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EMMA WINCUP

CRIMINOLOGICAL RESEARCH

UNDERSTANDING QUALITATIVE METHODS

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QUALITATIVE APPROACHES TO CRIMINOLOGICAL RESEARCH



Qualitative research has a long and distinguished history in the social sciences, arising in part from dissatisfaction with quantitative approaches. The ethnographic studies conducted by the Chicago School in the 1920s and 1930s established the importance of qualitative research for the study of crime and deviance (see Chapter 7). In this chapter, a brief history is given of the origins of criminology and the development of the empirical research tradition within it. This provides a backdrop for considering the growth of qualitative approaches to criminological research, and for pinpointing the pragmatic utility and methodological desirability of qualitative approaches for researching crime and criminal justice. Before exploring the development of qualitative criminological research, we need to pause for a moment and consider first what we understand by qualitative approaches.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY QUALITATIVE APPROACHES?

There is now a vast methodological literature on qualitative research but too often it obscures rather than clarifies what the term refers to. Curiously it often defines qualitative research with reference to what it is not, i.e. quantitative research, thus contributing to the polarisation of the two approaches (an issue we will return to later in this chapter) and underplaying both the strengths of qualitative research and the diversity of approaches which can produce qualitative data in many forms. The term 'qualitative approaches' is used consciously to recognise that whilst there are common features of qualitative research studies as we outline in Box 1.1, qualitative data are gathered by researchers from a range of disciplines and theoretical backgrounds using a multiplicity of methods. Traditionally this has included observation, interviews and documentary analysis but as we will explore later in the chapter, qualitative researchers are becoming more innovative. These methods can also be deployed, albeit in different ways, to gather quantitative data rendering the frequently deployed concept of qualitative methods a misnomer.

Box 1.1 What is a qualitative approach? Delineating key features

1 Qualitative approaches explore the social construction of reality

Qualitative research recognises the role of individuals and groups in creating a social world. The task for qualitative researchers is to understand everyday life which comprises, for example, of customs and routines, norms and values, roles and responsibilities; all of which have meaning attached to them by social actors.

2 Qualitative approaches seek to understand the subject's point of view

Qualitative researchers are influenced by the work of Max Weber (1949) who developed the theoretical concept 'verstehen'. This refers to the interpretative process in which an 'outsider' seeks to understand empathetically the social world of the research participant. In this way, qualitative researchers seek to give a 'voice' to those they are 'studying' which is seen as particularly important when conducting research with marginalised groups.

3 Qualitative researchers emphasise the need for reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the need to reflect upon the role of the researcher and recognise how they can influence the construction of knowledge at all stages of the research process. This is particularly important when gathering data via human interaction and requires the researcher to reflect upon how their characteristics (for example, in terms of gender, age and ethnic origin) might have influenced the data collection process.

4 Qualitative approaches emphasise the importance of depth of understanding

Reflecting the emphasis placed on uncovering meaning, qualitative researchers prioritise the collection of rich and detailed data. Consequently, qualitative studies are often small-scale, and make use of case studies which might be an individual institution or a particular locality.

5 Qualitative research values context and aims to collect data in 'natural' settings

Since qualitative research is typically associated with researching social life it follows that researchers should conduct research in settings familiar to the research participants.

6 Flexibility is integral to qualitative approaches

This is an important feature of qualitative research and applies throughout the research process. It is particularly important at the data collection stage when researchers need to reflect upon the data gathered and use it to guide future data collection.

Given these unique characteristics, it follows that studies which make use of qualitative approaches should not be judged on the typical evaluative criteria for

assessing the quality of qualitative research but instead more meaningful criteria should be used. The features listed above, which represent the strengths of qualitative approaches, have often been used to argue (using evaluative criteria which should be reserved for studies which adopt a purely quantitative approach) that qualitative research is too subjective, difficult to replicate, produces findings which are limited in scope and lacks transparency. These issues are explored in more detail in the final chapter.

THE ORIGINS OF CRIMINOLOGY AND CRIMINOLOGICAL RESEARCH

There is considerable debate about how best to define criminology. For Garland (2002: 7), criminology is ‘a specific genre of discourse and inquiry about crime that has developed in the modern period and that can be distinguished from other ways of talking and thinking about criminal conduct’. Criminologists will no doubt be aware that virtually everyone has ‘commonsense’ knowledge about crime, and correspondingly many ideas about the causes of crime and the best ways to tackle it. However, what characterises criminologists is that they subject these ideas to rigorous enquiry using either quantitative or qualitative research conducted by themselves or other researchers. Defining criminology as a discipline with an emphasis on empirically grounded, scientific study, Garland proposes that criminology grew out of a convergence between a governmental project and a Lombrosian project. The former were a series of empirical studies beginning in the nineteenth century that have sought to map patterns of crime and monitor the workings of the criminal justice system. Such work aims to ensure that justice is delivered effectively, efficiently and fairly. The latter was a contrasting project based on the notion that it is possible to ‘spot the difference’ (Coleman and Norris, 2000: 26) between those who offend and those who do not by using scientific means. This paved the way for a tradition of inquiry seeking to identify the causes of crime through empirical research, beginning with the use of quantitative methods but later supplemented by qualitative ones.

