Analysis and Interpretation in 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.

1. *An Introduction to Qualitative Market Research*
   Mike Imms and Gill Ereaut

2. *Interviewing Groups and Individuals in Qualitative Market Research*
   Joanna Chrzanowska

3. *Methods Beyond Interviewing in Qualitative Market Research*
   Philly Desai

4. *Analysis and Interpretation in Qualitative Market Research*
   Gill Ereaut

5. *Developing Brands with Qualitative Market Research*
   John Chandler and Mike Owen

6. *Developing Advertising with Qualitative Market Research*
   Judith Wardle

7. *Delivering Results in Qualitative Market Research*
   Geraldine Lillis

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Ginny Valentine deserves special thanks, partly for getting me interested in theory in the first place, but also for challenge, inspiration and friendship over many years.

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Editorial Introduction

About Qualitative Market Research:
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

This book addresses the tasks involved in analysing and interpreting qualitative market research. Some may be surprised that this volume is separate from Geraldine Lillis’ book on what qualitative market research ‘delivers’ (Book 7). For many practitioners and clients of commercial qualitative research, the task of analysing the findings and delivering useful results is seen as one single process. Yet we were acutely aware that both these aspects of qualitative market research have only rarely been explored in any depth.

Indeed, the whole nature of the activity that goes on between the end of fieldwork and the presentation of findings or debrief is shrouded in mystery. It is often referred to as ‘a black box’ and has been the subject of perhaps the only joke about qualitative market research, where the best answer to the question ‘How did you get from the groups to the debrief?’ is said to be ‘in a taxi’.

Thus, if this series is to succeed in its overarching aims (making explicit current practice, writing down the oral traditional and linking it back to relevant theory), then it is vitally important to shed light on this important, but under-explored area. In initial debates about the scope of this series we quickly came to the view that analysis and interpretation (of the research) and delivering results (making it relevant to the client) represent two quite different sides of one coin. Moreover, although the two tasks usually happen concurrently, we are certain that they represent quite separate tasks that require quite different processes, knowledge, skills and perspectives.

The notion of the ‘dual role’ of the researcher as a committed-but-independent agent of the client, explored in detail in Book 1 of the series, helps clarify this. As an independent ‘pure researcher’, the qualitative market research practitioner seeks to understand the world of respondents, through thorough analysis and interpretation of the field data, and seeks to compare this with the way in which the client sees that world. As the ‘committed agent and partner’ of the client, the qualitative market research practitioner seeks to put these two perspectives together and to use this understanding in order to make an informed and insightful contribution to the client’s decision-making. So whilst the two volumes on ‘A&I’ and delivering results are wholly complementary, they are quite different in emphasis and we have consciously keep them separate.

This book on analysis and interpretation represents a landmark contribution to understanding of this aspect of commercial qualitative research, in a variety of ways.

First, A&I is a largely ‘hidden’ aspect of qualitative market research – done by the practitioner in private, with little or no tangible or explicit exposure of analysis processes to the client. This is in sharp contrast to the very ‘public’ aspects of
fieldwork and presentations/debriefs with which all clients are very familiar. This is so in spite of the fact that analysis and interpretation can represent a significant proportion of the work involved in a project and thus its cost. An important benefit of the book is to pay overdue attention to an under-debated, and arguably undervalued aspect of commercial qualitative market research.

Secondly, there are major differences in analysis and interpretation practices. This book succeeds in creating an ‘inclusive’ framework that describes the diverse practices in terms of commonality of purpose.

Thirdly, analysis and interpretation involves a highly complex and multi-faceted set of tasks and, like many aspects of qualitative market research, is not describable in terms of linear sequential processes. The challenge for this book was to conceptualise and make clear this complex interwoven web.

Finally, analysis and interpretation in the commercial arena is notably different in academic practice, especially in terms of timescales, cost pressures and other factors that arise from the fact that qualitative market research is a business. These different sets of practices are compared, and possible benefits for both sides in better mutual understanding are suggested.

Overall, this book transforms the tacit knowledge of analysis and interpretation within the commercial qualitative industry into a more usable form of explicit knowledge. Ironically, like all efforts to codify, describe and explain that which already exists as tacit knowledge, it runs the risk of being perceived as ‘things we already knew’. However, the benefits of the clear and comprehensive exploration of analysis and interpretation that this book contains are considerable:

- It gives us a language to talk about analysis and interpretation in an informed and professional manner – and thereby enables us to engage in constructive dialogue about analysis and interpretation with colleagues, clients and academics.
- It provides a basis for debating and defining ‘good practice’ in analysis and interpretation.
- It gives us the wherewithal to examine current practice critically and to explore alternatives.
- It makes more feasible the task of teaching analysis and interpretation to students and those new to the industry.

The ‘black box’ has given up its secrets.
PART 1

Context
Introduction: The Status of Analysis and Interpretation in Qualitative Market Research

This chapter introduces the scope and aims of this book, beginning by noting the relative invisibility of analysis and interpretation within commercial qualitative research practice. It argues that greater awareness and discussion of these practices would be of benefit to practitioners and client users alike, even if on a day-to-day basis the latter are unconcerned with details of the research process. Some use could be made of knowledge that exists of qualitative methodology within academic literature, although commercial research does of course operate under very different conditions and with different objectives.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION IN QUALITATIVE MARKET RESEARCH – THE ‘BLACK BOX’

What, in the context of market research, is qualitative analysis and interpretation and when and how does it happen? These are basic questions which are surprisingly difficult to answer in a simple way.

What is analysis and interpretation? A narrow definition is that it describes a specific type of intensive work done on data collected from fieldwork. But, more accurately, it comprises a much broader set of practical and intellectual processes. In effect, it includes every bit of thinking by which researchers get from a client’s problem to some form of answer or explanation. So in its broadest sense, ‘analysis and interpretation’ – of the client’s problem or question, and of possible solutions – is the substance of the market research task, arguably served by other parts of the process, such as fieldwork.

When does it happen? Accounts of practice reflect both the narrow and the broad definitions just given. There is a stage of intensive analysis activity – between the end of fieldwork and the presentation of findings to the client – which is commonly known as ‘analysis’. But practitioners also commonly assert that ‘analysis’ begins the moment they hear about the project and its objectives (Glen 1997; Wardle 1989). The introductory book to this series (by Imms and Ereaut) describes the ‘all-at-once-ness’ of
qualitative research. It suggests that although there are discernible stages to a qualitative project, many of the critical operations that ultimately provide the value of the research actually pervade the whole process. In this respect, ‘analysis and interpretation’ go on all the time in the researcher’s mind (and in conversations between researchers in a team) before, during and after fieldwork.

How does analysis and interpretation happen? How analysis and interpretation is carried out in the field of qualitative market research is largely the subject of this book. It will focus on the post-fieldwork period of formal analysis, but continues to set this within the broader view of analysis just outlined.

Given its central role in the research process, how is ‘analysis and interpretation’ regarded within the qualitative industry? Surprisingly, its profile and status seem rather low. Analysis and interpretation (in contrast to other more public aspects of the process such as fieldwork or final presentation of findings) is hidden from view, carried out in the private spaces of the researcher’s office or home, notepad, computer and brain. The detail of these activities is rarely discussed between researcher and client. It is rare for clients to judge the quality of a research proposal on the intended data analysis, or for them to question the researcher after the event on its detail.

It seems that commercial clients are not interested in or concerned about this part of the research, or are interested in analyses and interpretations only as outputs or conclusions, not as processes. Why should this be? Clients perhaps assume a standard or minimum process, common to all researchers. Or they may see analysis as part of the idiosyncratic skill and experience of the individual researcher they have selected and not something into which they can or should delve (Glen 1997; Robson and Hedges 1993).

[Clients] know if they’ve got a good researcher and they assume they’ve done something good to get to their conclusions. (Practitioner interview)

Few researchers raise the issue of analysis and interpretation with clients. As Glen comments:

Researchers for the most part volunteer nothing either, which is a little more curious as it is mostly their skill at delivering insights upon which their reputations are maintained, as opposed to their ability actually to conduct interviews. It’s as if ‘A&I’ is too delicate an area of the process to withstand more than the most superficial discussion. (1997: 119)

It might be asked in this context why anyone should attempt to examine the detail of how researchers analyse. Maybe the whole process is too delicate, or too complex to explain. Or maybe it really does not matter very much. Clearly the existence of this book argues exactly the opposite, though there are many reasons why it is a difficult subject to tackle.
As will be seen in later chapters, it is difficult for experienced practitioners to explain exactly what they do in carrying out analysis and in reaching conclusions.

‘Interpretation’ is often portrayed as a rather mystical process, carried out by those who somehow have, or acquire, the ‘gift’ or secret of doing it. This has tended to support an industry structure in which some individuals acquire guru-like status. Clients feel that good researchers do something ‘magical’ with the material to arrive at insightful and really useful conclusions. Interpretation can be seen as a talent, like musical or sporting giftedness, highly valued and residing in certain individuals, but which might not warrant examination.

It may be that interpretation is effectively written out of the research process for quite the opposite reason. Clients may prefer not to acknowledge the influence of the researcher and instead want to believe that what they get from qualitative research is the (unmediated) ‘voice of the consumer’.

The processes involved in qualitative research are indeed very personal – it is often claimed that qualitative research ‘is’ the person conducting it. So discussion of the subject, and comparison of methods used by different practitioners, can easily become adversarial or defensive.

Alternatively, such discussion can mutate into rather sterile debates about ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’, which often set qualitative analysis unfavourably and unhelpfully within positivist models (see Chapter 9).

Practitioners may feel strongly that there is an important element of creativity involved in good analysis and this will be endangered by over-examination or intellectualisation of the process itself.

Finally, there have been criticisms made of the qualitative industry as overly navel-gazing and process-driven, along with calls for a focus on ‘benefits not processes’ (see for example Forrest 1998). Maybe examining analysis and interpretation would be just another example of this.

Given all these obstacles, why should this series devote a whole volume to trying to unpick the processes of analysis and interpretation? The inclusion of this book in the series is based on a belief that analysis and interpretation is a crucial and under-represented aspect of commercial qualitative work that urgently needs public examination and debate. The book takes the following view of the role of analysis and interpretation:

The ‘unmediated voice of the consumer’ is an illusion – the researcher is a critical factor in the process, an assertion supported in practice by the strong belief amongst researchers and clients that it matters who does qualitative research. If so, researchers are better off understanding how the choices they make in analysis affect outcomes for their clients. Throughout the following account of the analytic process, the researcher’s role is treated as being inevitably one of active mediation.
between the client and the outside world, not just of relaying ‘the voice of the consumer’ – or of any other respondent group – to the client.

- Analysis and interpretation is a critical aspect of good qualitative research, at least as important as effective and sensitive collection of data. It is part of an implicit agreement between researcher and client (Reuter 1995), less visible but no less important than other more public aspects of the process.
- It often accounts for a great deal of the time spent by the researcher on a project, and thus its cost, and is therefore of potential commercial concern to researchers and clients.
- It constitutes a key professional skill. Even if clients are justifiably uninterested in the technical detail of the analysis process, there could and should be a debate about analysis and interpretation at least within the qualitative market research community, especially regarding its quality and researcher training. The current status of ‘A&I’ is clearly not helpful to the management of these processes nor to professional development in the field.

There have already been a number of challenges to the ‘black box’ or ‘black arts’ view of analysis and interpretation, notably by Griggs (1987) Valentine (1995), Goodyear (1998) and Cowley (2000). All these writers reject the mystification of analysis and interpretation, though they may propose different solutions to the problem. Griggs suggests that ‘the analysis of qualitative data clearly mirrors quite closely the analysis of quantitative data or, at least, it should do’ (1987: 33) – an idea examined later in this book. Mary Goodyear (1998: 230) also proposes ‘good practice’ for a number of different types of research problem and argues that the process of analysis and interpretation is simply a logical one, ‘always working with hypotheses which either do or do not have data to support them’. She, like Griggs, suggests that the route by which conclusions are reached should be explicit, at least to the researcher her or himself (1998: 230). Virginia Valentine, while arguing equally strongly for examination and exposition of analysis itself, proposes a quite different framework, in this case one of deciphering cultural codes and meaning systems (1995). Cowley (writing from an Australian perspective) argues that we have to ‘define and articulate our skills or we will be replaced by others’ (2000: 17) and proposes a multi-faceted model of analysis skills, skills only acquired by ‘incredibly disciplined hard work over time’ (2000: 32).

Practitioners may already be interested in thinking and talking more about analysis and interpretation but lack a set of general concepts and a vocabulary with which to start a productive debate. This book sets out a descriptive and conceptual version of what seems to happen in practice in analysis and interpretation, to offer such a vocabulary for future discussion and development. Its primary aim is to act as a catalyst for greater understanding and explicit discussion of the commercial analysis and interpretation process, not to rob it of its creativity and undoubtedly
skill, but to open ways for more effective training and professional development.

It is also possible that opening this debate will re-engage clients with the implications for them of differences between research practices and between researchers. Robson and Hedges (1993) report that the clients they interviewed initially felt they did not need to be concerned with how researchers analyse, but after only a little discussion concluded they could and should take more interest. As will be seen in later chapters, researchers vary a great deal in how they analyse – but also vary in the importance they attach to the process and how much analysis they actually do. There are significant time and cost implications in carrying out (or not carrying out) full analysis and this can account for large costing differences between research suppliers. Greater awareness of differences in analysis procedures might in fact contribute to a more informed segmentation of the supply market, effectively turning processes into benefits for clients and researchers.

COMMERCIAL AND ACADEMIC QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PRACTICES

Throughout this book, deliberate if cautious comparisons are drawn with analysis and interpretation in academic qualitative enquiry. Of course market research differs fundamentally from academic research, especially in being carried out explicitly in the interests of someone other than the researcher. Academic research may or may not be applied to address particular issues or problems, whereas market research by definition is. The two domains work to different standards and criteria of evaluation. But qualitative market research does share some methods, and certainly shares an interest in certain fields and subject matters, with qualitative studies in social science. This is seen especially within cultural studies (effectively the academic study of everyday life and cultural forms) and within academic qualitative consumer research. For this and other reasons explored below, there may be benefit to both sides in the comparison.

It is of course dangerous to generalise too far – the term ‘academic qualitative research’ covers a huge range of methods and a wide range of disciplinary interest. It also covers many kinds of project in a spectrum from ‘basic’ research (generating knowledge or theory without the aim of direct or immediate application) to highly focused applied research (Patton 1990). Academic qualitative practice is likely to be highly variable, although certain things seem common, including a requirement for methodological and theoretical accountability and for publication of both research findings and full details of the methods used.

Criteria of ‘success’ are naturally very different for the qualitative researcher in academia and in commerce, and this accounts for many differences in practice. There are also other significant differences across this divide – for example, regarding the time allowed for a project, the funding
or resources available for it, and its reporting requirements. However, writers from both commercial and non-commercial camps have noted similarities of subject matter and method and have proposed mutual benefit in narrowing the gap that exists between these worlds (Barker and Nancarrow 1998; Catterall 1998; Gordon 1999). Commercial and academic practitioners alike are concerned with quality and professionalism within their field; both might learn from sharing experience and knowledge. Differences in ultimate purpose should perhaps not blind us to useful similarities.

In addition, there is significant and expanding use of qualitative methods, and the presence of researchers from both traditions, within social and policy research. This kind of research examines and helps develop publicly funded programmes and initiatives, often in educational, social or health care areas. Projects show similarities to those of traditional private sector market research, but will generally make more demanding requirements of researchers, especially in terms of accountability. They may also be very large projects by commercial standards, and are very likely to employ a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. This field seems to represent a potentially productive meeting point of two research traditions.

- Researchers working in this arena are often closely involved with academic life, and may be attached to academic institutions, but unlike many in academia they share certain problems with their commercially trained counterparts. That is, they are carrying out research projects on behalf of others, have to work to specific objectives and schedules and have to deliver directly usable information (Patton 1990). They in particular may thus benefit from exposure to some of the working strategies developed by those from a market research background.

- With increasing demand from the public sector, more researchers and agencies with a pure commercial market research background are finding themselves working in social and policy research and have to adapt their approaches to meet the specific needs of the public sector (Hedges and Duncan 2000; and see Book 3 by Desai). Those coming from the market research tradition, with its fast turnaround times, find, amongst other differences, the opportunity to carry out more technically rigorous analyses and fuller reporting than are required or allowed in much business research.

Better contact between researchers with different backgrounds and training – commercial and academic – would seem to be of particular potential benefit in this area.

Academic qualitative work in general is of particular relevance to this volume since a great deal has been written about analysis and interpretation in scholarly literature. This is because professional standards generally
require academics to justify and account for their methods. In contrast, relatively little examination of analysis and interpretation exists within the commercial research literature (readers will thus see the same few commentators referenced often throughout this book). The body of academic writing could offer a resource for commercial researchers better to understand, develop and improve their own practice, and they might be more able to benefit from this knowledge if they understand how their own version of this practice differs in important ways from that in academia.

In the same way, though, academics (or those with an academic research training) engaged in qualitative work might benefit from understanding analytic and other practices that reflect the distinctive nature of commercial qualitative research. These include many methods developed through the extensive field experience of commercial researchers (especially in the use of discussion or focus groups) and others that derive from the freedom to invent and experiment that exists outside academic boundaries.

Few academic researchers undertake more than one or two research projects in any year, and sometimes a single qualitative project may be conducted over a few years. This reduces the opportunities for academics to try out new methods or variations on existing ones. Practitioners, by contrast, are constantly trying out new methods or ways of combining existing ones. (Catterall 2000)

THE SCOPE OF THIS BOOK

This book largely reflects the nature of analysis and interpretation in qualitative market research in the UK, though where possible specific differences in practice, especially between the UK and the USA, are highlighted. It is also concerned primarily with the analysis and interpretation of interview data, since this forms the bulk of research data in qualitative market research (see Book 1). It is hardly surprising in the context of globalisation and global marketing that cross-cultural market research is on the increase. While the focus of the book is on single-country projects, some reference is made to the specific problems involved in analysing cross-national projects and to some of the ways in which commercial researchers devise practical solutions to these problems.

The relative invisibility of analysis and interpretation in commercial research has already been described. Practitioners and clients would say when asked that these are important processes, but they hardly feature in the qualitative market research literature and are rarely discussed and debated in any detail amongst practitioners. This is quite different to the situation in academia, and the possibilities of mutual benefit from greater contact and understanding between the two fields have been suggested.

Chapter 2 goes on to examine the specific purposes of qualitative enquiry in commercial or market research, and thus the particular conditions
under which analysis and interpretation are carried out. These are discussed at both the general level (what the whole activity is for) and the more specific (particular features and conventions of the industry). Continuing to set the context for analysis and interpretation in market research, Chapter 3 then looks at common frameworks for thinking that can be traced within analysis practices. It looks too at the relationship between formal theory and everyday practice in this most applied field.

The way in which analysis and interpretation practices are experienced and described by commercial practitioners is the subject of Chapter 4, while the actual processes of analysis and interpretation are explicated in the following three chapters within Part II. In Chapters 5, 6 and 7 the processes of ‘analysis’ and ‘interpretation’ are dissected and analysed as if they were separate, but their simultaneous and mutually dependent nature is asserted. The final chapter in Part II, Chapter 8, digresses slightly from common practice in market research to look at developments in computer assisted qualitative data analysis and the opportunities these might offer the commercial researcher.

Chapters 9 and 10 comprise the final part, offering a view on issues of quality and ‘best practice’ in this field, and of how debates on these potentially thorny issues might productively be carried on.

**KEY POINTS**

- Processes of analysis and interpretation pervade any qualitative market research project, although there is also a period of formal analysis between fieldwork and presentation of findings.
- Analysis and interpretation appear low in visibility and in status; they are made virtually invisible in the dealings between clients and researchers.
- This ‘black box’ view of the process has been challenged, but practitioners and clients may lack a vocabulary with which to debate the role and practice of analysis and interpretation.
- This book begins to provide a vocabulary of activities, processes and skills to aid training and development of professional skills in commercial researchers. This might also open the possibility of better dialogue between clients and suppliers on what exactly is being bought and sold.
- There are some parallels between commercial and academic qualitative research (although clear differences too) and there exists a body of academic literature concerning analysis and interpretation far
greater than any within commercial practice. There could be mutual benefit in greater contact and understanding between these two communities.

- The scope of this book is outlined in this chapter. There is a focus on UK qualitative market research practice and this means concentration on interview data. The book also focuses on single-country projects, although some reference is made to practice in other markets and to the analysis of international projects.
Qualitative Research as a Commercial Activity

This chapter highlights some specific features of qualitative market research relevant to understanding its characteristic methods of analysis and interpretation. This provides a context for looking at how, why and from what sources interpretations and conclusions are drawn. It will do this both to inform those outside the industry, or new to it, and also to make explicit some aspects of the business which may be taken for granted within the industry but which deserve closer examination.

WHAT IS ‘COMMERCIAL’ ABOUT ‘COMMERCIAL RESEARCH’?

In Book 1 of this series a distinction was made between commercial research, where the user of the research has commercial or profit-making aims, and a commercial researcher, defined as someone making a professional living carrying out research projects on behalf of various businesses or other organisations. In the past, this distinction would not have been necessary, but has been made so by the huge growth in the demand for professional services from the market research industry by public sector and non-profit-making organisations (see Marks 2000 for the range of users of commercial research services, including the public sector; see also Book 3 in this series, by Desai). A great deal of qualitative market research still involves profit-making clients, especially in the areas of brands, advertising and other consumer marketing activities. However, we can no longer assume that professional market research is concerned only with consumer research, nor even with ‘commercial’ research clients.

Throughout this book, then, ‘commercial research’ and ‘market research’ are used as synonyms, and refer to research carried out for a fee by those making their living this way, and with a background in carrying out research for profit-making clients. However, the reader should bear in mind that this refers to a professional tradition and set of research practices which may these days be applied to non-commercial as well as to commercial organisational aims.
THE COMMERCIAL RESEARCH CONTEXT: GENERAL ISSUES AFFECTING ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Mediating and Translating

There are many conceptualisations of the role and scope of qualitative market research and some of these are explored in Book 1 in this series. For our purpose here, it is useful to think of qualitative research as providing a form of *mediation*, typically between a commercial organisation and its ‘stakeholders’, however defined. This may include existing or potential customers, or end-users of services, but may extend to any group with significant contact with the organisation – employees, shareholders, voters, citizens and beyond (Marks 2000).

The fundamental purpose of analysis can be thought of as producing useful knowledge through cultural mediation and translation, the commercial researcher occupying a role as a ‘cultural intermediary’ (Bourdieu 1984; Hirschman 1986). Proposing cultural decoding and mediation as a way to look at interpretation in commercial research owes an obvious debt to Valentine’s (1995) suggestion that interpretation be regarded as a process of deciphering and translating between cultural codes, though the idea of mediation is used more generally here.

Simply put, the commercial researcher makes a living by professionally translating in complex ways between two worlds: that of the paying client (company, government, charity or other organisation) and that of the ‘researched’ (consumer, employee, citizen, voter and so on). In analysis the researcher negotiates between two ‘domains’, framing the language, meanings and world-views of each in terms of the other, looking for fit, dissonance and possible common ground. In reporting to the client, the analyst’s role is not simply one of relaying or summarising – it is one of translation, or making something ‘foreign’ comprehensible in the client’s own terms. To do this the researcher has to become fluent in the language and culture of both domains. Without skilled professional immersion in the world of the *respondent*, the researcher can offer little that the client could not achieve him or herself; but without sufficient immersion in the world of the *client*, the research findings about respondents’ lives may be interesting but quite unusable.

The addition of an international dimension multiplies by a large factor the problems of cultural translation inherent in qualitative market research in general, necessitating more layers and points of mediation. In the words of one practitioner, there can be ‘not so much a gap as a chasm’ between the client’s and the respondents’ world-views. Client needs and assumptions must be translated, literally and culturally, for local markets and local researchers. The ‘findings’ must
be translated back again across linguistic and cultural boundaries. There are many people involved in the chain and much room for mistranslation or massively erroneous interpretation. In international work the difficulties of the already-complex job of qualitative analysis can become enormous.

In addition to the challenges of mediation, 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.

- Like all researchers, commercial researchers strive to be impartial in conducting their analyses. They must, as professionals, look as far as possible without prejudice or favour at the findings of the study (ideas of ‘impartiality’ and ‘objectivity’ are examined more later).
- But –
- Because they are commissioned and paid to do research, commercial researchers are effectively partisan, always professionally on the client’s side. That is, their mediation and translation is not done out of interest, or to further knowledge in general, or for the direct benefit of the researched group; it always done with a view to maximising its usefulness to the client.

The need to be both impartial and partial results in a tension or duality of responsibility that Mike Imms and I termed ‘the dual role’ in Book 1. The specific implications for analysis and interpretation of playing these two roles are outlined below.

**The ‘Dual Role’ Within Analysis**

The crucial implication of the dual role in analysis and interpretation is not the effect it has on looking at the materials gathered from respondents, but on the way in which the researcher must look at what emanates from the client. That is, at any point in the research process the researcher has two possible ways to treat the client’s aims, assumptions, corporate culture, beliefs and intended actions; and he or she must do both.

- On the one hand, the client’s organisational knowledge, assumptions and intentions have to be treated as unproblematic and given – commercial researchers place themselves firmly in a commercial alliance with the client organisation and, by accepting a commission, essentially agree to support the latter’s aims. This is the ‘committed partner’ position.
On the other, as professional researchers they must also treat these same assumptions and intentions in a detached or impartial way, as materials to be analysed, questioned and checked out against some kind of external world. (Note this is not the same as being ‘objective’ in a classic scientific sense but means being impartial as to the outcome of the analysis – see below.) This is the ‘pure researcher’ position.

So commercial qualitative researchers must, at the same time as acting as agents of the client organisation, be disinterested observers and analysts of culture and behaviour, including that of the client. An essential skill of the commercial researcher is to hold both positions simultaneously (and to resolve any conflicts that might arise between them) (see Figure 2.1).

The ‘dual role’ concept originated from examining commercial practice where client and research supplier are effectively independent of each other, but it may also have something to offer those in other forms of supplier–user relationship. For example, in social or policy research in the public sector the researcher may be working for the same organisation as the internal ‘client’, but it may help to focus analytic thinking even in these situations to see the participants as ‘clients’ and ‘suppliers’ as described in Box 2.1.
Box 2.1 The ‘Dual Role’ in A&I: Roles and Skills

The ‘pure researcher’ role in analysis and interpretation

- Researcher as disinterested and impartial analyst of behaviour, belief and culture, including that of the client
- Exploring, testing and mapping a territory ‘out there’ in some specific way (often through responses to specific objects or ideas) and comparing this external territory with client beliefs, assumptions and intentions regarding it

This involves a complex activity of synthesising information across a cultural boundary (manufacturer/consumer; political party/voter; charity/donor and so on), looking for areas of fit and of dissonance. It requires specific analytic skills to deal with the information – skills of data handling and evaluation, model-building, conceptual thinking and impartiality towards outcomes.

The ‘committed partner’ role in analysis and interpretation

- Researcher as committed agent of the client – making informed judgements and recommendations believed to be in the client organisation’s best interests
- Managing the relevant input from the client into this synthesis, then designing the output from it, to maximise its usefulness to the client organisation, in terms of both content and delivery

This involves activities of thorough interrogation of the business or organisational problem; then framing and precise communication of the output of the analytic process to maximise its utility to the client. It requires the ‘professional’ skills of an (activity-based) business consultant; including full commitment to the client’s intentions, mature business knowledge and sharpened communication skills.

There is, of course, a significant overlap between these roles, activities and skills but arguably they are vitally different, particularly in the way in which the client’s input is treated. Both sets of skills and processes are needed if an individual is to produce excellent analysis in qualitative research where there is a sponsoring client.

This book focuses on the ‘pure researcher’ role where the researcher acts as impartial analyst, and will look at how ‘good’ robust qualitative analysis is achieved in practice; the methods, skills and processes involved in
doing this within a commercial context. The emphasis here is on processes of analysis and comparison of the client’s and respondent’s world-views, languages, definitions, assumptions, intentions and so on. Findings may in fact legitimately and usefully question or reframe fundamentals in the client’s starting position of knowledge and belief.

Geraldine Lillis’ book in this series (Book 7) examines the ‘committed partner’ role, where the focus is on the researcher as committed agent of the client. It looks at the specific skills and resources needed by the qualitative researcher to make this form of knowledge production – ‘qualitative market research’ – truly useful to organisations. In this mode, the client’s organisational aims are clearly understood as framing, driving and funding the whole process; maximising the benefit of the research to the client is paramount.

This has given an outline of some rather general but very important factors that characterise commercial research practice – the idea of analysis as mediation and the notion of the ‘dual role’. The following section looks at some more specific factors that have implications for analytic and interpretative processes.

**SPECIFIC FACTORS AFFECTING ANALYTIC PRACTICES**

There are aspects of the way in which qualitative research is organised when it is carried out as a business which have a direct bearing on how analysis and interpretation happen.

*The Importance of Interview Methods and the Centrality of ‘the Group’*

Most qualitative market research in the UK is interview-based, focusing on material gathered by face-to-face interviewing, especially through group discussions (also known as focus groups) or individual interviews (also known as depth interviews or IDIs). Commercial qualitative research has not fully embraced the breadth of qualitative method found in academic qualitative research, which includes ethnography, textual analysis, life history and so on. Reasons for this are explored by Imms and Ereaut in Book 1. The situation is rapidly changing in the UK, however, with emerging eclecticism or ‘bricolage’ of method and orientation, including increasing use of observational research; such developments are discussed within this series in Book 3 by Philly Desai.

Methodological emphasis on the group discussion in particular has a major effect on analytic practices. Because market researchers work routinely with the group format, they have developed skills and techniques to highlight the research benefits of groups and reduce their negative effects whilst actually interviewing, as described by Joanna Chrzanowska.
in Book 2. Critically, they have also developed ways actively to use the process effects of groups within analysis and interpretation. So they would use, for example, knowledge of the ‘stages’ typically seen in any group to help evaluate the meaning of comments made at a given time in the group (see Chapter 6). The commercial researcher in the UK typically relies at least as much on reading the interactive process of the group in forming interpretations as on the simple verbal content of the discussion (Catterall and Maclaren 1997). To ignore these factors by exclusive focus on individual responses is generally considered to be bad practice.

Despite the uniformity of research vehicle, there is great variety in the uses to which the basic group format is put and the ways in which it is handled. Researchers treat the group discussion or focus group as a flexible vehicle, within which they can pursue a very wide range of material to address a very wide range of research problem. The material which is elicited in commercial qualitative research is thus highly diverse and this has implications for the range of analysis practice described later.

Types of Problem and Types of Project

Here, we are concerned specifically with the kinds of question qualitative market research sets out to answer and how these might shape the analysis process. For a broader treatment, readers are referred to Book 1 in this series, which looks at the kinds of organisational information needs which result in qualitative projects.

Some have argued that commercial researchers have suffered negative consequences through accepting for too long the blanket label ‘qualitative research’ and not sufficiently differentiating types of question or project, particularly in terms of the differing analytic input that is required by each. Mary Goodyear suggests that ‘… this has allowed clients to believe that all qualitative research is the same, the only difference being dependent on the “personality” of the researcher’ (1998: 194). While all the analytic processes outlined later in this book can be and are applied to many different projects, the type of research question posed does affect the choices made from within the range. It also affects the evaluative criteria used to assess a particular analysis.

