knowledge regarding cars, for example, or women regarding childcare, irrespective of real experience. Mixed gender groups on such topics can for these reasons be very interesting and lively, but need to be set up with care and in the knowledge of these likely 'postures'.
- o Moreover, work on communication styles has concluded that men and women tend to adopt quite different styles in groups – and as a consequence the moderator faces quite different tasks in managing the group dynamics of men's and women's groups, as well as in managing mixed groups.

- **Age** is a complex issue:

  - o Young people with others just one year older or younger than themselves may well not gel as a group and school children usually need to be within the same year.
  - o Radical differences of lifestyle can apply to the same age group, for example an 18-year-old woman could be at school, at work but still living at home, an undergraduate in a shared flat, or married (or not) with child(ren). We need to make a judgement about whether this will matter or not within the group for a specific study.
  - o As people get older, wider age groups are more workable.

- **Commonality of life stage, lifestyle or experience** can make wider age groupings and even mixed gender groups workable:

  - o Golfers of almost all ages talking about golf, or pet owners talking about their pets, probably have enough in common to set aside age, socioeconomic and other differences.
  - o Women of 25 with babies and without paid jobs will probably have little in common with women of 25 who are unmarried, working and regularly out clubbing, but will probably work happily with other full-time mothers in their 40s.
  - o A middle-class man in his early 30s who works in a merchant bank and lives in the heart of the capital will probably have more in common with his female counterparts than with other middle-class men in their early 30s working as accountants and living in a provincial town.

- **Usership issues within group dynamics** can cause difficulties, *or* enable useful discussion.

  - o Users and non-users in the same group will tend to polarise, to 'defend' their choice. This can be helpful in some circumstances if done deliberately (exploiting the 'conflict' to understand the phenomenon), but it suppresses users' criticism and can inhibit the identification of brand weaknesses.

- o Rejectors (of the brand, the client, or of advertising *per se*, or any other relevant variable) are of course a fact of life and to ignore them is naïve. However, the aim is to generate usable findings – there can in many projects be little point in including people who cannot or will not contribute to the debate and they will be screened out at recruitment. The best practice is to exclude overt rejectors (of advertising, the product category, the policy) or, if the aim is to understand rejection, then have *only* rejectors in the group.

- **Major cultural or ethnic differences** need to be handled with care. However we might feel about this, mixing some cultural groups within a market research group may not be comfortable or productive for all concerned, *or* it may work well, depending on many factors, including the topic for discussion. Again, client and researcher knowledge, and common sense, have to be used.

Issues for the Recruiter

Whatever the sample, accurate recruiting is vital since 'off quota' respondents can seriously muddy the picture. If respondents are not who we assume they are on important dimensions, it is impossible to interpret their responses to the client's issues in any useful way, since the 'worldview' we get is not genuinely the one we wanted to access.

The research design needs to ensure that recruiters are not set an impossible task – and that respondents are ready and able to do the things we will ask of them. Professional recruiters regularly work miracles but sometimes the 'impossible' sample really is exactly that. If the recruiters are set too hard a task they cannot be expected to achieve good results – and we need to acknowledge that it may encourage some to 'cut corners'.

There is a need to be clear about which criteria are *essential* and which are not. Usually, the key criteria are ones that concern behaviour or eligibility – the buying or usership or lifestyle habits which make them of importance to the client. These criteria are often more important than demographically defined ones, but this is not always the case.

It is also prudent to be clear about the *spirit* of recruitment intentions as well as the letter of the specification.

- We often have a 'mental image' of the type of people we want to talk to, which is essentially 'qualitative' in nature, e.g. 'the kind of music-mad youngsters you see in record shops on Saturday afternoon'.
- However, this can be translated into rather dry, demographic, behavioural and attitudinal 'facts': 'youths 17–18, still in education, who watch MTV at least five times a week and have bought at least three current top 20 albums'.

- The difficulty is, respondents can fit the 'dry facts' – but be quite different from our 'mental picture'.
- There are also ambiguities, e.g. 'students' can be 21-year-old under-graduates or 17-year-olds shifted from the dole queue by employment training initiatives.

As shown earlier, too, researchers must *specify* closely what they mean by, for example, 'users' of a brand or service, since the recruiter cannot otherwise be expected to know what is meant. Are the respondents to be purchasers, users or specifiers? Consider these examples:

- Family members may eat a brand of crisps either because they make a point of buying that brand, or simply because that's what mum put in the cupboard, or maybe they told mum they wanted that brand.
- In the car market, buyers may be different from user/choosers.
- In the business equipment market, choosers may be purchasing managers and be quite different people from users.

Respondent perspectives are also an aspect of recruitment and thus of sample design. Certain aspects of the rules and guidelines that aim to ensure the quality of recruitment – ensuring respondents do not know each other and do not know the recruiter, and being vague about the specific subject of the research – can actually add to respondents anxiety and reduce their willingness to take part.

It can be difficult to recruit under certain circumstances because of the effect this might have on potential respondents. As a check on a proposed design, it can be helpful to imagine oneself being recruited for the research: can one imagine being a member of this group (TV licence dodgers, for example), willingly going along to a stranger's house to talk about this issue? Or being a victim of crime asked to do the same?

WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES OR IDEAS AND HOW CAN THEY BE RESEARCHED?

Development of Relevant Materials for Use in the Research

An important characteristic of interview-based qualitative market research is the extensive use of stimulus materials and techniques to extend the range and quality of information gathered in groups and inter-views. It is rare for commercial researchers to go into groups or interviews without any kind of material, or without the means to produce or invent these on the spot. The development of research material is an important pre-fieldwork task. Whilst some materials are provided by the client (or their agents), researchers have a responsibility to ensure the material is

suitable for research purposes, and they may often create or source much of the material themselves.

The common types of material used in qualitative market research include:

- Current products, literature, advertising etc.
- Other material to help remind/recreate existing situations (pictures, logo boards, video etc.).
- Effective material to help respondents understand proposed ideas, products, options for 'prognostic' projects. This might include:

  - 'concept boards' – written descriptions of ideas
  - rough representations of plans and options (e.g. TV commercials, store layouts, mock-ups of brochures, pack designs etc.)
  - collage boards of images, words, associations etc.
  - 'analogous' materials such as pictures, video
  - materials intended to create (recreate) mood – images, sounds and music, video etc.

Researchers also develop materials needed for projective and enabling exercises such as:

- 'Bubble drawings', sentence completion sheets and so on.
- Sensory material to help 'go beyond words' (pictures and images from magazines, collages of visual images, colour, music, texture).

The development of appropriate material for use in qualitative market research is a major subject and this short section can only skim the surface. More detail on these and many other approaches can be found elsewhere in this series (Books 2, 5 and 6).

Preparation of a Discussion Guide or Topic Guide

The topic guide is used by the moderator to give focus and structure to the discussion (it is *not* a rigid set of questions or a form of questionnaire). The discussion guide is not only a tool for the use of the researcher during interviewing, but is also produced to demonstrate the researcher's grasp of the key issues in the research and to illustrate the way in which he or she proposes to address these through the interviews. As such it is a useful tool for communication between client and researcher but also a potentially contentious or political object, with these and other interested parties (such as advertising agencies) attempting to imprint their perspective on or exert control over the project. (The same can apply to stimulus material for the research.)

The key considerations in constructing a topic guide concern:

- ensuring the key organisational topics are explored;
- ensuring respondents are asked open and non-directive questions that are also appropriate, valid and ethical;
- ensuring the process of the group (order of topics, style of moderation etc.) encourages effective group dynamics and trust, as well as an appropriate 'sequence' of topics.

There are several different styles of discussion guide – in part dictated by the type of project and the style of qualitative market research.