The legacy of this historical development can still be felt and produces continued tension within the discipline between policy-oriented criminological research, with its emphasis on the management and control of crime, and a theoretically oriented search for the causes of crime. For Garland (2002) the combination of the two projects is sufficient if criminology is to continue to claim to be a useful and scientific state-sponsored academic discipline. Whilst this aspect of his view is not widely challenged, the implication that classicism ‘becomes the criminology that never was’ (Coleman and Norris, 2000: 16), in the sense that it does fit Garland’s definition of criminology, has been disputed. Others, for instance Hughes (1998), would argue that with the benefit of hindsight the Classical School is the first clearly identifiable school of criminology, distinctive because it marks a shift away from explaining crime in terms of religion or superstition. Even a cursory glance through the main texts available on criminological theory – both established ‘classics’ and contemporary – indicate at least implicit support for this view (see for example, Lilly et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 1973).

The Classical School, a term used retrospectively to describe the work of philosophers such as Beccaria and Bentham, refers to late eighteenth century theorising about crime which grew out of the Enlightenment project with its focus on reason. The Classical approach to the study of crime was underpinned by the notion of rational action and free will. These notions were neither subjected to empirical testing nor had they been developed from exploratory research. Hence, they do not meet Garland's definition of criminology. The debate presented here relates to the question 'Is criminology a science?' – a question that has also plagued closely related disciplines such as sociology. In relation to criminology, Coleman and Norris (2000: 176) argue this is a 'difficult question that has taken up a lot of energy over the years, often to little effect'. We can certainly say with confidence that the empirical criminological research tradition dates back over 300 years, although those conducting it may not have identified themselves as criminologists.

The debate outlined above is one of many that criminologists continue to have on fundamental issues. This is unsurprising in many respects. Criminology, as an academic discipline, is held together by a substantive concern: crime (Walklate, 2007). Consequently, it is multi-disciplinary in character rather than being dominated by one discipline. For this reason, it is helpful to view criminology as a 'meeting place' for a wide range of disciplines including sociology, social policy, psychology and law amongst others. Individual criminologists frequently adhere more closely to one social science discipline than others. Hence, to understand fully what they are attempting to articulate, it is important to note the conceptual apparatus they are utilising (Walklate, 2007). For instance, my own research – broadly defined in terms of links between crime and social problems – draws heavily upon sociology, social policy and political science. As a consequence of the diverse theoretical frameworks upon which 'criminologists' (defined broadly as researchers with an interest in crime and its control rather than those who identify themselves in this way) can draw, they frequently disagree with one another. Walklate (2007) argues that despite such disagreements there is some consensus (and we would argue that it is tenuous) in that criminologists aspire to influence crime control policy. However, there is much less consensus around features of what constitutes the crime problem.

We will now explore the development of both quantitative and qualitative traditions within criminology, and to locate their emergence and development within their social and political context. We include the former because it provides a backdrop to understanding the emergence of qualitative techniques which have been used by researchers who adopt a wide range of theoretical perspectives. Whilst we will demonstrate linkages between different theoretical traditions and the use of qualitative and quantitative approaches, we wish to emphasise that the relationship between theory and research is not a straightforward one.

Before moving on it is important to note that not all criminological research is empirical but that some takes a theoretical form. Both forms require different skills and training but it is not appropriate for a 'pragmatic division of labour' (Bottoms, 2008: 79) to be fully adopted. All empirical researchers need to acknowledge that theory is an essential element of the data collection and analysis process (see Chapter 8). Similarly, theorists need to draw upon, and understand, empirical research as one means of testing the ability of their theoretical ideas to explain the social world.

THE QUANTITATIVE TRADITION

The quantitative tradition is closely allied to a theoretical perspective known as positivism, which has been adopted to study a wide range of social phenomenon. Researchers who adhere to this approach aim to explain crime and predict future patterns of criminal behaviour. Emulating the analysis by natural scientists of causal relationships, positivists are concerned with developing objective knowledge about how criminal behaviour was determined by either individual or social pathology. As Muncie (2013) notes, identifying the exact moment when positivist criminology became apparent is difficult but it is typically associated with the work of French and Belgian ‘moral’ statisticians in the 1820s. The publication of national crime statistics, beginning in France in 1827, provided these scholars with a dataset to be analysed. Quetelet’s (1842) work is well-known. He was concerned with the propensity to commit crime, which he used to refer to the greater or lesser probability of committing a crime. The potential causes of crime he concerned himself with were the influence of season, climate, sex and age. Based on his analysis of these variables, he concluded that crime patterns are regular and predictable, reaffirming his view that the methods of the natural sciences are wholly appropriate for understanding the causes of crime. For positivists such as Quetelet, the search for the causes of crime emphasised the role of social contexts external to the individual, thus the role of social, economic and environmental factors. Other important sociological positivist work includes Durkheim’s (1895) analysis of crime rates and the Chicago School studies of crime patterns within the city of Chicago (Shaw and McKay, 1942). All these studies made use of official crime data in the form of police statistics or court records.