One useful major division, outlined in Book 1 of this series, is between projects whose primary orientation is diagnostic, and those that focus on, or contain an element of, prognosis. More specifically, the following classification of qualitative questions (also appearing in Book 1) allows further discussion of analytic alternatives and the kinds of outcome that are required. This is an approximate classification since in practice these objectives often overlap within a project. (The third application suggested by Imms and Ereaut in Book 1, creativity, is covered by Desai, in Book 3.)
Box 2.2 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 or packaging for example) before quantitative testing.

- **Exploration**: mapping out the nature and dynamics of a market or sub-culture 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 service, or how to decide on an overall approach for marketing or advertising a product, service or social programme.

- **Diagnosis**: 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 (see 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.

The particular mix of objectives for a project will of course have crucial implications for how much and what kind of analysis is carried out. For example:
Goodyear (1998) points out that evaluation should be carried out against predetermined objectives and that this in fact reduces the amount of analysis which is needed or indeed is desirable. So a final evaluative stage of advertising research might only look specifically at what the advertising is communicating against its agreed communication objectives (see Wardle, Book 6).

In contrast, projects with a diagnostic or exploratory intent will require much more detailed and less predictably structured analysis. They may well take much longer and require far more concentrated effort from the researcher, since the criteria for analysis are less clear.

**The Nature of a ‘Project’**

A further relevant feature of commercial qualitative research concerns how ‘projects’ are defined and what they typically look like.

First, they are of a particular **scope**, **size** and **duration**. An academic project such as that for a PhD may stretch over several years and involve many emerging hypotheses, multiple fieldwork stages and interim analyses. Commercial qualitative research is largely conducted through small-scale projects (often ‘one-offs’, though sometimes in series), each spanning a few weeks or less. Project size will vary widely, but it is rare for more than around ten group discussions or 30 interviews to be carried out in one project – between four and eight groups or 10–20 interviews is more common. Project design, respondent recruitment and fieldwork are conducted in one single phase. Reporting usually takes the form of a face-to-face presentation of findings to the client, rarely more than two weeks after the end of fieldwork and sometimes after far less time.

In this context, commercial analysts have to work with what has been gathered and come up with some useful answers from each project, no matter how flawed the design turns out to be in the field. ‘Rolling’ analysis is of course carried out; early hypotheses or ideas are fed into and explored in later groups or interviews, and topic or discussion guides are amended and refined throughout the project. However, once the agreed fieldwork is done, there it ends. Commercial researchers do not have the luxury of going back into the field half way through the analysis to help clarify muddled or inconclusive findings. In this sense they must sometimes draw heavily on other resources – most commonly their own professional experience and accumulated knowledge.

Another feature of a commercial qualitative project is that the research problem and objectives are usually **specific** and **well-formulated** at the beginning of fieldwork, although the researcher may well have been heavily involved in helping frame and formulate these questions (see Book 1 by Imms and Ereaut and Book 7 by Lillis). The business ethics of qualitative market research require the researcher to address specific client issues, and this does to some extent focus the analytic task, in the same way that
reading a book in order to collect material for a specific task such as an essay will be more focused and perhaps easier than just reading it. However, it is also the case that the researcher must remain alert to other information which could be of interest or importance to the client, even if not specified by the latter. It is sometimes the case that in addressing specific client questions the researcher gathers knowledge of a field which forces a re-contextualisation, re-framing or challenge to the relevance of those questions.

Projects may emphasise specific hypothesis-testing (say of the acceptability of a new product idea), or may focus on a more general exploration of relevant behaviours and meanings within an aspect of daily life. Often, both will be carried out at the same time, using one to inform the other. So responses to product concepts (say a new range of cooking sauces) will shed light on general aspects of people’s lives (how people deal with feeding a family) and vice versa. Having said this, many clients are very well informed about their market and are in a position to define closely the problem and the information needed from a project; in this age of information overload, client companies are very rarely starting from scratch (Imms 1999). This might contrast sharply with some academic research, where much of the time and resources spent on a research project, especially in its early stages, can be concerned with defining and re-defining the research problem.

A final key feature, one effect of the need to answer specific client questions, is that in qualitative market research interviews or groups respondents are often actually responding to something. There is routine use of ‘stimulus’ of some kind (advertising ideas, or representations of products, places or policies) as well as broad-based questioning. Beyond this, there is widespread use of non-verbal interviewing approaches and respondent tasks within commercial research (see Book 2 by Chrzanowska, Book 5 by Chandler and Owen, Book 6 by Wardle and also Gordon 1999 for detailed discussion of such ‘projective and enabling techniques’). This changes the nature of the interaction within the interview itself away from simple question-and-answer, but also of course presents the commercial researcher with a range of material for analysis and interpretation.

Time Frames

Time is often claimed to be a critical component of analysis but is both an expensive commodity – commercial research executives being by most standards well paid – and under increasing pressure in today’s market. Lillis in Book 7 discusses the speed of change in today’s commercial environment and the effect this has on many organisations’ need for and use of research. A company offering qualitative research must always balance the quality of the company’s product against the need to contain costs, including the time spent by researchers on different stages of projects. It
must also deliver findings to the client at the agreed time. While difficulties in the field beyond the researcher’s control may just (though not always) allow an extension to a debrief deadline, within current business practices an extension to allow more analysis time is simply not negotiable.

In the UK the term ‘debrief’ refers to a formal presentation of findings generally following full and considered analysis of the work by the researcher. Clients are actively discouraged from making decisions based on watching groups (although of course some do), and indeed it is unusual for all groups to be viewed by clients. (The time allowed between fieldwork and debrief, at least for many commercial clients, is however shrinking all the time.)

The situation in the USA is different, in that there may be no time at all for considered analysis before clients go off and make decisions. There are clear differences in the organisation of business between the two countries; for example, in the meaning of the term ‘debrief’. When US researcher Judy Langer (2001) refers to ‘the debrief’ she means the discussion that takes place with the client after each group, which the client will almost always have watched through a one-way mirror. The fieldwork itself and the immediate analysis and interpretation provided by clients themselves, aided by the moderator, often constitute the major outcome of the project and form the basis for decision-making. The analytic skills required by researchers involved in operating in these two ways will of course be very different.

Even in the UK, where there is usually a period allowed for formal analysis, it is worth emphasising time frames as a crucial difference between the commercial and the academic qualitative analyst. Project timescales in commercial research are certainly shorter on average – and are much more fixed – than in the academic world. Commercial researchers emphasise that analysis is a continuous process, but ‘analysis’ is also seen as an intensive stage of a project, taking place sometime between the end of fieldwork and the ‘debrief’, where the findings and conclusions will be given to the client in a face-to-face presentation. The date of the debrief is usually agreed at the outset of the project. So, in qualitative market research, the bulk of the hard analytic thinking needs to take place in a specified and non-negotiable time period, typically only one to two weeks from the end of fieldwork.

Within these timescales, it seems obvious that minute analysis of the kind sometimes reported in academic work simply will not happen. Another major difference between academic and commercial work is in the degree of recording of the analysis process itself. There is simply not time in the latter to document every step of the analytic process for each job, nor, importantly, any apparent commercial justification for doing so. As will be seen later, a great deal of analysis happens at great speed and in the head of the researcher – the written record may be very sparse.

Given this rather obscure and often speedy process, how do sound conclusions emerge from commercial qualitative projects? As noted, experienced
qualitative practitioners acquire extensive practical experience of doing analysis and interpretation, along with accumulated knowledge of popular culture and practical knowledge of how people behave in research. Arguably, with these tacit and explicit knowledges, commercial qualitative researchers can arrive at robust conclusions faster and through less overtly formal processes than may be seen in an academic environment. However, it is also true that they are not required to submit to the same standards of methodological transparency, leaving room for inadequate or sloppy analysis. Later chapters examine the role of professional experience as a crucial factor in analysis and interpretation processes, but also take a critical look at issues of professionalism, transparency and accountability in commercial practice.

The quality of what commercial researchers do depends on quality of thinking; this is ultimately what they sell. The intellectual tasks involved in analysis look likely to get more, not less, difficult. The increasing interest in eclecticism, multiple methods and ‘bricolage’ will require even more refined analytic and interpretative skills. In order to make use of these expanded horizons – which are highly likely to bring benefits to clients – clients and researchers alike need to accept the crucial role actually already being played by analysis skills (see Chapter 10).

The nature and quality of the analysis to be carried out on a particular project seems to have escaped close attention in the routine negotiations between clients and agencies. Perhaps the making explicit of current practice might begin to make quality of analytic thinking (not just sensitive group moderating and impressive presentation) matter to clients, along with its implications for costs and timing.

**Business Management Issues: Processes, Team Working and Training**

Here it is useful to distinguish between sole operators offering qualitative market research and companies or agencies operating businesses in this field, both of which are common in the UK. There are certain issues that affect agencies in particular and which have an effect on analysis.

First, while it may be true for the individual operators, it is certainly the case for agencies that to build a profitable business from such an activity one must define and manage processes. Each project must have at least a broadly defined set of processes, from client briefing through to fieldwork and on to analysis and presentation of conclusions. What happens at each stage needs to be agreed and understood within the company so that it can be routinely implemented, managed and trained.

The ‘industrialisation’ which this to some degree represents offers particular challenges in the case of analysis and interpretation, which is by all accounts an amorphous and elusive intellectual process. It is difficult to define and describe, let alone train and manage.
Secondly, although reference is usually made here to ‘the researcher’ or ‘the analyst’, in many cases the individual will be working as part of a research team, or at least with a research partner. Solo operation is not uncommon, but many projects are in practice carried out by teams within research agencies.\(^3\) The benefits of team working are widely accepted within the industry, partly because the experience of collective working includes an element of mutual support, excitement and reward; the ‘buzz’ of cracking a problem together. This can be very important within what is a demanding, pressurised and stressful business.

There is a strong feeling that two or more heads really are better than one, allowing problems to be tackled from a variety of individual perspectives, and reducing some of the problems of the personal nature of qualitative interpretations. Usually researchers will split the fieldwork and carry out individual analysis, getting together to discuss interpretations and conclusions. Having more than one person working on the same material, not just at analysis but also throughout the fieldwork, is also regarded as a very productive, if expensive, research option. Having two fully briefed and experienced researchers working in tandem throughout all parts of a project is one of the ways in which some researchers try to maintain quality under increasing time pressure from clients.

More often, for commercial and organisational reasons, teams consist of one senior researcher and one or more less experienced researchers. Within an agency, it may therefore be routine for researchers to analyse not just their own but other researchers’ fieldwork on a project. Junior researchers may in particular take the bulk of the ‘functional’ work of analysis (see Chapter 5), reducing the bulk of the data and making it manageable; this is seen as a necessary and economical division of labour.

A third issue follows on from the last comment. Many do consider the analysis of interview data by someone other than the interviewer to be bad practice. However, this division of labour is also regarded as part of a training process, and reflects the difficulty acknowledged by experienced practitioners of formalising the later stages of the process, or ‘interpretation’ – a difficulty that has obvious effects on training. Current practice thus tends to have trainees learning by doing:

> ... we don’t formally teach it. It is taught, [but] it is the only piece that is taught on the job, in other words they kind of learn it by osmosis ... we have put more formal training around the visible skills than the invisible skills. (practitioner interview)

If juniors at least go through the elements of the process that can be described – making notes, annotating transcripts and so on – it is felt that they eventually begin to ‘see’ how interpretation takes place. Watching more experienced researchers make sense of data the trainee has worked on allows the demonstration or modelling of the elusive processes of ‘interpretation’; a good example of the transferring of tacit skills by a
process of ‘socialisation’ (see Book 1). The delegation of analytic work does have implications for practice in that, as will be discussed later, processes of functional analysis and of interpretation do seem to be intimately entwined.

**Beyond Analysis: The Role of Professional Experience and ‘Consultancy’**

Qualitative market research is an experience-based business. Skills are generally learnt by apprenticeship and by actually carrying out projects; cumulative experience in the business is highly valued by clients. It is worth repeating that a key apparent difference between academic and commercial researcher is the sheer volume and variety of research projects undertaken. It is not uncommon in the UK for an experienced researcher to conduct and analyse the equivalent of two or three group discussions per week, every week. The experienced practitioner thus accumulates knowledge in three areas:

- knowledge of **how people tend to behave** when interviewed for market research, individually or in groups;
- knowledge of **particular product or business fields**, or specific aspects of everyday life; and
- highly developed skills in **rapidly sifting, sorting and evaluating qualitative data** for meaning and for relevance to clients’ issues.

As discussed throughout this book, the primary use which researchers make of all this professional experience and knowledge is as a set of filters through which to examine data. This first of these in particular, knowledge of how people behave in groups and in market research, constitutes one of the vital validity checks performed by the researcher in the course of analysis and before conclusions are reached for the client (see Chapter 6).

In addition, though, while the bulk of commercial qualitative research still relies heavily on ad hoc data collection, commercial researchers are increasingly engaged in commercial activities that emerge directly from the second and third kinds of knowledge listed above.

Accumulated conceptual or cultural knowledge of particular product or business fields, or specific aspects of everyday life (shopping for food; managing household finances; voting) have a commercial value beyond any ad hoc project work. This kind of information is generally gathered within an individual project as context, in order to understand and evaluate responses to specific issues, products, brands or advertisements. But because individual researchers are working on many projects and often visit a product field, topic or target group again and again, they build a cumulative store of knowledge about this field, a resource within researchers and organisations which is rarely written down. There are forms
of consultancy which thus tap the researcher’s accumulated knowledge of a field without any ad hoc fieldwork stage, including workshop participation, or giving feedback on product or policy ideas (see Book 7).

Highly developed skills in rapidly sifting, sorting and evaluating qualitative data for meaning and relevance are finding another important commercial application in ‘interactive’ or ‘rolling’ or ‘workshop’ research. Here the researcher might facilitate a series of client/consumer (or other stakeholder) sessions or workshops, sometimes combined with other forms of research or internal client sessions (see Book 3).

Here the ideal outcome is defined not in terms of a debrief or report of ‘findings’, but in terms of the client’s experience and learning from the event itself. Analysis and interpretation is likely to be a collaborative process carried out during the session itself, involving researchers, clients and perhaps respondents. The client may need help in pulling out and evaluating the major conclusions from the session, but this must often be done during or immediately after it to have real benefit. The ability to do this kind of ‘live’ analytic work is clearly related to the ability to perform the more rigorous analysis of data after the event described in the bulk of this book, but it may also involve some different skills.

These two ways of using researchers’ skills are commercially useful to clients, although they may not conform to some definitions of ‘research’. They are resources which add to or even sometimes substitute for field-based research. Thus, in some of the work carried out by commercial qualitative researchers, the issues of analysis and interpretation are far less relevant than in other research fields. The provision of this kind of service is likely to increase as clients become more interested in insights that will help their business or organisational aims and, as seems to be the trend, less concerned with the detail or orthodoxy of the methods by which these insights are reached.

At the extreme, it must also be acknowledged that some researchers have long been valued by clients purely for their individual charismatic or ‘inspirational’ value. In some commercial situations, especially in advertising and new product development, it actually is not important from whom the ideas came, or on what they are based, but just that they help to solve a problem.

The comparison of commercial qualitative practice with other forms of qualitative enquiry throws up some real differences and points to its distinctive nature. Commercial qualitative research has developed for very particular reasons and under very specific conditions. Its thinking and practice is highly developed in some areas, for example in making highly creative use of the basic vehicle of the group discussion or focus group. While in practice sophisticated analysis and interpretative work is carried out, the articulation and understanding of these processes is relatively underdeveloped.

Market researchers arguably could learn and benefit from the extensive work done in this field within academia, but care needs to be exercised,
because the two sets of researchers do operate under different conditions, address different kinds of research problem, and are subject to very different evaluative criteria.

**KEY POINTS**

- A distinction needs to be made between commercial research, meaning research conducted by a researcher for a fee and commissioned by a third party, and ‘commercial’ research carried out to further commercial or profit-making aims.
- Contemporary commercial or market research suppliers now apply their expertise to problems and organisations far beyond the field of profit-making companies and they increasingly conduct research for public sector and other non-profit-making organisations.
- This book thus looks at the skills and practices of market or commercial researchers, bearing in mind that the object of their work may no longer always be ‘commercial’.
- Taking a professional or commercial approach towards conducting qualitative research involves adopting a dual role and a dual set of responsibilities – on the one hand towards the idea of impartiality and ‘good’ research and on the other towards the idea of maximising the usefulness of the research to the client.
- In analysis and interpretation, this involves taking a particular stance towards the client’s aims, assumptions and perspective. These serve both as things that need to be internalised by the researcher, given that the client’s interests drive the whole commercial contract, and as things that need to be kept external and analysed as part of the research process.
- Other specific features of the qualitative market research business which affect the way in which analysis and interpretation are carried out include: the types of problem addressed; the centrality of the group discussion as a field method; how ‘a project’ is defined; time frames for research; business management issues for research agencies; and the critical role of professional experience.

**NOTES**

1 The term ‘bricolage’ in the context of academic qualitative method is used by Denzin and Lincoln (1994/2000) but appears first in the commercial practitioner literature in Gordon (1999). See also Barker et al. (2001), Ereaut and Imms (2001), and Book 3 of this series, by Desai.
2 I am extremely grateful to Miriam Catterall of Queen’s University, Belfast for many of the insights discussed here, and for other invaluable observations used in this book. These are derived both from conversations concerning her on-going academic study of commercial research methods and from Catterall (2001).

3 It is now also sometimes the case that, with the agreement of both sides, client personnel will be regarded as an active part of the research team. In this arrangement a more collaborative stance is taken towards defining the problem, generating hypotheses and interpreting and evaluating findings.
This chapter explores how commercial analytic practice might be linked to formal theory from many sources, despite low explicit awareness of such connections among many practitioners. The possible influences on qualitative market research are very varied. The chapter argues that greater explicit awareness of the theory of practice (as well as ‘theories’ to use as tools) benefits researchers. For analysis and interpretation, at the most basic level this allows a move from unconscious competence to conscious competence, and beyond this potentially opens up new and productive ways of seeing.

Qualitative market research in the UK is generally taught by apprenticeship, novices learning primarily by watching and doing under the supervision of senior researchers. Formalisation of professional knowledge has been limited to the work of a few highly expert researchers who have set down their own experience, and to a small number of industry training courses outlining expert wisdom regarding good practice – effectively an ‘oral tradition’. Against this backdrop, there has been some active resistance to the idea of formal or academic research theory as relevant to practice, though there has been eclectic and creative borrowing of social science theory for specific applications.

So what relationship does commercial research have with different kinds of ‘theory’? There is now more interest in understanding the roots of ‘good practice’, but relating everyday practice to formal methodological theory has not been centrally important to the average qualitative market researcher. That is, most are not particularly concerned with the theory of what they do. This is not to say, however, that the same researchers are not concerned with forms of theory. Certainly, many projects will create ‘theory’, in the form of abstractions, conceptualisations or models built from data to help address client needs. Additionally, doing this may entail the use of ideas and models borrowed from psychology, sociology or elsewhere. This chapter looks at all of these notions of ‘theory’. It considers the possible relationships (whether recognised or not) between formal theory and the practice of commercial research, and the bodies of thought from
which researchers explicitly or implicitly draw ideas and inspiration in making sense of findings.

Everyday practice tends to be pragmatic; researchers focus largely on the problem of getting the job done for the client as well as they possibly can. It is quite hard to trace how far and in what way practice has actually been influenced by formal theory, such as that existing within the social sciences. Overt reference to known theoretical constructs and models, for example in research reports, is not a reliable measure. Researchers do not have a professional need visibly to relate their methods, findings or interpretations to formal or existing theory, unlike their academic colleagues. There may indeed sometimes be good business reasons not to do so, if a client is resistant to the idea of ‘theory’. So even if formal theory is known and used by a researcher, it may well sit at an implicit and hidden level. Researchers also use experience and native wit at least as much as any externally derived explicit knowledge in developing their skills and thinking – and from my observations may in fact end up in the same place by either route. These researchers can often be surprised to find an ‘official’ academic version of an approach they have developed intuitively through experience.

It is best therefore to see this as an examination of some possible and probable links between commercial research practice and identifiable bodies of thought, plus some examples of how researchers do make clear use of theoretical constructs drawn from specific sources.

**GENERAL FRAMEWORKS**

Intellectual frameworks, methodological assumptions and ways of thinking influence the whole qualitative research process – from problem definition to research design, interviewing and analysis. Several of the books in this series thus explore the question of what might have influenced today’s commercial qualitative practice, each giving a focus through its own topic. Here, the probable influences on analytic thinking are given priority, even though the data available to be analysed is inevitably shaped by processes of design and data collection.

What are the key intellectual traditions and movements traceable within qualitative market research? Some major divisions in ‘ways of thinking’ within the business have been pointed out by those researching and writing in this field (see also Book 1).

**Two Broad Approaches to Qualitative Enquiry**

As outlined in Book 1, a major difference in orientation appears between a form of qualitative market research that exists primarily in the USA and that commonly practised in the UK and Europe. This has been called the ‘cognitive’ vs. ‘conative’ difference (Goodyear 1998).
In the **cognitive** school, largely seen in the USA, people are interviewed in groups, but interaction between them is tightly controlled (and may be discouraged as ‘bias’). There will be strict adherence to the discussion guide agreed by the client, and there may be some quasi-quantitative techniques such as asking for a show of hands on an issue, or administering mini-questionnaires within the group. There will be a reliance on direct questions, often directed at the individual rather than the group, and little if any use of projective or enabling tasks (see Book 2).

The **analytic** focus is generally on summarising and evaluating what was said – this style of research tends to see less significance in non-verbal or other less visible data (see Krueger 1998). In many cases the interviewing event itself leads directly to the outcome, in that those clients viewing the fieldwork will go away and make decisions immediately based on what they have heard.

In the **conative** style, there is greater flexibility in interviewing and the researcher has greater autonomy over the way in which the problem is tackled. Emphasis is placed on interpretative activity carried out by the researcher both during and after the interviewing itself, and far greater significance is placed on hidden or subtle phenomena such as non-verbal behaviour and aspects of group process.

The **analytic** focus will thus be quite different and there is a need for a period of formal analysis before decisions based on the research are made. This is the normative style of research for the UK and forms the basis of the analytic practice described in this book. In fact, Roddy Glen notes that the USA and UK may differ in their linguistic cultures, the latter adopting a more ‘inferential’ position (personal communication). That is, it is more difficult in the UK to take language at face value; where ‘yes but’ and ‘I suppose so’ probably mean ‘no’, and where irony and understatement are everyday linguistic devices. In this context a ‘cognitive’ approach to research is seen as inappropriate and misleading.

Gordon (1999) makes a broadly similar distinction between what she terms ‘cognitive’ and ‘humanistic-cultural’ research, as do Smith and Fletcher (2001) with ‘rational/non-participatory’ vs. ‘emotional/participatory’ research. These differences are seen by Mike Imms (1999) to crystallise in a contrast between the ‘focus group’ (USA) and the ‘group discussion’ (UK), although in practice this terminological distinction is disappearing. What these ways of categorising research approaches all do is to draw attention to different ways of making meaning and to the privileging of, or setting great store by, different forms of data. The attaching of further labels to these approaches is not necessarily helpful since they do not map exactly onto broader epistemological schemes. In general terms, though, the ‘cognitive’ or ‘rational/non-participatory’ style adheres to a scientific or positivist model, whereas the ‘conative’ adopts an interpretivist model. In the latter, understanding, rather than ‘objective’ assessment or measurement in any form is the desired outcome.
Before moving on, it is important to note that the ‘cognitive’ represents just one style of US qualitative research – Goodyear notes that the division between cognitive and conative styles exists within the USA, not just between the USA and the UK or Europe. This is exemplified by Judith Langer’s description of her own extensive experience as a US moderator (2001). Most of the thinking she describes, although not all, would fit into a ‘conative’ model. She does report however having to resist pressures from clients to adhere to a more cognitive model – being told exactly what questions to ask, for example.

The fundamentally different assumptions made by these different approaches can be especially problematic in international work, or where a researcher from one culture conducts research for a client from the other. Especially when there is no apparent language barrier, as between the UK and the USA, client and researcher can be using entirely different research and analytic frameworks while thinking they are talking about the same thing.

**From Psycho-Social to Psycho-Cultural**

In addition to this broadly positivist/humanist spectrum, a number of writers have noted a progression in intellectual orientation within British qualitative market research, seeing it moving from a psychodynamically and psychologically dominated tradition to the inclusion of sociological/anthropological and cultural orientations (Barker 1999; Imms 1999). The influential paper by Chandler and Owen (1989) proposes such an evolution of orientation. The authors see a progression through three models of thinking:

- A ‘discursive’ model (where respondents are seen as able to tell the researcher all that is needed).
- A psychological model (whereby techniques are needed to access hidden but useful information within respondents).
- A sociocultural model (which is concerned with what respondents can help the researcher discover about shared meanings and cultural norms).

They suggest that this progression does not mean the abandonment of earlier models, but rather that the theoretical repertoire has expanded. The question of what respondents are seen as capable of providing is obviously an important one in looking at analysis and interpretation and aspects of this apparent progression are explored in the next section.

The current trend in the UK is firmly towards increasing eclecticism and methodological ‘bricolage’, including familiarity with a broad range of analytic frameworks and models of thinking with which to work (Barker et al., 2001; Gordon 1999).
CONNECTIONS TO SOCIAL SCIENCE

It would be fair to say that a distinguishing feature of contemporary qualitative market research in the UK is its enthusiastic (some might say wanton) borrowing of theory and method from a very wide range of human sciences. If an idea or theoretical construct proves to be useful to the individual researcher in interviewing or in addressing a client problem, it will be borrowed or adapted; if not, it will not. This cheerful appropriation of method and thinking, sometimes admittedly at a relatively simple or unsophisticated level, can be criticised as superficial and cynical, or celebrated as creative, eclectic and pragmatic. Whichever view is taken, current practice in analysis and interpretation owes debts to – or is at least connectable to – many disciplines and schools of thought, often without the conscious awareness of those practising in the industry. Some of the more obviously influential schools of thought with regard to the UK commercial research tradition are outlined below.

This is an attempt to sketch out the major philosophical and disciplinary sources which appear to inform or connect with current practice within analysis and interpretation. It is highly likely to be incomplete, but will perhaps open up consciousness and debate in this area. Being aware of a theoretical aspect to practical work not only potentially enhances the researcher’s understanding and use of this theory, but opens the way for experimentation and further eclecticism.

Before talking about specific models, though, note that the application of theory or ways of thinking to analysis and interpretation varies along two important dimensions:

**Naturalised Practice vs. Conscious Use of ‘Theory’** Models of thinking or intellectual traditions vary in how far researchers are conscious of using them. Some, like many ideas drawn from psychology and psychoanalysis, are so naturalised within the UK industry that to most they do not look like ‘theory’ at all, but are treated simply as ‘common sense’ or ‘just the way we do it’ (Valentine and Evans 1993). Other orientations, such as the integration of semiotics into qualitative methods, have been more recently adopted within the industry and are more publicly visible as ‘theoretical’.

This is a potentially damaging and divisive distinction, there being an unproductive tendency to assume that attachment to or interest in ‘theory’ cannot co-exist with commercial practicality or service to clients. One of the aims of this book is in fact to demonstrate that all analysis and interpretation is ‘theoretical’ and would be better recognised as such. Miriam Catterall, herself a commercial practitioner and academic, commented at a practitioner seminar in London:
Whilst practitioners have not engaged in 'academic' philosophical debates on ontology and epistemology, new ways of thinking about consumers and engaging with them during the research process are emerging. Whilst it would be arrogant to suggest that practitioners would benefit from these philosophical debates, there is a strong case for arguing that the assumptions that underpin the trends ... need to be made more explicit. In other words, it needs to be made very explicit that no technique, method, analysis or interpretation approach is theory- or assumption-free. (Catterall 2000: 7)

'Way of Seeing' vs. 'Toolbox' Approaches How extensively a certain theory or philosophy is applied also varies both by researcher and by project. A project may be analysed and interpreted entirely from a single theoretical perspective, this perhaps being the overt specialism and strength of the researcher. Another researcher (or indeed the same researcher on a different project) might simply 'borrow' a single idea or construct from an established theory and adapt or apply it very loosely to help frame or explain a set of findings. This division between theory as a 'way of seeing' and theory as a 'toolbox' is relevant again later when discussing specific processes of analysis and interpretation.

The rest of this section examines the two primary movements or sets of influence traceable within commercial qualitative research in the UK, both in influencing practice and in providing models to aid analysis. They are:

- The broadly psychological and psychoanalytic heritage.
- The contemporary influence of cultural models.

**Psychological and Psychoanalytic Models: The Psycho-Social Heritage**

Three roles are played by broadly defined theoretical traditions of psychology and psychoanalysis within commercial qualitative practice. All are relevant in trying to understand common practices of analysis and interpretation.

The first role is in **underpinning interviewing and group moderation** practices. Face-to-face interviewing, with individuals and groups, has been the staple method within the business, and theories of interpersonal processes have had much to contribute to what is 'good practice' in these specific situations (see Book 2). That is, researchers seek access to all kinds of information from which to draw useful conclusions for clients (see below), but they do it primarily through the vehicle of social interaction. Thus, psychological theories about interaction have greatly informed researchers and led to the development of practices specifically designed to maximise the usefulness of such encounters.

The same theories about interpersonal processes are thus also used in **analysis and interpretation** within commercial practice. Indeed, it
appears that the understanding and active use of process factors is a distinctive feature of commercial qualitative research, and the ways in which this is done are examined later in this book. Aspects of social psychology such as body language, notions of social acceptability, group effects like ‘shift to risk’ and theories of group behaviour are important not just to successful interviewing, but also to an evaluation and analysis of the material produced.

The third role of psychological and psychoanalytic theory has been in providing dominant models of what it is we are looking for from these interviews and groups. Most commercial research projects boil down to trying to understand what people do and why they do it (so as to try to affect this behaviour) and/or trying to predict what they might do in response to client activities. But, even as sensitive researchers, we cannot actually predict what people will do, nor even fully understand what they currently do, because we are not inside them – we have to infer this from material gained in the research process. This leads to the question of what kinds of material we choose to observe or elicit, from which we can draw inferences to address the client’s problem. It is in this area that psychology and psychoanalysis has played a key foundational role, albeit one that is now augmented by other philosophies – this is discussed further later in this chapter.

So what kind of psychological/psychoanalytic theory does qualitative market research currently use – and how?

It has been argued that the roots of qualitative market research as practised now in Europe lie in ‘motivational research’. This was a form of commercial application of psychoanalytic theory and technique developed by European psychoanalyst Ernst Dichter amongst others in the USA in the 1950s (Goodyear 1998; Gordon 1999; Imms 1999). While mainstream commercial research now encompasses a much broader theoretical and methodological base, psychoanalytic assumptions still underpin key aspects of practice. As soon as the research is framed as ‘going deeper’ or looking for ‘inner motivations’, there is some form of reference to a psychoanalytic world-view. This approach to research assumes:

(a) that such inner motivations exist, are not obvious but are uncoverable by techniques in research; and
(b) that uncovering them will provide useful material with which to address the client’s problem.

Explicit use of psychoanalytic theory is now uncommon in research (though see Cooper and Patterson 2000; Pawle 2000), but the principle of projection is very widely used indeed. This is the idea that one can access unspoken or unspeakable material from individuals by inviting them to project it onto a neutral object, often another person or situation. The use of this principle remains an important influence and this ‘projected’ material will need to be analysed.
Traditions of humanistic and other branches of psychology are more generally visible in how researchers define useful data with which to address client issues. So UK researchers will routinely try to elicit, look for or notice material seen as giving insight into the individual and/or social psychology of respondents. From this they will draw inferences with which to account for, or begin to predict, behaviour. Again, Joanna Chrzanowska discusses these important models and approaches in her consideration in Book 2 of the roots of interviewing and group moderation practice.