Clearly, more 'cognitive' approaches to qualitative market research (see Chapter 2) require more detailed and prescribed specific questions to facilitate the more structured form of enquiry. Such discussion guides typically consist of specific questions, asked in a fairly ordered way. A 'cognitive' discussion guide may run to many pages of such questions.

More 'conative' qualitative market research approaches require a 'looser' discussion guide – often consisting of key themes and broad issues for exploration. It may consist of nothing more than a handful of words. Moreover, the conative model of qualitative market research means that the moderator has no pre-defined order for exploring. Rather than act as a '*script of definite questions*', conative discussion guides tend to act more as '*a reminder of key objectives*'. An effective conative topic guide usually 'evolves' during the project – questions and topics that arise early in the project are incorporated in the topic guide and explored in later fieldwork.

Clearly this very loose style is more appropriate for some types of project than others. Even within the conative model, certain types of project demand a more structured approach (and therefore more structured discussion guides) – for example, comparing the relative merits of alternative options, or providing comparable assessments of different products, brands, or initiatives.

The design of the discussion guide also needs to take account of such things as 'process' factors. As a general principle, topics explored early on (when respondent trust and comfort with the research situation has yet to be fully established) should be simple and uncontentious, perhaps restricted to the factual and behavioural, or to easily expressed feelings. More personal matters, issues relating to more private feelings and beliefs and *key topics* are best left until the group is settled and 'performing'.

Further discussion of the issues involved in developing effective discussion guides are explored in Chapter 6 of Book 2.

WHAT ARE THE PRACTICAL ISSUES?

There may be – and often are – real constraining factors that have to be allowed for in the design.

- These often involve costs and, especially, timing. The research project will often be slotted into a development or production schedule and if it does not meet its deadline, the whole process will be disrupted. Air time may already be booked for a TV commercial, for example, and there will be severe financial implications if the commercial cannot be made to meet its schedule.
- In addition, there may be legal constraints on what can be researched and how – for example, one cannot in the UK do alcohol tasting research with 15-year-olds.
- The other major form of restriction concerns what actions and options are available to the client – there is no point researching an idea, or designing research around a certain target group, if there is no real possibility that relevant action can be taken as a result.

WHAT ARE THE INFORMAL ISSUES?

Finally, the research design will need to take account of any 'soft' factors concerning the client organisation and the individuals within it.

- The current state of organisational knowledge and belief must be understood and used to determine what is known/not known (see Chapter 3) and this will affect all design decisions.
- Organisations and individuals vary in how far they want and need a mathematical or statistical foundation to information before they can believe and use it. This may affect whether qualitative or quantitative research is used, or the balance between the two – again, see Chapter 3.
- Occasionally it will be necessary to design a project in order to satisfy a 'non-research' need. For example, a senior figure may have a particular desire to include a specific group of people in the research, or the organisation may need for political reasons to have included a certain group in the research (for example where employees must be consulted, even though their views are unlikely to affect the decisions being made).

KEY POINTS

- Each qualitative market research project is custom-designed and project design is a multi-faceted task involving negotiation and, frequently, compromise. It must take into account a variety of inter-related factors, including project objectives, the theoretically optimal research solution and many practical issues.
- Choice of research agency by the client organisation can be informal (based on previous experience and personal factors) or a process of competitive tendering and formal proposals.

- Sample design, whether selecting people to interview or activities and settings to observe, is clearly a vital facet of project design, and qualitative market research uses purposive sampling principles designed to be 'information-rich'. Commonly, qualitative samples are designed to be 'typical', although extreme sampling can be useful in some projects. Similarly, the existence of other client information enables the stratification of qualitative purposeful samples. Other factors are also routinely used in order to avoid obvious bias.
- Sample design has an important role to play in enabling the researcher to analyse why differences between groups may arise.
- Appropriate sample design has a powerful part to play in helping to ensure positive group dynamics (based on practical experience of the types of respondents likely to work together as a group).
- The project design stage also includes identification of appropriate stimulus material and projective and enabling techniques to extend the range and quality of information gathered in groups and interviews.
- The creation of an appropriate topic guide includes consideration of not only issues of content (i.e. ensuring the client's questions and issues are addressed) but also process factors (ensuring the questions and tasks expected of respondents are both achievable and ethical).
- Project design needs to take into account informal issues such as the current state of organisational beliefs, the organisational attitude to the kinds of 'soft' data qualitative market research provides and other non-research issues such as organisational politics.
- Each or any of these project design considerations can force re-consideration of the overall design several times before a solution is reached.

NOTE

1 A note on terminology: in this and subsequent chapters we follow the convention of referring to the interviewer as a 'moderator' when working with a group.

⑥

How Local and International Qualitative Market Research Projects Work

In this chapter we describe the practical phases of an illustrative commercial qualitative market research project (based on groups), in anticipation that it will give useful insight into such projects for those without first-hand experience. This description is meant to be easy to digest and as such is very generalised and oversimplified.

After a brief introduction, the first part of the chapter summarises the stages of a typical UK domestic project, as another way of contextualising the content of other chapters. The second part looks briefly at the major issues and challenges of conducting qualitative market research internationally and outlines the ways in which this kind of work is organised.

Some readers may find it helpful to understand the 'life' of a typical interview-based qualitative market research project. For the sake of simplicity, we describe a 'typical' UK project made up of a series of group discussions – for the simple reason that in practice this represents the great bulk of commercial qualitative market research projects. (Those interested in the observational/ethnographic approach in qualitative market research should see Book 3.)

As we have already said, of course, not all projects fit this 'typical' pattern. Moreover, in reading this description of a typical group-based project, five points should be noted:

- All qualitative projects are custom-designed and no two projects are ever identical in content, size, structure or process.
- The following paragraphs describe such projects as a linear sequential series of tasks and stages – but it is vital to be aware that an important aspect of qualitative market research is what is described as the 'all-at-once-ness' of qualitative market research. This notion has been described in Chapter 1 of this book, and relates to the fact that all the stages of a project are inter-related and interlocking.

- The description makes the process sound beguilingly simple, but in fact this masks considerable complexity. This complexity arises in part from the 'all-at-once-ness' of qualitative market research and in part from the dual role that the researcher plays. As discussed in Chapter 2, the dual role involves being simultaneously both 'pure researcher' (disinterested and impartial explorer and analyst of the respondent's world) *and also* 'the business partner and committed agent' of the client (partial, and committed to maximising the usefulness and value of the research for the client organisation), and this pervades all stages.
- Ethics and the rights of respondents are a constant consideration. This important issue is outlined more fully in Chapter 7.
- International projects have rather different characteristics – and these are described in a separate section at the end of this chapter.

These points aside, a typical group-based qualitative market research project can be described in terms of five broad sequential phases:

- Phase 1: Problem definition and project design
- Phase 2: Recruitment and preparation for fieldwork
- Phase 3: Fieldwork
- Phase 4: Analysis and interpretation
- Phase 5: Delivering results – debriefs and reports of findings.

Reference was made earlier to specific and ever-decreasing timescales for qualitative market research projects: from start to finish, a typical commercial qualitative market research project is likely to take 4–8 weeks, although international projects and some kinds of domestic project can take much longer.

For international projects coordinated by one agency, there will often be two extra phases – the briefing of overseas agencies (following phase 1 above), and the collection and synthesis of the data, interpretations or conclusions for each individual country from these agencies (preceding phase 3 or 4 above). How these activities are handled in a project depends on how it has been organised – several possible patterns are outlined later in this chapter.

A DOMESTIC (UK) PROJECT

Phase 1: Problem Definition and Project Design

These aspects have already been described and the reader should refer back to Chapter 5 for more detail. Design often includes some pre-fieldwork tasks, such as agreement and production of research materials and negotiation of discussion outlines.