Both positivism and the quantitative tradition have been subjected to fierce criticism, particularly since the 1960s. Critics have argued that it is highly dubious to translate statistical association into causality. Quantitative work in criminology continues to be conducted but no longer adheres to a narrow positivist research tradition. Instead, quantitative work seeks to understand the complexity of social behaviour through examining a wide range of factors. For example, Jennings et al. (2015) combined a number of large datasets to situate explanations of crime in the changing social, economic and political contexts of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. In addition, quantitative research techniques have also been used to explore the workings of the criminal justice system, often evaluating new interventions. A recent example is an outcome evaluation of two domestic violence interventions delivered by the National Probation Service (Bloomfield and Dixon, 2015). Quantitative data were collected to examine whether the interventions were successful in reducing reoffending over a two year follow up period.

THE QUALITATIVE TRADITION

The qualitative tradition in criminology developed in the United States. It owes a great deal to the work of the Chicago School. This school made important contributions to

criminological theory, namely through developing 'social disorganisation' theory and their 'ecological model' of the development of cities and patterns of crime within them (see Downes et al., 2016). Whilst many aspects of their work, particularly the 'ecological model', have been discredited, they left behind a tradition of linking urban social problems to crime and provided the inspiration for the development of environmental criminology. Some of this work was based on quantitative research but the Chicago School also bequeathed a tradition of conducting criminological research which was distinctive in that they used ethnographic techniques to explore groups on the margins of urban industrial society in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. They focused, in particular, on the 'dispossessed, marginal and the strange' (Brewer, 2000: 12) and included in the long list of Chicago School ethnographies (see Deegan, 2007) are studies of gangs, prostitution and homelessness.

Drawing their inspiration from developments within sociological theory, Chicago School researchers pursued innovative qualitative work making use of participant observation, life histories and documents. This work began to influence British criminologists in the 1960s (see Chapter 7 for a more detailed discussion). The qualitative tradition is now firmly established in criminology. Part of the explanation for this is the growth of new theoretical perspectives, which are broadly compatible with qualitative approaches to criminological research. Positivism has been subjected to fierce criticism by advocates of symbolic interactionism. As a result, they turned their attention away from the causes of crime to explore the process by which crimes are created and social reactions to crime. Advocates of the interactionist position see the social world as a product of social interactions, emphasising the socially constructed nature of crime and deviance. The basic principles of positivism were called into question as symbolic interactionists emphasised the importance of human agency, consciousness and meaning in social activity, and highlighted the plurality of norms and values relating to 'normal' and 'deviant' behaviour. Symbolic interactionism inspired the development of the labelling perspective and the work of 'deviancy theorists' in the UK (Downes et al., 2016). Criminologists working within these theoretical frameworks were anti-statistical. Whilst their work has been subjected to vehement criticism for paying insufficient attention to the exercise of power by Marxists and critical criminologists in particular, these theoretical approaches have continued to support the use of qualitative methods.

The history of criminology we have presented so far is characterised by male criminologists studying male offenders whose contribution to the problem of crime far exceeds women's whether measured via official crime data or self-report studies (Smith and Wincup, 2009). From the late 1960s feminists began to draw attention to the tendency for female offenders to be ignored or on the rare occasions they were included to be misrepresented as mad rather than bad (see Heidensohn, 1996 for an overview of the feminist critique of criminology). Whilst arguably criminology has yet to embrace fully the gendered nature of crime, it has made females visible as offenders, victims and criminal justice professionals. Feminist criminologists have also posed epistemological and methodological questions, questioning the nature of criminological knowledge and the most appropriate ways of gathering it (see

Heidensohn and Gelsthorpe, 2007). For some feminists, particularly those who would describe themselves as radical or socialist feminists and therefore concerned with women's oppression by men (see Renzetti, 2013 for a more detailed discussion of different perspectives within feminist criminology), research should always be from the standpoint of women, giving a voice to those who have traditionally been silent. Often this has led to a preference for qualitative data but as we will explore in Chapters 6 and 7, there has been considerable debate about whether there is a natural fit between feminism and particular research methods. Moreover, there has been extensive discussion about whether it is appropriate to talk about a woman's voice or whether this fails to recognise how women are divided by social class, ethnic origin, sexual orientation and so on.

In many respects, the qualitative tradition is alive and well. Increasingly qualitative researchers are using more innovative methods which Wiles et al. (2010) categorise as inception (using new settings for research), adaptation (altering or expanding an existing method) or adoption (using a method in a different discipline or sphere). Criminological examples of these three types of intervention are listed in Box 1.2. The 'cultural turn' in criminology has also been influential in supporting the qualitative tradition. Cultural criminologists, who emphasise the importance of locating crime and its control within broader cultural dynamics, have favoured qualitative approaches, ranging from the collection and analysis of media images of youth subcultures to ethnographic research with 'deviant' subcultures (see Ferrell et al., 2008). Whilst there is much to be optimistic about, there are also threats to the health of qualitative criminological research, not least due to the political context which for a period of time after the turn of the millennium explicitly favoured quantitative research. We explore this recent history in the next chapter.