As noted earlier, the valuing of the psychological (often by implication the hidden or subtle aspects of behaviour) has become so ingrained in British commercial research culture that it can be in danger of not being recognised as being at all ‘theoretical’ but simply seen as ‘good practice’. It can therefore come as a shock to see a quite different set of underpinning assumptions in action – as is the case when European researchers encounter the far more ‘cognitive’ research common in the USA, discussed earlier. In this model, people are assumed to be quite capable of meaning what they say and saying what they mean. Here, the material sought to answer the client’s objectives is seen to lie chiefly within what respondents say.

It is not necessarily true (as is sometimes felt by UK researchers) that in doing this US researchers and clients are ‘wrong’ or misunderstand the qualitative process. Rather, they are using different assumptions about what material will give them useful answers to client questions. They use the same basic vehicle as we do – the focus group or interview – to access quite different things. We might have a more productive dialogue with those colleagues and clients by making our different assumptions explicit, and only then arguing our view of their relative usefulness.

Returning to UK practice, researchers have continued to explore the possibilities offered by models and theories from a psychological/psycho-social tradition. Three examples of this kind of appropriation and adaptation are discussed briefly here, these being amongst the better-known and more influential.

Transactional Analysis (TA) is a theory of personality and a psycho-therapeutic method. Although related to traditional psychoanalytic approaches, it is included as a separate category here because it is probably better known and more widely used than the latter, especially as a deliberately applied ‘toolbox’ model in analysis. Its origins have some relationship to Freud’s division of the personality into the Superego, Ego and Id; in TA the personality is seen as containing the three ego states ‘Parent’, ‘Adult’ and ‘Child’ (PAC):

- The Parent contains instructions, moral codes and ‘shoulds and oughts’.
- The Adult ego state evaluates and acts on information.
- The Child is home to playfulness and creativity.
All of us have and act from all three ego states, though we may have a state or states that are stronger or more preferred.

The ‘PAC’ model is simple to understand and use and TA has been found to be very useful to qualitative market research because it talks about transactions and relationships. Using TA as an analytic model, one might identify matched transactions (between the same ego states) or complementary ones (Parent to Child, for example) or more problematic ‘crossed’ transactions (where one person’s Parent is addressing someone else’s Adult, for example). This kind of analysis can provide a useful metaphor to look at relationships between brands and people, or between advertisements and their intended audiences (see Gordon and Langmaid, 1988 for a more extensive discussion of the use of TA in this way).

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) originated in the close study of ‘excellence’ in areas of communication, looking initially at successful psychotherapists and others, and has continued to evolve into a multi-stranded body of thought. As Joanna Chrzanowska says in Book 2, NLP is useful to researchers because it is essentially about ‘the structure of experience’ or ‘how people take in and process information’ (Book 2, p. 58). Its theories and models are probably used more heavily as process-management and interviewing aids, but some researchers do apply its thinking to analysis (and to the extent that elicitation and analysis are linked, this is inevitable).

A key idea from NLP relevant to analysis and interpretation is that of ‘perceptual positions’ – seeing things consciously and deliberately from several perspectives. Corr and Taylor describe the three principal perceptual positions:

- ‘First position’ means seeing things from one’s own point of view.
- ‘Second position’ means seeing things from the point of view of the other(s) involved in a situation.
- ‘Third position’ means seeing things from the point of view of an observer, or stepping ‘outside’ the situation (1996: 71).

From their study of qualitative analysis processes amongst experienced market researchers, they illustrate what they see as habitual and deliberate switching of positions. This links with ideas about qualitative analysis skills drawn from quite different sources. Spiggle, for example, talks about ‘immersion’ and ‘distancing’; or the analyst striving to be ‘inside’ the respondent to understand his/her world, but also pulling back to see this from the outside, perhaps to see the broader cultural meanings which are in evidence (1994: 500). Perceptual positions are a useful way to think about analytic processes and skills and are of obvious relevance to a researcher trying to ‘be’ in both the client’s and the respondent’s worlds (Chapter 2).

Another aspect of NLP that has been influential within commercial research concerns sensory channels; the visual, the auditory, the kinaesthetic (perception of movement or effort) and the digital (mathematical or
reasoned thinking) (Holmes 1989). People use all of these modes or channels, but may have preferred modes. This has implications for rapport-building and listening skills in interviewing, but also may have implications for analysis. It can be useful to think about matching analysis methods (listening to tapes, reading transcripts, watching videos) to researchers’ preferred modes. It can also be instructive to think about one’s preferred ways of thinking and expressing conceptual thoughts; once again the interplay and comparison of the client’s, respondent’s and researcher’s ‘ways of seeing’ can be useful in cracking a problem or delivering useful insight to the client (see Book 7 for further discussion of NLP in delivering usable findings to clients).

Theories from psychology of brain function and memory have more recently given rise to new thinking in qualitative market research. As researchers we ask people to tell us about their experience and we are often concerned with trying to understand past action, such as that of choosing one brand over another. There is a mass of theory about what constitutes a brand (see Book 5 for an overview and synthesis), but it makes sense that theories of how memories, associations and meanings might be stored and accessed will be highly relevant to brands. So there is a growing body of work looking at, for example ‘low involvement processing’ and developments in neuropsychology and applying this to client questions concerning advertising and brands and how these are perceived and stored by individuals (Gordon 2001; Heath and Howard-Spink 2000; and see Chrzanowska, Book 2).

Theories and ideas drawn from a psychological tradition clearly continue to be relevant and useful to commercial researchers. The next section looks at the emergence and incorporation into commercial practice of frameworks that focus more on the social and cultural.

Sociocultural Frameworks for Thinking: The ‘Cultural Turn’

It has been noted several times now that something of an intellectual sea change appears to have occurred within commercial research practice since its origins in the middle of the previous century. It is perhaps in the past two decades or so since the mid-1980s that this has been most noticeable, and it concerns the increasing inclusion in mainstream practice of what might broadly be called sociocultural frameworks for thinking.

Psychological models of respondents are generally considered to have a central and important place in commercial qualitative methods and thinking, and marketers and others still wish to feel they can understand and therefore address people in a psychologically informed way. However, a focus on individual and social psychology has begun to share its central place with sociocultural approaches. These, in analysing at the level of shared meanings, mesh with the mass communication objectives of many marketers and advertisers, political parties and governments. They involve a focus beyond the individual psyche, or even social psychology, onto the norms, values and collective shared meanings of a given
group and might include the way these are interrelated with the material goods characteristic of that group, including products such as popular culture and advertising.

In applying this thinking to interview data, there are some critical differences between a culturally oriented approach and one informed primarily by psychological thinking. The broad difference is outlined well in Chandler and Owen’s paper from the late 1980s: they propose that ‘the proper object of study is not the individual either as rational or psychological being. Our proper object of study is the web of cultural meaning and behaviour which we call consumer culture’ (1989: 298).

The primary qualitative market research vehicle at the time of writing remains the face-to-face unstructured interview or group discussion. So the influences of individual and group psychology on issues of communication and process – helping researchers make best use of this vehicle – remain significant. But definitions of what it is useful to look for to address client needs have been augmented by thinking drawn from a sociocultural research tradition (and some would argue may ultimately be replaced by them, see Barker 1999).

The ‘cultural turn’ in qualitative market research is clearly manifested in two ways.

• There has been an adaptation of the basic research vehicle – primarily the group discussion – to allow access to slightly different types of material than before. That is, researchers have developed ways of accessing (or inferring) the cultural through the personal and social, or the responses and discussions we hear in focus groups; some of these are discussed below and throughout this book.

• There has been an (more institutionally challenging and thus slower) expansion of the research methods repertoire itself. It is becoming more accepted that there are real limits to what people can tell us, even when we use subtle means to ask them, and we might legitimately go beyond these methods. We can look for insight into cultural forms and meanings, which might be of real relevance to clients, without ever speaking to people at all. This is seen in the growth of observational methods (although these are still often carried out in conjunction with conventional interviewing) and in the increasingly mainstream position of methods of ‘pure’ cultural analysis, including semiotics. These more radically different methods lie outside the scope of this book, which is concerned primarily with analysis of interview data, but are discussed within this series in Book 3.

What does it mean in practice to take a sociocultural perspective in analysing data from commercial research interviews? Anthropology has for many years provided qualitative market research with interesting and useful ideas about culture, although until more recently its influence has probably been less significant than that of psychology and psychoanalysis.
Ideas of ritual, for example, are ingrained in the commercial research culture (whether talking about the personal ‘ritual’ of making a cup of tea; or the mating ‘rituals’ of young men and women involving certain brands of clothing, music or alcohol). The anthropological ideas of symbolism and myth have also been harnessed to provide some useful analyses of brands and advertising and their ‘mosaics of meaning’ (Lannon, 1998). For the interested reader, McCracken (1990a, 1990b) provides an outline of a way to look at culture, meaning and consumer behaviour from an academic anthropological perspective.

However, the introduction of semiotics and other overtly different cultural approaches into marketing and market research probably played a significant part in opening up qualitative enquiry in UK market research to a wider range of methods. The overt use of semiotics in research and marketing was pioneered in Britain by Virginia Valentine, initially within the qualitative research agency TRBI and then within the specialist consultancy Semiotic Solutions. This quite different way of thinking was introduced into the qualitative market research field, and subjected to vigorous public debate, through the 1980s and 1990s. The debate may well have played a part in uncovering the theoretical underpinnings of existing practices, by at last causing some practitioners and clients to look carefully at their underlying and naturalised assumptions.

The brief treatment of cultural thinking and semiotics in market research given here comprises some examples of the use of such thinking as a tool for analysing ‘regular’ qualitative data, i.e. data collected from interviews and groups. Note though that in the UK and parts of Europe, semiotic analysis of cultural products such as packs, advertising and merchandising has a significant commercial presence alongside or indeed instead of traditional interview-based qualitative research (Desai offers an introduction to theory and practice in this field in Book 3).

A cultural approach essentially works with the idea that our individual realities and identities are culturally constructed and constantly negotiated and reformed within culture.

Chandler and Owen (1989: 298) describe the thinking which underpins such an approach:

1. That there is a realm of taken-for-granted meanings which underlies much behaviour, these levels often being inaccessible to rational or psychological probing.
2. That there are social forces and/or social/cultural dynamics which are the frame in which individual action takes place.
3. That people do what they do because they share in cultural meaning systems.
4. That these factors intrude upon, influence and determine behaviour.

This shifts the focus for research – at elicitation and analysis stages – to these meaning systems and cultural structures themselves; their
components, interrelationships and dynamics (Chandler and Owen 1989: 299).

Semiotic analysis in particular is concerned with how things mean what they do to people within a culture or sub-culture; how signs of all kinds are read within this context of cultural norms, imperatives and taken-for-granted meanings. (It can thus suggest how culturally meaningful communications can be constructed so they will be read within these norms and imperatives in the way the client intends.) The critical difference between cultural and other approaches to the research task is that the respondent is positioned differently. Rather than the individual being the object of study (even in a social context), the respondent is regarded as a resource through which cultural meaning can be read or inferred. The consumer in the group becomes the carrier of culture and his/her responses in research are living examples of such meanings and dynamics; as Chandler and Owen put it, ‘Ultimately the individual is not the subject of our research: he or she is the means of access to it’ (1989: 299).

One of the effects of taking this stance towards interview data is that one can use different aspects of it, or use the same aspects differently. So one might ‘hear’ the same things in a new way with a cultural rather than a psychological mindset. The field of ready meals gives an example. One of the features of repeated work in a product field is that one gets to know the ‘obvious’ things people are bound to say at the beginning of a discussion on a particular topic, and people in research groups on frozen or chilled ready meals generally begin by complaining vociferously that ‘they’re too small’.

- One could look at these comments using various psychological/psychoanalytic models – looking at the brand as a ‘withholding mother’, or examining the connections between women’s self-image, food and issues of control. However, with a ‘digging deeper’ orientation one might dismiss these obvious and familiar comments as entirely superficial and not connected to deeper reasons for action in the individual or the social group.

- With a cultural mindset, one can hear this ‘trivia’ differently and ask ‘too small for what – against what taken-for-granted criteria are they failing?’. What these respondents might be saying is that within our culture there is a clear and taken-for-granted idea of how much food it takes to constitute ‘a meal’ – and these products fail to meet this standard. They are still bought, because as real food objects they do fulfil a useful role – but they do not qualify for the culturally determined descriptor ‘meal’ and people are annoyed that they claim it. This alternative interpretation is potentially useful to a client in this field.

Simple clues to the presence of such taken-for-granted cultural meanings can be found in interview data within clichés and truisms, and in statements which assert things that ‘just are’; ‘you just can’t do that’ or ‘it wouldn’t be right’ or ‘you have to …’ or ‘you’re not supposed to …’.
Much of the published work in this area has emanated from the principals of the British company Semiotic Solutions, Virginia Valentine and Monty Alexander. Alexander (in Goodyear, 1998) and Valentine and Evans (1993) outline some particular analytic strategies which derive explicitly from linguistic theory. These take a radical view of the ‘rational’ and the ‘emotional’ in research responses, using a framework that positions both of these not within the individual, but as shared communication systems within culture. The interested reader can also look at other examples of their innovative applications of ideas from structural anthropology, structural linguistics and semiotics to commercial projects. These include the idea of cultural groupings or ‘style clans’ (Alexander and Valentine 1989); myth and folk tale as analytic tools for qualitative research (Valentine 1995); and a detailed example of how cultural thinking was implemented in a successful advertising campaign for British Telecom (Alexander et al. 1995). Alexander has also laid out the principles of this approach specifically for use and experimentation by qualitative researchers (2000).

The ‘post-structuralist’/‘social constructivist’ paradigm from which these approaches are drawn takes the view that our social and cultural realities and identities are entirely context-dependent and are endlessly constructed and re-constructed in daily life, for example through consumption. (A set of Open University texts provides an excellent and accessible introduction to contemporary thought concerning identity and consumption – Du Gay 1997; Du Gay et al. 1997; Hall 1997 see Mackay 1997; Woodward 1997). This is a generally interesting and useful line of thought in qualitative market research, although it can uncomfortably challenge the idea of a clear and consistent ‘reality’ out there, waiting to be uncovered, amongst those who would believe this (see Valentine 1995).

Seale (1998) explores the tension that arises between a ‘realist’ position and a ‘constructivist’ one in how we can regard interview data. He suggests that one can see ‘interview talk’ in two ways – as a window on an external reality (i.e. a resource for understanding that reality) or as a constructed, situated product of the interview itself (i.e. an interesting topic of study in its own right). The first is a ‘realist’ stance; the second a ‘social constructivist’ one. The latter suggests that rather than language telling us about an event, we can only look at how people construct accounts of their social world, drawing on available shared cultural meanings.

Most usefully, Seale suggests that these two approaches to data are not mutually exclusive, and that taking both into account is most likely to lead to useful research – what he calls ‘subtle realism’ (1999). It is not that real concrete things do not exist ‘out there’ or that we can never know them through interviews, but that we can also make use of knowledge of how different groups make sense of and talk about the same reality in different and sometimes conflicting ways. This stance is also suggested by Miller and Glassner (1997). This is in fact the practical position routinely taken by commercial researchers – we implicitly treat some interview data as (probably) ‘true’ in some external sense, but are also constantly aware
of and take into account the situated and specific nature of the interview itself.

Particular research approaches drawing on a social constructivist paradigm, which may be used intuitively and partially by commercial practitioners, exist in explicit and formulated ways in academia. A first example concerns the growing field of discourse analysis. This gives a framework and a set of methods for reading the implications of the precise form in which respondents choose to say what they say (see for example De Vault 1990; Tonkiss 1998; Wetherell et al. 2001). A second example would be the study of narrative as a fundamental mechanism by which we both tell and make sense of ourselves, our lives and the world (Berger 1997; Riessman 1993; Valentine 1995). These are two areas in which perhaps greater theoretical awareness and conscious competence might enhance the researcher’s skills base, but where formal understanding is as yet relatively undeveloped.

The following section looks at a possible influence on analytic practice in commercial qualitative research which comes from a quite different source – that of quantitative market research.

THE INFLUENCE OF QUANTITATIVE MARKET RESEARCH

The temptation to define qualitative in relation to quantitative research is almost irresistible. Some may dismiss any such comparison as sterile, but in market research the two approaches are frequently compared – and this may actually account for some aspects of qualitative analysis and interpretation practice.

At its most simple, qualitative research is characterised as involving ideas of understanding, not counting; of answering ‘why?’, ‘how?’ and ‘what kind of?’ questions, rather than ‘how many?’ (see Book 1 of this series for a more detailed account of this). Although it would be easy to think of qualitative as in some way ‘the opposite of’ quantitative research and as competing with it, the two paradigms more accurately represent different but complementary ways of seeing the world, producing different forms of knowledge.

That aside, it is consistently demonstrated in practice that unstructured and interactive interviewing produces contextualised, rich, complex description and understanding of a group, an activity or other phenomenon. Qualitative research in the marketing or organisational context allows the teasing out of subtleties of meaning and the drawing of informed inferences about behaviour. The benefits of this to marketers, advertisers and managers working in increasingly complex and competitive worlds, where marginal differences (such as those between brands) really count, are demonstrated by the growth of the qualitative market research industry.

Qualitative and quantitative research clearly draw on different methods and frameworks, often described as positivist vs. humanist (Gabriel 1990;
Goodyear 1998; Imms 1999). Hirschman describes the ‘humanist’ view of marketing (with qualitative as the preferred research method of such a philosophy) as constituting an entirely different ‘metaphysic’ to that of the positivist paradigm of traditional marketing thought, effectively offering a ‘parallel path’ to knowledge (1986: 238–9). She regards these metaphysical positions as impossible to reconcile. In practice, though, in market research they clearly do co-exist and are used alongside each other; there are plenty of practitioners successfully producing hybrid or integrated qual–quant projects. Smith and Fletcher (2001) offer a view of how reconciliation can take place, for example between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ information from different sources. From an academic perspective, too, Seale (1999) illustrates ways in which qualitative and quantitative methods and data can be successfully and powerfully combined.

But Patton refers to ‘the special seductiveness of numbers in modern society’ (1990: 479) and this is reflected within the business of market research. Given the general cultural persistence of positivist thought – the idea of ‘hard’ ‘objective’ science as paramount – qualitative market research has often been cast in the role of the lesser adjunct to ‘proper’ quantitative research. It has suffered the explicit or implicit criticism that its activity is in some way ‘unscientific’ and, by extension, second-rate (Jackson 1997). It has been seen as useful for generating hypotheses or helping design questionnaire wording, but fatally flawed in areas where objective examination or evaluation of phenomena are needed – and where such objective evaluation is by implication the only useful form of knowledge (De Groot 1987). This pejorative comparison has been contested for some time and is consistently challenged by the popularity of qualitative research amongst its buyers and users.

Patton also notes that ‘Numbers do not protect against bias; they merely disguise it. All statistical data are based on someone’s definition of what to measure and how to measure it’ (1990: 480). A more enlightened and increasingly common view thus sees qualitative enquiry as providing a knowledge more dependent – or perhaps more overtly dependent – on the subjectivity of the researcher. This subjectivity and the complex interaction of problem, respondents, researcher and client nevertheless provides a valuable and legitimate form of knowledge. (The comparison of qualitative with quantitative market research and positivist scientific method does however raise important general issues about reliability, validity and ‘truth’; these are tackled in Chapter 9.)

Despite the maturation of the qualitative market research business and the evidence of its value to clients provided by repeat buying, the comparison with quantitative or survey research remains a sensitive one to many qualitative researchers. (This has not been helped by current popular misconceptions about the uses to which ‘focus groups’ have been put by British political parties.) It seems possible that vestiges of the negative influence of the comparison remain in aspects of analysis and interpretation practice, albeit at a low level, in terms of:
• Some ambivalence about ideas of counting responses.
• Uneasiness about ideas of ‘objectivity’, science and the role played by theoretical orientation.
• A determined and creative pursuit of the ‘hidden’, specifically that which cannot be accessed by quantitative methods.

**Counting Responses and ‘Reportage’**

Using counting in analysing qualitative data is something that many British qualitative researchers feel is naive and bad practice, since they know enough about probability and sampling theory to know one cannot draw legitimate quantitative conclusions from such small and non-random samples. Yet it is also common for qualitative debriefs and reports to contain language which alludes to ideas of counting or weighting: ‘most people felt …’; ‘only a minority liked the idea that …’ and so on (Overholser 1986). There is thus ambivalence and implicit confusion about the role and legitimacy of this kind of analysis.

The consensus within market research in the UK is that qualitative research must offer more than counting or assessing the weight of response. Insight, understanding and useful interpretation does not come, it is felt, just from seeing patterns of incidence. This may parallel what Seale calls ‘the critique of numbers within the creation myth of qualitative research’ (1999: 119). But, in many projects, patterns and simple weighting of responses are very useful to clients and legitimately form a significant part of what is reported. Some kind of counting is also inevitable since it is at least partly by processes of numerical evaluation of some kind that we find ‘patterns’ in the material and decide which are the ‘most important’ concepts or issues (Griggs 1987; Tesch 1990). It seems important to understand that a version of counting is vital to seeing patterns and meaning in data, and in creating ‘insight’, and that we may be mistaken in rejecting it so vehemently.

However, it is true that the value of interpretative qualitative research also comes from looking at data in quite different ways. Many researchers know that the key to understanding a phenomenon or a problem may actually come from the insight provided by one respondent in one group – the remark which suddenly causes a shift of perspective and which enables the researcher to make sense of the whole (Robson and Hedges 1993). Only one person ‘said it’ and this can cause nervousness, especially in a client relying on the findings. But experienced researchers overcome this, defending the use they make of such remarks by the ‘validity’ of the whole explanation (see Chapter 9). The difficulty is that we have had no explicit understanding of how this process works. Later we will see how it can be understood by using a quite different framework – the idea of the ‘hermeneutic circle’ – to describe and explain what research practitioners actually do in analysis.

Whether the non-numeric aspect of qualitative analysis is conceptualised as gaining ‘depth’ or ‘insight’, if a qualitative project fails to deliver
this in addition to assessing the weight and pattern of responses, it may be seen simply as ‘bad’ quantitative research, i.e. small-scale and badly controlled. When quasi-quantitative reporting of respondents’ comments, roughly weighted by incidence, is all there is, this is given the pejorative label of ‘reportage’ (see Glen 1997). Many British practitioners seek very strongly to distance themselves and their work from this descriptor.

‘Objectivity’, Science and the Role of Theory

Qualitative market research seems also to have developed an uneasy relationship with ideas of ‘objectivity’. This again perhaps derives from the historical comparison with quantitative research and the persistence in researchers’ and clients’ minds of certain tenets of positivist scientific method. The difference between ‘objective’ and ‘impartial’ needs to be clarified here.

• The term ‘objective’ is used here to mean the traditional scientific belief that facts and phenomena, even social ones, are ‘out there’ in some way; that they exist as stable truths outside of and potentially unaffected by the researcher, waiting to be found. This is an idea which has been contested within many fields and the existence of truly ‘objective’ observation or science is widely challenged, even within the hardest of natural sciences. It seems inescapable that qualitative research cannot be truly objective in this sense, no matter how hard we try to be ‘scientific’. The researcher, and the way he or she sees the world, are inevitably part of the process and as such will affect it.

• However, one part of the ‘dual role’ of the commercial researcher was earlier described as being impartial – this means being impartial to the outcome of the research and taking as unbiased and value-free a view of it as possible. This remains a legitimate aim in qualitative (and indeed quantitative) research.

Another reason for making this point is that commercial researchers may confuse impartiality and objectivity not only with each other but also with avoidance of theoretical bias.

• Qualitative researchers may suffer from the feeling that, in order even to stand on the same stage as their quantitative colleagues, they must be ‘objective’ and, it follows, free from any theoretical orientation that might bias the ‘true’ findings. There has also perhaps been a cultural tension between ‘pragmatic’ commercial life and any idea of philosophy and theory beyond that of economics and ‘hard’ science. For many years researchers rejected the idea of discussing formal ‘theory’ as unnecessary or even dangerous (and possibly pretentious), whilst clearly using implicit theory every day – a theme raised earlier in this
chapter. This perhaps accounts for the reluctance, now thankfully disappearing at least in the UK, to engage with explicit theory.

**The Pursuit of the Hidden**

Qualitative practitioners in market research work within the same business sector and for the same clients as quantitative or survey researchers. In this context they have, not surprisingly, striven to develop a professional territory, specifically things which qualitative market research can provide for marketing or other organisations which quantitative cannot. This is one of the ways in which occupational groups seek to specify and professionalise their activities (Fournier 2000). (It should again be noted that some individuals conduct both qualitative and quantitative projects, but on the whole practitioners do specialise.)

Going beyond counting or measurement, looking for subtle clues with which to reach an understanding of complex phenomena, is a natural outcome of adopting a qualitative mindset. But it is also perhaps driven in this historical context by the profession-building desire of a qualitative research community to put tangible distance between quantitative and qualitative methods.

This has led to the placing of great value on accessing the ‘hidden’; that is, material only accessible through unstructured, interactive, face-to-face encounters between research subjects and trained researchers themselves; things which, bluntly, are specifically untranslatable into the survey instrument of the questionnaire. In practice, this has meant the use and adaptation at both explicit and implicit levels of a very wide range of theory and method drawn from an equally wide range of human science, as outlined above.

**IDENTITY AND ‘THE CONSUMER’**

Within qualitative market research there is a further crucial but effectively invisible set of assumptions that underpin practice and must affect how researchers think in analysing findings. It concerns how they think and talk about what has been the subject of much market research – ‘the consumer’. (Again note that contemporary market research now reaches much further than this consumer focus.) Within academia there is increasing interest in consumption and consumers; Miller (1995) offers a comprehensive survey of consumption studies across a wide range of disciplines. Valentine (1995) argues strongly that qualitative researchers should be similarly concerned and should adopt a role as ‘consumptionists’. There are two points to make here.

- On one level, it is easy to see that there have been consequences for the scope of market research in ‘creeping consumerism’ or the re-framing
of users of public services of all kinds as ‘consumers’. This has brought some types of organisation, such as museums, galleries and educational institutions, into the field of market research for the first time (Desai, Book 2; Marks 2000).

- Beyond this, writers have observed that ‘constructions’ of the consumer – the ways in which ‘consumers’ are talked, written and thought about – have changed and continue to change (Gabriel and Lang 1995). These constructions have real consequences both for those so defined (which of course includes all of us as consumers) and for how research is carried out. For example, whether one sees the research respondent as passive recipient of a brand ‘message’, or as one capable of actively participating in making meaning from such a message (by accepting, rejecting, negotiating with or even subverting it), makes a real difference to how one goes about researching advertising (Lannon and Cooper 1983).

Gabriel and Lang (1995) identify nine current and to some extent competing constructions of the consumer, including ‘chooser’, ‘communicator’, ‘explorer’ and ‘identity-seeker’ (which might sound familiar to a commercial qualitative researcher) and ‘victim’, ‘rebel’ and ‘activist’ (which are less comfortable and less familiar ways to think about what we generally just call ‘the consumer’). Gabriel and Lang’s treatment is politically critical, too, which also provides challenging food for thought for those making a living supporting a particular political and economic system.

There is another very important change in thinking in this area, highly relevant to analysis and interpretation, and this concerns the idea of shifting identities. A familiar and common analytic and reporting device in use in qualitative market research is the ‘typology’. This is designed to describe and characterise differences between respondents displaying different behaviours or attitudes. It would generally consist of a set of descriptive names of groups or ‘types’, attached to thumbnail sketches of ‘typical’ behaviour and/or attitudes for each described group. Typically respondents might be divided in terms of their behaviour in one specific respect (‘weekend hobbyist’ cooks vs. ‘everyday pragmatic’ cooks) or their response to the client’s brand (‘young aspirers’ vs. ‘sceptical rejectors’, for example). But the descriptions can go much further, claiming to categorise far broader attitudes and lifestyles.

Generating typologies and offering them to help formulate marketing or other plans relies heavily on the assumption that individuals have stable attitudes, consumption patterns and a stable identity. This model of identity seems to be the norm; for example, respondents are criticised as ‘fickle’ if repeat measurement does not result in repeated results. But stability of identity, lifestyle and attitude is a notion which is under attack in academia and recently too in the commercial world.

It is now questioned whether an ‘identity’ displayed in one context – however sensitively researched – has any kind of bearing on other aspects
of that person’s life, or indeed on the same aspect displayed in another
case. That is, in the ‘postmodern condition’, given the speed and com-
plexity of the contemporary world, we might better regard individuals as
occupying myriad roles and as displaying multiple identities according to
the specific situations in which they find themselves. Our only real iden-
tities, it is suggested, are the sum of these shifting identities, always pro-
visional and always in flux. Our experience of ‘self’ and our ‘needs’ and
‘preferences’ will thus be as much a product of a specific situation as they
will be of any more sustained personality or identity. In the commercial
literature this idea has begun to be explored, emerging for example
through the notion of ‘need.states’ (Leith and Riley 1998; Valentine and
Gordon 2000) and also through the Henley Centre’s idea of ‘modal iden-
tities’. It has yet to be fully adopted and its implications for commercial
practice developed.

There is not space here to explore fully ideas about identity or ‘the con-
sumer’. It is worth noting though that we tend to use a limited repertoire
of ways of thinking about those we interview and the identities they dis-
play to us in research, and that it could be instructive to be aware of some
others.

So, skills and knowledge in qualitative market research are practice-based
rather than theory-based and the business tends to think of itself as prag-
matic and effective rather than theoretically profound. However, it does
operate with a theoretical base, in that routine practice can be seen to con-
tain taken-for-granted ideas about:

• what it is useful to know to contribute to marketing or organisational
decisions;
• the nature of the object of enquiry (often though not always ‘the con-
sumer’); and
• how useful knowledge might best be acquired.

Three broad possible influences on these assumptions have been suggested:
the adaptation and selective raiding of a wide range of human science
theory; the relationship of qualitative to quantitative market research and
the need for professional differentiation; and some as yet under-examined
notions of how we think about identity and ‘the consumer’. It is useful to
acknowledge these assumptions for a number of reasons:

• To know why we do what we do; to do it better by being more aware
of where we start from.
• To be able to experiment with the effects of making different
assumptions.
• To see some differences in practice as possibly reflecting different sets
of assumptions, rather than necessarily representing ‘good’ or ‘bad’
practice.
The chapters that follow take these themes and apply them to examination of the processes of analysis and interpretation seen in commercial practice.

**KEY POINTS**

- Qualitative market research is essentially a practice-based activity and researchers take a pragmatic and highly eclectic view of formal or academic theory.
- It is possible to trace connections between ideas of good practice and methodological theory drawn from psychological, social and cultural fields, but many practising and experienced researchers are largely unaware of (and unconcerned with) these connections. There is, though, evidence of increasing interest in the theory of qualitative market research practice.
- Researchers do routinely create ‘theory’ in terms of conceptualisations, abstractions and models built for clients from data. In doing this, ideas, models and frameworks for thinking are borrowed freely from the human sciences; in some cases consciously and in other cases less so.
- There is evidence of a broadly psychological heritage informing not just interviewing practice but also frameworks for analysis, now supplemented by ideas drawn from a sociocultural perspective.
- It is suggested that greater awareness of theory which does or could underpin practice will benefit researchers both by bringing current perspectives and skills into conscious rather than unconscious competence and by opening up new ideas and possibilities.
- The relationship between qualitative and quantitative market research, and the historical need for professional distance between these fields, is suggested to have had a real effect on some of the features visible in qualitative analytic practice. The continuing usefulness of some of these ideas is questioned.
- Other implicit theory which could benefit from closer examination includes that of identity, consumption and ‘the consumer’.