Crucially, this phase usually involves significant discussion and negotiation with the client before the final project specification is agreed. Moreover, this process of negotiation frequently involves 'looping back' – consideration of one set of project design issues often results in the re-framing and re-definition of core aspects and details of the project.

Once this phase is complete, and the project is formally commissioned, it is the responsibility of the qualitative market research practitioner to execute the project to the agreed specification. This includes specific details of the fieldwork (number and composition of the groups/interviews etc.), timing, costs, reporting and documentation and so on.

Thus radical amendments to the scope and nature of the project are rare after this phase, and the subsequent stages tend to follow a more direct linear sequence.

Phase 2: Recruitment of Respondents and Preparation for Fieldwork

The specified types of people needed for the research are typically 'free found' by local specialist recruiters, and recruited using a structured questionnaire ('screener' in the USA).

The aim of the recruitment procedure is to ensure that people with relevant personal characteristics (demographic, behavioural and/or attitudinal) take part in the research, without revealing 'research sensitive' information such as the brand being studied, etc. Recruiters in the UK tend to work on a freelance basis for specialist recruitment companies or direct for the qualitative market research agency. In the USA they work for the viewing studios. Recruitment from lists provided by the client is common practice in some sectors (e.g. projects amongst the customers of banks etc.), but here issues of Data Protection legislation impact upon recruitment procedures.

While this is going on, many researchers take active steps to 'immerse' themselves in the topic before starting fieldwork, with the aim of familiarising themselves with the *respondent's* experience. Common activities here might include sampling products or services, studying packs or brands, visiting shops or other places of relevance to the topic, reading around the subject and examining relevant popular culture.

Researchers may also prepare themselves for fieldwork by gathering materials such as paper and crayons, or scrap art, for use in impromptu 'enabling' tasks during groups or interviews (see Chrzanowska, Book 2). Although the general interviewing approach will have been discussed and agreed with the client, many researchers do work in a flexible and responsive way and are free to improvise in the cause of addressing the client's objectives.

Once all the material for the research is collated, the topic guide needs to be reviewed, not only for content but also from the perspective of

process factors (see Chrzanowska, Book 2). The aim here is to ensure that the topics flow, and enable the moderator to create the appropriate conditions for respondents to explore the research topics and materials.

This is also the time for practical preparations – respondents in most countries are usually paid a cash incentive for attending an interview or group and this needs to be organised, hotels must be booked and fieldwork location maps found.

Occasionally there may be an additional pre-fieldwork briefing with the client, especially if finished research materials such as product ideas or advertisements were not available at the initial briefing. If there are researchers working in the field who were not at this initial briefing meeting they will be thoroughly and formally briefed by the lead researcher in the team at this stage.

Phase 3: Fieldwork

The principles and practice of qualitative market research interviewing are the subject of Book 2 in this series; those of non-interviewing approaches are detailed in Book 3.

Interviewing fieldwork is by far the most familiar and publicly visible element of the whole qualitative market research process to users – despite the fact that it represents perhaps no more than a quarter of the total project activity for a conative, analysis-rich project.

In the UK, many group discussions have traditionally taken place in the recruiter's own home. In most of the rest of the world – and increasingly in the UK – groups are convened in specialist 'viewing studios', which include a one-way mirror and a back room for observers (for example, personnel from the commissioning organisation). Such studios exist in the main cities of every country where an established qualitative market research industry exists.

Business-to-business interviews often take place at the interviewee's office or in a hotel, and unsurprisingly, staff research is usually done at the place of work.

A key aspect of qualitative market research fieldwork is that the moderators generally go to the respondents for reasons of economy and practicality (unlike the recruiters who are locals). It would clearly be impossibly expensive to pay respondents to travel very far to the moderator – quite apart from being unreasonable and ridiculous to expect them to do so. By the same token, if moderators only interviewed those who were located close to them their samples would be unacceptably skewed. So the working life of a qualitative market research practitioner involves extensive travel around the country to moderate groups and conduct interviews.

A consumer project in the UK would typically involve groups in the London area and other key centres of population – Birmingham,

Manchester, Leeds, Bristol etc. – and the moderator will travel from one location to another (or different members of the team will go to different places). Similar principles usually apply in other countries – fieldwork is spread across the country and the moderator(s) travels from location to location to conduct groups.

A great deal of qualitative market research fieldwork, especially consumer research, takes place in the evening, to suit respondents and allow the inclusion of working people. The exceptions would be some business-to-business interviews and staff research. In the UK the moderator will often conduct two 'standard' groups in an evening, each lasting 1½ to 2 hours; other European countries may have more flexible ideas about group duration, and in France, for example, groups may be much longer – up to 4 hours or so.

Each group or interview is run by a specialist moderator from the qualitative market research agency, using the topic guide and three core interviewing skills. These are 'active' listening, management of group dynamics and group processes, and constant monitoring and feedback into hypothesis development, identifying meaning and implications for the client.

Interviews are routinely recorded on audio tape (researchers often using very high-quality portable equipment) and may be video-recorded, especially if conducted in viewing facilities. Researchers sometimes take photographs of respondents or locations, and/or make fieldnotes on paper or tape to add to the richness of the data collected.

Phase 4: Analysis and Interpretation

Practices in analysis vary considerably between the USA and the UK/Europe. Cognitive-style interviewing in the USA is usually watched by clients who effectively do their own analysis. The researcher's analytic responsibility may be limited to providing guidance and thoughts at the end of each group and the end of the project. In the UK, analysis and interpretation by the moderator before, during and after fieldwork is given far greater significance, although it is also treated as a rather mysterious and invisible process and has traditionally received little public attention. Book 4 in this series addresses the UK approach to analysis and interpretation.

The following section briefly describes common practice in analysis and interpretation of conative-style projects in the UK and Europe. Here, the process of analysis and interpretation is complex and vitally important, but often invisible except to the practitioner. None the less, it can account for over 50 per cent of total project activity.

Although the most concentrated stage of analysis and interpretation happens after the fieldwork, it should be noted that it is a constant process that starts with the arrival of the client brief and continues through developing, testing and refining hypotheses: 'what does all this mean? – and

what does it mean for the client?' It continues during fieldwork – indeed the mental process of hypothesis development and refinement often begins in earnest during fieldwork, based on respondents' reactions, the probing of those reactions and the re-framing of questions on the topic guide.

Clearly, the recordings of groups or interviews (on audio or video tapes) are the primary source of 'data' for the analysis stage, but it is important to recognise that what gets analysed includes not just what people said, but also other 'data'. This will include what is *not* said, non-verbal information (such as body language, tone of voice and energy levels), process factors (i.e. the order and sequence in which things emerge, the evolving interactive quality of the group) and other material generated by respondents via projective and enabling techniques.

Within the commercial qualitative market research field different practitioners adopt different styles and use different methods of analysis. Some work from transcripts, others listen to tapes, some do both. Some prepare detailed 'grids' and some create 'notes under headings'; but some do little in the way of written analysis, instead 'immersing' repeatedly in the material until they feel ready to produce a presentation and conclusions for the client.

Within these differences of practice it is possible to describe a commonality of purpose, and analysis and interpretation typically involves several processes including revisiting and 're-immersing' in the data, giving it some order and structure, identifying meanings and patterns from within the data, conceptualising and theorising about what it all means and constantly developing, testing and refining emergent hypotheses in a circular, iterative way.

Clearly, the complexity of the analysis and interpretation phase depends on the type of project and, again, its purpose. A 'gross negatives' check on a planned tactical initiative that reveals no gross negatives needs little analysis, whereas a major strategic study of a complex issue demands much closer attention.