Box 1.2 Thinking outside the box: Innovation and qualitative criminological research

INCEPTION: Williams (2007) used online methodologies, replicating methods used to study the 'real' world in virtual settings which included a graphical online community (cyberworlds), associated newsgroups, web pages and an email distribution list.

ADAPTATION: Hollway and Jefferson (2008) used free association narrative interview to research fear of crime. Applying psychoanalytic principles to the research context, they emphasise the importance of allowing interviewees to structure their own narratives in order to understand the unconscious connections people make when they have the freedom to do so. The focus here is on the account as a whole rather than a series of questions and answers.

ADOPTION: Anderson (2016) used creative methods, specifically 'collage as inquiry' (Butler-Kisber, 2007) to explore meaning and interlinked processes of recovery for people with complex needs including drug and alcohol dependence and offending. This approach is 'borrowed' from arts and humanities.

COMBINING TRADITIONS

Whilst we have just presented quantitative and qualitative traditions within criminology separately, we are mindful of the dangers of too sharp a distinction between the two traditions. As Silverman (1998) argues, it is absurd to push too far the qualitative/quantitative distinction. He suggests that the qualitative/quantitative research dichotomy is acceptable as a pedagogical device to aid understanding of a complex topic but such dichotomies are dangerous because they tend to locate researchers in oppositional groups. For some criminological researchers this is not problematic because they adhere strictly to either qualitative or quantitative methodology. However, many, including those who identify themselves as qualitative researchers, make use of quantitative measures where appropriate. This might take many forms. Firstly, it is possible to derive some quantitative data from techniques typically associated with the generation of qualitative data. It is feasible that a study involving qualitative interviews will produce some basic quantitative data such as counts of interviewees who fit into particular categories. Secondly, we might use the same data collection method such as the face-to-face interview to generate both qualitative and quantitative data by including a range of questions, some open-ended, others fixed-choice. Thirdly, we might use two different methods, one that will produce qualitative data (for example, focus groups) and another quantitative data (for example, structured observation). The case studies included in Chapters 10 and 11 illustrate how different forms of data can be used to answer research questions, although the discussion prioritises the collection of qualitative data.

The process of combining both qualitative and quantitative methodologies is one aspect of triangulation. Triangulation can be defined simply as ‘the use of different methods of research, sources of data or types of data to address the same research question’ (Jupp, 2013b: 474). For Hoyle (2000), the term shrouds in mystery straightforward and sensible means of looking at the social world and obfuscates the role of the social researcher. However, the concept is widely used in a number of ways and these are defined in Table 1.1.

The term ‘triangulation’ was first used in the context of social research by Campbell and Fiske (1959) but was used more frequently following the publication of Webb et al.’s text on unobtrusive measures and social research in 1966.

Table 1.1 Forms of triangulation

Form of triangulation	Alternative names (if any)	Definition
Data triangulation		Collection of different types of data on the same topic using the same method or different methods
Investigator triangulation	Researcher triangulation, team triangulation	Collection of data by more than one researcher
Method triangulation	Technique triangulation	Collection of data by different methods
Theoretical triangulation		Approaching data with multiple perspectives and hypotheses in mind

Whilst Webb et al. (1966: 174) are keen to point out that single measures are not 'scientifically useless' they propound that 'the most fertile search for validity comes from a combined set of different measures'. Triangulation as a social science concept derives from a loose analogy with navigation and surveying (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The term was used in these professional fields to refer to the use of two or more landmarks to pinpoint a position more accurately than if one were used.

Applied to social research, arguments have been advanced for combining methods. The use of different methods can be an implicit or explicit decision. It may also be built in to the research strategy adopted. Brewer (2000) argues that combining methods is a routine feature of ethnographic research (see also Chapter 7). Most research projects in the social sciences are in a general sense multi-method because alongside the main method of choice, subsidiary techniques are used, even if this is not explicit in the research design. For example, conducting interviews in a prison will always involve some degree of observation of the social setting, which may impact on the research even if the data are not formally recorded or analysed. Similarly, a study relying mainly on participant observation within a youth centre for children at risk of offending is likely to begin with reading published documents about the centre, for instance bids for funding, annual reports and media coverage.

Numerous advantages are advanced in the literature to persuade researchers to adopt a multi-method approach, and the overarching theme is that combining methods increases the validity of the findings. Reflecting on his own criminological research career, Maguire (2000) argues for utilising as many diverse sources of evidence as feasible to answer a research question. His rationale is that criminological research often involves working with information that is unreliable to varying extents. By bringing together different methods with their own blend of strengths and weaknesses, it is hoped that the weaknesses of one method can be countered by the strengths of the others. If the data gathered using the different methods offer similar conclusions, criminologists can be more confident that the conclusions offered are valid in the sense that they are plausible and credible.