**NOTES**

1 Somewhat confusingly for my purposes, they call this the ‘analytic paradigm’.
2 I am grateful to Joanna Chrzanowska for these examples and for her helpful discussion of this and many other topics.
PART II

Processes in Analysis and Interpretation
The Experience of Analysis and Interpretation in Commercial Qualitative Research

This chapter examines some of the ways in which practitioners in qualitative market research have described their own experience of ‘A&I’ and begins a conceptualisation of this process. Recognising it as complex and multi-layered, the chapter draws out some common themes and suggests a working model for the process, some way in which it can be described and understood, for the purposes of analysing it further. It makes use of the idea of the ‘hermeneutic circle’ as a useful model of qualitative interpretation practice, though it suggests that commercial research implements a particular form of this.

HOW DO RESEARCHERS TALK ABOUT THE ‘A&I’ PROCESS?

Some clear definitions of the key terms ‘analysis’ and ‘interpretation’ would be a good way to begin this chapter. Unfortunately, such definitions are slippery and inconsistently used. Susan Spiggle, writing about academic consumer research, makes a comment that might equally apply to commercial practice:

Investigators use both analysis and interpretation, employing them in a linear or circular way, discretely or in tandem, in a more or less systematic fashion, with more or less conscious deliberation, and with more emphasis on one than the other. ... We have no conventionally recognised vocabulary for describing these inferential procedures. Nor do we generally make conceptual distinctions between analysis and interpretation, frequently using them interchangeably. Further, both terms refer to the process of arriving at conclusions, as well as the final product – the output of these conclusions. (1994: 492)

Later in the chapter some working definitions are suggested, not because it has become clear how to separate the processes neatly, but because it is essential to do so in order to talk about them further.

So, the analysis and interpretation of a qualitative project is experienced as a complex and elusive process, often difficult for practitioners to describe at anything other than the practical level. Researchers can talk
about their physical methods for revisiting interview materials – listening to tapes, making notes, annotating transcripts and so on. They can also talk about how it feels to go through the process; it is demanding and difficult, but often satisfying and rewarding. Researchers may experience it as an intense intellectual and emotional process (see for example Gordon and Langmaid 1988; Wells 1991). But practitioners apparently have more difficulty describing or conceptualising the intellectual steps that get them from tapes or transcripts to a fully thought-out set of findings and conclusions for the client and in this they are joined by academic colleagues.

Corr and Taylor comment on the ‘identity level’ involvement of researchers (1996: 67–8) – engaging with and ‘living’ the process. Clearly there is something important going on that is far more than abstracting a few key themes and bundling them into some answers for the client, something which involves significant engagement of the researcher and his/her existing knowledge and experience with the problem and with the data.

One way to start tackling this problem is to ‘analyse analysis’ – to look at elements within practitioner descriptions that might offer themes with which to start a conceptualisation of the process. This results in a number of general themes, three of which are explored here in turn:

- The ‘all-at-oneness’ of ‘analytic’ and ‘interpretative’ tasks.
- The idea of movement towards closure; working to objectives and to a deadline.
- Circularity and the interplay of hypotheses and data.

‘Analytic’ and ‘Interpretative’ Tasks – and their ‘All-at-Oneness’

Other writers have offered analyses of analysis and interpretation in qualitative market research. Within these, there is often some kind of intuitive split between processes of ‘analysis’ and processes of ‘interpretation’, made explicit by Alan Hedges in his distinction between ‘functional’ and ‘interpretative’ problems (Hedges 1983) or between ‘data handling’ and ‘thinking’ (Hedges 1990). This is echoed by Gordon and Langmaid in their division between ‘the mechanics’ and ‘interpretation’ (1988: ch. 10).

Roddy Glen (1997: 124) develops this further and offers a four-part description of the processes involved:

- Interpretation (level 1) – what do respondents each feel and mean?
- Analysis – sifting, differentiating, separating, sorting, ordering the data.
- Interpretation (level 2) – what patterns emerge, and what do they mean?
- Interpretation (level 3) – what does it mean re the ‘Client’s Thing’?

We can start to see some consistent distinction between physical or functional operations of ‘analysis’ – sifting, sorting and so on – and mental processes of ‘interpretation’. So on one level this provides a solution –
researchers do physical things to data, and ask themselves questions about it. But accounts of how it actually works in practice resist simple categorisation.

Specifically, it seems processes of analysis and of interpretation are completely overlaid and interdependent and both permeate the project.

- ‘Analysis’ does tend to involve focused functional activity at a particular point in a job, but is often felt to run through the whole project in some form. We are in some sense always sorting and sifting in the course of interviewing, not just at the formal analysis stage.
- Similarly, the activity of ‘interpretation’ (or solving the problem, or making meaning within a specific project) is experienced as a rolling process, which also pervades the project and which begins with the first phone call. Rachel Ormrod describes this view as ‘total immersion – a case of every whisker alert from the moment a project is commissioned’ (1989: 90).

So the analyst is engaged in various physical and cognitive tasks, throughout the whole project, which cumulatively and together constitute the route through which meaning and understanding are derived. Alan Hedges, in a working paper produced as part of the study reported in Robson and Hedges (1993), comments that

> It is useful to distinguish between these two processes [of ‘data handling’ and ‘thinking’], because we often get in a muddle if we confuse the two, as it is very easy to do. On the other hand it can be fatal in qualitative research to act as if these are two distinct and unconnected processes, because good qualitative research is to a large extent an organic whole, and in best practice the ‘data handling’ and ‘thinking’ processes are knitted firmly together as an interactive whole – handling the data in itself generates ideas, and thinking about the problem controls and guides the way in which we handle the data. (1990: 1)

A key theme developed throughout later chapters flows from this: functional processes feed interpretative ones, but interpretative thought guides functional analysis.

For the purposes of the rest of this book, the intuitively meaningful division between ‘analytic’ or functional processes and ‘interpretative’ processes of deriving meaning is adopted, but the two should continue to be seen as concurrent and inevitably linked in this way.

**Movement Towards Closure: Working to Objectives and to a Deadline**

Although researchers insist that in one sense analysis and interpretation are inextricably linked and pervade the whole research process, there is also movement throughout the life of the project in the emphasis given to
these linked processes. So, at the intensive post-fieldwork stage, from a focus on the sifting, sorting and reducing of material generally called ‘analysis’, the researcher will move through lower-level abstractions and conceptualisations to the ‘bigger picture’ and ultimately to the emergence of conclusions and recommendations for the client (these latter stages commonly called ‘interpretation’). This is commonly experienced, as described by Robson and Foster, as a shift from a process of sorting to moments of ‘eureka’ (1989: 85).

Compared with some forms of academic research, where the range and focus of the research and the precise definition of the research problem may be kept very broad for a long time, two elements effectively constrain – or maybe sharpen – the analysis of data in the commercial world. First, it is important to reiterate that commercial qualitative analysis takes place firmly within the context of the organisational objectives of the client:

From the first phone call every decision on that project is part of the analysis, as I see it, and the most important part of any researcher taking on a project is internalising and appropriately understanding the objectives. If that doesn’t happen you can forget analysis. (Practitioner interview)

Secondly, as part of the routine contract between research buyers and research suppliers, analysis also takes place within predetermined and often short periods of time (Lillis, Book 7).

So commercial researchers have little opportunity simply to repeatedly analyse or play with data; there has to be an inexorable shift in emphasis from open-minded analysis to sharp extraction of organisational implications. This entails a movement from detail to generality, from open to closed, from concrete to abstract and from multiple hypotheses to a single ‘best fit’ account. The issue of ‘closure’ is revisited in a later chapter.

Circularity and the Interplay of Hypotheses and Data

At first glance, the description in the previous section (a progression through time of linked processes of analysis and interpretation) looks like a linear process, albeit a complicated one. However, looking more closely at how researchers describe their experience, there is always a sense in which deriving meaning and reaching conclusions from qualitative market research data, even within very short spaces of time, is an iterative or circular process.

Hypotheses are generated from the very beginning of the project, many researchers regarding the development of the discussion or topic guide as a significant analytic task (Chrzanowska, Book 2; Glen 1997). But as the project progresses many ideas and lines of thinking about the client’s problem will be tried out and refined or discarded. Throughout fieldwork and certainly in formal analysis, there is often a sense of holding a lot of
detail in one’s head and letting it ‘swim’, combined with more deliberate excursions into particular lines of thought or hypotheses.

Images of the experience given by practitioners can be colourful: ‘the data swims around in my head and emerges as a torrent’ (Evans 1989); ‘an unravelling’ (practitioner interview); ‘a kaleidoscope’ (practitioner interview) and so on. There is some sense of progression (the torrent, the unravelling) but there is, within the progression, also some kind of iteration or circularity. Practitioners describe in various ways how exposure to the detail of the material suggests ideas, but also how ideas are refined through re-contact with the detail. This is done again and again and is described as, for example, ‘moving in and out of the detail’, or ‘test and flex’ (practitioner interviews).

Although qualitative analysis is sometimes described as an inductive form of reasoning, where general principles are drawn from examination of data, there is clearly a deductive aspect to this work, with hypothesis-testing also going on, even if at a micro level. Jonathan Fletcher (2000) suggests that it is not useful to think of qualitative analysis as either ‘inductive’ or ‘deductive’ but as both. He proposes that ‘data are dumb but beliefs are blind’ – that we need frameworks in order to think about data but we need data to give us frameworks. The historian Ginzburg (1989) offers the notion of ‘clues’ as a way to look at such an inductive/deductive process, a concept which Fletcher applies to qualitative market research. The ‘clues’ idea does offer a useful model of some aspects of commercial practice, especially the way in which experience provides a benchmark of prior knowledge (of how people behave in market research groups, of how people tend to think and talk about a particular product field, or of conceptual models of behaviour) against which we are highly sensitive very small observations or ‘clues’. Fletcher suggests that we are most effective as researchers if we are aware of a wide range of possibly relevant frameworks and knowledges, and then ‘shuttle between observation and prior knowledge’ (2000: 21).

A similar set of images and thus a potentially useful model of what is happening in qualitative market research analysis is offered by the idea of hermeneutics and the ‘hermeneutic circle’, whereby understanding is generated through an on-going back-and-forth process between data and concepts. This provides a working model used throughout this book to look more closely at analysis and interpretation practices, although once more the specific conditions of commercial research mean that we implement and operate ‘the hermeneutic circle’ in a very particular way.

THE ‘HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE’ WITHIN COMMERCIAL QUALITATIVE PRACTICE

Hermeneutics, originally concerned with deciphering the meaning of ancient texts, considers the way in which meaning is derived and
interpretations reached. It provides an established methodological account of how qualitative interpretations are produced. In the ‘hermeneutic circle’ the researcher moves back and forth, ‘studying parts in relation to the whole and the whole in relation to parts. ... combined with an analytic flow between abstract and concrete’ (Kincheloe and McLaren 2000: 286). Holbrook and O’Shaughnessy describe it thus:

In the Hermeneutic Circle, an interpreter’s tentative grasp of the whole text guides an initial reading of its parts. The detailed reading, in turn, leads towards a revision of the original overview. This dialogue between reader and text then proceeds through subsequent iterations of a circular process that, far from being vicious, tends towards its own correction in the direction of increasing validity. (1988: 400)

Gabriel describes it for the market researcher, in relation both to fieldwork and to analysis:

If you are listening to a group discussion or an interview properly you are all the time switching between hearing detail, and forming global schemes and belief systems into which the details fit. You are then, perhaps, testing your belief system by asking questions or making suggestions and listening to the resultant discussion. This process of fitting details to the whole, and then modifying the whole to accommodate the details, and then listening for more details, and so on round and round is called a hermeneutic circle. When the circle becomes stable, that is when new details can be accommodated by your belief system, without changing it, even though you go on testing for a while by considering more detail, then you are said to have ‘closed’ the hermeneutic circle by understanding the situation and your understanding is valid. (1990: 514; original emphasis)

So the researcher will develop and tie together the everyday detail of people’s lives (the ‘text’), with abstract ideas, conceptualisations and models of it (the ‘reading’) so that understanding of each is grounded in the other. The utility of this within market research is obvious – clients will find it more useful and of longer-term benefit to have models and frameworks for understanding people’s behaviours than they will to have just the detail of particular respondents’ behaviours – but the former must be grounded in the latter to have validity.

This does raise the question of hypotheses and how far, at what stage and with what degree of detail hypotheses (or Gabriel’s ‘global schemes and belief systems’) are produced. As Gabriel (1990) notes, hermeneutics bears an important relationship to the idea of ‘rolling hypotheses’ for which some highly regarded practitioners have described their own preference (Glen 1997; Wells 1991). Even when such ideas are not accorded the status of ‘hypotheses’, many acknowledge that for the more experienced practitioner each group or interview becomes in some way ‘a development of the previous one, used for checking out current hypotheses, discarding
some and introducing new ones' (Robson 1988: 14). Kirk and Miller actually propose this as a defining characteristic of qualitative research; ‘the location of hypothesis-testing activity in the discovery, rather than the interpretation, phase’ (1986: 67).

Corr and Taylor (1996), in their detailed study of seven experienced practitioners, noted that these researchers differed noticeably in terms of the adoption of rolling hypotheses. They comment, interestingly, that an overt hypothesising approach seems to make the research process less emotionally costly for the researcher, perhaps because this ensures that at any point, if called upon, the researcher could provide ‘an answer’, even a provisional one, for the client. Those who avoid crystallising hypotheses until a later stage seem to pay an emotional price.

It is perhaps in this area that the qualitative method seems most open to positivist and quantitative critique; why, after all, should rolling hypotheses not be regarded as self-fulfilling prophesies? Glen (1997) and others advocate the development of many hypotheses before the fieldwork stage, let alone during it. Why should we not see ‘evolving ideas’ as the researcher’s pet theories being demonstrated? Here again Gabriel (1990) has some useful comments, suggesting like Holbrook and O’Shaughnessy (1988) that the hermeneutic circle is self-validating, but also advocating further tests of the findings and increased transparency of the process as possible solutions.

The issue of validity is revisited in Chapter 9. For now, it is worth stating that care is clearly needed not to ‘close down’ to conclusions too quickly, to consider the hermeneutic circle closed too early, whether or not an overt hypothesis approach is used. The researcher needs always to seek refutation as well as confirmation of his or her hypotheses, throughout the life of a project (Patton 1990; Seale 1999). Indeed, in some academic research this would entail repeated visits to the stage of data collection to test hypotheses, until nothing further was being added to the emerging theory by such excursions. The commercial researcher, with little or no chance to return to the field, must rely on skill, experience and careful analysis processes to do hypothesis checking.

Once the ideal of the hermeneutic circle is placed in the context of the practical organisation of commercial research the potential effects of decreasing the time windows allowed for analysis become evident. This model has implications for clients; it may allow greater understanding and evaluation of what it means to ask the researcher for interim findings and of the effects this may have on the quality of the final outcome. Once the researcher has committed publicly to a set of conclusions, even in the shape of ‘topline’ hypotheses, it may be genuinely difficult to go back and re-examine them in the light of further data.

In summary, the hermeneutic circle might be seen as a useful descriptive model of the complex, amorphous and rather elusive method of knowledge production we call qualitative research. It emphasises and
indeed celebrates qualitative analysis as being creative, skilful and complex – but also systematic, disciplined and methodical.

Next we need to ask how qualitative market researchers actually go about this ‘hermeneutic’ process. This chapter has suggested the complicated nature of the qualitative analysis process, but has noted that there is an intuitively meaningful division between ‘analysis’ (roughly corresponding to techniques for reviewing and making the material manageable) and what is termed ‘interpretation’ (addressing all the ‘what does this mean?’ questions). Significantly, this also corresponds to a division in ease of description, processes of ‘analysis’ being somewhat easier to talk about and perhaps teach than those of ‘interpretation’.

Despite the holistic view advocated here, it is now necessary to start to fragment the process, distinguishing especially between ‘analysis’ and ‘interpretation’. The next chapter looks at the practicalities of ‘analysis’ and offers a more general way to look at the different objectives of analysis than is possible in descriptions of individual practice.

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**KEY POINTS**

- Descriptions of analysis and interpretation practices in market research are idiosyncratic and hint at its complexity.
- Elements that are discernible include a strong impression of (a) the inter-relatedness of analytic and interpretative processes, (b) a sense of iteration or circularity, but also (c) a sense of progression throughout the project.
- In looking for models of thinking to help frame these activities, it seems that the classical distinction between inductive and deductive thought is not a useful one for qualitative researchers.
- This chapter suggests that two frameworks that attempt to cross this divide or even leave it behind altogether might be more useful – the idea of ‘clues’ and, importantly, the idea of the ‘hermeneutic circle’. These might give researchers better tools with which to think about their current practice and to manage and train these processes better.
- The chapter emphasises the inter-relatedness of the physical and intellectual processes of analysis and interpretation, and of the different tasks of sorting, sifting and working on data and of coming to a point of understanding or grasping its meaning.
Processes of ‘Analysis’

Broadly speaking, researchers seem to include within ‘analysis’ a number of operations by which they break complex material into parts and begin to impose structure and meaning on it – or, perhaps more accurately, they work on it in such a way that allows structure and meaning to be read from it. Practice in this area is highly variable. This chapter suggests a way of looking in general terms at the kinds of activity clustered within the term ‘analysis’, giving some examples of how these are translated in quite idiosyncratic ways into actual practice by commercial researchers.

WHAT GETS ANALYSED?

Before talking about the processes involved in analysing research materials, it is appropriate to describe what exactly gets revisited, analysed, or otherwise attended to in the course of qualitative market research analysis. In this section we look briefly at:

- Interview records
- Respondent-produced materials
- Fieldnotes and observation records attached to interviews
- The client’s perspective as material for analysis.

*Interview Records*

The first and most important source of materials in commercial qualitative research will be the records of the group discussions (focus groups), individual interviews or other material from interviews conducted specifically for the project. As market researchers increasingly experiment with ethnographic and other non-interview approaches, this does raise the question of the analysis and interpretation of observational records and fieldnotes; such analysis is discussed in this series by Philly Desai in Book 3. However, it is worth noting that many of the principles of analysis and interpretation described here would also apply in general terms to such data.

Here, the various forms that interview records usually take are simply listed. The activities typically performed on such records and some of the
implications of choosing one form over another are examined later in the chapter.

- **Audio recording** of groups and interviews is standard practice and in the UK there would probably have to be very specific reasons not to record in this way. Generally, this will use standard magnetic tape, though some are experimenting with mini-disc and other audio options. **Video recording** is now standard for fieldwork conducted in viewing facilities, and although still less common in other interview situations, it has become more popular, especially for certain approaches with a strong observational element (Desai, Book 3). For many researchers, actually listening to tapes, or viewing videos, constitutes the only way fully to use the material gathered (this is discussed again later).

- However, others prefer to move one step on from this and get a written record made from tapes, which will then form the primary record for the analysis (or may be used alongside listening to tapes). So **transcripts** may be made. In the UK these are usually produced by external transcribers who are specialists but not researchers, although sometimes this job will be done by junior researchers working on the project, and sometimes a full transcript might be made by the primary researcher him or herself.

- Less commonly, the tapes will be subjected to initial ‘**content analysis**’ by external workers, who list and summarise respondent comments according to a scheme provided by the researcher. This completed scheme acts as the primary material for the analysis and interpretation process, aided by reference to the original tapes or transcripts as required.

- Other forms of original interview recording, as a substitute for or adjunct to tape recording, will include **notes made during the interview** by the moderator (not generally very popular for focus groups, given the attention this takes from other issues like handling group dynamics) and notes made by an observer. Again these vary from a detailed almost-verbatim commentary to a more selective noting of salient or relevant points. Here it is clear that the observer is not just recording but carrying out a process of analysis by making this selection.

**Respondent-Produced Materials**

Commercial research which is not of the entirely ‘rational’ or ‘cognitive’ school (see Chapter 3) tends to make extensive use of respondent tasks and exercises including ‘enabling’ and ‘projective’ approaches, often of a semi- or non-verbal nature. This can result in large quantities of materials – drawings, lists, stories, collages and so on – being gathered in interviews and available for analysis.
The common view is that it is not the material itself which should be analysed, but the meanings attached to the material by the respondents who produced it, and this will have been captured as part of the discussion on tape or in observer notes (Gordon and Langmaid 1988). The materials themselves must still, of course, be available during analysis – not least because it is possible to notice useful features such as consistencies and differences across a sample, once all such materials are available for comparison. They can also, used carefully, be powerful tools in communicating findings to the client.

Other researchers will go further, however, taking the view that it is legitimate to ‘read’ these materials in the absence of the respondent who produced them, and that significant and valid meaning can be extracted from them, say by taking a Freudian approach. Again, it is probably more important that the researcher is aware of the assumptions he or she is making in using respondent materials in a particular way – and is able to explain and defend these assumptions if necessary – than that a particular approach is or is not taken.

**Fieldnotes and Observation Records Attached to Interviews**

One effect of greater familiarity with traditional ethnographic methods within qualitative market research, even within projects that are still interview-based, might be an elevation of the status of ‘fieldnotes’. These are the comments and observations of the researcher, captured in note form (or perhaps on tape or dictaphone) around the time of an interview. These would cover things like first and subsequent impressions of respondents and locations, and observations about other factors within the situation which the researcher notices at the time and which might be relevant to a good understanding of what went on in the interview itself.

Some commercial researchers routinely do this, making tape notes to themselves on the end of a recorded interview; Glen, for example, describes his ‘dump notes’ or ‘dicta-notes’ (1997: 129). Some too will take photos of respondents in their own homes, and regard these as an important resource in later analysis.

More widespread and formal adoption of this technique might have been held back by the fact that the content of such notes, and even what is chosen to be photographed, is unavoidably ‘subjective’ – the researcher must choose what to ‘notice’. They are reasoned choices, but choices they are, and they deliberately include and exclude different things. Qualitative market research continues to struggle with the negative connotations of ‘subjectivity’, in the shadow of the apparently ‘objective’ status of quantitative research (see Chapter 4). In fieldnotes, the role of the researcher in creating the data is unavoidable.

In academic writing, the usefulness and indeed the necessity of fieldnotes is stressed (Kirk and Miller 1986; Miles and Huberman 1994). With
increasing use of observation, cultural analysis and approaches that do not produce direct records of respondents’ comments or actions, field-notes will become more familiar and commercial researchers’ views of them will need to evolve, not least to include awareness of the choices they contain.

The Client’s Perspective as ‘Data’ to be Analysed

The logical extension of the ‘mediation’ function of analysis proposed in Chapter 2 is that the knowledge, beliefs, definitions and intentions of the client must take their place – formally and consciously – alongside the materials gathered from ‘outside’ for the project. This client information might be given in documents or verbally, and offered spontaneously or drawn out from the client during the briefing. There might be ‘hard’ information in the shape of previously gathered quantitative or qualitative research, briefing documents and other material provided by the client. There should also be ‘softer’ information – effectively qualitative data – derived by ‘interviewing’ the client at the briefing meeting (Lillis, Book 7). Together, these give the researcher an understanding of the perspective of the client, against which to analyse the material gathered from elsewhere.

This information concerns not just the client’s organisational issues and their desired or intended actions, but the social/cultural assumptions, the nature of the definitions they are using, and the world-view visible in the client’s brief. Without this grasp of where the client ‘is’, it is not possible to carry out research that helps the client move forward.

Roddy Glen is clear on this point:

Interrogating the ‘Client’s Thing’ in terms of its structures both before fieldwork (hypothesis generation) and in the light of responses is vital ... by achieving and communicating the required understanding in terms of supply-side structures we are enhancing the usefulness of the research to the client. It then explains what is happening in terms of the client’s end of things. It provides explanations, diagnoses and guidelines in terms of the structure of the ‘Client’s Thing’ – and that is what he or she is able to change, not the people. (1997: 142; original emphasis)

In placing client material here, as an object for analysis alongside the interview and observational material, the researcher can use it to filter, focus and contextualise the interview responses, but not automatically share or internalise the client’s perspective.

This is one of the points where the researcher needs to oscillate between being a ‘pure researcher’ in relation to the client, and being the client’s ‘committed partner’. One of the benefits of qualitative research to clients is that their own tacit perspective can be subjected to inspection, and can be exposed explicitly to them. Researchers do not help clients by simply
taking on their perspective uncritically. While clearly one has to exercise tact in delivery, it is not uncommon for research conclusions to answer a brief most effectively by challenging it, say by suggesting more useful definitions of problems or phenomena than those currently used by the client.

FUNCTIONAL ‘OPERATIONS’ WITHIN ANALYSIS ROUTINES

We can now return to look in much more detail at how researchers tackle the functional problem of dealing with the interview records they have gathered – the heartland of ‘analysis’ for commercial researchers.

A number of quite different accounts of how individual qualitative researchers routinely go about tackling analysis may be found in the literature (Glen 1997; Goodyear 1998; Gordon and Langmaid 1988; Griggs 1987; Ritchie and Spencer 1994; Robson and Foster 1989) and more were collected in research for this book. Some examples illustrate the diversity:

- There are those who feel they must listen to tapes, usually but not always making notes as they do.
- Others are fans of transcripts, often making marginal and other annotations.
- There are many different paper-based stages between revisiting data and producing presentation charts; many researchers make ‘analysis notes’ under various headings, or are committed to data grids or matrices. Some literally ‘cut and paste’ sections of transcripts, sorting and arranging them under headings. A few do this by computer, using word processing or (rarely) dedicated software (see Chapter 8).
- Some, however, go straight from intense ‘revisiting’ operations to drafting a debrief or presentation structure, which they then work on and may re-structure many times.
- Researchers working in pairs or teams may have ‘brain-dump’ or other collaborative sessions at various points in the process.
- The favoured analysis routine may vary greatly by project type for a particular researcher, or it may vary hardly at all.
- In one researcher’s routine a particular kind of operation might be done on paper – in another’s the same kind of thing (say comparing the responses of different sub-groups) will take place entirely as a mental operation.
- Some analysts attach more weight or value to certain operations than others, regarding different things as essential. Some, for example, will always produce matrices, some never do.
- Elements of the process may be collapsed into others, especially in experienced practitioners who may move rapidly to ‘interpretation’ without apparently doing much formal analysis, or at least not in the form of notes or summaries.
How can we conceptualise what is done? A possibly useful distinction is made by Spiggle between what she calls the ‘editing style’ and the ‘immersion/crystallisation’ style of academic qualitative analysis:

- The **editing** style of analysis involves a focus on categories, and exploration of patterns and themes that connect them.
- In the **immersion** style, ‘researchers alternately immerse themselves in and reflect on the text until they intuitively grasp its meaning’ (1994: 500).

Most commercial researchers probably fall somewhere between these extremes of style, although they may incline in one direction or the other. As a group, they certainly consciously seek and develop themes and categories, but also use intuitive and holistic skills to ‘grasp meaning’ or ‘crack codes’. They are likely to facilitate both of these through their choice of methods. This is why – as will be seen – they carry out both detailed analysis and more holistic ‘scanning’ of data; and why they actively engage in ‘immersion’ and ‘incubation’ as well as in sort-and-sift analytic procedures. The descriptions of practice given later in fact challenge the separateness of these two styles. That is, sometimes it does seem that the key insight ‘just emerges’, but arguably what looks like ‘intuitive grasp’ is actually underpinned by micro-interpretative processes of the kind discussed in subsequent chapters.

The difficulty with looking at specific analysis habits is that while each analysis/interpretation ‘routine’ has its own logic, and is often believed in passionately by its proponent(s), it is difficult to see much consistency. That is, experienced and respected qualitative researchers have very different views about what is necessary and what is ‘good practice’ in analysis. The contentious issues seem to centre on how far and in what way data is revisited, and on how far analysis processes are committed to paper. These can be read as indicative of both how systematically and carefully ‘analysis’ has been performed and, crudely, how much time and effort has been given to it. The value-judgements applied to these aspects of practice will be examined again in Chapter 10.

Going up one level of abstraction, however, it is possible to see a number of **general functions** or objectives which the different operations within these methods fulfil, each individual routine taking a different path through these functions. This gives us a way to talk about the kinds of things that people seek to do with their data, without getting caught up for now in how these are actually done. It seems that four general conceptual categories of activity or operation take place in analysis:

- Revisiting
- Selection for relevance/interest
- Sorting/categorising
- Comparing/contrasting sub-samples.
Revisiting
- Immersion in data
- Overcoming memory problems
- Re-experiencing the events

Selecting for relevance
- Reducing data volume
- Focus on client issues but alert to others
- Explicit and implicit material selected

The ‘thought dump’: recycling ‘big thoughts’ into the analysis
- Patterns and clusters
- Discontinuities
- Generalisations
- Relationships
- Dynamics
- Models
- Metaphors

Sorting and categorising
- Pre-set and emergent categories developed
- Explicit and implicit material included

Comparing and contrasting sub-groups
- Pre-set or emergent sub-groups separated

Matrix display
- Combines ‘sorting and categorising’ with ‘sub-group comparison’
- Allows patterns to be seen

FIGURE 5.1 Processes in analysis: functional operations
A fifth form of activity emerges when the last two are combined and ‘matrices’ are made, to allow comparison (say across sample sub-groups) of categories or topics. Figure 5.1 shows these activities in diagrammatic form; note that they are not ‘stages’ but related activities or functions which may be approached in practice in many different physical ways.

The simple abstraction of operations within commercial practice offered here may seem obvious, and indeed ought to make good sense to any practitioner, but analysis has not itself been analysed in this conceptual way before. This way of looking at the process crucially allows us to separate the principles from the practices within what we call ‘analysis’.

Before going on to describe these functions further, however, a note about interpretation is needed, since we cannot for long ignore the interconnectedness of functional and interpretative activity. Readers will notice a sixth item on the diagram of analysis operations – a central ‘thought dump’. As analytic operations are taking place, the researcher is also performing interpretative activity, always thinking on several levels about the meaning of the material (see Chapter 6).

The major work of pulling together ‘what it all means’ and extracting implications for the client usually takes place towards the end of a project, but it is seen as vital to catch apparently random insights or ‘big thoughts’ as they occur at any time.

What you hear has its own value but it also triggers off other [things of value] … you’ve got to make notes on both. You mustn’t ignore what’s triggered off by what you’re hearing. (Practitioner interview)

Capturing these ideas happens concurrently with analysis operations, but is not a process of analysis in the functional sense. Within commercial researchers’ own accounts, these ‘big ideas’ or insights are felt by the analyst to be of a different nature to ‘the analysis’ itself and are often captured in a quite different place. So they may end up on a sheet of paper entitled ‘thoughts’, on ‘a parallel “hypothesis pad”’ (Glen 1997: 127) or ‘a piece of paper for “random jottings”, the thoughts and hypotheses which well up as one is reading the transcript …’ (Hayward 1989: 97). This activity captures what are effectively high-level interpretations and hypotheses about the meaning of the whole project, or about its meaning for the client’s problem, and re-cycles them into the analysis process. We begin to see the ‘hermeneutic circle’ in action.

In fact, it is possible to see all ‘functional’ analysis processes as providing both the raw material and the cognitive experience that is needed to carry out interpretation. That is, it is not just the physical products of analysis, but the very act of thinking in these ways that provides the mind with the input necessary to produce interpretative thought. The pieces of paper are produced to feed the intellectual processes, not to constitute them, or indeed to prove that they have been gone through.
This is why commercial practitioners vary enormously in how far they produce written materials like notes or matrices in the course of doing analysis. In a culture that does not require these for other purposes, such as verification, there is a case for feeling that these are not always essential and in fact can slow down and stultify the complex analytic and interpretative processes involved.