Phase 5: Delivering Findings

Although this series explores 'analysis and interpretation' (Book 4) and 'delivering results' (Book 7) as separate topics, they are opposite sides of the same coin. In effect, they involve interrogating the same data from two quite distinct but essential perspectives:

- **Analysis and interpretation** is about achieving understanding from the perspective of a detached observer (or at least as detached as possible) – comparing the perspective of respondents on an issue with the perspective and plans of the client on this issue (adopting the 'pure researcher' role).
- **Delivering results** is about using the understanding that emerges from analysis and interpretation as a 'filter' through which to

approach the organisational problems of the client – and thereby provide insightful and valuable recommendations (switching into the 'committed partner' or business adviser role).

However, those recommendations are not simply 'what respondents said', or 'what they want', they are about the *implications* of what respondents said and want, and need to take into account such things as client objectives and priorities (not the same as respondent objectives) and non-consumer issues affecting organisational decision-making such as feasibility, fit with strategic objectives and so on.

In practical terms, in the UK the findings of most qualitative market research projects are presented to the commissioning organisation as a structured presentation or debrief (supported by a written version of the debrief charts and other relevant documentation).

The situation is rather different in the USA – and moreover, similar terms are used with quite different meanings. In the USA, the 'debrief' describes a short informal discussion of the researchers' top-line impression, typically carried out 'on the road' immediately after each of the groups (and prior to any formal process of transcription, structured analysis etc., Langer 2001). 'Presentations' – akin to the UK debrief – are a quite separate thing and in practice many US projects do not include such a stage. US projects often include 'reports' – a narrative of the fieldwork experience, with or without the development of further analyses and recommendations.

Returning to UK practice, designing and giving the debrief is a matter of creating an accurate, compelling and coherent digest of the meaning and implications of what has emerged and not a matter of repeating what happened and was said by respondents during the fieldwork. In addition, a full written report can be prepared by the qualitative market research agency. This tends to include both detail of the fieldwork experience *and* detailed analysis and interpretation, plus conclusions and recommendations. In the past full reports were almost always prepared, but in response to changing client needs and in order to reduce charges, such reports are increasingly rare. In practice they may be limited to certain projects or to certain types of client, such as those in the public sector.

A full exploration of what is involved in delivering useful knowledge from qualitative market research is to be found in Book 7 of this series by Geraldine Lillis. She in fact explores in more general terms the skills involved in performing the 'committed partner' role throughout the whole process, from initial client contact to research report.

INTERNATIONAL OR MULTI-COUNTRY PROJECTS

Thus far, this chapter has concerned itself with the life of a typical domestic project, but international projects – linked studies undertaken across a

range of countries – are also an important and growing part of the business. With the growth of multinational organisations and global brands, such multi-country projects (or single projects conducted in series across many countries, coordinated by a single agency) are of increasing importance. We should also note that a high proportion of such projects are conducted for US multinational companies.

Such multi-country studies have quite distinct characteristics. It might be assumed that they are simply bigger and more geographically spread versions of a single-country project – yet this is not the case, as this next section will illustrate.

At a simple level, multi-country projects tend to be larger and take longer. Whereas a typical domestic project might consist of six groups and take about 4–6 weeks from commissioning to debrief, a typical multi-country project in Europe might involve four groups in each of three or four countries and take about 7–8 weeks to conduct. The domestic job might involve one or two researchers; the international project may include very many more.

Beyond these simple differences of scale and timing there are some more fundamental factors that need to be taken into account in coordinating multi-country projects, which we address in the next section. We then describe some of the different approaches that have been adopted in carrying out multi-country projects, before ending with some observations on the way the industry has organised itself to meet these challenges and client needs. Judith Wardle discusses the issues raised by international advertising research in Book 6, while Chandler and Owen consider cross-cultural brand research in Book 5.

Factors Affecting the International Coordination of Multi-Country Projects

Mary Goodyear suggests that 'the separateness of international research [from single-country] exists more at the operational than the conceptual level' (1998: 188) and many of the general considerations and issues raised in this book will apply equally to international work. However, the practical implications of these operational differences are significant and this section will indicate some of the major issues involved and the effects they have on how this kind of research is organised.

Common to almost all multi-country projects is the need to collect, from a range of different countries, information that is sufficiently similar in form and subject to be *comparable* and to allow commonalities to be seen. This is largely a practical need. Yet at the same time it is important that findings are sufficiently culturally sensitive to provide an understanding of what it is that makes each country *distinctive* and singular. This essentially stems from the dilemma inherent in global marketing and advertising – balancing the benefits and disadvantages of global similarity with

those of local sensitivity within international business operations. This kind of project may also involve the researcher in complex company politics and sensitive situations arising, for example, between local operating companies and their head office.

Balancing the need for comparability with individual country sensitivity represents an inherent tension within multi-country qualitative market research projects and there are a number of sources of this tension. Practitioners Jane Gwilliam and Gyorgy Pasztor (2001) highlight six key planning considerations for international research coordination:

- Language and semantics
- Social habits and cultural mixes
- Legislation
- Differences in cultural norms of interpersonal relations
- Variations in market development
- Ways of doing research and the infrastructure of the research industry.

Gwilliam and Pasztor's categories provide a useful framework for this discussion. Throughout this section, examples given are drawn from their paper, from the UK AQR Directory (see Appendix) and from informal sources.

Language and semantics and the problems of shared language being used in different ways, mean that an understanding of issues of *social context* is a vital prerequisite of effective multi-country qualitative market research.

Some examples quoted include quite different American and British uses of the word 'faggot' (homosexual vs. a meat dish); along with Australian and British understandings of the Durex brand (rolls of sticky-tape in Australia vs. condoms in the UK). As Goodyear (1996) points out, this also applies to the cultural context of business itself, where there may be fundamental but hidden differences in how marketing terminology is used. So it can be that the common terms 'brand' or even 'marketing' itself signify quite different things between different markets. This can cause serious problems of translation and context in setting and addressing objectives for international research.

Social habits and cultural mixes in markets influence the feasibility of conducting certain types of fieldwork, and can affect the way the project is *structured*.

For example, mixed gender groups are generally taboo in Arab countries and often impractical with older respondents in the Far East. In Belgium, Flemish and French speakers are generally interviewed in separate groups while mixed race groups are perfectly normal in South Africa provided other demographics are homogenous. In Japan, respondents generally defer wholeheartedly to the opinions of any respondents who are older or of a higher status. In Brazil, female moderators are needed for female groups – and so on.

Legislation – particularly privacy laws and voluntary codes of professional conduct – can vary substantially from country to country. This clearly compromises the ability to conduct truly comparable studies in each country and affects the way the research is *conducted*.

Some examples include legislation about video-recording of groups without advance written permission – certainly illegal at the time of writing in many European countries. Less formally, few Central and Eastern European respondents object to being observed or recorded, civil rights awareness or legislation seeming to be far less developed than in Western Europe.

Differences in cultural norms of interpersonal relations mean that there can be differences in the way people behave in research. Put another way, differences in response from one country to another can simply reflect differences of 'how people are' – rather than true differences in attitudes or interests in the research subject. This clearly affects the way in which responses are *interpreted*.

Some examples include the observation that Philippino and Japanese people relate to each other with extreme courtesy and do not interrupt each other – giving a false impression of consensus to the unwary visitor. Men in Europe tend to assume they have been invited to take part in order to be critical, and therefore do so, whereas European women tend to assume they have been invited to take part to help and so tend to be less negative. The British make extensive everyday use of irony and understatement, making literal interpretation by a non-native researcher quite problematic.

Variations in market development can occur in, to some eyes, unexpected and counter-intuitive ways and this again must affect *interpretation*.