Denzin (1970) also advocates a strong case for triangulation, suggesting that this is the basic theme of his book entitled *The Research Act in Sociology*. He argues that his definition of each method implies a triangulated perspective. Denzin notes that the shifting nature of the social world and the biases that arise from the sociologist's choice of theories, methods and observers provide difficulties that a researcher working in the natural sciences does not face. For Denzin, the solution is to recognise these difficulties and to use multiple strategies of triangulation (data, investigator, methodological and theoretical) as the preferred line of action. He suggests that triangulation is the key to overcoming intrinsic bias that stems from single method, single observer and single theory studies. Despite Denzin's claim in the preface that he subscribes to a symbolic interactionist perspective, Silverman (1985) highlights how Denzin's prescriptions can be seen to mesh with the positivist desire to seek an ultimate 'truth' about the social world through cross-validation. In his later writings, Denzin (1990, 1994) no longer subscribes to his earlier view, favouring an approach which gives precedence to the subjective world-view of research participants as the only reliable vantage point.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT TRIANGULATION

Substantial support can be found for Hammersley and Atkinson's (2007) argument that triangulation is not a simple test. Even if the findings do accord, this cannot be interpreted as 'fact'. It is plausible that the results tally due to systematic or random error. For this reason, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) suggest researchers need to avoid naïve optimism, and resist the temptation to assume that the aggregation of data from different sources will produce a more complete picture. For the majority of qualitative research studies, the goal of establishing 'truth' is actively rejected and multiple versions of reality are acknowledged. Consequently, differences between data are as significant and enlightening as similarities. As King (2000: 306) argues, it is incumbent on the researcher to report the conflicts as far as possible so that the reader may also try to form a judgement. We can add here that the role of the researcher is also to explain different findings.

Jupp's (2013b) suggestion that a much less bold and precise claim for triangulation can be made is helpful. He argues that different methods can be used to examine different aspects or dimensions of the same problem. Deliberately avoiding the term 'triangulation' and replacing it with 'methodological pluralism', Walklate (2007: 325) advances a similar view.

Methodological pluralism ... reflects a view of the research process which privileges neither quantitative nor qualitative techniques. It is a position which recognizes that different research techniques can uncover different layers of social reality and the role of the researcher is to look for confirmation and contradictions between those different layers of information.

Best practice is for researchers to adopt a pragmatic and theoretically coherent approach to data collection, using appropriate methods to answer their research questions. The latter is important because researchers need to guard against the tendency to keep adding research techniques to their research design in an eclectic manner with the blind hope that it will produce a better thesis, report or other publication. A multi-method approach should only be pursued if it adds value to the study by enhancing understanding of the criminological issue of interest. Sometimes there may be little to be achieved by using different methods. As Jupp (2013b) argues, some combinations of methods do not work well because they are founded on different assumptions about the nature of the social world and how it can be explained. Hence, combining methods does not automatically enhance validity. There are often pragmatic reasons for considering carefully whether a number of methods should be utilised. Maguire (2007: 276) shares the useful advice he received as a novice researcher: 'the best tip is to imagine the final report and work backwards'. This should not be interpreted as a rigid approach to criminological research. Instead it requires the researcher to consider what they have been asked to produce both in terms of focus and also length.

WHY CONDUCT QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON CRIMINOLOGICAL TOPICS?

In the remainder of this chapter we provide some of the more common responses to the question above in order to persuade the reader to employ qualitative methods for future research projects.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PROVIDES A MEANS OF RESEARCHING THE 'DARK FIGURE OF CRIME'

The 'dark figure of crime' can be defined as 'the figure for unrecorded crime or undetected offenders, that is to say those not included in official statistics' (Coleman and Moynihan, 1996: 146). There are other ways of collecting information on offences which do not appear in official crime statistics using quantitative techniques. The most obvious example is the Crime Survey for England and Wales, a victimisation study involving interviews with 50,000 individuals aged 16 and over living in private households, complemented by a separate survey of young people aged 10 to 15 (see www.crimesurvey.co.uk/index.html). Maguire (2002: 322) suggests that a 'data explosion' took place at the end of the twentieth century, and he goes further to argue that there is no longer a strong demand in late-modern societies for a crude general 'barometer' (2002: 361) of crime; a role traditionally fulfilled by official crime statistics. Criminologists are streetwise enough to realise that combining the different data sources will never reveal the full extent of the 'dark figure of crime'. More realistically the hope is that combining different sets of quantitative data will build up a more complete understanding of the nature and extent of crime. However, as Coleman and Moynihan (1996) argue, there are some areas of criminological enquiry that are difficult to investigate using official data and survey methods. Hence they suggest qualitative techniques could be used as a means of researching these areas. Whilst these techniques need to be subjected to critical assessment, they should not be seen as a second best or a kind of fall-back to be employed where there are no quantitative data available. The use of qualitative techniques offers the opportunity to make a distinct contribution by elucidating the context in which offending takes place and the meanings attached to such behaviour.