Analysis … should be a tool. It gets you there, it’s not something that’s worthy in its own right … it will either stultify you or enrich you massively depending on which way you do it. (Practitioner interview)

Robson and Hedges also comment:

Analysis can become stultifyingly boring even if you do it very superficially, if you do not engage your brain. Without your brain in gear it becomes a mechanical shuffling around of the things people have said … it is possible to become bogged down in the mechanics of the task and lose the insights that are there to be found. (1993: 32)

This has some parallels to comments about the process of data coding as ‘head-wrecking’ posted on an electronic bulletin board concerning computer analysis of qualitative data, explored by Marshall (2000). Perhaps the time pressures and focus on objectives of commercial work do mean that there is actually less opportunity to get ‘bogged down’ in this way. Thinking – keeping ‘your brain in gear’ – is the real activity and is the connection between the processes of analysis and interpretation.

We will now return to the five general functions or operations (proposed above) which analysis practices seek to fulfil, to provide fodder for this interpretative thinking. After each description a brief illustration is given of how this operation is commonly manifested in practice; a later section gives a more full discussion of the way these are in practice linked together into analysis ‘routines’.

Revisiting

Here the researcher engages in revisiting all the research material, whether from groups, interviews, observations or client briefing and contact. These might be in the form of tapes, transcripts, observer notes, respondent-produced materials, videos, briefing notes, fieldnotes, photographs or other material. This has usually all been seen and experienced by the researcher before – the objective here is to immerse oneself in it all and set in motion an intensive phase of concentration on it. The analyst’s focus is likely to be on the interview materials, since these will provide the bulk of the material. Other elements, such as the client’s knowledge, beliefs and intentions, and ideas from fieldnotes, act as running filters through the process.
The revisiting of interview records may be experienced as a cognitive and an emotional experience.

- First, and most simply, it allows the researcher to remember what went on – not just what was said but the mood and tone of the discussion, what gaps, absences or difficulties occurred and so on. There are many problems with a reliance on human memory and these are discussed in Chapter 10.
- For many researchers it is essential to re-engage not just with respondents but with their own experience at the time of interviewing (especially with group discussion material), in order to access forms of meaning which they value. This will affect their choice of revisiting method, making use of tape or video more likely.
- It is also a major method for ‘holistic’ analysis. The analyst needs to remain open-minded and let the material wash over her/him – ‘mentally roaming quite free’ (practitioner interview) – but also to stay alert. Researchers describe this type of activity as requiring a form of ‘relaxed attention’. But revisiting, even with a ‘holistic’ intention, is very often combined with a process of selection and reduction (see below).

Revisiting is fundamentally different from the remaining analysis operations. Revisiting is deliberately all-inclusive – its purpose is immersion in detail and arguably it is the only operation which, even with experience, cannot be done effectively ‘in the head’ (see Chapter 10). The other operations have in common the purpose of allowing this bulky and messy material to be reduced, set out and ‘displayed’ in ways that make it easier to work on and see meaningful patterns within it. This they do by requiring or inviting the analyst to make distinctions of various kinds.

In practice revisiting is most usually done by listening to tapes, reading transcripts and/or watching videos, though it may include reading notes and looking at visual material. This process undoubtedly takes significant amounts of time; the final chapter examines the debate about the role and importance of such revisiting within a commercial environment.

Selection for Relevance

In this activity, the analyst selects for further attention aspects of the material which are seen to be relevant or interesting or both. Whatever is selected, the objective is to change the nature of the material such that the relevant and interesting, whether explicit or implicit, becomes more salient and thus easier to review and work on further.

- In commercial research the primary filter for relevance in this selection process will be the client’s immediate needs as expressed at the briefing.
However, the researcher will also be alert to *peripheral* material which, while not of immediate or obvious relevance to the problem, may turn out to be; or material which is not of immediate use but which may be of *general interest and value* to the client.

The content which is selected may be *explicit* (what respondents said, for example) or *implicit* (what the analyst notices was not said; or a meaning attributed to a remark by the analyst).

It is also undeniable that most commercial researchers will also notice and select things – turns of phrase, respondent anecdotes – which are simply *interesting, puzzling or amusing* and which may or may not find their way into the final debrief.

Deciding exactly what is of relevance to solving the client’s problem is not just a question of mechanically selecting for ‘relevant’ subject matter. Seeing ‘what’s there’ is both an analytic and an interpretative activity. This is examined more in the following chapter on interpretation.

**In practice** selection for relevance may be done in one of two ways:

- A way that retains the ‘shape’ of the interview – either by annotating a transcript, or by producing analytic notes that follow the narrative course of the interview or group.
- Alternatively, the process of selection will be collapsed into the function of sorting/categorising and/or comparing/contrasting (below) by the transfer of pieces of the material, such as respondent comments, direct to structured headings or an analysis grid.

### Sorting and Categorising

Here different parts of the material are grouped under topics, categories or concepts.

- This may be done using *pre-set categories* like themes, questions or topics which came from the client or which were developed by the researcher into discussion headings before fieldwork. More often, the analysis categories will include some pre-set and some *emergent* categories, the latter being topics, or issues, or ways of seeing something which have emerged in the course of the fieldwork, or which emerge throughout the analysis process. These may come directly from respondents or be seen and named by the researcher.
- Again these categories or headings can be linked to largely *explicit* interview material (containing actual responses to a particular commercial or brand, for example) or linked to largely *implicit* material (unspoken by respondents but inferred by the researcher).

**In practice** sorting and categorising is often done using a highly provisional and evolving set of ‘analysis headings’. Notes arranged under these
headings begin to capture and display material relating to crucial issues, topics and areas which the analyst believes to be relevant to the research and its objectives. An alternative is ‘cut and paste’, where segments of transcript text are literally cut, sorted and pasted under similar headings.

Comparing and Contrasting Sub-Samples

In this operation, the analyst sets up the material so as to allow comparison between sub-sets within the total sample. Again, the way in which the sample is so split may vary:

- It may mirror sub-samples anticipated in the research design and implemented in fieldwork (different age, gender, region or brand user-ship groups, for example).
- Or the split may mirror groups emerging through fieldwork or analysis (so groups where in the event there was a particular response to the client’s brand may be compared with groups where the response was quite different, to seek understanding of this apparent difference).

In practice this may be done by transferring analysis notes to sheets according to the relevant sub-sample, or it may be done ‘in the head’ by reading through all the transcripts or notes from one sub-sample, then all the corresponding material for another sub-sample, and thinking about the differences seen.

Matrices

It is possible, and common practice, to ‘display’ data in order to see patterns in it not otherwise visible. Commonly, the analyst sets up some form of grid or matrix which collates information of the ‘sorting/categorising’ kind and allows comparison with information of the ‘compare and contrast’ kind. So explicit and implicit material ('responses' and 'meanings') can be compared by sub-sample within topic heading so commonalities and differences, patterns and generalities may be discerned.

In practice this constitutes the ‘big piece of paper’ approach described in detail in some accounts of analysis, and discussed in more detail in the next section.

Examples of Common Analysis Routines and Their Implications

The particular ‘route’ taken through these conceptual analysis operations will depend on a number of factors. All of the operations are done
mentally to some degree, but individual routines vary in terms of which
of the operations are given priority. This priority shows in what is given
time and close consideration, and in what is written down or otherwise
brought to attention. So different methods might be used depending on
factors such as the inclination and training of the researcher, the involve-
ment of a single or several researchers on a project, the nature of the pro-
ject and its objectives, and the time available for analysis. So, for example:

- A difficult diagnostic project may need maximum revisiting and
  immersion in search of ‘clues’ and ‘insight’, but require little sub-group
  analysis – ‘Why is it that this cat food advertising has been so success-
  ful – and how can we now develop it?’
- A large international study may really need matrices to keep track of
cross-cultural differences across themes – ‘How well was each of the
four product ideas understood in France, Germany, Finland and Brazil?’
- Sometimes it is understanding the respondent’s own concepts or
  constructs that really matters, so categorising and defining themes is
  central – ‘How do women think, talk and feel about the menopause?’

Methods will be selected purposefully to suit the analytic needs and scale
of the specific project:

I start off getting a ‘feel’ for the whole group or depth (ergo, Holistic &
Interpretative), then develop analysis accordingly. Right now, I’m writing a
debrief from my handwritten notes from listening to the groups, nothing
more – but it’s a small scale project and I can get my head around it as it is.
Even, here, though, I’m figuratively ‘cutting & pasting’ by making compari-
sions. (Practitioner e-mail)

In a moment, we consider some examples of common ways of organising
the actual work of revisiting and analysing data in commercial qualitative
research and will look at the way some of these factors affect choice of
method.

There is, however, a second strand to this section. While it would be
easy to regard choices between analysis routines as simply a matter of
personal preference and convenience, this is not so. Each way of per-
forming the five analytical operations described above does involve the
researcher in making conscious or unconscious choices about what is
important in creating knowledge. Analytic processes may seem neutral,
but choices have to be made and these have implications for what is avail-
able to be noticed and used. Some of these choices relate to what is
considered to be the relevant ‘unit of analysis’ – what it is worth paying
attention to – and some relate to ways in which interpretations and
conclusions are drawn.

Critically, it is tempting to feel that records of interviews such as
tape recordings have a kind of inherent ‘truth’; that nothing can alter or
skew ‘what was actually said’. But choices about how to deal with such material matter – different representations close down certain avenues of thought while opening up others. One method might make impossible a certain kind of exploration which is well facilitated by another. So, for example:

- Those with a psychological orientation might favour analysis methods, such as tapes or full transcripts, which allow them access to indicators of emotion, ambivalence and conflict (see for example Gordon and Langmaid 1988).
- Those with a more ‘cognitive’ (Goodyear 1998) approach might favour methods that primarily accurately capture and summarise what was actually said about relevant topics (see for example Griggs 1987) and may work with edited transcripts (those with ‘irrelevant’ material taken out, for example), or externally produced content analyses.
- Matrix-type analysis tends to mask group or order effects and, if these are suspected, the ‘narrative’ of the group or interview will need to be preserved by an analysis that keeps them available, such as transcripts.

Because researchers regard what they habitually seek from data as the ‘right’ material to seek, they tend to see their particular method as the ‘right’ method.

The aim of this discussion is to engender in researchers a greater awareness of these issues and thus the ability to make a more informed choice, offering a wide repertoire of useful approaches from which to choose the best fitted to a particular task or team. The issues to consider when choosing an analysis method are displayed in Box 5.1 and are discussed as they occur in the subsequent sections.

**Box 5.1 Issues to Consider in Adopting an Analysis Method**

- Type of project and project objectives; facilitation of comparison of subgroups or responses to multiple stimuli
- Time taken
- Direct costs, i.e. transcription costs; external content analysis
- Indirect costs, i.e. junior/senior executive time
- Involvement or not of analyst in fieldwork/whole project
• Single or multiple analysts
• Preservation or loss of narrative thread of interview/group
• Focus on particular forms of information, e.g. verbal/non-verbal
• Facilitation or hindering of ‘immersion’ of analyst in data
• Degree and point of ‘closure’; facility to amend and develop hypotheses throughout analysis
• Ease of conversion to final debrief/report document
• Personal preference and preferred processing mode (aural/visual/kinaesthetic)

**Listening to Tapes or Watching Videos of Groups and Interviews**

As a way to revisit interviews in ‘real time’, listening to or watching tape recordings can achieve a high level of immersion in many aspects of the material – not just the verbal content but the subtleties of human interaction and their embedding in a social context. Accessing these is often argued to be the very strength of qualitative work, even that limited to the artificial interview situation. Listening to tapes or watching videos is particularly important to researchers whose training and orientation lead them to see things like mood, tone, energy levels, non-verbal and emotional content as highly relevant. Given the psychological and psychoanalytic heritage that permeates practice in the UK, it is thus not surprising that many researchers in the UK feel that they cannot adequately analyse without returning to the nearest approximation they have to the interview event itself – the audio or video tape. This demands high levels of sound and visual quality and these researchers will often use high-quality recording and playback equipment.

This is often a process of revisiting and re-experiencing. (For a vivid description of the process of re-experiencing interviews through listening to tapes, see Gordon and Langmaid 1988.) When pressures of time and workload make listening to all the tapes from a project impossible, such researchers may compromise by having some tapes transcribed but making sure they listen to the rest; without this they feel ‘out of touch’. Their security and confidence in coming to interpretations and conclusions depends on access to a particular form of material, which others may regard as unimportant. Another reason for preferring to analyse from
tapes or video involves preferred modes of information processing; aural, visual and so on (see comments on NLP in Chapter 3).

But listening to or watching tapes is time-consuming and intensive work. On the whole, commercial researchers who listen to tapes or watch videos to achieve immersion also perform one or more of the other analysis operations as they do so. So they are almost certainly selecting relevant and interesting material and recording this in some way.

- This might be done in the form of a ‘selective narrative’, where the researcher listens to the tape (or watches the video) and makes notes in the form of a continuous commentary, following the stream of events in the interview. Such notes provide a written record that preserves the interview’s narrative flow, while producing them also provides a disciplined route to re-immersion in the detail.
- Alternatively, the analyst may be performing the operations of selection, sorting/categorising and comparing sub-groups all at once by producing topic-driven and/or sub-group-driven ‘displays’ like matrices direct from the taped material. In this case there will be no ‘narrative’ record of the group or interview.

While it is clearly efficient to perform several operations at once, the difficulties of both these approaches include the fact that the written record will only reflect what the analyst has chosen at that time to notice and pull out. Anything else remains unnoticed and ‘unseen’ on the tape, henceforth unavailable to co-researchers or indeed to the original analyst without re-running the tape. This is where a full transcript used in addition to listening to tapes can provide a very effective (though of course more costly) alternative.

Why are several operations carried out at once? Commercial timescales do not allow the researcher just to ‘immerse’ in tapes and then go back through them to process them further. It is very rare for the original tapes to be listened to a second or subsequent time and this is a major difference between commercial and certain forms of academic qualitative research. It is not just lack of time that accounts for this, though; there is a feeling that there are real dangers in over-analysis of data, that one can indeed lose sight of the wood in looking too hard at the trees (Robson and Hedges 1993).

The commercial researcher always has the focus of the commercial objectives (whether these are regarded as a narrow strait-jacket or a useful discipline) to act as a guiding framework for all the processes of analysis. It is like the difference between reading a book for a purpose – say to collect arguments and evidence for an article or essay – and just reading it. Reading ‘for’ something is purposeful and directed and may be experienced as easier and faster than simply reading. The real skill of the commercial qualitative analyst is to achieve as much looseness and open-mindedness towards the material as possible within this purposeful framework, and usually under time pressure. Without this looseness,
unexpected but valuable finding will be lost; but without the purposeful framework the objectives will not be addressed.

**Annotating Transcripts**

This is again a very common method of working on interview material and offers a flexible approach that facilitates several of the analysis objectives described earlier. The process of simply reading through transcripts provides a convenient way rapidly to **revisit** interviews and groups; the activity of annotating them allows the operations of **selecting** and to some extent **thematic and sub-group sorting**. They are easily read and re-read to achieve ‘immersion’.

Having got ‘verbatim’ transcripts made (although see comments below about the nature of ‘verbatim’ transcripts), the qualitative researcher reads carefully through them, usually making annotations like underlining, highlighting, margin notes and comments. Many researchers who use this approach develop their own shorthand or code whereby they mark up in a consistent way things they often see to be relevant and important – asterisks for important points, abbreviated codes for points like ‘contradiction’ or ‘energy high/low’ and so on. They may also make use of ‘sticky notes’ to mark and comment on sections of text. Note that it is not just verbal material which will be marked in this way.

Annotations are used to draw attention to a number of different features:

- Relevant aspects of research procedures (when certain topics were introduced by the moderator, or when certain materials like ads or product ideas were shown).
- Relevant and/or interesting responses (which may include **lack** of response, see later).
- The researcher’s own comments about the possible meaning of responses, or lack of them (see later section on ‘commenting’).
- Distinguishing ‘spontaneous’ respondent comments on an issue from those which are the result of probing or prompting.
- Marking what seem at the time to be pertinent or ‘typical’ respondent remarks for possible later use in illustrating a debrief or report.
- Silences, hesitation, evasion, laughter and indicators of inter-respondent or respondent–moderator conflict.

We have various mnemonics for everyone talking at once, [and] for instance a sort of excitement factor, in our transcription. Or dead-as-a-dodo silence. Often you can see it just by the volume of response … (Practitioner interview)

As the remark above indicates, even the appearance of the transcript page is used and marked as data, especially for focus groups. So the researcher might note phases of the group where the text is dense, respondents
giving long responses; or pages of multiple short exchanges between respondents; or pages where the group moderator has had to ask many questions and contributions from respondents are sparse. All contribute to interpretation and whole pages may be annotated accordingly.

The purpose of annotation is two-fold:

- Paying close attention to the text like this is a good way of getting immersed in detail, letting it wash over the mind, yet in a disciplined and systematic way.
- Annotations to some extent reduce the volume of data – a well-annotated transcript can be scanned quite rapidly and an overall impression of the main points, issues and findings derived.

So both revisiting and selection can be carried out in one procedure. The marked-up transcripts provide a working summary of complex information from each group or interview. Many researchers who use this method will then go on to draw up some version of a thematic and/or sub-group comparison ‘display’ using the annotated transcripts as source material. Some, though, do not do this but take a more holistic or ‘immersion/crystallisation’ approach and work through the transcripts again and again until they are ready to come to conclusions and write the debrief itself (see Evans 1989; also quoted in Chapter 10).

What are the benefits and disadvantages of using transcripts? Those who are critical of a reliance on transcripts for revisiting interviews or groups complain that these can never re-create the tone, mood and feel of a group discussion and that assessing these elements is crucial to good analysis. However, many researchers feel that they can indeed recreate in their minds a group atmosphere through reading a good transcript, given that they will have conducted the group probably only a few days before. Some too, given enough time, like to listen to the tape with the transcript in front of them, adding things noticed from the tape such as tone of voice, pace and energy levels. Indeed Alan Hedges describes this as ‘the best and most thorough way’ to analyse (1985: 87), combining as it does the re-creation of the researcher’s experience with the convenience of a written record, which can be annotated to capture the ‘soft’ information coming from the tape.

Good transcripts take time and cost money, whether done by external typists or by the researcher; but they do offer many advantages to those who like to work in this way.

- They are more flexible than tapes (one can flick back to check an earlier impression far more easily than with tape or even mini-disc).
- They are highly portable and require no equipment other than a pen (researchers in the UK spend many long hours on trains – often a good environment for looking at transcripts).
• They preserve and allow later examination of the linear 'narrative' of the interview, which can be important in looking at how attitudes evolved in the course of the discussion, perhaps as respondents were exposed to certain ideas or materials.
• This narrative is also invaluable in assessing the contribution of group effects (for example where a group grows increasingly and inordinately hostile to an idea, or indeed attached to it, as members feed on each other’s views).
• The narrative also allows checking of order effects (whereby the order in which ideas were shown might have had a major effect on responses to them). These can be harder to track in other analysis methods such as the 'big piece of paper' (below).
• Finally, annotated transcripts provide a concrete record of some of the processes of analysis. Since they show not just what the analyst noticed but also what he or she ignored, they can be a useful aid to training and indeed to later checking of interpretations and conclusions, should the need arise.

A rather more hidden issue regarding transcripts involves their apparent completeness and deceptive sense of analytic neutrality. They appear to represent a complete record of the interview – but no form of transcription can be absolutely verbatim and every representation of a complex social encounter like an interview is exactly that – a representation (see Reissman 1993 for a full exploration of this issue). Each recording format will bring to the fore certain aspects of content and make others unavailable for analysis.

In UK market research, it is common to work from what are called ‘verbatim’ transcripts – but choices are actually being made and these choices have analytic consequences. This is highlighted by looking at the transcription conventions of a sub-discipline within academic sociology called Conversation Analysis (CA). The detail of CA is unimportant here; what is relevant is that the method of transcription reveals the concerns and priorities of the analyst. The CA analyst considers relevant, wants to be able to look at and thus transcribes certain details including the place and length of in-breaths and out-breaths; exactly where and for how long two people’s talk overlaps; and pauses in the conversation, measured to within one-tenth of a second. This level of detail would clearly not concern most commercial market researchers – but in instructing transcribers they make similar choices, even if by default. Should the transcriber attempt to represent pauses, laughter, tone of voice? Should he or she include the ‘irrelevant’ chatter about the respondent’s granny or edit this out? There are no ‘right’ answers to this – the point is that the analyst could and should be aware and in control of what he or she is considering to be worthy of analysis. The chat about the respondent’s granny could well be irrelevant – or could be very useful indicating the respondent’s determined avoidance of an issue, for example.
‘Analysis Headings’

In this approach respondent remarks, and researcher observations about their meaning, are categorised and arranged on separate sheets of paper as ‘notes under headings’. These notes may be drawn straight from listening to tapes/videos or from annotated transcripts, from other summaries of the taped material or from notes taken by an observer at the interviews or groups. As noted earlier, too, a related method has the analyst cutting and pasting transcript text into categories, though in this case the opportunity for adding the analyst’s own observations is more limited.

The making of these analysis sheets or cut-and-paste categories represents a straightforward physical manifestation of the sorting/categorising operation described earlier.

- The headings chosen may reflect the discussion guide or the client’s objectives in quite a straightforward way (‘reasons for using the local library’ or ‘responses to pack design A’).
- They usually reflect a more complicated emergent debrief structure, encompassing not just major themes from the objectives but also findings and hypotheses that the researcher has been developing throughout fieldwork (‘hidden barriers to library usage’ or ‘the problem of pack size’).

This approach is especially suited to projects where there are clear categories of enquiry – reactions to three pack designs, for example. Even with relatively straightforward jobs, however, the analysis headings are likely to develop as the process continues. Headings will be added or changed as the analyst identifies further issues or refines existing ones.

The evolving nature of the headings avoids premature closure of the ‘hermeneutic circle’ but does, of course, present some problems for projects involving more than one researcher, where individual analysts may end up with mutually incompatible analysis schemes. Ritchie and Spencer (1994), working in applied social research, describe their approach to this problem. They begin analysis with a formal ‘familiarisation’ stage, whereby a selection of transcripts will be read primarily with the purpose of generating relevant and relatively inclusive topic headings, which they term the ‘thematic framework’. The full analysis of all the material, including that originally scanned, then takes place using these headings. In commercial practice it is common for co-researchers informally to exchange ideas about ‘what’s coming out’ during and after fieldwork, such that they can individually carry out analysis to roughly the same topical scheme. Any differences that emerge after the full analysis will then be subjected to examination and debate at the ‘pulling together’ stage.

Presentations of findings are often structured largely around discussion of a set of topics or issues, within which sub-group differences might be
highlighted (rather than being structured around separate treatment of sub-groups, for example). There will therefore often be a strong degree of consonance between the final analysis headings and the bulk of the substantive information that needs to be presented to the client. So this is, for many researchers, a very efficient way to analyse within commercial timescales, since it allows room for flexibility of thinking throughout the analysis, but also means that the analysis summary sheets will map quite easily onto presentation charts communicating major issues and conclusions to the client. What will be added before the final presentation are higher-level abstractions and models which set these topics in a larger context, and the focused application of these findings and models to the client’s problem. These are elements that emerge primarily from the higher-level interpretative processes described in later chapters.

The possible difficulties of this approach in team research have been indicated. More importantly, perhaps, there is also a danger in commercial research that if the thematic framework is seen to too great an extent as a prototype ‘presentation of findings’, it might close down possibilities and narrow the researcher’s thinking. Having a version of the presentation and conclusions in sight before immersion in the detail can make the scheme self-fulfilling. This is especially a risk where no interim records such as transcripts exist to be reviewed at a later point. Going straight from tape material to something like presentation headings potentially blinds the analyst to unexpected or contrary evidence which is in the data but was not at first apparent. Again, this does not mean this is not a useful and efficient commercial method, but that researchers could be aware of this risk in carrying out this approach and in training others to use it.

The different analytic routines differ in how far through the process they allow provisional ideas and options to be kept open – that is, how soon they require the researcher to commit to certain hypotheses and begin to close the ‘hermeneutic circle’. This discussion highlights the question of at what point, within the commercial context, this is done. Choices in analysis methods often reflect decisions about this – at what point the researcher believes that he or she can afford to stop looking for anything that would alter the scheme or ‘belief system’ developed through the research process. Decisions about this issue will reflect both a personal approach and the needs of the specific project:

- If options need to be kept open for longer (because the project or the researcher’s own style demands it) researchers are likely to provide themselves with interim records and displays like transcripts, notes and analysis sheets, before moving towards any thematic stage and certainly before drafting a presentation.
- Where researchers feel they can ‘see’ the key issues and their implications for the client immediately after (or throughout the course of) the fieldwork, or when timing constraints demand this, they may go straight to a thematic outline and slot detail into this throughout analysis.
In the extreme, they may miss out any analysis operations altogether and produce a presentation of findings immediately after the last interview (though see Chapter 10 regarding ethics and 'best practice').

As always in commercial research, the degree to which an analysis framework can be regarded as flexible will depend on the requirements of the project but also to a large degree on the time allowed by the client for the process. Tight deadlines mean more pressure on the analyst to firm up a thematic scheme in order to allow a coherent set of findings to emerge on time – and less chance that potentially useful but ambiguous or less obvious themes will be spotted. This **may** not be a problem in a straightforward evaluative or screening project (though it might be), but is likely to be very wasteful in a more complex exploratory or diagnostic one.

**The ‘Big Piece of Paper’**

Producing a matrix is a very popular method of imposing some order and structure on a mass of qualitative data, allowing sorting and categorising by themes along with sub-group comparisons.

- In this approach, large analysis sheets are prepared, each headed with a major topic or area of enquiry.
- The sheets are divided into boxes, according to sub-groups represented in the research sample which seem to be important (so comments from male and female groups might be kept separate, or those from older and younger respondents, or those from different regions or usership categories).
- The analyst will then, using the tape, video, notes or transcript, summarise and insert material in the relevant box.

For examples of this approach see Goodyear (1998) and Glen (1997), along with Griggs’ (1987) description of ‘data reduction’ and ‘data display’ matrices. From within academic writing, there are commonalities between these approaches and those advocated by Miles and Huberman (1994) and those described by Ritchie and Spencer (1994).

It is a method that has many advantages and some drawbacks. The benefits are apparent in that ‘messy’ qualitative data can be tamed and sorted according to relevant criteria; and inter-group or inter-stimulus differences examined and displayed. But some of the difficulties outlined in the previous section apply here, too. Once a fixed set of headings has been developed it is possible for more than one analyst to work on data, the sets being integrated at a later point, **but** this can prevent the emergence of potentially important information.

The degree to which matrices are made, and the fixedness of the headings and categories, will depend on the size and nature of the qualitative
sample interviewed and the number and location of analysts. In a very large international project, for example, it is often crucial to look at material from the different cultures separately but also to be able to compare and contrast them on a consistent set of key issues, even at the risk of losing some subtlety. To this end, international research co-ordinators may require local researchers to analyse to a specific analysis template (although they may also use other methods to allow subtle and culturally specific issues to arise, such as brainstorming sessions). Where fewer and less physically separated researchers are working together, and where sub-categories are fewer, more flexibility can be allowed in the process.

An interesting feature of matrices is that they, like transcripts, also produce visual patterns. That is, the density or otherwise of comments or other notes within boxes can be compared; why was it for example that younger women had so little to say about a specific issue, while the comments of older groups were many and detailed?

It must be said that some researchers find it stultifying and restricting to analyse in this way. The ‘big sheet of paper’ method, while not actually requiring it, can invite a particular view of what constitutes an analysable unit, or what counts as proper data. That is, because boxes are there to be filled with ‘attitudes to’ or ‘responses to’ something, they can encourage a focus just on what was said, rather than on the way it was said, what was not said, or any of the myriad contextual clues to subtle meanings that those comments might carry. They can also lead to all content being given equal weighting, when in one case a comment was a central and critical part of the respondent’s contribution and in another it was a ‘throwaway’. This decontextualisation and loss of nuance can be frustrating and limiting, though it should be reiterated that individuals can and do adapt this approach to their own needs. There is nothing to prevent boxes being filled not with ‘data’ but with observations about anything that strikes the researcher as relevant, and many do use them in this way.

Another issue relates to the extent to which matrices mimic a quantitative paradigm; this brings benefits but also dangers.

- For a project involving many different sub-groups, many different product concepts or ideas, or many countries, it is difficult for the researcher to keep track of the detail of responses. A tight and detailed analysis matrix, completed in a systematic way, can allow sub-group comparison by topic which is useful or even essential to the project. The analysis sheets reduce the data and make it more manageable, allowing patterns to be seen but keeping detailed information available for further inspection.
- On a small project, though, sub-samples may have been recruited primarily to ‘spread the net’ and to allow for smoother group dynamics rather than to allow real comparison between sample groups (see, Book 1). Here, over-enthusiastic analysis by sub-sample can be
misleading since no part of the sample will be big enough to warrant this comparison.

Users of matrices have to keep in mind the potential tension between keeping the essence of qualitative enquiry (achieving understanding) and the desirability of imposing some form of quasi-quantitative comparison between sub-groups or other ‘cells’ of the matrix.

A common secondary version of the matrix occurs when a researcher essentially using an ‘analysis headings’ approach (described above) makes some display of sub-group differences. So, the analyst might use a device – say using a different coloured pen for each group discussion, or for each relevant sample category – to allow a degree of visual comparison of these groups. It gives some of the advantages of the full matrix approach but, without the pre-set boxes, is less formalised and overall the separation of sub-groups is less rigorous. This is more likely to be used for smaller samples or where pulling out sub-group differences is, for pre-determined or emergent reasons, less important.

A final and far less common version of the matrix approach occurs where initial ‘content analysis’ is carried out by someone not involved in fieldwork, employed specifically to carry out such analysis. This is a detailed summary and record, ordered by sub-group, of the content of interviews or group discussions. Because what is required here is what has been said on a particular topic, rather than more ambiguous, subtle or contextual information, this analysis can be carried out by people who, although trained, are not necessarily qualitative researchers, nor necessarily the researchers who carried out the interviews. So it can be done by raw trainees with no previous experience, by researchers totally uninvolved in the project, or by external freelance analysts.

Researchers in the UK disagree about the value and validity of such a content analysis:

- Those who regard the processes of analysis and interpretation as mutually dependent and as pervading the project, and especially those valuing ‘soft’ or non-verbal and subtle material, regard this practice as potentially liable to result in insensitive and literal conclusions.
- Others see it as a legitimate first step in data handling, getting time-consuming ‘grunt work’ done and freeing the primary researcher to think and interpret. They contend that the researcher using it will have absorbed enough ‘soft’ information through conducting the interviews or groups to be able critically to sift and amend this material in coming to interpretations and conclusions. It is more common within certain parts of the business, such as pharmaceutical market research, where samples will often comprise large numbers of individual interviews (and indeed where more rationalistic views of qualitative data prevail). It may also have a role where the information required is largely behavioural rather than attitudinal.
Cognitive Mapping

Cognitive mapping or mind mapping tends to be an approach adopted wholeheartedly by those for whom it makes sense. It allows the representation of many pieces of information and the relationships between them in two-dimensional space. Many maps are of the ‘spider’ variety, where linked chains of information and observations will extend like the legs of a spider out from a central idea or question on a large sheet of paper. Smith and Fletcher (2001) describe this specifically as a useful way to represent and explore interrelationships between data, as does Hedges (1990).

This chapter has suggested some conceptual categories for what goes on when commercial researchers analyse interview and group data. These are presented as four or five major analysis objectives or ‘operations’ that are performed on data and which are made concrete in a variety of actual techniques and practices.

We have looked at ‘analysis’, the methods by which commercial researchers commonly examine and sort data in order to allow them to read structure and meaning from it. The subsequent two chapters describe and examine the more elusive parts of the process: how ‘interpretation’ happens.