There is, for example, a relatively low penetration of credit cards and credit in Germany, while Indians are often very sophisticated in their handling of money. These are facts which those unfamiliar with these cultures can find surprising. Similarly, relationships with brands in the West are frequently dominated by long-term familiarity, and values of heritage and authority are important – whereas in emerging markets these factors do not exist and may need to be created by brands.

Again, Goodyear puts this into broader perspective when she talks about a 'continuum of consumerisation' (1996: 110). This model, based on her extensive experience in international qualitative research, describes what she sees as discernible stages in the development of markets. She suggests these have important effects on the role for qualitative research, and for what kind of qualitative research, at a given time within a country or region.

Ways of doing research and the infrastructure of the research industry can vary markedly from country to country – and thus results need to take account of such limitations of *operational* comparability.

Recruitment procedures vary: at the time of writing, a few countries recruit respondents on the street, face-to-face, but more do so via databases

and by telephone. In Eastern Europe recruiting on the street is not possible because of levels of begging, and in-home groups are impossible as living rooms are generally far too small to hold a group. The bulk of UK groups takes place in hostess homes, but in the USA all take place in specialist independent viewing studios. Generally, European groups take place in viewing studios, but often these are attached to the research agency rather than being independent. These factors are, of course, open to change at short notice but dramatically affect how research may be carried out.

Each of these different factors compromises the opportunities for direct comparability and similarity of approach across different countries in a multi-country project. Each in its way highlights the importance of local 'mediation' to take account of inevitable local differences in research practices and responses. So how do clients and agencies together strike an appropriate balance between the need for coordinated, comparable research and the need for local sensitivity? The following section outlines how this is addressed in practice.

Approaches to Managing International Projects

Within the broad spread of multi-country projects, there are a number of quite different ways in which projects are set up and managed. Three experienced international researchers (Monica Bhaduri, UK; Marianne de Souza, France; and Timm Sweeney, USA) identify six different approaches to the organisation and management of multi-country qualitative market research projects (1993).

The first three approaches they identify appear to involve differing degrees of **client** involvement in coordinating multi-country projects:

(A)   The 'hands on' approach
(B)   The 'client as expert' approach
(C)   The 'we know best' approach

The last three concern different ways in which **research agencies** themselves provide an additional layer of analysis and interpretation at a pan-country level:

(D)   The 'democratic' approach
(E)   The 'colonial' approach
(F)   The 'cheap and cheerful' approach.

Usefully, as well as describing each approach they also summarise the advantages and pitfalls of each. Although six approaches are identified, we would suggest that three are most common (A, D and E) and, again, we have used their framework to structure this discussion.

(A)   The 'Hands on' Approach

The client goes direct to research agencies in each country and coordinates the study him or herself. The agency in each country conducts its own project – usually against a 'tight' brief so the client can maximise comparability across countries. Frequently, the client attends all the groups in each country in order to aid the coordination of findings and to monitor the work of each agency. The researchers in each country have limited input into project design and no input into the cross-country coordination of findings. None the less, the agency in each country does its own analysis and interpretation of the project in its own country.

Clearly, to be effective this approach relies heavily on the skills and knowledge of the client coordinator, and what the organisation gets out of the project is entirely reliant on his or her experience and knowledge – of products, markets, local conditions, the chosen research agencies and their abilities. The scale of this task is, of course, complicated by all the issues spelled out in the previous section.

Despite this complexity, this is an approach favoured by US companies, and unsurprisingly they tend to want their overseas suppliers to do US-style 'cognitive' focus groups (as described in Chapter 2).

Bhaduri et al. suggest some advantages and disadvantages of this approach:

The main advantages are:
- There are no 'go-betweens' – which maximises client control. There are also cost savings – no fees for coordination and no expensive international travel to enable the separate research agencies to meet and discuss the project and the findings, prepare coordinated reports etc.
- The agencies need limited understanding of the client and the issues behind the research – their role is merely to moderate and feed back, and so there is no 'learning curve' required for them to do an effective job.
- Internal dissemination of the findings is easy and convenient – simply because the client–coordinator has simply to debrief to colleagues.

Whereas pitfalls include:
- Superficiality – the client–coordinator, however experienced in a client role, is usually not a research practitioner and thus interpretation and conclusions can be restricted to 'first degree constructs' (see Chapter 2).
- Loss of objectivity – the client–coordinator can be too close to the organisation's products or existing management views.
- Loss of global perspective – the client–coordinator is working solely with experience of his/her own project and in isolation of broader perspectives.
- Limited opportunities to assess 'validity' – as we have already pointed out, dependence on the breadth and depth of knowledge of the client–coordinator to ensure good research is considerable.

(B) The 'Client as Expert' Approach

A more extreme version of the above, this arises when the client may not attend all the groups – but asks for videos and/or transcripts, the research agency in each country merely *moderating. All* analysis, interpretation and reporting is done by the client him or herself.

Bhaduri et al. point out that this approach clearly requires the client to possess all the knowledge needed for approach A. There is the additional compounding problem of the client being at a real distance from the local researchers, with no first-hand experience of the fieldwork. Moreover, in this case clients are often working with material translated from a foreign language by someone unconnected with the project, as well as a foreign culture.

(C) The 'We Know Best' Approach

These include, according to Bhaduri et al. the most extreme examples of client-controlled projects and arise when the client organisation asks the local agency to simply set the groups up and then sends its own 'preferred' moderator to conduct the groups in all markets.

The main advantage to clients is one of convenience – they utilise a trusted and known moderator they understand, and they avoid the need to deal with different and 'foreign' researchers. The use of a single moderator also provides useful and efficient continuity.

Clearly, in addition to all of the problems and issues pointed out with approach A, there are massive difficulties of language (including the subtle semantic difficulties described earlier). We would add that it is also very rare for a single person to be truly multi-lingual *and* multi-cultural to the degree needed for sensitive qualitative work.

The remaining three approaches concern different ways in which research agencies themselves provide an additional layer of analysis and interpretation at a pan-country level.

(D) The 'Democratic' Approach

This is a commonly used approach, where the client appoints a single research company to coordinate a multi-country project. It is clear that this is the approach advocated by Bhaduri et al.

Typical characteristics of this approach are said to be:

- The coordinating research agency acts as a go-between for the client and local research agencies in each country (relieving the client of this administrative and managerial burden).
- The coordinating research agency designs the project – with the aim of maximising comparability of recruitment, discussion topics etc.
- Local research agencies are briefed in person by the coordinating research agency.
- Fieldwork is conducted by the local research agency – usually watched by and sometimes with the involvement of a researcher from the coordinating agency.

- Primary analysis is undertaken in each country – again with the guidance and involvement of the coordinating research agency.
- A further stage of analysis usually involves all of the local agencies and the coordinating research agency. This will include the initial stages of development of cross-country overviews, broader interpretations and recommendations.
- The final stage of analysis and development of cross-country recommendations etc. is carried out by the coordinating research agency – who also take responsibility for reporting back to clients.

Bhaduri et al. suggest that the main advantages of such an approach are:

- Greater involvement and contribution of suppliers (including their ability to take account of the kinds of 'local' factor outlined by Gwilliam and Pasztor).
- Multiple perspectives.
- Greater objectivity.
- Better value-for-money (i.e. saving client time as well as enhancing the quality of the work through local market input, true understanding of local conditions and cultures and greater consultative input at all levels).

As can be inferred from the title 'the democratic approach', the relationship between supplier agencies and the coordinating agency is highly collaborative. They work as a team of equals – with the coordinating research agency effectively acting as their spokesman.