One example of a form of crime which is difficult to research using quantitative approaches is white-collar crime. The definition of white-collar crime has been contentious since it was first coined by Sutherland (1949), and it remains a contested concept. We will not attempt to open up this debate here but instead direct the reader to Payne (2016) for an accessible introduction to this complex area of crime. As our working definition, we will adopt the following:

a heterogeneous group of offences committed by people of relatively high status or enjoying relatively high levels of trust, and made possible by their legitimate employment. (Tombs and Whyte, 2013: 492)

It would be misleading to suggest that qualitative research on white-collar crime is unproblematic. Explanations as to why it is rarely detected, reported and prosecuted also serve as explanations for the lack of research in this area. They include the invisibility of such offences, their complex nature, the difficulties of identifying victims and the limited number of convicted individuals. Offences are hidden in occupational routines, and for this reason, often the only strategy researchers can employ is to conduct covert participant observation (see Chapter 4). A dated but excellent example of this form of research is Ditton's (1977) study, which he describes as an ethnography of fiddling and pilferage. His setting was a

medium-sized factory-production bakery. Croall (2001) remarks that researchers are rarely in a position to conduct overt research on the more serious forms of white-collar crime, especially within financial and commercial enterprises. There are, however, some notable exceptions. Levi's (1981) study of long-firm fraud is described by Hobbs (2000: 171) as 'as close to an ethnography of fraud as we are ever likely to get'. Levi conducted an intensive study of court records from the Old Bailey and Manchester Crown Court, interviewed credit controllers and businessmen, criminal justice and legal professionals, observed four trials at the Old Bailey and interviewed offenders within prison and the community. The latter aspect of the research was limited due to lack of time but also because the places frequented by white-collar offenders were beyond the budget of a doctoral student! Where access to the extent enjoyed by Levi has not been possible, qualitative researchers have been creative in their use of data sources. In addition to the sources of data used by Levi, qualitative researchers have also made use of individual case studies, investigative journalism, court reports, media reports of cases and interviews with enforcers (Croall, 2001). For Hobbs (2000) multiple methods have become the norm, and researchers inevitably have to compromise but with a preference for qualitative approaches.

The covert, non-institutionalized base from which professional and organised crime operates favours the use of a range of largely interpretive approaches. Until gangsters, armed robbers, fraudsters and their ilk indicate their enthusiasm for questionnaires or large-scale social surveys, ethnographic research, life histories, oral histories, biographies, autobiographies and journalistic accounts will be at a premium. (Hobbs, 1994: 442)

Given the difficulties of pursuing this line of research, as long as researchers remain cognisant of the limits of their data, they can help to illuminate the 'dark figure of crime'.

We could have selected many other forms of crime as illustrative examples. As argued in the extensive literature on crime data (see for example, Hope, 2013), the 'dark figure of crime' includes a wide range of behaviours which, for varying reasons, are not counted in official crime statistics. Qualitative research has shed light on many of these including illicit drug use, domestic violence, hate crime and sexual offences.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH LEADS TO AN 'APPRECIATION' OF THE SOCIAL WORLD FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE OFFENDER, VICTIM OR CRIMINAL JUSTICE PROFESSIONAL

Matza (1969) first used the term 'appreciative studies' to refer to specific studies of deviant subcultures. This work was based on observation, sometimes involving participation, of the social world of deviants. In this respect the influence of symbolic interactionism is apparent. Criminologists often talk about appreciative criminology, referring to 'an approach that seeks to understand and appreciate the social world

from the point of view of the individual or category of individual, with particular reference to crime and deviance' (Jupp, 2013a: 16).

There are numerous examples of criminological studies which have attempted to 'appreciate' the social world from the point of view of the criminal justice professional, and one example is included in Box 1.3. It would be fair to say that some criminal justice professions have attracted more attention than others, with studies of police officers receiving the greatest consideration. There are a number of explanations for this imbalance, and the more obvious ones relate to the ease at which access can be negotiated, the appeal of the professional group and its work to criminological researchers and the priorities of funding bodies. These issues are explored in the next chapter.

Box 1.3 Understanding occupational culture: Qualitative interviews with electronic monitoring officers

Hucklesby's (2011) research with electronic monitoring officers is an example of how qualitative research can shed light on the occupational culture of criminal justice professionals. Whilst not our focus here it is worth noting that increasingly those engaged in crime control are employed by the private sector. Her study involved interviews with 20 monitoring officers employed by G4S, one of the contracted providers at the time, coupled with observation of over 50 shifts. The research found that whilst there was a loosely defined shared working orientation it did not represent a clearly defined occupational culture. Instead, the officers could be categorised into three working credos (the technician, the probation worker and the pragmatist). The credos the officer was most closely aligned to influenced how they managed concerns about their personal safety which shaped the working practices of all officers.

Before moving on, a few brief comments need to be offered about appreciative research with offenders and victims. Hoyle's (2012) review of research on victims demonstrates that a great deal of criminological attention is now focused on victims. Alongside the long-established quantitative surveys of victimisation and fear of crime, there are numerous examples of qualitative work on experiences of victimisation and criminal justice responses. Feminists have played an important contribution with studies of hidden victimisation including domestic violence, sexual violence and child abuse. The scope of work on victimisation continues to grow and challenge conventional understanding about victimisation, through exposing 'new' forms, for example at the hands of the State or corporations, or in 'new' settings such as cyberspace. In this field of criminology, there is considerable scope for a 'mixed economy' using different forms of data. Hoyle (2012) argues that qualitative approaches can make a particular contribution to understanding victimisation experiences.