### KEY POINTS

- The kinds of material or data that commonly emerge from market research projects can be quite varied, but the analytic focus will almost always be on records of interviews or group discussions.
- It is clear that there is a constant connection or open line between analysis operations and interpretative thought and it is crucial that any functional analysis be carried out ‘with the brain engaged’. In this way analysis feeds interpretation.
- Practice in analysing interview data varies greatly and there seems little consensus on good practice at this level of analysis. A general conceptual model of the major processes is offered which, by making clear the principles involved, might allow a greater awareness of the implications of choosing one method over another. This could promote informed flexibility in implementing analysis in physical terms.
- No matter what analysis approach is chosen, it has implications for what is actually available to the analyst; making choices about how to analyse at a physical level makes visible the researcher’s implicit orientation (what he or she sees as important and relevant to creating knowledge or to solving a problem through qualitative research). In this way, functional processes are guided by interpretative thought.
• It is suggested that awareness and positive management of the implications of different methods would allow more efficient and better quality analysis for individuals and teams.

NOTE

1 CA does, however, produce many fascination insights into micro-social organisation which could be of real interest to practitioners – see Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998) or Silverman (1998) for an introduction to the field.
Processes of ‘Interpretation’ I: The Micro Level

The previous chapter has looked at various physical ways of dealing with the materials amassed from fieldwork and the mental and procedural operations to which they are typically subjected. It made the point that it is not just the ‘stuff’ of analysis – analysis sheets, grids, notes and so on – but the very the act of performing analytic operations that provides the grist to the interpretative mill. We now need to consider the question of how analysts actually decide what interpretations to make of the material as they go through these analytic operations and how they move towards conclusions and recommendations for the client. The next two chapters concern the ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ processes of interpretation (although this division is again somewhat artificial). After some general comments on interpretation, this chapter focuses on the ‘micro’ level, that of interpretation of the detail of the material. The next chapter looks at what happens at the ‘macro’ level, when the researcher tries to ‘pull it all together’.

INTERPRETATION: ASKING QUESTIONS

There is an intuitive distinction made by practitioners between ‘analysis’ or working on data, which is more open to description but which cannot by itself solve the client’s problem, and ‘interpretation’ which is harder to articulate but which actually constitutes the commercial value of qualitative market research. It may be hard to articulate, but it is worth looking as far as possible at how and by what means qualitative market researchers make interpretations and draw conclusions.

In an academic article that describes in minute detail the processes involved in ‘analysis’, Spiggle comments that, in contrast, it is very difficult to describe interpretation:

We can describe data manipulation as a series of operations; not so for interpretation. The intuitive, subjective, particularistic nature of interpretation renders it difficult to model or present in a linear way. In interpretation
the investigator does not engage in a set of operations. Rather, interpretation occurs as a gestalt shift and represents a synthetic, holistic, and illuminating grasp of meaning, as in deciphering a code. (1994: 497)

Or, as Smith and Fletcher observe, some things are ‘easier done than said’ (2001: 18). But if we are to attempt to improve analysis and interpretative practices and make them accessible to discussion and training, this assertion needs to be examined more closely. This is the position taken by those practitioners, referred to in the first chapter, who call for the abandonment of the ‘black box’ analogy and a proper exposition of method and process in interpretation.

Where to begin? Roddy Glen presents the interpretative process as a series of questions (1997: 124), and this approach is also used here, though the list he suggests is considerably extended. Interpretative questions are asked over and over again, as the researcher trawls through, sorts and re sorts the material, using whatever physical method she or he has chosen to do this. There are several sorts of question; they operate on different levels of detail and at different levels of abstraction:

- In general terms, the analyst asks ‘What’s there?’ or ‘What do I notice about this?’
- For each detail or aspect of the material noticed he or she asks ‘What might this bit mean?’
- At another level he or she is also formulating and testing ideas of ‘What might it all mean?’
- And, beyond this, comparing these hypotheses with what he or she knows of the beliefs, assumptions and intentions the client has with regard to the target group – this comparison ultimately allows an interpretation of ‘What might it all mean for the client?’
- And ultimately, ‘What should I tell the client to do?’
- Interwoven with all of this, the researcher will also constantly be asking ‘How far can I rely on this – how far is this a product of the research?’

The questioning process within interpretation is not linear but iterative. This cycle of questions will be asked again and again for every aspect of the raw data, such as a respondent’s remark, that is noticed or picked out as relevant. But it will also be applied to every further analytic item that the process itself throws up, such as patterns, differences and anomalies. Eventually the researcher will be asking these same questions of the total picture he or she has built up.

So there are several levels of interpretative thought going on more or less simultaneously, applied to various types of material. What they have in common is that they all take the form of questions which the analyst asks about the material, and to which he or she provides provisional
answers, which get fed back into the analysis/interpretation process, throughout the whole project process.

Giving labels to the six interpretative questions suggested above (as portrayed in Figure 6.1) offers a possible framework and working vocabulary for looking at interpretation.

- What’s there? (noticing)
- What might this particular bit mean? (commenting)
- What might it all mean? (theorising)
- How does this relate to the client’s issues and perspective? (applying)
- How far is this a product of the research or researcher? (reflecting)
- What does all this mean the client should do? (recommending)

It seems from accounts of practice that this cycle of questions continues throughout the life of the project, but that there is a shift in emphasis at some point during the formal analysis phase.

- During the course of formal analysis, the researcher moves from a primary focus on the micro level – ‘noticing’ and ‘commenting’ (whilst being open to thoughts for the macro level) – to more active focus on this macro level – ‘theorising’, ‘applying’, and ‘recommending’ (whilst still keeping an eye on the detail of the micro level).
- The material for the earlier micro questions will tend to be the detail of the interview and other material, while the material for the macro questions will tend to be the patterns, connections, anomalies and structures identified within this material. This is not a perfect correlation, though – as noted earlier – it can actually be one respondent comment (micro-level material) that suddenly makes the whole picture clear and makes sense of everything else (a macro-level question) – the hermeneutic circle in action.
- Validity assessment – ‘reflecting’ – seems to go on throughout the process.

Again, in order to be able to talk about it we need artificially to slow down or ‘freeze-frame’ this cycle of ‘question – provisional answer – feed back into data – question’, while in practice it will be applied rapidly and almost automatically as the researcher becomes more and more experienced and skilled. Indeed, for training purposes this somewhat stilted freeze-framing is all that can initially be done, in the way that in learning to drive a car the individual operations are at first performed consciously and often rather jerkily. Eventually enough experience and confidence is gained to allow the total skill to be performed smoothly and also in a way that flexibly allows for different conditions.
Macro-level interpretations:
- 'big thoughts'
- Patterns and clusters
- Discontinuities
- Generalisations
- Relationships
- Dynamics
- Models
- Metaphors

What might this bit mean?
(commenting)

What might it all mean?
(theorising)

What's there?
(noticing)

What might it all mean?
(thesising)

How does this relate to the client's issues and perspective?
(applying)

How far is this a product of the research or researcher?
(reflecting)

What does this mean the client should do?
(recommending)

FIGURE 6.1 Processes in 'interpretation': asking questions
MICRO-LEVEL INTERPRETATIVE PROCESSES: ‘NOTICING’ AND ‘COMMENTING’

‘Noticing’ – What’s There?

The reader may be wondering why the question ‘What’s there?’ is included here within ‘interpretation’. Surely the first act of the analyst is to ask simple ‘factual’ questions; what did respondents say and do in the course of the interview or group discussion? It is important to deal with a false distinction between ‘analysis’ as a factual and objective sorting of material, and ‘interpretation’ as a process relying heavily on the subjective judgement of the analyst.

To some extent the content of interviews is indisputable – certain words were uttered by individuals and certain discussions took place. The problem is that while it would be convenient to think of the marking up or noting of ‘what’s there?’ as a neutral, objective process, even this is heavily interpretative. The analyst faced with a mass of verbal and non-verbal information from interviews or group discussions has to decide what to notice and what to ignore. Even in the highly detailed and recorded analysis processes sometimes required in academic research, the researcher will not label or code everything: ‘some parts of the text will contain no meaningful information to the analyst and remain uncategorised or unlabeled’ (Spiggle 1994: 493).

Selection according to relevance to the client’s area of concern is one obvious criterion (explicit discussion of relevant brands, activities or policies, responses to ads and so on), but choosing what are to be significant or meaningful ‘units of analysis’ and what indeed counts as relevant to the problem in hand is not as simple at it seems. I suggested in an earlier chapter that researchers cannot actually know what people do, or why, nor really predict the possibilities of client activity changing this behaviour. What they must do in research is gather a whole range of material from which, through interpretation, they can infer this knowledge. What researchers see as capable of providing useful inference varies enormously and this is reflected both in what they choose to elicit through interviewing and in what they choose to notice in the resultant data.

So the relevant ‘units of analysis’ might include:

- The obvious verbal categories which are the core of much market research, qualitative or quantitative: ‘answers’, ‘preferences’, ‘attitudes’ and ‘opinions’.
- But also (depending on the researcher’s orientation and the detail of the particular project), ‘feelings’, ‘avoidance’, ‘ambivalence’, ‘cultural imperatives’, ‘key distinctions’ and so on.

All of these decisions rely on or reveal the researcher’s belief system, assumptions and mental frameworks, and indeed do so whether or not he
or she is fully aware of these underpinnings (see Chapter 3). Kirk and Miller remark that ‘Deciding what is to count as a unit of analysis is fundamentally an interpretative issue requiring judgement and choice’ (1986: 5). Different researchers may thus choose to note or label quite different things from the same material, although in practice having already followed their particular orientation in conducting the interviewing, the material they each work with is likely to be quite different. One of the features of commercial qualitative research is the degree of involvement of the researcher in actively seeking and eliciting different kinds of material, through specialised questions and through the use of tasks and materials (Chrzanowska, Book 2). So, one researcher might be inclined to elicit and work with emotional responses, while another might be most interested in eliciting and understanding the relevant distinctions and definitions that respondents are using to make sense of the world (Barnham 2000).

Some indication of the way in which certain physical methods of analysis tend to mesh with certain ideas of what constitutes a ‘unit of analysis’ was given in the previous section. Listening to tapes allows access to forms of non-verbal material which are lost in transcripts, while a meticulously compiled matrix of respondent comments gives access to detailed sub-group differences. Choosing one method rather than another, giving access to different forms of ‘what’s there?’, is effectively an interpretative act.

‘Commenting’ – What Might this Bit Mean?

Having made a decision that something is ‘there’ (be it a comment, a non-verbal event, indicator of emotion, a discontinuity or paradox, and so on), the analyst asks what this means. Giving provisional answers in each case, and recycling these back into the analysis process, is here called ‘commenting’.

There are several essential forms of ‘comment’ applied both to what people said and to other noticeable features of responses. Thus there are comments about:

- What the respondent meant.
- What it meant in the immediate context of the interview.
- What significance it might have in the context of the project.

Hedges makes this distinction between ‘deducing what people mean from what they say; and assessing the implications of what is said for the problem in hand’ (1985: 88, original emphasis). Spiggle (1994) also notes two forms of interpretation: of what respondents meant or intended; and abstract or higher-order concepts that researchers impose on the whole.

So the analyst is reading or listening for meaning; linking analysis (data immersion, reduction and sorting) with interpretation (grasping meaning) at a micro level. Even if in practice these two feel like one continuous
process, practitioners might recognise a distinction between ‘noticing’ (by writing down or underlining) whatever they are choosing to see as significant and ‘commenting’ on what these things might mean.

In practice researchers will ‘comment’ by scribbling notes to themselves in the margin of a transcript, or they might add comments of their own while making a summary of what respondents said. Indeed, it seems to be essential to the process that these somewhat fragile ‘tendrils of thought’ (practitioner interview) are caught immediately and uncritically as they bubble up from some level of consciousness, or they are likely to be lost forever.

The usefulness of this process is that these scribbled ‘comments’ can safely be regarded as provisional – they do not commit the analyst’s mind yet to a particular conclusion. The micro-level hypothesising at a conscious and semi-conscious level involved in ‘commenting’ seems to be the crucial step that links simple immersion and trawling through detail with the emergence of abstract conceptualisations, models and extrapolations. It is perhaps one way in which the hermeneutic process becomes visible and, through this, potentially more open to explicit teaching and learning.

How Researchers Arrive at ‘Comments’: Questions of Content and of Process

We still have not fully addressed the question of how experienced researchers see meaning and arrive at ‘comments’. How can this vital process, that effectively links activities of data handling with processes of interpretation, be understood and taught? It is commonly accepted that certain skills are impossible to learn by verbal or technical instruction, no matter how good. These skills just have to be experienced and practised again and again, until the body and/or mind have internalised the necessary procedures and habitual patterns. This is a view often taken in relation to interpretation – people just have to learn it by doing it.

The problem of the novice having to learn primarily through doing is one encountered in teaching complex skills like tennis or skiing. These skills constitute tacit knowledge which it is very difficult to translate into explicit knowledge, or where conscious mental effort can actually prove counter-productive (see Book 1 for more about tacit and explicit knowledge). These skills have been tackled very successfully using the ‘inner’ approach (Gallwey and Kriegel 1997). So instead of trying to teach the novice skier the exact movement (‘bend the knees!’), the student’s attention is drawn to what is known to be a critical aspect of the movement, and invited to experiment (‘try bending your knees more, then less, and see what happens each time’).

Following this analogy, we might best explain how interpretation happens by drawing attention to aspects of research materials to which seasoned researchers routinely attend. Technical instruction in exactly how...
to ‘see’ meaning in data and reach coherent and commercially useful conclusions is difficult and this skill needs apprenticeship and practice. However, one might point out to inexperienced researchers the things they might pay attention to; the kinds of question experienced researchers often ask themselves, and about which aspects of interview material they ask them.

The rest of this section endeavours to begin such a catalogue, outlining and categorising some of the many questions that practising qualitative market researchers do ask of data, albeit often at an implicit level. These questions are not mutually exclusive and there is much overlap but they might offer a practical checklist of questions which can help move from ‘analysis operations’ towards ‘interpretative thinking’. Experimenting with these kinds of question could help those learning the skill to develop their own perspective and repertoire of interpretative tools, developing approaches which work for them, their clients and the kinds of research problem they tackle.

A second objective addressed here is to attempt to connect what is done in practice with formal theory – bodies of thought that are (or might be) drawn on in taking this stance towards data. This is an ambitious project and what follows is almost certainly incomplete; it represents only an effort to open up this discussion and to invite interested researchers to (re)discover the possible underpinnings of what they do.

The list is drawn from personal experience, interviews with qualitative market researchers and from what discussion there is in the literature. Links are made to a wide range of theoretical perspectives, but the list also reflects practitioners’ resources of professional experience and common sense.

Significantly, the questions here focus both on the content of the material (what was said by individuals and how it was said) and aspects of the process (the sequential and social aspects of the interview or group process itself). In doing this, researchers acknowledge in practical terms the inextricability of individual and group material. Morgan, writing about analysing data from focus groups, comments:

we must recognise not only that what individuals do in a group depends on the group context but also that what happens in any group depends on the individuals that make it up. In other words, neither the individual nor the group constitutes a separable ‘unit of analysis’; instead, our analytic efforts must seek a balance that acknowledges the interplay between these two ‘levels of analysis’. (1997: 60)

Of course researchers listen hard to what individuals in a group say and come to interpretations as to what they might mean. But aspects of group process, at least as far as it can be preserved in the research records, are also a vital part of how market researchers arrive at ideas about meaning. This attention to process seems a particular feature of commercial research
compared with qualitative methodology in branches of academia. Catterall and Maclaren (1997) comment that some academic users of group methods tend to treat process as a nuisance in analysis, whereas commercial researchers have developed ways of thinking that treat it as a resource. This probably reflects the heritage of commercial qualitative research in a psychological tradition as well as the dominance of the focus group method in the business and the resultant pool of expertise in dealing with group data.

So two categories provide many of the questions asked of data:

- Questions that use **content** – ideas, concepts, opinions expressed by individuals – to form hypotheses and ideas about the research problem itself.
- Questions that interrogate the interactive **process** of the interview itself for clues about the significance and meaning of this content **and** as ‘data’ in its own right.

But a third category also needs to be included:

- Questions through which researchers assess the **validity** of the content in gauging the specific effects of the research situation and/or the researcher on what appears to have emerged (see Chapter 9 for further examination of validity).

Notice that in all three, researchers use both verbal **and** non-verbal material. These types of question are summarised in Box 6.1, then each is examined in more detail.

### Box 6.1 Microinterpretative Questions: How Researchers Arrive at ‘Comments’

1. **Questions that use (individual) content to form hypotheses and ideas about the research problem itself**

   Q: What is the respondent’s perspective on this issue?
   Q: Of what is this an example?
   Q: What does this contradiction or anomaly mean?
   Q: What’s this like? How else could I look at this? What does it remind me of?
   Q: How is this relevant? How does this look compared to the client’s perspective?
2 Questions that use aspects of process to interpret and evaluate what is being said

Q: Why this, now?
Q: What's not being said?
Q: What was the respondent's purpose or intention in making this comment?
Q: What's going on beyond the words?

3 Questions that assess validity through looking for specific effects of the research situation and the researcher on responses

Q: What kinds of interviewer or group effects are going on?
Q: How does what's here compare with normative responses in this field?

Questions that Use (Individual) Content to Form Hypotheses and Ideas About the Research Problem Itself

It is clearly important to look very closely at what individuals have said, and researchers do listen carefully to verbal responses, setting these in the context of how these were said in order to derive meaning at the individual level. They thus try to understand the perspective of the respondent and what he or she was trying to communicate. Let us look at the kinds of question asked implicitly which concern the content of data, derived from a mixture of verbal and non-verbal cues.

Q: What is the respondent's perspective on this issue?
What is the respondent's experience really like (from inside) and how can I describe and conceptualise it (from outside)?

Researchers need to interpret respondent comments about their lives and experience on two levels:

- getting inside what respondents mean, trying to understand their point of view
- whilst also finding meaning in this material from the outside, locating ways to talk about and use it in a more general way.

The idea of ‘perceptual positions’ from NLP as relevant to this process of switching in and out of the respondent’s position has already been described in Chapter 3. Researchers do talk of re-experiencing interviews/groups, not just revisiting them, and some consciously use their own ‘being’ as the conduit or tool of the analysis (Corr and Taylor 1996; Gordon and Langmaid 1988). We use all the resources available to us as social human beings, as well as analytic researchers, to try to ‘get inside’ and understand what is said to us.
Moving ‘outside’ again, describing and interpreting the meaning of a remark or other piece of data at the ‘commenting’ stage may involve, for example:

- simply attaching a common-sense label (‘guilt’)
- and/or speculating about links with broader cultural meanings or contradictions (‘changing role of women’)
- and/or signalling relevance to client concerns (‘need to avoid stereotyping here’).

Often the most useful aspect of qualitative research is that it does allow respondents to talk about an issue in terms of their own language, concepts and categories. What is important to people is named by them (Patton 1990) and it can be critical to discover that distinctions and definitions used by the client organisation are somehow different from those of its intended customers. For example, in my experience food manufacturers and writers in the UK continued to talk and think in terms of ‘proper cooking’ vs. ‘convenience food’ long after these opposed ‘public’ categories ceased to be meaningful to many women, who instead saw themselves as engaged in different tasks without names, described in research as ‘getting the family fed’, or ‘practical cooking’.

So the role of ‘getting inside’ is actually to try to see it from the respondent’s perspective – and this may mean inventing new vocabularies to represent how their reality is structured.

**Q: Of what is this an example?**

*Categorisation and developing constructs; seeing and developing patterns; testing comments against current categories*

Earlier it was suggested that researchers always begin a project with hypotheses, made up of concepts or categories, and that these are inevitably tested and refined throughout fieldwork. At the formal analysis stage researchers are deeply involved in developing, testing and, if necessary, discarding and replacing, these concepts.

Griggs suggests that the question ‘of what is this a specific instance?’ is a good way to move up ‘the abstraction ladder’, accounting for what we see in terms of ‘unobserved and usually hypothetical variables or factors’ (1987: 29). So the researcher is always looking out for patterns and similarities in the material from which to draw abstractions. This is where counting has an important implicit role, even though the idea is anathema to many qualitative researchers (see Chapter 3). Counting is a tool, not an outcome, in qualitative research; it is how we see themes and identify important issues:

> When we identify a theme running through our data we are actually isolating something that happens on a number of occasions and consistently in a particular way. (Griggs 1987: 28)
We might also ask if there are different ‘types’ of people or response sets and start to develop typologies in much the same way.

Of course, not all content will fit into the categories and concepts the researcher had in mind at the outset, nor into the scheme he or she was using at the end of fieldwork – the conceptual scheme is highly likely to be amended and refined as the more detailed formal analysis progresses. So the next set of questions concentrates on seeing and interpreting such contradictions or anomalies.

**Q:** What does this contradiction or anomaly mean?

_Evolving new concepts and categories by refining or splitting existing ones_

This is a process of actively using anomalies and contradictions within the material, treating them not as a nuisance but as a valuable catalyst to refining emerging concepts and hypotheses. So the researcher must ask what lies behind an apparent disagreement, or maybe what concepts are not there in respondents’ talk that the researcher or the client expected to find. How can discrepancy be explained or accounted for?

The ‘odd’ or surprising comment or respondent is treated in the same way. Can the analyst account for an unusual view or ‘deviant case’ in terms of existing concepts or do these need to be amended or new ones invented (see Chapter 9)?

**Q:** What’s this like? How else could I look at this? What does it remind me of?

_Inviting metaphorical thinking, leading into higher-level ‘theorising’_

Even at this micro level, small details of responses or other aspects of data might trigger a line of thought related to higher-level or more abstract and holistic interpretations. So even when working with detail the researcher is alert or open to inspiration, looking at what more abstract structures a comment or exchange or respondent reaction might bring to mind. What metaphors are evoked? What existing structure/system/model might be tried out as a template on these emerging concepts to help see their relevance and relationships?

This is the way in which ‘toolbox’ models of thinking are best used – when inspired directly by something in the detail of the data. The researcher must be open to indicators that certain models or schemata might prove useful as specific tools in grasping meaning for the project. This kind of linkage of detail with model begins the process of drawing threads together that will become more and more important as the end approaches (see the following chapter).

**Q:** How is this relevant? How does this look compared to the client’s perspective?

_Again, beginning to link with higher-level ‘applying’_

How does this fit with what the client knows/believes and intends regarding the respondent? The researcher is constantly carrying out a comparison
between the respondent’s world-view and the client’s world-view. In this, he or she will be beginning to look for implications for the client – playing with provisional ideas, ideas again that will be further developed in the closing stages of the project.

**Questions that Use Aspects of Process to Interpret and Evaluate What is Being Said**

Given that most commercial qualitative research is conducted by means of interviews and group discussions, those working in this field have developed a store of common wisdom about the many ways in which reading the interactive aspects of data can greatly enhance its richness and usefulness. Note that by ‘process’ we do not simply mean ‘non-verbal’. Process factors are somewhat different from the interpretation of tonal and non-verbal cues within individual contributions covered in the previous set of questions.

Commercial researchers in the UK set great store by ‘reading around’ the manifest content of interview data and using the context to do so. The specific social and interactive conditions of the interview and, especially the group, are read for meaning. The following are the kinds of question asked, again implicitly, in this vein:

**Q: Why this, now?**

Using common knowledge of ‘ordinary’ interaction in a specialised way, plus professional knowledge of group processes, to draw conclusions about content coming at a particular moment

There are a number of aspects to this interpretative process. Qualitative researchers carrying out many projects acquire and actively use a trained human sensitivity to mood, tone and atmosphere and use it, along with what is being said, to derive meaning at any particular moment in an interview or, especially, a group. So if, for example, part of the interaction seemed strained or difficult they might consciously look for what in the process of the group, as well as in the topic of discussion or in the individual, might have contributed to this. They will then ask what implications this has for how they can use the manifest content. They might in fact do this by trying to relive the atmosphere – asking ‘what was I feeling here?’ and exploring why this might have been so (Gordon and Langmaid 1988).

Researchers also, like any social beings, use the sequential interactive quality of the session to understand content. We all see the meaning of a comment, or indeed a pause, as inevitably linked to what preceded it, including that respondent’s own previous contributions. Work in the academic field of Conversation Analysis (see Chapter 5, n. 1) in fact sets out to formalise and describe these everyday interpretative processes and could be of interest to market researchers, although it is not widely known in commercial research circles. As Glen says, ‘we are essentially using the same tools as we use in everyday conversation, only using them more intensively and more objectively’ (1997: 133).

The meaning of a piece of content can and should be read in awareness of its place in the progression of ideas within the shared space of the group.
That is, respondents’ ideas change through the course of a group and so temporal context is very important. There may be, for example, convergence as respondents move to a false consensus, or are indeed persuaded by others’ arguments. Or respondents may change their minds on an issue in response to information, and so on. Many ‘group effects’ such as ‘hot-housing’ (the tendency to exaggerate responses) are known and can be problematic. But groups also give another layer of information about respondent beliefs, views, constructs and so on in an interactive, social context. As Chrzanowska points out in Book 2, many common group moderating techniques are specifically designed to reduce negative group effects and enhance useful ones.

Finally, commercial researchers routinely use experiential and theoretical knowledge of group processes to decide how much weight to give content that comes from different phases of a group discussion. The Tuckman model of group process is simple but very helpful and allows some weighting and calibrating of comments. This proposes that groups commonly go through five stages – forming, storming, norming, performing and mourning. Chrzanowska again gives detail of this model and how it is used in practice (see Book 2); what is most relevant here is that these phases are seen to have effects on content. It is important to know where in the process cycle a comment came and therefore whether it can be accepted as relatively uncontaminated by this process or whether it should be treated with caution. So, comments that emanate from the ‘storming’ phase, for example, may be more about process (in this case establishing status and power hierarchies within the group) than about their apparent topic, and should thus be treated carefully.

**Q: What’s NOT being said?**

*Actively considering, and regarding as data, the gaps, spaces and absences within the manifest content. Accounting for and interpreting interactive difficulties and silences*

If there are silences and gaps, is it that respondents are avoiding a question, or trying to change the subject? Or are they simply not able to talk about it? In looking at silences, hesitation, avoidance or difficulties in answering questions, researchers once more might apply various interpretative frames.

- For example, a psychoanalytic framework might invite one to see hesitation as respondent avoidance of uncomfortable or repressed topics.
- A quite different perspective might be taken using ideas from discourse analysis, interpreting hesitation or silence as respondents not having the ‘public’ language accurately to describe their private experience (De Vault 1990).
- From a broader sociocultural perspective, one might look for what is not being said because it is being taken for granted. What cultural or
sub-cultural assumptions are respondents working with which underpin their assertions? What unspoken definitions and rules are being implicitly invoked, but are too obvious to respondents to be spelled out (see Barnham 2000)? A cultural analytic or semiotic approach would look in this way at taken-for-granted meanings and world-views.

Researchers will also routinely look at what material was offered freely and spontaneously against what had to be prompted or extracted by probing. What does this indicate about it; what effect does this have on how this material can be regarded? Again one can apply a range of interpretations to this difference, for example:

- One can use theories of memory and how information is stored (Heath and Howard-Spink 2000).
- Or one can use ideas of social acceptability (respondents can only talk about something once the moderator has made it OK to do so by bringing up the subject).
- Or it may simply be that something that matters a great deal to the client is just unimportant and of low salience to respondents. Most simply, perhaps, a researcher might question the foundation of early hypotheses (the researcher’s and client’s), to explore, in a common-sense way, why an expected response is not there.

Q: What was the respondent’s purpose or intention in making this comment?

Talk as action: what is the respondent doing interactively in giving this view or information?

When someone says something in an interview they may be trying very hard accurately to represent their inner world – but the talk will also be designed to perform other actions in its social context. In the market research situation examples of such actions would include arguing, defending, trying to please the moderator, posturing, displaying expertise, trying to say something socially unacceptable in an acceptable way and so on.

Formal knowledge of theories of social behaviour, of group dynamics and power relationships in groups may be used both in moderating the groups and in analysing outcomes (Chrzanowska, Book 2). Again, though, the major tool used to ‘hear’ such meanings is that of accentuated common sense. It is perhaps here that experience of running many groups really does make a difference, enabling a heightened awareness of ‘normal’ group behaviour and providing a personal benchmark against which to calibrate data from a specific project.

Researchers also use their ordinary knowledge to look at how people assert or defend their views in the face of opposition, at the arguments and sources of information or authority they draw upon. This is formalised
in the academic field of discourse analysis (see Chapter 3) which looks at how, in drawing on certain arguments, language is employed to perpetuate or challenge a particular state of affairs or system of values.

**Q: What’s going on beyond the words?**

*What are the non-verbal cues indicating about how to read the verbal? What else was going on here when this was said?*

Many commercial qualitative researchers feel a real need to access non-verbal as well as verbal content in revisiting interview and group material. They are not just reading non-verbal behaviour in any simple ‘body language’ sense, but primarily looking for *consonance or dissonance* between verbal and non-verbal clues in individuals and groups, and asking themselves what might account for this. In this, they may consciously use theories of non-verbal behaviour including NLP (Chapter 3), as well as common-sense human interpretation.

Another extremely important form of non-verbal data used by commercial qualitative researchers, who work often with group discussions, is usually referred to as *energy* – how high or low was the group’s mood and energy here? What seemed to make it change? ‘Energy’ is frequently cited as a very useful measure, for example in assessing the overall response of a group to an idea or issue, but is difficult to describe or defend. This can lead to difficulties when, as is increasingly common, groups are viewed by clients from behind a one-way mirror. It is less easy from there to judge the group’s energy in the same way as the moderator can and as a result observers may come to quite different interpretations of content. This also, of course, has implications for the use of audio or video tapes as against transcripts for analysis.

There is an emerging field of study known as ‘bio-energetics’ (see Book 2) which deals with this idea, but which is so far not widely familiar to practitioners. The ‘energy’ of a group is a very common and important feature used by researchers, however, and is likely to inspire further investigation.

**Questions that Assess the Specific Effects of the Research Situation and the Researcher on Responses**

Commercial researchers accept that behaviour and responses in interviews and groups give only an approximation, or index, of factors that actually affect behaviour outside that context. Many non-interview methods are being developed within qualitative market research (Desai, Book 3), but the interview or group discussion remains important. It offers a form of information which, despite limitations, has proved to be very useful and cost-effective to organisations. So a third set of questions is asked constantly by the researcher in analysis, concerning making the best of this vehicle, and being sensitive to responses which are, through experience, known to be more a product of the research than the topic.
Q: *What kinds of interviewer or group effects are going on?*

How far and in what way do I think what’s here has been specifically affected by the researcher and/or the research situation?

In academia this is known as being reflexive (Mason 1996), and may be given a more formal place than in commercial research, where it tends to be bundled into the general idea of ‘experience’. Commercial researchers do have an advantage in gaining much practical experience and exposure, day after day, to how groups and individuals behave in a research situation. They can thus develop their own benchmarks.