More generally, of course, the approach is still highly dependent upon the calibre and experience of the coordinating research agency. Bhaduri et al. express the view that not everyone has the capability to undertake such coordination:

> It is, in our view, a SPECIALISM. Coordination is more than knowing how to look up a directory and getting on airplanes. In our view, International coordination, especially in the case of Qualitative research, requires EXPERIENCE. (1993: 186)

We would agree wholeheartedly with this view.

(E) The 'Colonial' Approach

This differs from the previous approach essentially in terms of the working relationship between the local agencies and the co-ordinating agency. Here the local agencies are cast much more in the role of 'local moderators' with less responsibility and less autonomy than the 'democratic' approach allows. In process terms, the topic guides tend to be far more tightly prescribed and, although moderating is carried out by local researchers, *all* analysis and reporting is done for *all* countries by the coordinating research agency. For this, the coordinating agency will use a small team of multi-lingual researchers who attend all the groups in each country.

The main advantages of this approach are:

- High involvement by the coordinating research agency (with more 'first-hand' knowledge of the project in each country). The same advantages of approach B – 'client as expert' – could also apply, i.e. consistency, closer understanding of the client information needs etc.
- Convenience for the client – with no need to deal with foreign language-speakers or multiple suppliers.

However, there are pitfalls to such an approach:

- Language and cultural boundaries can still be argued to be substantial, however skilled the team of researchers/linguists may be.
- There is a lack of global overview based on local perspectives, through limited interchange of ideas and thoughts between local suppliers and the coordinating research agency.
- There is a potential loss of quality when local suppliers have restricted responsibility.
- Costs can be high (the researcher/linguist team effectively add an additional layer of manpower and travel costs).

Whilst Bhaduri et al. are clearly not advocates of this model, we should point out that many experienced and high-quality agencies do work in this way. They would argue that the acknowledged advantages are considerable, especially when working in countries where qualitative market research expertise and experience is less well developed. Moreover, the 'colonial' approach is effective where the coordinating agency has developed its own unique and well-tried techniques, stimulus materials, conceptual models, question types etc. for the specific purpose of enabling cross-country comparisons.

(F) The 'Cheap and Cheerful' Approach

There are some examples where clients will take advantage of specific language skills of an individual researcher. That individual will be commissioned to undertake a project that includes fieldwork in various countries, and will personally undertake all stages of the project. This can have advantages of costs and possibly timing but of course relies, somewhat serendipitously, on the researcher having the right mix of language skills.

How the Industry has Structured Itself to Manage and Undertake International Projects

We have already remarked that the commercial market research industry has consistently adapted and developed to meet changing client needs and this is evident in the way the industry has developed structures and procedures to manage multi-country projects.

Two broad approaches have emerged – and note that both organisational models offer the potential to work in either 'democratic' or 'colonial' ways (as above).

- **Networks of independent qualitative agencies:** These operate as semi-formal affiliations of agencies in different countries who cooperate and work together whenever any member agency is approached by clients who want an agency to coordinate a multi-country project.
- **Multinational research agencies with offices around the world:** These operate as truly multinational companies with the resources to service clients' global needs. However, even these do not operate everywhere across the world and will also make use of local agencies as necessary.

Any directory of market research services, such as the (UK) MRS Handbook or the ESOMAR directory, will indicate examples of companies operating in these ways.

KEY POINTS

- Despite the fact that there is really no such thing as a 'typical' project *and* despite the oversimplification inherent in describing such a project, those without first-hand experience of a commercial qualitative market research project may find the description of 'what goes on' informative.
- Multi-country projects are increasingly important – and as well as being larger and taking longer than single-country projects, more fundamental factors need to be taken into account. These differences include practical, financial and operational differences arising from the sheer logistics of operating in more than one country. There is also the crucial need to understand and take proper account of local issues and variations, at cultural, research/infrastructural and business/marketing levels.
- There are a variety of approaches adopted to manage international projects – essentially reflecting different degrees of control exerted by the commissioning client organisation or by the specialist qualitative market research agency appointed to coordinate the project.
- The rise in demand for international qualitative market research has encouraged both the growth of multinational research agencies and the development of pan-national networks of independent qualitative market research agencies who work together when conducting multi-country projects.

⑦

Ethics and Professional Standards

Ethics and the protection of the rights of respondents are a vital element of all aspects of qualitative market research. Equally, but rather differently, there is a clear need to do a professional job of a high standard for clients. Both these issues are discussed in this chapter.

Ethics and professional standards are a constant underlying presence in qualitative market research. This topic is not explicitly covered in great detail elsewhere in the series, but the reader should be clear that this is a critical aspect of qualitative market research at all stages and at all times. It is taken very seriously by practitioners and their professional bodies.

Ethical and professional concerns underpin all aspects and all stages of qualitative market research. Moreover, the dual role of the qualitative market research practitioner (as discussed in Chapter 2) brings with it dual responsibilities:

- responsibilities to **respondents** taking part in the research, which arise from the 'pure researcher' role; and
- responsibilities to **clients**, which arise from the 'committed partner' or 'business adviser' role.

Occasionally, these dual responsibilities can conflict – and in such cases the responsibilities to respondents must come first. Qualitative market research is governed by relevant Codes of Conduct – the MRS in the UK, ESOMAR across Europe and QRCA in the USA. Moreover, as an 'information collection and analysis' process, qualitative market research falls within the requirements of relevant local privacy legislation (for example, the Data Protection Act in the UK).

ETHICS AND RESPONDENTS

Underpinning all of the specific ethical controls designed to protect the rights of respondents are four overarching principles:

- Having respect for respondents
- Ensuring respondents' well-being
- Maintaining confidentiality and anonymity
- Gaining respondents' 'informed consent'.

Each of these principles and their practical implications is discussed below.

Respect for Respondents

Access to respondents and to their thoughts, feelings and behaviours is a privilege, not a right, and as a consequence respondents must at all times be treated with due respect by everyone involved in the research (researchers and clients alike).

In a general sense, this principle should be evident in every act, attitude and comment of the researcher (and others involved in the research). Moreover, the researcher has a responsibility to ensure that observers of interviews or groups are aware of this responsibility.

Respondents' Well-Being

It is the responsibility of researchers to ensure the well-being of respondents and to ensure their contribution is not misused in any way. The potentially intrusive nature of qualitative market research means that *emotional* well-being is an area of particular concern, and the objectives of a study can never give researchers a special right to intrude upon an individual's right to privacy nor set aside normal respect for an individual's values.

We have already talked about qualitative market research as aiming to go beyond public and conscious factors and to explore private thoughts and feelings, and some unspoken or intuitive associations. The potential for abuse here is obvious and at all times researchers need to be alert to this potential – and take specific steps to avoid such abuse.

This abuse might consist of respondent embarrassment (being made to feel foolish for not knowing, or for saying something others may laugh at or disapprove of). However much the *researcher* may adopt the principle of 'unconditional positive regard' towards respondents, the possible reactions of other respondents (and observers) need to be considered. More seriously, the notions of suppression and repression as 'defence mechanisms' to block out painful thoughts and feelings are well known. One needs to be acutely aware that encouraging people to bring such thoughts and feelings into consciousness can have serious and unintended repercussions for the individual. In a practical sense this has wide-reaching implications.

At its most general level, it means the researcher needs first to consider whether it is ethically possible to conduct the research *at all*. Such circumstances may be rare, but they do arise. These considerations can affect the design of the research and the topic guide: for example

- there may be legitimate client questions that it may be unethical to explore; or
- there may be a need to take the time to 're-connect' respondents to positive feelings after discussion of issues that evoke negative feelings and associations.

Whilst this may seem far-fetched, here are some specific examples of such ethical considerations on real projects.