Alongside the growing interest with victims, research on offenders continues. It is, however, different from the past; it is less concerned with understanding offending behaviour and more focused on how best to address the problem of crime, looking for guidance on how best to prevent crime or to reduce reoffending. Criminologists,

as Maguire (2007) notes, have been guilty for some time of focusing their research efforts on convicted offenders rather than meeting them in their 'natural' settings. He argues that without the correcting influence of ethnographic work (see Chapter 7), it becomes too easy for criminologists to see offenders as 'problems' or 'numbers' rather than individuals (Maguire, 2007: 285). There are important exceptions to this trend, for example, the work of cultural criminologists which we referred to earlier in the chapter.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH CAN COMPLEMENT QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research can complement quantitative research in a number of ways. Firstly, using qualitative approaches can help to inform the design of research instruments for the collection of quantitative data. King (2000) has used this strategy to conduct research in prisons. He suggests beginning with observation and records, then moving on to interviews and ending with questionnaires. The latter can be used to test the generality of the findings in the wider population. By administering questionnaires at the end of the fieldwork the response rate is also boosted as the researcher has established rapport with the research participants.

Secondly, qualitative studies can contribute to our understanding of the context in which crime occurs and criminal justice is administered through providing rich and detailed data to flesh out the bare skeleton provided by quantitative data (Coleman and Moynihan, 1996). Regardless of the size of the dataset or the number of variables contained within it, quantitative data can only represent abstractions from complex interactions, and as Bottomley and Pease (1986: 170) remind us 'we should not allow statistics to make us forget the people behind the numbers'. A burglary offence, which appears in official crime statistics, is the outcome of negotiation processes between the victim and/or witness and the police. It tells us nothing about decisions to report and record the crime. These decision-making processes can be researched using qualitative techniques such as semi-structured interviews with victims, witnesses and police officers or observation within a police station.

Thirdly, Mhlanga (2000) argues that statistical correlations in quantitative research require further explication using qualitative research techniques. Mhlanga's study of the role of ethnic factors in decisions made by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to prosecute young offenders (Mhlanga, 1999) included an examination of case files of just over 6000 offenders. These files were used to collect statistical data on a number of key variables including ethnic origin, gender, age and previous convictions. The data gathered were analysed using multivariate techniques, which control for other variables in order to identify the actual impact of ethnic factors. Noting that it is 'always hazardous to move from correlation to explanation' (Mhlanga, 2000: 414), and even more so when the topic of interest is a sensitive one, Mhlanga made a decision to present preliminary findings to CPS lawyers and managers to gain feedback. This took the form of a discussion group (he does not describe it as a focus group). The finding that the CPS were more

likely to discontinue cases involving ethnic minority defendants was explored. The discussion group came up with two explanations for this: firstly, the police were 'getting it wrong' by charging ethnic minority defendants without sufficient evidence, and secondly, the CPS 'could be using positive discrimination' in favour of ethnic minority defendants (Mhlanga, 2000: 415). Mhlanga suggests that in any further research on this topic, it would be highly desirable to conduct individual face-to-face interviews with CPS lawyers.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH HELPS TO INFORM THE DEVELOPMENT OF POLICIES OF CRIME CONTROL

There are multiple ways in which qualitative research, conducted either by researchers or practitioners, can assist the policy development process. Research can fulfil the role of evaluating current policy. It may also serve as an instrument for generating ideas for policy development. Finally, research may take the form of action research, which integrates the processes of research and action. In so doing the typical model of academics or other researchers generating knowledge to be applied by practitioners is rejected. We will concentrate on action research here and leave the broader discussion of the relationship between qualitative research and criminal justice policy to the next chapter.

Action research was first developed in the US and the UK in the late 1940s by social scientists who advocated closer ties between social science and solving current social problems (Denscombe, 2014), often relating to health, education and social welfare (Banks, 2012). It describes a form of research, which is often evaluative in nature, which sets out to impact upon policy and practice (Crow, 2013). This evidently practical approach to research is typically associated with small-scale research studies and promotes practitioner involvement and thus their professional development. Action research can be perceived as a dynamic model based upon ongoing dialogue (Crow, 2013). To begin the process, critical reflection on professional practice is required to identify a problem, which is then researched and the findings are translated into a plan for change. The plan is then implemented and evaluated. It is envisaged that the process is ongoing with a rolling programme of research, with research continually informing practice in a cyclical way. The reality is that action research often involves discrete, one-off pieces of research (Denscombe, 2014). Action researchers are not limited to qualitative techniques but can use different techniques for data collection. However, qualitative methods are particularly suited to exploratory, small-scale studies. A criminological example of action research is provided in Box 1.4. This example illustrates some of the challenges of action research (see Denscombe, 2014) relating to objectivity (since the researcher is far from impartial), ethics (since research and practice are indistinguishable) and ownership (which partner takes control over the research and its outcomes?). It also exemplifies what can be achieved when all parties have a shared commitment to a goal (see Crow, 2013).