- Respondents may well have never thought about the subject of the research before, or might not want to admit to others or even themselves how they feel and behave (Glen 1997). But most people also want to sound coherent and competent. So researchers know they have to be cautious in interpreting fully formed and apparently logical answers to questions.
- It is known that people will tend to be polite in market research groups in the UK, so care is taken in interpreting positive responses, especially when respondents make helpful suggestions to avoid being critical. They may suggest many target groups who would like a product or idea, for example, simply to avoid dismissing it entirely.
- Using knowledge of group dynamics and group effects (described earlier in this section) is one slightly more formal way in which commercial researchers assess what they hear and see.
- Some work has also been done on specific issues, too, including research on the effects of client observation of group discussions (Robson and Wardle 1988). Sykes (1991) advocates more of this kind of study as a route towards increased validity in the field.
- Finally, people taking part in market research group discussions come with ideas about what is expected of them and what constitutes their task. They may see themselves as being there to give clear-cut ‘opinions’, or to pass a final judgement on an idea, when the objectives of the research require something else. While much of this will be dealt with in the interviewing process, it remains a filter in analysis. Study of institutional discourse suggests that the ‘rules’ of some semi-formal exchanges, such as job interviews or counselling sessions, are enacted collaboratively by the participants (Drew and Heritage 1992). This potentially offers a way to look more closely at what has been largely tacit knowledge within the research community – in this case how researcher and respondents together ‘do a market research interview’ – and is perhaps beginning to attract academic attention (Myers 1998).
Q: How does what’s here compare with normative responses in this field?

Using professional experience and knowledge of previously researched topics to calibrate certain responses and behaviours in groups

Glen (1997) describes part of the qualitative research industry ‘common knowledge’ as ‘sensitivity to the conventions, totems and taboos of various product fields’ (1997: 131). Researchers develop a keen sense of what is normative for a field and can use this to interpret a particular set of data in that field. For example, in the food area new researchers quickly learn that: ‘It would be good for camping and caravanning’ is a common respondent euphemism for ‘There is no way I will buy that’; and that (to use an earlier example) all ready meals are ‘too small’.

Neither of these raw responses constitutes a useful finding for a client, but each needs interpreting in the light of experience for what it can tell about the product or idea in question. Such norms exist for any research field.

- Mattinson and Bell (2000) describe some of the normative styles of response in qualitative research in the political polling field – where respondents tend to be either confident and dominant or hesitant and reluctant to express any view, a response pattern for which they have developed specific research techniques.
- In the same way, Norman and Barraclough (2000) describe how, in the field of direct mail, reliable but entirely useless responses in qualitative research (‘I never open it’, in circumstances where this was certainly untrue) led them to reformulate their approach.
- Advertising ideas and executions are particularly difficult to research, not least because it is very difficult to distinguish research effects from useful responses to the advertising idea in question. Judith Wardle (Book 6) notes how the researcher must learn to read very small cues to distinguish responses to this advertisement from ‘typical’ responses to advertising in groups. It is common for qualitative researchers in this field to specialise in it, largely for this reason.

We have been concerned in this chapter with the micro-level items on the list of interpretative questions – ‘noticing’ and ‘commenting’ – whilst allowing for the fact that, in the iterative process of analysis and interpretation, the bigger questions of what it all means and what it means for the client will always be present as open slots in the analyst’s mind. ‘Reflecting’, or assessing the data for its likely validity, is a continuous process at both levels. The next chapter focuses on those bigger questions – what does it all mean, and what does it mean for the client?
Interpreting qualitative research – coming to a view on what it means – is an elusive, complex intellectual process and it is hard to describe what actually goes on, whether in commercial or academic fields.

It is suggested here that the process in market research is most usefully conceptualised as a set of questions, of varying degrees of specificity, which the researcher asks again and again of him or herself.

The researcher asks these questions constantly, both whilst trawling through the raw data and when considering the higher-level summaries, displays and analyses of the data which the functional analytic processes produce.

These questions number at least six, and these are here given a working vocabulary:

1. What’s there? (noticing)
2. What might this particular bit mean? (commenting)
3. What might it all mean? (theorising)
4. How does this relate to the client’s issues and perspective? (applying)
5. What does all this mean the client should do? (recommending)
6. How far is this a product of the research or researcher? (reflecting)

It is suggested that these questions may be asked of any piece of data, at any time, throughout the project. However, there is a gradual progression from a focus on the ‘micro’ level – say that of the detail of interview data – through to a focus on the ‘macro’ questions which concern the meaning of the whole picture and its meaning for the client.

This chapter is concerned primarily with the first of these levels and especially examines ‘noticing’ and ‘commenting’, or the process of noticing and making provisional comments about the meaning of detail in the raw data.

In seeing meaning in the detail like this, commercial researchers draw on a very wide range of frameworks for thinking to make sense of it.

A particular feature of qualitative market research is its expertise in using group discussions to address a wide range of research issues. This is evident in the active and positive use made of the features of groups in making sense of respondents’ remarks and in using features of group process as an additional source of data in their own right.

The major way in which commercial researchers look critically at their conclusions – ‘reflecting’ – is by use of their own experience. This is experience both in the process of qualitative analysis itself and in the product field or area of concern of the particular research. Both of these knowledges are actively used as a filter for validity and meaning, at both the micro and macro interpretative levels.
Processes of ‘Interpretation’ II: The Macro Level

From a concern with the micro-level items on the list of interpretative questions, we now move to the bigger questions; what it all means (‘theorising’) and what it all means for the client (‘applying’). This chapter concentrates on more specific discussion of these two macro processes, which become progressively more important as the time available for analysis runs out. With a deadline approaching, commercial researchers must actively move towards drawing conclusions about the meaning of all that has been learned in the project and about its meaning for the client’s objectives. They must also produce a coherent narrative for the face-to-face presentation to the client and some recommendations for action.

BUILDING MACRO-LEVEL CONCEPTS: ‘THEORISING’ AND ‘APPLYING’

When revisiting and trawling through data, interpretative questions will be asked mostly at the micro level (What did the respondent mean? What did this bit of interaction mean?), although the researcher is always alert to possible wider implications (What does the whole picture mean? What does it all mean for the client?). As the project progresses, the analysis is likely to shift, both in material terms (from the transcripts or tapes and onto the data summaries, notes or analysis sheets) and in its focus (from a concern with detail towards the ‘bigger’, often more conceptual, questions). But remember that this is iterative and not a fixed progression. Tentative macro-level conclusions will have been developing throughout the process, from the briefing meeting onwards. In the same way, even when pulling the project together at a late stage researchers might still return to the original data to further refine hypotheses or redefine concepts, seeking ‘closure’ of the hermeneutic circle.

In coming to integrated conclusions about the meaning of all the data, or coming to see the organisational implications of the research, the degree of abstraction or conceptualisation increases. As this happens, so researchers seem less and less able to describe their habitual processes; the origins of the common ‘black box’ descriptor.
However, researchers do often describe a ‘shift of gear’, where the analyst shifts from immersion in data and hypothesising at a micro level to thinking actively about the bigger picture (Wells 1991).

It’s the big questions … what’s the nub of this stuff? What are we talking about here? (Practitioner interview)

This might be conceptualised as ‘flying above’ the detail, or as standing back from or ‘letting go’ of the data (Glen 1997), or some similar metaphor, in order to reach these higher-level interpretations. It may be accompanied by a change in physical work process, too – moving from private immersion in data to brainstorming with colleagues; or from working with a pile of transcripts to working only with a pile of scribbled notes; from A4 paper to a flipchart pad. It may also be represented in a descriptive shift from ‘doing the analysis’ to ‘pulling it together’.

The data still grounds this process, but the focus shifts. This might be seen as the point at which processes of sifting, description and summarising are left behind. Useful as these have been to identify patterns and key issues in the material, the real focus now is to seek systems, relationships, explanatory links, dynamics, tensions or conflicts that apply to this data – and their implications for the client’s objectives.

It is perhaps the letting go of relative certainty – the prevalence of a particular opinion, for example – that makes this notoriously difficult for novice researchers to do. They have to learn to leap towards more abstract thought: ‘some of our researchers have to be taught not to hang on to the content analysis and to realise that it is a tool’ (practitioner interview). They tend, it is said, to want to hang on very tight to the data and have to be taught and actively encouraged to stand on it rather than in it.

‘Theorising’ and ‘Applying’

It is worth reiterating that at this point in commercial research, which is by definition applied research, two forms of higher-level interpretations and conclusions must be drawn.

- Emerging theory – a model or understanding of a specific aspect of the social world, accessed through these respondents (What does it all mean? – ‘theorising’).
- A view of what, given the starting point, beliefs and intentions of the client, this is likely to mean for the latter’s organisation. Do the client’s intentions (new product or advertising idea, re-positioning of established brand, a new local government initiative) roughly cohere within
the behaviours, desires and belief systems of their intended target, or are there areas of dissonance and non-compatibility? How far do these areas of dissonance look likely to be fixable by client actions and how far do they seem intractable? (What might it all mean, looking at the client’s issues? – ‘applying’)

These are extremely difficult to separate, since the researcher is generally ‘theorising’ (producing, for example a, ‘theory’ of how asthma is conceptualised and managed by patients and professionals) and ‘applying’ (coming to a view on what this means for the client’s plans for marketing an asthma drug) at the same time. In this process, the researcher is implicitly or explicitly making a comparison between two sets of qualitative data, i.e. that gathered from respondents and that gathered from the client at the briefing. The questions that lie within these interpretative processes might be more precisely phrased as:

- What’s out there?
- What does the client think is out there?
- What are the implications of this comparison for what the client intends or wants to do?

This is a key issue if we see commercial research as mediation between clients and their stakeholders or targets – researchers need to speak both languages and be able to view the world from both positions in order to translate or mediate effectively between them.

So the researcher’s models and theories for describing and explaining what is ‘out there’ are compared with what the researcher knows of the client’s existing frameworks which inform their market plans – beliefs, definitions and conceptualisations of the field and the problem. In ‘pure researcher’ role the analyst simply makes this comparison, in ‘committed agent of the client’ role, he or she thinks about how to make this situation work for the benefit of the client.

It is this comparison, and its implications for the best way forward for the client, which really form the usefulness of the project to the client. It is helpful for a client company to be told, for example, not just that its marketing idea for an asthma drug is flawed but also that this is because the company is understanding and categorising this condition quite differently from patients, and to be given guidance as to how to re-frame its thinking. Glen describes the process thus:

In taking the project forward from our interpretation of the aggregated views of the consumers interviewed, we need to establish how these various interpretations or conclusions relate usefully to the client view or model or to their ‘Thing’ – be it a new product, packaging, advertising or the market itself. (1997: 135)
This results in the researcher in commercial research holding a kind of Janus-like position, looking two ways at once – at the respondent and at the client at the same time. Again, these theoretically slightly separate activities are likely to be experienced by the practised researcher as one seamless (albeit demanding) mental process.

It is worth noting how important conceptual or abstract thinking is to this process – one of the key skills of doing ‘good’ qualitative research by UK standards is to get beyond the dreaded ‘reportage’ and think conceptually. The next section looks at the importance of this skill and the role of using models and frameworks drawn from outside as aids to thinking. (The final skill, of course, is to communicate insights derived in this way within the possibly very concrete culture of the client organisation, an issue covered by Lillis in Book 7.)

**Types of Macro-Level Interpretations in Qualitative Market Research**

Patton offers the following list of qualitative ‘interpretations’ from his work in social evaluation research: ‘attaching significance to what was found, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, building linkages, attaching meanings, imposing order and dealing with rival explanations …’ (1990: 423). These look quite familiar to a qualitative market researcher. In commercial research, various categories of statements, abstractions and concepts, pulling together the detail of the research, will be produced at the macro interpretative stage. Some of these are suggested below, though once again this list is not exhaustive and the items are not mutually exclusive. One can see that many of the analysis procedures so far described are designed to facilitate the building of these different kinds of statement, as indeed are different approaches to interviewing.

Of course, different research projects require different types and levels of analysis and interpretation. All of these interpretative outcomes will be grounded in and usually illustrated by examples drawn from the data – statements, events and so on. But description, while important, is rarely enough. Wolcott (1994) offers ‘description’, ‘analysis’ and ‘interpretation’ as ascending levels of ‘transforming’ qualitative data. Some commercial projects do largely or exclusively require simple description, or straightforward thematic analysis – the important features of the data and their relationships. However, generally within the UK qualitative research business, a more interpretative level of analysis is valued and expected, both by those buying and by those supplying it, and this is reflected in Box 7.1.

Sometimes the shape of the research outcome is largely predetermined, as when the client’s brief requires detailed description, or a solution to an
apparent conundrum, and where this is a formal objective of the project. But the need for other forms of outcome might emerge as the project progresses – in order to explain something the researcher may need to produce various descriptions and perhaps definitions, even if these were not explicit research objectives.

So commercial research presentations will contain a unique mixture of different kinds of interpretation, driven by the initial and emergent objectives of the study. But researchers also tend to have their favourite modes and models and it is useful to be aware of these. Again, this awareness might increase quality by self-critique, might facilitate working with colleagues using alternative modes, and allow useful experimentation and professional development.

Box 7.1 Common Macro-Level Interpretations in Qualitative Market Research

- **Generalities or descriptions:** general statements about and descriptions of an aspect of the world which interests or is of concern to the client, in literal and conceptual terms, for example how young men in the UK think and talk about drinking lager and the meanings attached to this activity. The meanings and associations of a brand for its users and non-users

- **Patterns and clusters:** tendencies for attitudes, meanings or behaviours relevant to the client’s organisation to cluster and relate to discernible characteristics such as demographics, lifestyle patterns, attitudes and behaviours towards other things and so on. Includes ‘typologies’

- **Definitions and distinctions:** how respondents actually think about something which is key to the client – what ‘convenience’ actually means to women feeding families, for example. What is contained within the concept and what lies outside it; and maybe how it is ‘read’ from packaging or advertising. How consumers in a market divide up and talk about different brands or products within it; or how users of a service define what benefit they get from it

- **Relationships** (causal or non-causal): for example, an account of how aspects of the respondents’ everyday lives seem interrelated and inter-dependent, perhaps with speculation about apparent causality (see Patton 1990: 490 for discussion of this kind of causal statement). May include relationships with brands.
• **Dynamics or internal logic:** the cultural or psychological forces involved in maintaining a situation, and some suggestion of the factors which might bring about change in that situation. The everyday logic which holds a set of behaviours or beliefs together (which may draw on quite a different logic to that of the client, for example)

• **Explanations:** attempts to account for behaviours, attitudes and so on in a logical way (may be closely related to narratives – the story of how something comes about)

• **Discontinuities and anomalies:** gaps or contradictions either within aspects of the respondent’s world (between belief and behaviour, for example) or between that of the client and that of the respondent, or between parts of an apparently homogenous market or community

• **Metaphors and models:** ways of thinking about something which, by explaining or describing one thing in terms of another, will allow further insight into it (see below)

• **Narratives:** stories or narratives about an event, for example the sequence within which a decision to buy or not buy something is made, with characters, plot, setting and outcome

• **Codes:** unpacking and making accessible to the client the internal logic, language and system of meaning of the researched group or audience, however defined (see Valentine 1995)

• **Explicit fit or conflict with client hypotheses:** comparisons with explicit or implicit client hypotheses or beliefs about the area of interest. Making overt comparisons between what has emerged from looking at the respondent’s world, for example categories, themes or priorities – and those which can be seen by the researcher as explicit or implicit in the client’s world-view

• **Cross-cultural description and comparison:** in international projects which may span several countries and continents, higher-level interpretation will entail coming to a detailed understanding of each culture (in any or all of the ways above) and attempting some cross-cultural comparison or synthesis. The synthesis will be closely linked to the kind of business problem and solution that the client needs – for example one communication strategy to work across several markets, or a broad central strategy with local executional control
The previous sections have attempted to outline some of the tasks involved in putting together higher- or macro-level interpretations in qualitative market research. It is impossible to catalogue all the routes by which researchers do this, not least because these processes are fast, complex, idiosyncratic and very often done only in the head of the researcher. However, there is one more way to try to open the ‘black box’ a little – to look at what is believed to assist in this process.

RESOURCES AND SKILLS FOR HIGHER-LEVEL INTERPRETATION

What personal qualities, forms of knowledge, skills and resources are believed to help researchers come to interpretations? These may be easier to access than the operations themselves and provide further insight into the processes involved. Considering again the images of analysis and interpretation offered in this book, they can be seen as falling into four broad categories:

- Those linked to the idea of the ‘hermeneutic circle’ as a model of the qualitative process.
- Those related to mediation skills or the ‘Janus-face’ position outlined above.
- Some which connect to the importance of prior knowledge and professional experience.
- Some related to an ability to think conceptually and to use models.

Working with the ‘Hermeneutic Circle’

Those working in qualitative research of any kind need to have or acquire a tolerance of ambiguity, messiness and chaos (some of the work on ‘emotional intelligence’ is relevant here – see Goleman 1996).

- They need to be able to scan and assimilate lots of complex material.
- They must hold and play with provisional hypotheses and not jump to conclusions too quickly.
- They need to be able to discern patterns in complex data, not becoming so involved at the detailed level that they either lose sight of ‘the big picture’ or lapse into quasi-quantitative generalities to find a way out.

Qualitative interpretation also seems to be an activity that inherently contains certain tensions. Researchers need to be systematic and disciplined but also lateral and creative in thinking. They require concentration and attention to detail but also imagination and the ability to see a bigger picture. Patton comments
There is both a science and an art to qualitative inquiry generally, and qualitative analysis specifically. The scientific part is systematic, analytical, rigorous, disciplined and critical in perspective. The artistic part is exploring, playful, metaphorical, insightful and creative. (1990: 433)

It is through this kind of tension or interplay of different kinds of thinking that hypotheses can emerge from data, be checked, explored and amended in an open-minded way – the hermeneutic process.

I think it is a combination of being able to deal with lots of wobbly data and make sense out of it; so there is a kind of analytical framework that some people are just naturally better at. (Practitioner interview)

Apart from personal disposition and intellectual ability to think in these ways, three things seem to help the hermeneutic process: experience, sharing the process with others and time.

**Experience** is a recurrent theme when researchers talk about interpretation. Glen comments that the ‘ability to rise above the data ... to make intuitive leaps with confidence once data patterns have been assimilated is a crucial part of the interpretative process, and one which takes time and experience to grow into’ (1997: 142). Going through the hermeneutic process again and again seems to develop skills and improve its effectiveness in largely indefinable ways. Perhaps simple successful repetition of the process over time and over many projects leads to greater attunement to small ‘clues’. Or perhaps experience leads simply to greater faith within the researcher that order will emerge from chaos if they can alternately grasp and let go of the data.

Experience of doing it to a ‘successful’ conclusion gives confidence in the process itself. It allows the researcher to develop trust in her or his own interpretative instincts, although there is a need for humility, to keep in touch with the data and to be open always to challenge or surprise. Note that the experience of the process gained in this way is different from the experience which gives ‘prior knowledge’ of a specific field (see below).

**Sharing the process** has been suggested in academic work to improve the quality of qualitative interpretations (Thompson et al. 1989). Within market research applications this is accepted wisdom, and the sharing of projects and interpretative work is often routine within organisations. Usually analysts do this through ‘brainstorming’ or ‘braindumping’ sessions involving all the researchers in a project coming together for a day or half day, with flipchart or whiteboard, to share and debate the findings and what they mean. In best practice, each researcher will have conducted their own detailed ‘analysis’, i.e. they will have become immersed at least in their own data, before this session. Done in this way, such collaborative interpretation has many advantages:
It is a fast and effective way to reach good conclusions.

It counteracts or ameliorates idiosyncratic interpretations.

It provides an invaluable training aid, where inexperienced researchers can see part of the most difficult processes in action.

It is also almost invariably involving, exciting and enjoyable for the participants.

That is what holds people in an agency, because if you don’t have that, you might just as well be home working. (Practitioner interview)

Brainstorming may be invaluable ‘for taking the research beyond reportage, beyond what one person can produce into something quite inspiring’ (practitioner interview). It in effect harnesses some of the known positive effects of group working. The difficulties with the approach, however, are the other side of this coin: its sensitivity to negative group effects, such as the skewing effect of dominant (perhaps senior) participants.

It can be that the loudest gets heard … or whoever gets hold of the pen … (Practitioner interview)

This method presents another difficulty, in being rather seductive. Since it is fast, effective and enjoyable it can be tempting to use it as a substitute for analysis or revisiting of the material in some way. In this case, any skewing or group effects will be fatally compounded by the problems (outlined in Chapter 10) occurring if the research materials are not reviewed.

There is another specific circumstance in which face-to-face discussion of findings is often considered essential to good research, and this is in international projects. Often fieldwork will have been conducted by local moderators, perhaps observed in simultaneous translation by a member of the co-ordinating research team. Practices vary as to how much and what kinds of analysis and interpretation is done by these local researchers, but a brainstorming session involving all of the participating moderators is common. Although expensive, this is seen as a good way to examine and understand the reasons for cross-cultural differences in findings.

This is also an opportunity for the co-ordinating researcher to engage some version of the hermeneutic circle, feeding in the hypotheses and overview so far derived, for debate with individual country researchers. It is seen as a way to get the best from the local moderator’s cultural knowledge, whilst leaving the co-ordinating researchers in charge of final conclusions. Sometimes this is not possible and instead the co-ordinating researcher will conduct an ‘interview’ with the moderator after the fieldwork in order to try to set what has been learned into the cultural context and to tap the local researcher’s interpretative ability.

Time is needed for the hermeneutic process to work to any effect – by now a persistent theme. The degree and nature of analysis and interpretation
needed for different projects does vary, and as noted earlier there is sometimes a good research and commercial case for doing little formal analysis and coming very rapidly to conclusions. However, much qualitative market research cannot be done, or done well, in such circumstances. Significant commercial value may be thrown away if researchers are forced too early into interpretations and conclusions which they have not had time fully to develop, test and ground in the detail of the project.

Time will be needed of course for revisiting and immersion – but time is also needed simply to think. In addition, all researchers recognise the value of ‘not thinking’, the unconscious processing of the client’s problem and the research findings during ‘fallow time’ (Goodyear 1998) or ‘mulling’ (Wardle 1989). This can allow a critical and valuable insight to emerge when least expected, when walking the dog or lying in the bath. Clearly the researcher does need ‘downtime’ to walk the dog or have the bath, to let these thoughts emerge.

**Being ‘Janus-Faced’**

Occupying the translating, culturally mediating role described earlier requires an ability to switch role and position taken with regard to input from respondents and from clients.

- Qualitative market researchers need the ability to be ‘engaged’ with the respondents and their world-view but also ‘detached’ from them in order to conceptualise, generalise and extrapolate.
- In the same way, they need to be able to be fully engaged (as committed business partners) with the client’s world-view, yet also detached enough from it to be impartial and objective analysts of the research problem and the client’s perspective on it, as well as the data.

Qualitative market researchers generally have an interest in and understanding of people and social groups, and popular culture. They acquire this both through formal study, say of psychology, sociology or cultural studies, but also through accumulated professional experience. Further, they need and acquire skills of critical self-awareness; they have to be able to acknowledge and put aside or ‘bracket’ personal prejudices and assumptions; to put aside the ‘I’.

This is not to say that researchers cannot or should not have existing views on the topic of a piece of research. Rather these need to be acknowledged, perhaps incorporated into initial hypotheses and subjected to objective analytic scrutiny as the project progresses. In a study of analysis and interpretation processes using an NLP framework, Corr and Taylor comment that the ability to use different ‘perceptual positions’ – to see things from perspectives other than the ‘I’ – is ‘a crucial ability for qualitative researchers’ (1996: 71).
Knowing a Market or Field: The Role of Prior Knowledge

This concerns the question of cumulative knowledge of a specific field or business area. This knowledge can reside within an individual and also, formally or informally, within an agency. Note this substantive knowledge is different from accumulated experience of the qualitative process – just having done analysis and interpretation many times – referred to earlier.

- Useful prior knowledge may accrue from conducting many studies within a particular field and might take the form of working models of a product field or area of activity, or original theories regarding a sub-culture (for example that of young male beer-drinkers; or primary care doctors). Many qualitative researchers do develop specialisms based on market sector (children; or business-to-business) and/or product field (financial services; food). Clearly this accumulated knowledge can provide useful shortcuts to understanding and framing the client’s specific problem and specific findings. This is where Ginzburg’s ‘clues’ idea discussed in Chapter 4 is useful, in describing a systematic process whereby one looks for small clues that indicate difference against prior knowledge about what might be expected.

- Researchers may also draw from their experience in other business areas. Sometimes work done previously in an apparently unrelated field can provide a useful analogy or model (see below) for the current project.

It is next to impossible to clear one’s mind of all previous knowledge when beginning a new project – and in a commercial context this would also be very wasteful (Robson, 1988). The treatment of this knowledge within the analytic/interpretative process is important, though. If the activity in question is to remain ‘research’ rather than ‘expert opinion’ or non-research consultancy, this store of prior knowledge needs to be given an appropriate place alongside the new material gathered for each project. Researchers must regard any ad hoc data as important enough to analyse in an open-minded way, even in a market they know well. If not, they risk missing new, contradictory but important information. Acknowledging assumptions and bringing personal hypotheses into the open at an early stage helps reduce this danger and allows prior knowledge genuinely to enhance the research.

- An other argument for humility with regard to prior knowledge is that this knowledge will always benefit from being updated, refreshed and occasionally completely overhauled. Markets, meanings and cultures do shift and evolve and experience of a market or phenomenon is only valuable if it provides a useful and flexible framework for understanding new material. If set in stone, it can blind researchers not just to the detail of a particular project, but even to a whole new way of seeing a market or phenomenon.
Here we see yet another way in which the delicate balance of the ‘dual role’ is visible – a researcher needs to be intimate enough with a client’s business to provide truly useful findings, yet disconnected enough from it to be able to see it afresh for each project.

**Thinking Conceptually Using Metaphor**

There are many different project and question types and these will have different interpretative requirements. The usefulness of mediation as a *general* analogy is that it would seem to apply across a wide range of project types. So the researcher might perform a translation role:

- whether simply closing a gap between consumer and manufacturer *language*;
- framing respondent *beliefs and behaviours* in terms of the client’s existing constructs;
- or working at a more complex level where a whole *sub-cultural world* may have to be made comprehensible to the client.

The researcher’s job as translator is to make the strange familiar for the commissioning client, so that the implications of the organisation’s intended actions may be understood. Continuing the analogy, we might look therefore at skills, processes and resources which help in this process of decoding, whereby the strange can be made familiar.

A useful tool for doing this is metaphor, or expressing and exploring one thing in terms of another. In metaphor, the unfamiliar or distant object is understood by analogy with something nearer and better known. The idea of metaphor as a fundamental part of how we see, speak and act, and as being essentially cultural, is developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Many of those writing about qualitative research from academic and commercial perspectives, even those taking quite different approaches to qualitative work, offer metaphor as a crucial part of qualitative interpretative thinking (Corr and Taylor 1996; Griggs 1987; Spiggle 1994). Miles and Huberman in fact attribute to metaphor ‘an immense and central place in the development of theory’ (1994: 250) and comment on the pervasive nature of metaphor and its implications for qualitative analysis:

> The people we study use metaphors constantly as a way of making sense of their experience. We do the same thing as we examine our data. The issue, perhaps, is not *whether* to use metaphor as an analysis tactic, but to be aware of how we – and the people we study – use it. (1994: 250; original emphasis)
They go on to outline the benefits of metaphor in interpretation:

- Metaphors are **rich and complex**: one aspect of data may suggest a metaphor, which then itself suggests further parallels that can be explored.
- Metaphors are **data-reducing and pattern-making devices**: making a generality out of several different aspects of the data, or patterns seen within it.
- Metaphors allow **decentring**: that is, they invite the researcher/analyst to pull the focus away from the detail and away from the concrete; actively seeking metaphors can help get out of ‘data-bashing’ mode.
- Metaphors are a way of **connecting findings to emerging theory**: as Miles and Huberman put it, metaphors ‘get you up and over the particulars en route to the basic social processes that give meaning to these particulars’ (1994: 252).

What does this mean in practice for the qualitative market research practitioner? Potential sources of metaphors are everywhere; they *may* but *do not have to* relate directly to brands, marketing or any of the specific subject matter of qualitative market research. In this sense, the more the researcher is exposed to a wide range of conceptual thinking and explanation the better.

In practice, one of the simplest ways that qualitative market researchers use metaphor and analogy is through **borrowing from other disciplines** such as biology, geography, history, computing or literature. We take a thing or concept that looks like it might fit some key aspects of what we see, then try ‘mapping the slots’ (Spiggle 1994: 498) and see if what emerges is illuminating (although care needs to be taken not to get too carried away and stretch the metaphor to breaking point). Virginia Valentine and I used a biological mechanism – that of osmosis – as a central concept in a paper about the use of celebrities in advertising (Ereaut and Valentine 1985). Later in this chapter a computing metaphor – operating system vs. application – is used to describe different uses of theory in market research practice.

Another good example of metaphoric thinking is ‘**systems theory**’ (Senge 1990). Often using models drawn from nature, Senge proposes that the idea of a balanced system provides a useful way to look at social entities such as organisations and families. The idea that an apparently static situation actually represents a system in dynamic tension might just provide a useful model to explain and describe a particular set of research findings. This ‘system’ idea is used regularly by practitioners Jon Chandler and Mike Owen (personal communication), though they in fact draw it from sociological and political economic theory.

Researchers who read widely and absorb different forms of abstract thinking will arguably be better prepared to derive some kind of structure, to use metaphor and conceptualise what they see, when faced with a mass of qualitative information.
Thinking Conceptually with Models and Schemata: The Mental Toolbox

Smith and Fletcher comment:

We cannot, to a certain extent, avoid approaching the unfamiliar through the familiar, but we must always ask ourselves whether there are other disciplines or areas of expertise with which we may not be familiar, but which could provide more appropriate models and theories for understanding the data before us. (2001: 21)

There is real value in recognising the variety of models of thinking in current use in qualitative market research, whether broad or specific, explicit or implicit. Researchers (and whole research communities) do have broad or implicit intellectual orientations in that they will tend towards the psychological, the cultural and so on. It has been suggested earlier that there is no such thing as completely objective ‘looking’: we always have in our heads assumptions, expectations and models of how the world works and these offer us particular ways to describe and explain our experience. It was noted in an earlier section that even the process of seeing ‘what’s there’ in a set of findings is far from a neutral, objective process, but constitutes the first step in interpretation.

As noted in an earlier chapter, in qualitative market research it seems that formal theory and established models work in several ways. First, at the meta or ‘grand’ level, a broad intellectual position will inform a researcher’s whole view of the world – people tend to have their favourite orientations such as psychological, psychodynamic, sociological/cultural – or more often an idiosyncratic blend of these. This forms the ‘way of seeing’ version of theory. Using a computing metaphor, the researcher will have a preferred ‘operating system’ or major instrument through which all aspects of the research endeavour will be produced.

Making explicit one’s initial hypotheses is part of the process of becoming more aware of this level of ‘theory’. Corr and Taylor conclude this has definite value, arguing that it allows conscious experimentation, for example by ‘matching’ and ‘mismatching’ processes (1996: 70–1). This can apply not just at the level of the topic of research (What do I expect people to say about this?) but also at the level of implicit beliefs about what will help to answer the client’s problem (What psychological, social, and/or cultural material do I need to tap into here? What must I discover from these respondents?). It must be better for researchers interested in reducing undue bias and blindness to acknowledge their favourite frameworks and world-views; such awareness also opens the way for conscious experimentation with other frameworks and an expansion of the skills repertoire. The practical arguments in favour of being actively aware of ‘theory’ are in this sense compelling (practical arguments admittedly made more
necessary in the increasingly pragmatic and action-oriented business contexts within which researchers operate).

At a more tactical and often more conscious level, the eclectic, informed and pragmatic researcher may also explicitly pull out specific models from a range of human science if they seem appropriate for a specific job; this is the ‘toolbox’ version of theory. In this way, continuing the computing metaphor, different models might be thought of as offering a range of computer applications running in reduced form at the bottom of the researcher’s mental ‘screen’ – they can be pulled up as tools to help clarify the analysis when something in the data itself prompts it. So the researcher with an essentially sociocultural orientation might still use a psychological model, say Transactional Analysis, to look at a specific set of findings, if something in the data itself suggests that this model might be useful.