- Discussion of 'feeding the family' can raise concern about being a good mother and this needs to be handled with sensitivity.
- In a project about fear of crime, the researcher's concern for respondents' well-being meant that time needed to be allowed at the end to 're-balance' respondents' views on the subject, and contingency plans were made to escort anxious respondents home.
- A project for an HIV/AIDS charity amongst high-risk groups needed to consider the possibility that discussion of the risk of HIV/AIDS could raise some very damaging thoughts and feelings.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

The third principle in protecting the rights of respondents concerns 'confidentiality through anonymity'. All market research aims to respect the confidentiality of respondents. Yet in qualitative market research this simple notion can be difficult to sustain.

At a simple level, any observers can see and hear who is taking part in the research. Video recordings shown to clients clearly compromise confidentiality, but in a broader sense, where does identity lie? Not *simply* in recognition of a face. In someone's voice on an audio tape? In a turn of phrase in a transcript or verbatim quote? (Such issues clearly become more important in small-sample projects such as business-to-business.) Thus, whilst total confidentiality cannot be promised, researchers must endeavour to ensure total anonymity.

Confidentiality and anonymity are clearly more important in some circumstances than others. Probably few people care if their views on breakfast cereal are known to Kellogg's (although this should not be *presumed*), but in other instances much more care is needed, especially in these main areas:

- Sensitive subjects: this could include health, finance, religion, sex, politics or any topic not normally discussed with strangers.
- Situations where respondents are compromised if their identity is revealed. Much useful research is done in areas where respondents' behaviour is generally disapproved of or even illegal. Projects on issues such as tax and benefit fraud, drug taking, domestic violence etc. are hugely valuable, but without clear protection of their identity it would probably be impossible to persuade respondents to take part in the research.
- In a rather different domain, but for exactly the same reasons, staff research needs to give particular attention to confidentiality and anonymity. Identifying criticisms of management and procedures, exploring how and why misuses and avoidance of organisational policy and practice occur is immensely valuable to organisations. Yet if staff feel they are going to be identified, such criticisms, misuse or avoidance are unlikely to be mentioned. In these circumstances even the attribution of verbatim quotes needs careful consideration (for example, the seemingly anonymous attribution of a comment to 'younger female manager, Leeds' could effectively identify this individual if there happen to be only two female managers in Leeds, one of whom is close to retirement).
- Situations where respondents are drawn from small populations. Here, the risk is that exposure of identity arises from the specific characteristics of the individual that can be known to clients (but not necessarily recognised as such by the researcher). This can be especially important in business-to-business research. In a project amongst individuals well known to the client – say key customers or specialists in any field – identity can easily be revealed. Clients might recognise a turn of phrase, a well-known expression, or a particular point of view via an 'anonymised' transcript, let alone a voice on a audio tape or a face on video tape.

In a practical sense this need to preserve confidentiality through anonymity can mean such things as:

- 'Anonymising' transcripts (removing names, titles etc.) before passing them on.
- 'Pixilating' faces on video tapes shown to clients.
- Anonymising audio tapes (blanking out names etc.).
- Possibly being unable on ethical grounds to release tapes to clients *at all*.
- Insisting that observers leave if they recognise any respondents.

The rigour of such anonymising rather depends on the nature of the consent given by respondents (see below).

The Notion of Informed Consent

The fourth and final principle in protecting the rights of respondents concerns informed consent. In essence, it is the responsibility of researchers to ensure that respondents are told enough to allow them to decide whether or not they wish to take part.

Given that researchers cannot know what respondents will find uncomfortable or difficult to talk about (or why), respondents must be told about *and consent to* key details of the research topic and process. This consent covers such factual issues as:

- The subject of the research.
- The presence of observers (including hidden observers in viewing studios).
- What types of recording are to be made.
- What will happen to the recordings and other research materials.

It goes without saying that undertakings made to respondents must be honoured. As an adjunct to this principle, respondents are *explicitly* told of their right to withdraw from all or part of any group or interview.

There is clear potential for conflict of interest here, since there may be good reasons to withhold information.

- Methodologically, it is of course impossible to explore 'top of mind' associations or awareness if key facts about the project have already been given.
- Issues of commercial confidentiality may mean that certain information is deemed sensitive.

A degree of judgement is called for, but the key principle is that respondents should be told things that have been withheld, such as the name of the client, *at the end of the interview*, even if there are sound methodological reasons not to do so earlier on. There is a philosophical paradox if researchers are on the one hand expecting respondents to reveal their thoughts and feelings in an open, honest and uninhibited way, and yet are gratuitously withholding information from them. Rather, researchers should 'model' the behaviour they expect.

In practical terms, these considerations mean:

- Clear and explicit information needs to be given when respondents are invited to take part.
- The introduction to interviews and groups must include important facts about the research project.
- Where consent has been given for tapes and materials to be used 'for research purposes' they *cannot* be used for any other purpose (such as sales conferences, staff training etc.) without formally going back to respondents and obtaining further consent for any such additional use.

ETHICS AND PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS – RESPONSIBILITIES TO CLIENTS

The ethical concerns are rather more straightforward here, but no less important. They concern the simple issues of confidentiality and the more complex issue of ensuring that findings can be relied upon.

Confidentiality

The information and advice generated by qualitative market research has a commercial value to the client and the researcher has a duty to protect the confidentiality of that information. This reason alone explains why commercial qualitative market research findings are rarely published or discussed in the public domain. In practical terms, it means project findings are certainly *only* discussed with the client, and in many sectors potential conflicts of interest mean that researchers working for one client usually *do not* work for any other client in the same sector. This is not always true; the risks involved in the researcher working for two or more competitive organisations need to be balanced by all parties against the benefits that come through sector-specific knowledge and experience.

The Need to Ensure that Findings can be Relied Upon

As instruments of organisational decision-making, self-evidently it is important that the findings of qualitative market research projects can be relied upon, and do not encourage inappropriate decisions. In writing this sentence we have deliberately avoided using words like 'reliability' and 'validity' as they inevitably evoke scientific positivist notions of *statistical* reliability and *statistical* validity.

There appear to be two big issues at stake: how far and in what way the findings are 'valid', and how far they can legitimately be generalised beyond the specific sample studied. Both these questions bring us to a very complex area (see Seale 1999 for a useful academic view).

Ideas of 'validity' appropriate to qualitative market research are explored in more detail within this series in Book 4. Here, we will just note that intuitively one can see that different measures and standards must apply, since the tasks undertaken by qualitative are very different from those tackled by quantitative research. Ideas of validity are, for example, quite different when exploring *shared* meanings, values and beliefs rather than personal preferences. As an example, the meaning or 'essence' of Coca-Cola – or rail travel – is a shared meaning which all 'normative' respondents can describe, whereas the validity of claims about the prevalence of specific individual likes or dislikes of Coca-Cola (or rail travel)

may be dependent upon collecting a technically 'representative' spread of opinions.

In a rather different way, it is clear to anyone who uses qualitative market research that some things *just are* – and once they have been 'revealed' their 'validity' is self-evident. As Chris Barnham asked at an AQRP Seminar:

> How many times would you read *King Lear* in order to make sure that Cordelia dies? … The question is, when framed in this way, clearly non-sensical. We are much more interested in understanding the *significance* of her death within the *context* of the play. And this is a qualitative question. (1995: 11–12)

Qualitative market research in no sense attempts to be statistically valid or reliable – but it can be relied upon using other criteria to assess its accuracy. In a practical way, those involved in commercial qualitative market research – researchers and users – typically apply a combination of *pragmatic* assessments in order to be confident their findings can be relied upon.