Box 1.4 Action research in challenging cultural contexts: Establishing alternatives to custody for juveniles in Bangladesh

Banks (2012) describes her experiences of working on a juvenile justice reform project in Bangladesh which was funded by the Canadian government and designed to develop the capacity of local officials through, for example, training and mentoring. She argues that action research is uniquely placed to provide culturally sensitive 'bottom up' support rather than imposing a reform agenda. It also allows resources to be devoted to research when otherwise none would be available. One of her first steps was to establish a 'micro policy network' (Banks, 2012: 480) to conduct baseline research initially and then provide ongoing monitoring and evaluation once a juvenile diversion project was established so that operational issues could be identified and resolved quickly. This was followed up with a workshop on practice in juvenile diversion where research findings were shared and perspectives on the project were gleaned. For Banks (2012) action research helped to appreciate the prevailing cultural norms, for example that children should not be 'spoilt' and that confinement is necessary for children deemed 'uncontrollable'. Recognising these enhanced the legitimacy of the diversion project in a country which still bears the imprint of its colonial past and might therefore resist the imposition of allegedly superior cultural norms. Banks (2012) argues that action research allows participants to be 'knowing agents' rather than objects of research.

CHAPTER SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have explored, albeit briefly, the maturation of criminology as an academic discipline and we have drawn the reader's attention to competing interpretations of the past. As Coleman and Norris (2000: 24) note in relation to criminology, 'there has been some confusion over both its birthday and parentage'. Exploring this debate included an analysis of the emergence of both qualitative and quantitative research traditions within criminology. We focused predominantly, but not exclusively, on the growth of qualitative approaches to researching crime and criminal justice. Whilst it may at first glance appear out of place to reflect on quantitative approaches in a text on qualitative research, such reflections were needed for two reasons. Firstly, by exploring the strengths and weaknesses of quantitative approaches we can elucidate the reasons why qualitative approaches developed. Secondly, researchers frequently use both quantitative and qualitative methods in their studies.

By combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches, criminological researchers are avoiding 'methodological pigeonholing' (Bottoms, 2008: 81). This can be defined as 'the tendency to assume that certain sorts of research methods "go with" particular kinds of theoretical approach, to the exclusion of other kinds of data' (Bottoms, 2008: 81). Bottoms (2008) suggests that some qualitative researchers have set up mental barriers against the use of quantitative data, and similarly some quantitative researchers have been reluctant to make use of qualitative data. He argues that these unjustifiable mental barriers have been some of the most unhelpful features of the British criminological landscape in the last quarter of the twentieth century. He proposes that these barriers are now being overcome, leading

to a healthier approach to criminological research. Many criminologists would concur with his view. Crucially it is important to select an approach suited to the research question being posed. Just as it might be considered flawed to insist on only using either qualitative or quantitative approaches, it is equally problematic to always assume that combining approaches is appropriate. There are many examples of criminological projects which rely wholly on qualitative approaches and which make a significant contribution to theory, knowledge, policy and practice.

Exercises

- 1 Identify ONE form of crime which makes up part of the 'dark figure'. A contemporary example is supplying psychoactive substances to friends following their criminalisation (in the UK) in May 2016. Whilst illegal, this type of crime is unlikely to be detected. Consider how you might use qualitative approaches to shed light on this form of crime.
 - 2 What do you think makes a good qualitative study? Keep a note of your key characteristics and revisit them when you have read the discussion of quality criteria for qualitative research in the final chapter.
 - 3 Look at a recent issue of a criminological journal which publishes empirical research, for example *Criminology and Criminal Justice*. Choose ONE article which is based solely upon qualitative research. Reflect upon why you think they chose a purely qualitative approach.
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FURTHER READING

- Cresswell, J. (2015) *A Concise Introduction to Mixed Methods Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This brief overview of mixed methods research takes the reader through the different stages of the research process and offers a foundation for understanding mixed methods methodology.

- Mason, J. (2002) *Qualitative Researching*, 2nd edn. London: Sage.

Despite being published some time ago, this well-established text provides excellent guidance on the practice of social research. It is organised around three stages of the research process: questions of strategy, generating qualitative data and analysing qualitative data.

- Miller, J. and Palacios, R. (eds) (2015) *Qualitative Research in Criminology*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.

Compiled by two experienced American qualitative researchers, this edited collection contains 17 chapters written by criminologists from across the globe including some referenced in this chapter (Hobbs, Ferrell). It explores the significant role of qualitative research in expanding and refining understandings of crime and justice.

- Silverman, D. (2013) *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn. London: Sage.

Written by one of the leading authors on qualitative approaches to research this book seeks to demonstrate how qualitative research can be methodologically inventive, empirically rigorous, theoretically alive and practically relevant.

- Tewksbury, R. (2009) 'Qualitative versus quantitative methods: Understanding why qualitative methods are superior for criminology and criminal justice', *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Criminology*, 1(1): 38–58.

This controversial article makes the bold claim that qualitative approaches offer a superior means for conducting meaningful research in criminology and criminal justice.