- Assessing **internal consistency within the project** – i.e., consistency of findings in different interviews/groups with similar types of respondent. This highlights the importance of ensuring the project is large enough to enable such checks. This issue has already been discussed in Chapter 5, in the section on designing qualitative samples.
- Assessing **external consistency of the project findings** with knowledge from other information sources. In this matter the researcher is drawing upon information over and above the findings of the specific project, and it is here that experience (of research in general and the topic area in particular) can add real value. The contribution of the client in assessing the 'goodness of fit' with other knowledge is also important (see Ereaut, Book 4).

The second issue identified earlier, that of generalisability, is no less complicated but is addressed in part by being clear about the nature of qualitative samples and the kind of knowledge they can supply. Certainly, researchers have a duty to ensure accurate sample selection and recruitment. And while research suppliers cannot control the ultimate use made by clients or their other agencies of the research they supply, they do need to be explicit with clients about the purposive nature of samples and the kinds of conclusion that can be drawn from them.

KEY POINTS

- The dual role of the qualitative market researcher brings with it dual responsibilities concerning ethical responsibilities to respondents and professional responsibilities to clients. Both aspects are dealt with in the Codes of Conduct of the various professional governing bodies.
- Ethical responsibilities to respondents are of paramount concern to practitioners and various overarching principles seek to protect the rights and well-being of respondents. These can perhaps be summarised as:

  o Respect for respondents by all involved in the research.
  o Responsibility to ensure the well-being of respondents (especially emotional well-being).
  o Adherence to principles of confidentiality and anonymity at all times (and irrespective of any specific complications arising from the nature of qualitative methods and small sample populations).
  o Adherence to the notion of 'informed consent' by ensuring respondents are explicitly and comprehensively informed about all aspects of the research, so they can decide whether they wish to take part.

- Professional standards and responsibilities to clients essentially concern two themes:

  o The researcher has a clear duty to protect the confidentiality of the findings (which generally have a significant commercial value to the client organisation).
  o There is a need to ensure that findings and recommendations can be relied upon, and that any consequent decisions by the client organisation are therefore soundly based. It should be noted that here we refer to notions of 'reliability' that are relevant to qualitative market research, not statistical reliability.

Appendix: Sources of Further Information on Qualitative Market Research

Those who wish to know more about qualitative market research will find a wealth of information in the individual volumes in the rest of this series, together with fully referenced details of key sources. In addition, however, the reader may wish to note the following primary sources of information on qualitative market research.

PROFESSIONAL BODIES AND ASSOCIATIONS

ESOMAR

Originally the European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research, this organisation has retained its acronym but is now the World Association of Opinion and Marketing Research Professionals. It has 4,000 members in 100 countries. Although much of ESOMAR's activity concerns *quantitative* research, the association organises a biennial qualitative conference (from which papers are published). Contact:

ESOMAR
Vondelstraat 172
1054 GV Amsterdam
The Netherlands
www.esomar. nl
Tel: + 31-20-664 21 41

Market Research Society (MRS)

The MRS is the professional body for the UK market research industry. Like ESOMAR, it represents both qualitative and quantitative researchers. Key information sources include the MRS conference (March), with published *Proceedings, Research* magazine and a quarterly journal *International Journal of Market Research* (formerly 'Journal of the Market Research Society'). The MRS also has a library at its London headquarters (open to members only). It runs an extensive training programme, some of which concerns qualitative market research. Contact:

The Market Research Society
15 Northburgh Street
London ECIV 0JR
England
www.mrs.org.uk
Tel: + 44 (0) 20 7 490 4911

Association for Qualitative Research (AQR)

AQR (formerly AQRP) represents qualitative market research in the UK and,
increasingly, internationally. Along with QRCA in the USA (see below), it is the
only trade body dedicated to commercial qualitative market research. Key infor-
mation sources include an annual conference, a bi-monthly magazine (*In Brief*)
and a website. The AQR runs an extensive training programme in qualitative
market research. Contact:

The Association for Qualitative Research
Suite 14, Davey House
31 St Neots Road
Eaton Ford, St Neots
Cambridgeshire PE 19 7BA
England
www.aqr.org.uk
Tel: + 44 (0) 1480 407227

Qualitative Research Consultants Association (QRCA)

QRCA represents the commercial qualitative market research profession in the
USA. It sponsors numerous publications, extensive training, an annual confer-
ence, world-wide affiliated 'chapters' and, in 2001, staged its first International
Conference run jointly with AQR. Contact:

Qualitative Research Consultants Association, Inc.
PO Box 2396
Gaithersburg, MD 20886-2396
USA
www.qrca.com
Tel: + 1 – 301 – 391-6644

PUBLICATIONS

Journals

International Journal of Market Research (formerly 'Journal of the Market
Research Society'*)*
Journal of the MRS. Not specifically about qualitative market research, but
includes key qualitative papers.

Qualitative Market Research: an International Journal
A much more academically focused journal, but offers 'Practitioner Perspectives' and commercial researchers occasionally contribute. Published four times a year by MCB University Press (Emerald).

Books on Qualitative Market Research by UK Practitioners

These tend to reflect the more 'conative' model of qualitative market research prevalent in Europe. There are very few books written by practitioners, but these include:

Wendy Gordon and Roy Langmaid (1988) *Qualitative Market Research: A Practitioner's and Buyer's Guide* **(London: Gower)**
A very practical book, grounded in qualitative experience from two of the UK's best-known researchers.

Sue Robson and Angela Foster (eds) (1989) *Qualitative Research in Action (*London: Edward Arnold*)*
A thoughtful and thorough collection of chapters by key practitioners and client users of qualitative market research.

Wendy Gordon (1999) *Goodthinking: A Guide to Qualitative Research* **(Henley-on-Thames: Admap)**
A comprehensive book and an updated view of the business by a highly experienced and much-respected practitioner.

Laura Marks (ed.) (2000) *Qualitative Research in Context* **(Henley-on-Thames: Admap/AQR)**
A useful book that concentrates on the application and use of qualitative market research in 13 different sectors written by specialist practitioners and clients.

Books on Qualitative Market Research by US Practitioners

Recently published books by practitioners include:

Judith Langer (2001) *The Mirrored Window: Focus Groups from a Moderator's Point of View* **(Ithaca, NY: Paramount**)

Hy Mariampolski (2001) *Qualitative Market Research* **(Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage)**

Academic Books on Qualitative Research

Books on qualitative research written from an academic or social research perspective are many. Much of what concerns those in academia is not relevant to commercial practice, but readers may find it interesting to look at how the more

broadly defined activity of 'qualitative research' is written about. The following represents a highly selective reading list:

Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (eds) (2000) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, **2nd edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage)**
A substantial work, difficult in places for the non-academic, but a definitive view of the academic qualitative tradition, especially in the USA.

Mason, J. (1996) *Qualitative Researching* **(London: Sage)**
A highly readable introductory book for academic researchers.

Patton, M. Quinn (1990) *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, **2nd edn (Newbury Park, CA: Sage)**
Coming from an applied researcher, much of this book is of real relevance to commercial research.

Seale, C. (1999) *The Quality of Qualitative Research* **(London: Sage)**
Tackles difficult theoretical problems of methodology, but with a strong practical bias.

Silverman, D. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research* **(London: Sage)**
A practical guide for academics embarking on a qualitative project.

Finally, it is worth noting a thorough and invaluable research-based text on qualitative market research, unfortunately currently not widely available:

Catterall, M. (2001) 'Focus Groups in Market Research: Theory, Method and Practice' (PhD dissertation, University of Ulster)

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Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (eds) (2000) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Desai, P. (2002) *Methods Beyond Interviewing in Qualitative Market Research*. Book 3 in Gill Ereaut, Mike Imms and Martin Callingham (eds), *Qualitative Market Research* (7 volumes). London: Sage.

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