Beyond this, researchers may use a whole range of ‘toolbox’ models drawn from explicit organisational, marketing or advertising theory.

More commonly, perhaps, they use models of brands, advertising or consumption which they or their companies have developed over years of experience (for many examples see Glen 1997; Gordon 1999; Chandler and Owen, Book 5).

Finally, models may be adapted which originated from experience in other business areas. A colleague once used models drawn from work in derivative technologies (where for example video players cannot develop commercially without videos; but videos will not be produced without players) to help put structure onto a set of findings from research in the pharmaceutical field.

It seems obvious that the more familiarity a researcher has with a range of relevant models drawn from diverse sources, the better equipped he or she is for conceptual experimentation. As Wendy Gordon notes, though, the researcher also needs to be careful not to become too reliant on such models. Applied uncritically or too habitually they can be, as she puts it, ‘models of not thinking’ (1999: 231).

It is important to note in this ‘theoretical’ area that it is entirely up to the researcher how far they wish to expose their clients explicitly to models. These perspectives and models are certainly tools for thinking, but not necessarily for communication, and decisions about how far to use them for communication depends on many other factors (Lillis, Book 7).

It is also worth reiterating here that one of the tasks of the qualitative market researcher is not only to recognise and use his or her own assumptions and explanatory models, but to think directly about the client’s world-view and mental models. How does this particular client (at the individual and organisational level) ‘construct’ the world out there and the organisational, political or marketing tasks they face? Are they, for example, using a ‘cause-and-effect’ model whereby their own actions are seen to affect consumer action directly, or have they adopted a more ‘collaborative’ stance towards their target customers (see Lannon and Cooper 1983; and also Desai, Book 3)? What does this political party believe about
the way voters make their decisions? What formal marketing theories seem to be operating in this company culture?

The researcher will need to identify and analyse these models, assumptions and processes of logic, not just accept them, or even ignore them. In this sense, awareness of marketing and other relevant theory can be useful to researchers, not to enable them to advise clients, but because it equips them to recognise models of thinking that might be in use within client organisations.

Matching of some of these beliefs and orientations is done implicitly by clients, in that they will prefer to work with researchers who they feel ‘understand’ them and talk their language. It is possible that making theory of all kinds more explicit could help researchers to communicate better with clients, as well as to analyse better.

**CLOSING THE CIRCLE: THE IDEA OF ‘BEST FIT’**

Qualitative analysis and interpretative processes have been described in terms of the hermeneutic circle, whereby the analyst moves between detail and model, between concrete and abstract, between data and interpretation, trying always to find a position of stability. No matter how long or intense the research project, this process cannot continue indefinitely – at some point a set of conclusions must be drawn and the ‘hermeneutic circle’ considered closed, at least for the practical purposes of that project. It is probably better described as a hermeneutic spiral, since at some point it does close towards a position of balance or continuity, where the detail collected and the holistic conceptualisation of the detail are in line with each other and stable. Cowley (2000), looking at commercial analysis and interpretation practices amongst Australian qualitative researchers, emerges with a model he calls the ‘funnel web’, which shows noticeable parallels with this idea.

The criteria governing the decision that the circle is closed are of course different between commercial and academic fields.

At one extreme, in certain forms of academic research, periods of analysis may well lead to a return to the field, or periods of fieldwork will be planned to allow detailed analysis between phases. The end point will not generally be seen to have been reached before a lengthy and detailed project has been completed. The analyst and his or her academic supervisors or peer reviewers will need to be satisfied that original and well-grounded knowledge has been produced, or that whatever criteria for evaluation set for the study have been met. (It should be noted, of course, that academics also work within constraints of time and budget, but that these tend to be configured rather differently – there may be very much more time but far less money available for an academic project.)

For the market researcher, there is generally only one fieldwork period and return to the field to check out emergent hypotheses is very rarely, if
Qualitative research is by definition responsive – the researcher can and does feed thoughts and hypotheses from early parts of the fieldwork process into the later ones, developing and refining the very focus of the research as he or she goes. But the commercial researcher effectively only has one chance per project to collect data, and then must produce some kind of coherent account from it.

The fact is, market researchers are judged ultimately on the quality and utility of their interpretations, not just on the technical rigour of their analysis – and they are often working with compromise samples and to impossible deadlines. This is why previous experience both of the process and of various substantive subject areas is so important – to be able to deliver useful findings under these conditions it is often necessary to add ‘implicit’ knowledge to the data collected for that specific project (Smith and Fletcher 2001). This is, of course, open to criticisms of bias, but it does reflect the nature of commercial research and underlines how and why its criteria of evaluation are different (see Chapter 9). Good commercial research is a balance of analytic rigour with intuition and creative thought and prior experience in the field.

Criteria for closing the circle in basic academic research might include ‘saturation’, or the state where new data do not cause the researcher to revise hypotheses, and where the researcher is satisfied that a full and valid account of the phenomena has been reached. In commercial research this is replaced by a pragmatic and instrumental focus on the idea of ‘best fit’, or attaining a state where the findings have acceptable internal coherence as well as coherence with whatever external reference points are available (such as information already held by the researcher and client). To fulfil the commercial contract, the market researcher must assemble a set of reasonably coherent ideas about what the research has revealed, along with some notion of how these ideas relate both to what the client already knew and believed before the research, and to what the client intends or hopes to do (discussed further in Chapter 9).

Throughout the project the researcher has always to maintain a tension between (a) keeping options open and (b) coming to conclusions. Deciding on ‘the answer’ too early shuts out potentially important detail; not coming to conclusions in time means flooding clients with unusable detail, or confusing them with under-developed schemes and models. As the deadline for the project approaches, some hypotheses must be rejected and others accepted as the best working model; issues and themes must be given appropriate priority and weighting. Selection for relevance must be made. From the totality of potential concepts, interpretations and accounts that have emerged, those that are really relevant to the client must be sorted from those that are just interesting. In the process the researcher has to let go of some of the possible outcomes and, in the words of one practitioner, ‘lots of gems just bite the dust’. This is a question of professional expertise and it is difficult to do well without appropriate experience.
At this point ‘analysis and interpretation’ for the project in hand is nearly over (although as knowledge is accumulated within the researcher from project to project, it is in another sense never over). Organisational implications and recommendations are made by incorporating interpretations of the findings with what is known of the client’s organisational intentions, capabilities and constraints. This means bringing in other knowledges – this time about the realistic options available to the client, or about real constraints on possible action, which affect what can sensibly be recommended from the research. The researcher makes a full switch from ‘pure researcher’ role to ‘committed partner’ role and develops a view about how the knowledge gained in the project could be used to further the client’s objectives (i.e. recommending how the learning from the research could be incorporated into a promotional strategy for a specific asthma drug). In the final presentation or report the research findings, implications and recommendations are ‘packaged’ into a coherent narrative form which makes them maximally usable by the client (see Book 7 for further discussion of these processes).

For the researcher, ‘writing the debrief’ may be experienced as a slightly separate step or exercise from ‘analysis and interpretation’. The building of a descriptive or persuasive narrative will itself test the robustness of the logical links drawn and may even at this late stage precipitate another round of analysis and interpretative activity. This will be done in order to achieve a better account of the research, refining or redefining the constructs used. Again, allowing more time for the process will generally allow better, more coherent and more robust conclusions to be drawn.

**KEY POINTS**

- Interpretation poses the most difficult riddle for the analyst of analysis practices to solve. It is by definition a personal intellectual process and thus resists close examination and explanation. This and the preceding chapter attempt to open up this process a little, at least to show the kinds of thing that might be inside it.
- Interpretation itself seems operationalised through a list of questions concerning meaning and significance, ranging from the micro to the macro level, asked repeatedly of all kinds of material throughout the life of a project.
- The kinds of outcome demanded by qualitative market research projects are highly varied and in some cases simple description or basic thematic analysis is much or all that is required. However, there is a tendency in the UK to regard highly interpretative analyses as constituting ‘good’ research outcomes.
• How researchers use all the materials and processes described to arrive at a set of conclusions is usefully represented by the model of the hermeneutic circle. This is supported both by accounts of practice and by accepted wisdom about skills and qualities and circumstances that seem to help the process.

• Key amongst the latter are the ability to deal with ambiguity and ‘messy’ data; the ability to see things from a number of perspectives; prior but flexible knowledge of a market or area of concern to the research; and the ability to think conceptually.

• The other key issue in higher-level interpretation concerns the way in which ‘closure’ is brought about. Aspects of the commercial research process itself, especially the norms regarding timescales for projects, shape the degree to which data can be revisited. They also have a direct bearing on how far and for how long the hermeneutic circle can be kept open, and hypotheses tested and refined, before findings must be produced for the client.
Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis – CAQDAS

Non-academic readers of this book may be puzzled at the inclusion here of two quite unfamiliar concepts. Neither grounded theory nor Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) is, at the time of writing, in common use in the commercial qualitative sector. However, we need to look at these because they are in use and are of clear importance within certain sections of academic qualitative research. Of course, commercial researchers might simply have not become exposed to these ideas, given the separateness of the two worlds, but the reasons for differences in practice in this area seem, on closer examination, to be more fundamental. Commercial and academic readers alike may be interested both to look at what the market research industry could learn from these apparently influential approaches to qualitative analysis and interpretation, but also to consider why they have as yet failed to make a significant impact in commercial practice.

WHAT IS CAQDAS?

Qualitative analysis using dedicated computer software is now widely known in academia. This software seems to be becoming an accepted or even standard analysis tool, although actual usage levels for CAQDAS are hard to establish. Nigel Fielding of the University of Surrey, an expert in this field, estimates that it is probably used in no more than 25–30 per cent of academic qualitative analyses, although the ‘ever used’ figure might be slightly higher. This means only a minority of qualitative studies do use CAQDAS, but nevertheless it represents a significant number of users. Additionally, in a field where methods are open to critical scrutiny, it indicates a significant degree of methodological acceptance. Some reservations are expressed within the academic community and not every researcher is converted, but the general premises of CAQDAS and the benefits it offers seem widely accepted and the programs continue to be developed. Yet CAQDAS, at the time of writing, is hardly seen at all in commercial qualitative analysis.

This chapter is primarily about the use of computers in qualitative analysis, but will begin with a slight diversion into the field of grounded...
theory. This is the title given to a method of qualitative research and analysis originated by sociologists Glaser and Strauss (1967), though later developed somewhat separately by each of these authors (Glaser 1992; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Grounded theory is just one approach of many used in academic qualitative research (Tesch 1990), but it is relevant here for a number of reasons.

• In some senses it seems to describe exactly what qualitative commercial researchers do – create interpretations and conclusions (‘theory’) based on (‘grounded’ in) data from interviews with people about the detail of their lives. It is quite rare nevertheless to find explicit awareness or knowledge of grounded theory in market research, the brief discussion in Smith and Fletcher (2001) being an exception.

• Grounded theory is also relevant to this chapter because it is related to, though not completely synonymous with, the origins of computer-assisted qualitative analysis software discussed in the next section.

• This, in turn, is interesting because of the sharp difference in uptake of such software between academic and commercial qualitative researcher communities.

A full account of grounded theory is inappropriate here, but essentially its processes are highly detailed and systematic, entailing ‘coding’ of qualitative data in a number of different ways, through several iterative stages of analysis and fieldwork (see next section). These procedures aim to produce accountable and rigorous methods of qualitative analysis, whereby abstractions and conceptualisations are indeed developed, but are well and traceably grounded in data originating in the ‘real world’. A key feature of the method appears to be its detailed documentation – every concept is logged and every amendment or refinement of every concept is detailed, recorded and linked to the primary data which inspired the amendment.

A grounded theory develops in a systematic way, emerging concepts having to be constantly checked against previously analysed data as well as being developed by further data. The method intertwines analysis with data collection, in that analysis of initial fieldwork should lead to further data collection (‘theoretical sampling’) to test and develop a concept or hypothesis and so on. Only when ‘theoretical saturation’ is reached – where additional data are not significantly adding to or amending theoretical constructs – does data collection stop.

It is important to recognise that grounded theory emerged at a time when much social theorising actually went on without reference to empirical research at all, hence its emphasis on inductive methods (Strauss and Corbin 1994). In addition, it answered a need when qualitative methods for social research were considered suspect and where demonstrable analytic rigour went some way to answering positivist critics (Seale 1999). Grounded theory, although significant historically, and enjoying what
Fielding and Lee call ‘a dominant position in the analysis of non-numeric data at the present time’ (1998: 39), seems to have its own adherents and critics within different fields of academia. Some writers in fact observe that much research that invokes grounded theory as its methodological authority may in practice operate far from the principles originally outlined (Bryman and Burgess 1994b; Fielding and Lee 1998).

What might grounded theory offer commercial research?

- There may be some benefits in looking at explicit principles and practices by which theory can be *demonstrably* grounded in data or findings, even if commercial researchers are unlikely to want or need to commit to the system itself.
- As noted earlier, some qualitative market research projects do need an element of *detailed and methodical* compare-and-contrast analysis (meticulous comparison of responses to several new product or brand name concepts, or comparing responses across many countries). The development of methods and ideas for systematic inter-case and intra-case analysis could well enhance these projects (see also Miles and Huberman 1994 for extensive coverage of this kind of approach).

The difficulties in applying grounded theory methods more widely to qualitative market research do include issues of time and cost, since this level of analysis and documentation can rarely be justified in the commercial context of a project (Gabriel 1990). But just as importantly, other difficulties lie in the distinctive nature of much commercial qualitative research, at least in the UK. This operates under quite different conditions from much academic or even applied social research, employs a rather different form of analysis and values different things. This becomes especially visible when looking at whether and in what way commercial researchers might make use of computer analysis for qualitative research.

**COMPUTER ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE DATA – A MARKET RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE**

Hedges (1985) refers to his own use of word processing software within analysis to sort, collate and collect quotes. There are highly likely to be others doing this and making use of various features of such software to manipulate text. This does not, however, constitute CAQDAS – this term generally refers to the use of dedicated qualitative analysis software, developed largely within and for sections of the academic community within the past decade or so. There are at the time of writing around 20 such packages generally available.

The categorisation of CAQDAS packages detailed in Box 8.1 is drawn from Weitzman and Miles (1995) and is used in the commercial literature by Catterall and Maclaren (1998) and by Barker and Nancarrow (1998).
Box 8.1 CAQDAS Packages

**Text retrievers:** specialise in finding all instances of words, phrases (or other character strings) in one or several data files

**Textbase managers:** organise, sort and make sub-sets of text systematically with text search and retrieve facilities

**Code-and-retrieve programs:** assist with dividing text into segments by theme or category and assigning codes to these. All text segments with the same code attached can be retrieved for examination

**Code-based theory builders:** have all the capabilities of code-and-retrieve programs and also allow graphic links between codes, for example taste, texture and colour may be sub-categories of a category called ‘reasons for drinking brand’. Theory builders permit the testing of hypothesised links between categories in the data

**Conceptual network builders:** systematically build graphic networks and permit testing of sophisticated semantic relationships between codes

I have been able to collect very few examples of commercial researchers using these kinds of software, although some do recall experimentation with text retrievers within the market research industry some years ago. Anecdotally, a few researchers have more recently been attracted to another kind of package, such as code and retrieve, but have found them time-consuming and awkward. They have concluded that project investment costs were too high compared with the possible benefits. Pike and Thompson (1995) concluded that there was little use of CAQDAS within commercial qualitative research, and several years later there seems to be no real change.

Why should this be the case? Several reasons suggest themselves:

- Technophobia is possible but is also unlikely; generally commercial researchers are not slow to seek out technology which might help their work, such as high-tech unobtrusive audio and video recording for observation, and facilities for multi-media presentation.
- There would inevitably be time and thus cost involved in learning how to use the software and this may account for some lack of interest, although the packages themselves are not, by commercial standards, expensive.
- There is a lack of familiarity, but non-use is unlikely to be accounted for by ignorance of the existence of CAQDAS software, since there has
been some exposure to it within the British market research community (Barker and Nancarrow 1998; Catterall and Maclaren 1998; Pike and Thompson 1995)

- The lack of uptake is more likely to be found in:
  - an **avoidance on principle**, through general antipathy to the idea of computers in qualitative analysis, and/or a confusion about what the software actually does;
  - a **real lack of fit** between what the packages offer and what commercial researchers need.

There seems to be truth in both of these last possibilities; they are explored in two very useful papers by Catterall and Maclaren (1997, 1998) and are discussed further below.

**Avoidance on Principle**

General antipathy to the use of computers in qualitative analysis is evident in writing by experienced practitioners (Gordon and Langmaid 1988; Robson and Hedges 1993) and is easily confirmed by informal conversations with practitioners. Catterall and Maclaren (1998) trace this at least in part to a conflation of CAQDAS with quantitative survey analysis packages and/or with earlier word-counting software. It appears that, to commercial qualitative researchers:

- Computers seem inextricably linked with numbers and counting, rather than ideas and thinking. They share the view of some academic researchers that the computer is ‘an alien device with roots firmly based in the quantitative paradigm’ (Tesch, quoted in Fielding and Lee 1998: 13).
- Beyond this, computers are also seen as incompatible with creativity and sensitivity in interpretation and, as we have seen previously, qualitative commercial practice takes pride in being ‘interpretative’, especially in the UK.
- So it follows that if computers are linked with quantitative thinking, computer analysis of **qualitative** material easily suggests a mechanistic and superficial approach, from which many commercial researchers would emphatically distance themselves.

Significantly, this directly contrasts with some academic situations where conflation of computer analysis with quantitative methods amongst colleagues or funding bodies may actually be beneficial. In these circumstances, computer analysis can add credibility to the research or even help secure research funding from bodies sceptical about qualitative methods (Fielding and Lee 1998). It must be emphasised that within a
client relationship, qualitative researchers in commercial practice are rarely if ever called upon to justify their use of qualitative methods. On the contrary, they are generally invited, as specialists, to conduct research that has already been identified as needing a qualitative approach. In this situation, references to quantitative methods introduced by the idea of computer analysis may be confusing to clients or even damaging to the qualitative researcher’s professional credibility.

Another source of ‘emotional’ rejection of CAQDAS is the expectation that the computer puts unacceptable ‘distance’ between the researcher and the material, somehow felt to link to the tactile nature of paper and pen methods (perhaps this is also a fear of total reliance on the electronic over the tangible). Indeed this is a feature of some academic rejection, too (Fielding and Lee 1998). As they note, it is the case that the researcher’s ability to scan the material is limited by the size of the screen and the technical limits of scrolling. Being limited to seeing a ‘screenful’ of text at a time would seem to enhance coding operations (see below), encouraging intellectual focus and close attention to detail, but seems far less useful for ‘letting it wash over you’. These two very different operations – close attention and relaxed scanning – both seem important to commercial researchers, but may not both be facilitated by CAQDAS.

So, should commercial researchers overcome these emotional responses and assumptions and look more seriously at CAQDAS? Catterall and Maclaren (1998) offer a comprehensive and accessible overview of CAQDAS in an article designed specifically for the commercial researcher. They comment that there are distinct terminological problems, where the CAQDAS world is laden with unfamiliar terms, including several that evoke distinctly quantitative associations: ‘textbase managers’, ‘conceptual network builders’ and ‘coding’.

‘Coding’ in particular – the cornerstone of the most widely used programs – sounds very quantitative to qualitative ears, being indeed a standard technical term in quantitative market research. In fact the term ‘coding’ is not liked by all CAQDAS users and the process could equally be called ‘marking’, ‘tagging’ ‘indexing’ or ‘labelling’. However, much academic discussion, as exemplified by the University of Surrey e-mail discussion group (see http://caqdas.soc.surrey.ac.uk), still seems to favour ‘coding’ as the generic term. Simply re-naming the process or explaining this term to commercial researchers might begin to make CAQDAS more acceptable.

Catterall and Maclaren do develop a number of ideas that support the use of CAQDAS in market research, but also acknowledge certain barriers to use, not all of which relate to those described above. While unfortunate terminological confusions and erroneous assumptions serve to fuel anti-software prejudice, there are also other more fundamental issues at stake – the fit between current practice and what the software can do.
Fit Between Packages and Commercial Researchers’ Analysis Needs

Catterall and Maclaren (1998) acknowledge that there is a potential gap between software developed within certain academic traditions and the habits and needs of commercial users. The most serious problem concerns the centrality to much of the academically developed software of ‘code-and-retrieve’ as the assumed primary strategy of the user.

In this analysis approach, which is closely related to grounded theory, segments of text – often transcripts of interviews – are ‘coded’ (that is, tagged or marked) with the name of the conceptual category or categories they contain. This coding process is likely to be done more than once for each transcript or text, with categories and codes being refined and developed further as coding proceeds. So an initial code of ‘anxiety’ might be further refined into a ‘family’ of codes, each being a different component of the developing concept of anxiety – separation anxiety, symptoms of anxiety and so on.

At any point, all the text relating to a certain code or codes can then easily be gathered – or ‘retrieved’ – into one file and inspected or printed out as a series of excerpts (a process that used to be done by hand by cutting up transcripts and pasting collections of text). The role of the software, of course, is to mechanise this process and allow fast retrieval of text coded in a certain way. Many versions also allow repeated and narrowly specified searches (for example, to look for co-occurrence of certain codes, or to look at the occurrence of certain codes by sub-sample or other measure).

Within some packages, too, the codes themselves are also analysed and ‘browsed’ and relationships between them explored and developed through ‘theoretical coding’. Codes, notes about their meanings (or ‘memos’) and text can be linked and modelled in complex ways. In this way, more abstract or conceptual theory ‘emerges’ from the concrete data; it is easy to see the connection with grounded theory, although a direct correspondence between CAQDAS and grounded theory is not universally accepted (see the discussion in Fielding and Lee 1998).

On initial exposure, this basic code-and-retrieve method tends to ‘feel wrong’ to commercial researchers, although they may be unable fully to articulate why. There is of course a time investment issue, since few commercial projects could justify detailed and laborious coding and re-coding of material. But the anxiety goes deeper.

There are specific worries about the way in which this looks dangerously like counting responses (Pike and Thompson 1995), a real problem given the ambivalence about counting described earlier (Chapter 3). Indeed Fielding and Lee (2002) do remark that ‘because it is systematic and increasingly self-documenting, work with CAQDAS tends to direct analytic attention to regularities and to things which can be counted’ and regard this as a trap into which the novice researcher, without the benefit of already-developed ‘craft’ skills, might fall.
There is also a feeling amongst commercial researchers that ‘coding’
detail at this level might actually be counter-productive to good interpret-
tative thinking. Again, there is parallel discussion amongst experienced
academic researchers who are users of CAQDAS about the dangers of its
inviting ‘mechanical’ coding, performed not to feed and support interpre-
tative activity but as an end in itself. Coding has to remain an interpretative activity if it is not to become mechanical, and the building of a ‘code frame’ (again, a technical term within quantitative market research) may militate against this.

Quite apart from these concerns about the process of coding, it seems
the biggest objection to code-and-retrieve-based CAQDAS is the feeling that there is something vital missing from the analysis. Pike and Thompson (1995), for example, express significant concern about the highly verbal focus of CAQDAS approaches. Dissection and manipulation, however diligent and considered, of the fragmented text of respondents’ remarks simply misses out two vital sources of meaning routinely used by commercial researchers; first non-verbal material, and secondly aspects of interaction and group process.

- **Non-verbal material** could conceivably be coded in using software, say if the researcher were to listen to the tape of an interview at the same time as coding the transcript. It also seems likely that many academic users do find ways to allow the non-verbal into their CAQDAS analyses.
- The interactive and unfolding quality of material, especially that from group discussions, is not impossible to deal with using current software, but is much more difficult (Catterall and Maclaren 1997; Fielding and Lee 1998).

The code-and-retrieve approach is acknowledged even by its users to fracture and fragment material, thus losing context, process and narrative. For those working in many academic traditions placing emphasis on text and language this is not so important. But it was noted earlier that a ‘holistic’ approach is common and valued in qualitative market research, as well as sift-and-sort analysis. In addition, the methodological dominance of the group discussion (focus group) in commercial research means that interactive effects are treated as inevitable and in fact actively welcomed in the majority of projects. They are thus routinely dealt with in analysis practices, at worst as effects to be watched and allowed for and at best as highly valuable source material. The focus group in market research is widely treated not just as a data collection exercise involving a number of respondents, but as an event in which certain issues and ideas are evoked and witnessed within a evolving, interactive, social context. Fielding and Lee note that:

> concerns about fragmentation are clearly relevant whenever sequence is a consideration in data analysis. When something of interest is embedded
within a narrative, refers back to something said or observed at an earlier juncture, or where one is interested in transitions from one topic to another, fragmentation is a problem. (1998: 75; original emphasis)

Catterall and Maclaren (1997) vividly highlight the role of process elements in analysis of group-based research. They regard these as an integral part of the resources used by many UK market researchers in analysis (and indeed in their own academic research).

This [loss of process dimensions] results in a snapshot approach to data analysis where what is analysed are individual photographs (segments of text) brought together as an album (report). By comparison the annotating-the-transcripts approach is more likely to capture the whole moving picture of the script or story that is the focus group discussion. (1997: 4.4)

They note the generally higher status in UK commercial research of interpretative, holistic approaches which actively use the evolving narrative of the group and treat interactive group effects as a rich source of meaning. They also highlight (for an academic audience perhaps generally less used to regarding these as data) many analysable and useful elements of process, including:

- The evolution of respondents’ ideas or opinions throughout a group.
- Effects of the stage of group formation.
- The ways in which people assert and defend their views in response to those of others.

These, as we saw in the earlier section on ‘commenting’, are aspects of data routinely and often automatically used by commercial researchers in interpretation.

It is worth noting that some qualitative approaches within academia do actively use process and interaction, Discourse Analysis and Conversation Analysis being two clear examples. These are very distinct and focused analytic approaches, informed by specific and well-developed theory, and will have very specific requirements of CAQDAS software, where indeed this is used. The attention paid to social interaction and to group processes as a standard feature of UK market research is more generalised and multi-dimensional.

There is another aspect of practice that may account for some of the resistance among commercial researchers to CAQDAS. As noted earlier, a distinction is made by Spiggle between two ‘styles’ of academic qualitative analysis. The ‘editing’ style involves a focus on categories, and exploration of patterns and themes that connect them. The ‘immersion’ style involves processes of intense immersion and contemplation until there is an ‘intuitive’ grasp of meaning (1994: 500). It seems that CAQDAS has so far been designed primarily to facilitate the first of these styles (though as
discussed below this may be changing), while commercial researchers use and value both approaches. If anything, they probably value the second more, and certainly resist anything which appears to inhibit it.

The coding issue does point to different criteria of accountability, since commercial researchers do not generally have to leave behind a detailed and comprehensible record of their thinking for others. They can choose how far they carry out elements of analysis as mental or paper-based operations. They have little professional need therefore for systematic records of the interpretative process itself which are conveniently provided by software via an electronic analysis journal, or by an evolving coding system recorded within the project file. As one practitioner who has experimented with code-and-retrieve software comments:

Commercial clients don’t often want to see all the evidence for your findings and recommendations, they bought your time because they trust your judgement and they are only interested in the finished cabinet, not the toolkit and shavings. (Practitioner comment by e-mail)

The publicly measurable product of the commercial researcher rarely includes the analytic process itself (though see Chapter 10), but lies in the analytic and commercial sophistication of the interpretations and conclusions drawn for the client.

Fielding and Lee (2002) comment that ‘applied research involves tight deadlines and relatively uncomplicated analytic requirements’, but this generalisation is likely to be contested by commercial researchers. Deadlines are ever-tighter and some projects do of course have quite simple analytic requirements. But, in the increasingly complex and competitive business world, many do not. ‘Reportage’, or even simple thematic analysis, is often not seen as ‘good’ research, although of course simple descriptive or thematic analysis can be very useful to clients and will form a part of many projects. Marketing gets more difficult, the market for research grows more competitive and there is demand for far more than this. As an experienced practitioner commented:

reportage is a waste of time. When qual first started it was much more reportage, sort of painting pictures was enough then, because [qualitative] was such a new way of painting. Suddenly we were colouring it in … Now we are placing a new skill and interpretation [on it] to take our clients into new insights and new dimensions. Because it is a much more competitive game, everybody is at the baseline, so you can’t do it like that any more. (Practitioner interview).

A Future for CAQDAS in Commercial Qualitative Research?

Are commercial researchers missing something important in ignoring CAQDAS? For research largely based on group discussions, and where
process factors are seen to be an important resource, with most current software packages the answer would seem to be ‘no’. Catterall and Maclaren concluded in 1997 that for researchers who value interaction and process elements in group research analysis, ‘the current crop of computer programs appear to offer little benefit and may even be detrimental to the analysis and interpretation process’ (1997: 5.2), though they remained optimistic that relevant software would be developed. It is clear that for usage to grow, relevant benefits will be needed, those that actually matter to these researchers. As the practitioner quoted earlier also comments:

The real ‘value breakthrough’ for CAQDAS would be if you could really demonstrate superior quality of output by comparing it scientifically with conventional approaches. I mean actually superior output, rather than (just) a higher level of transparency and confidence in the existing quality of output. If you could do that, you’d positively want to show the workings and shavings for a while – ‘See how much finer these shavings are than before! Now there’s a quality cabinet!’ (Practitioner e-mail)

Having said this, there are a number of ways qualitative researchers might benefit by being more open-minded in their thinking in this field. Arguably, relevant software is unlikely to be developed unless there is at least some interest or openness from within the industry.

How might commercial researchers gain relevant benefits from what is already out there? As a first step, the industry as a whole could examine its assumptions about the ‘quantitiveness’ of computers, thinking perhaps in terms of virtual reality and graphic design, rather than statistical testing and conjoint analysis. Academics everywhere also repeat that the programs do not do the thinking – this is still the job of the researcher:

Of course programs cannot replace the analyst’s core role which is to understand the meaning of the text, a role which cannot be computerised because it is not a mechanical one. (Catterall and Maclaren 1997: 4.2)

Secondly, there are some specific applications where CAQDAS even in its current manifestations might be genuinely useful. Inasmuch as there is a mechanical component to analysis and interpretation, there are opportunities in some commercial circumstances for computer assistance. Catterall and Maclaren (1998) suggest, for example, that the software could be used for ‘first cuts’ of large data sets, simply using the search function to look for incidence and salience of key concepts. Data handling for larger and, especially, interview-based (rather than group-based) projects, perhaps those spanning many countries, would of course be much easier with software, especially if this allows better integration of findings from several sources. One of the key issues in many international projects, for example, is not just the complexity but the sheer volume of data generated.
The value of current CAQDAS software to commercial researchers may also be in showing in certain situations that even within ‘soft’ interpretative qualitative enquiry there can be rigorous and demonstrable connection between detail and concept, between data and theory. One of the arguments made in favour of CAQDAS is that in making analytic processes explicit, it exposes weak or bad practice which before went under the guise of creative induction or ‘heroic’ interpretative skill (Fielding and Lee 1998).

A third way to think about CAQDAS is not in terms of merely mechanising or replacing operations that are currently carried out manually, but of actually enhancing or extending the analytic capabilities of the researcher. In this way there would be a more obvious payoff for the investment of time and money that would be required to adopt these programs into everyday projects. For example, in the case above concerning a large sample and several countries, current manual methods mean that display matrices (Chapter 5) must be specified in advance of analysis. But with CAQDAS one might produce many different matrix analyses, looking at several different aspects of the material by several different sub-groups. Crucially, none of these would need to be specified before detailed examination of the material. There might be some saving of time but more importantly it could allow far more sensitive and subtle analysis (again see Catterall and Maclaren 1998).

Barker and Nancarrow (1998) and Pike and Thompson (1995) also point to the possibilities for the commercial researcher of entirely video-based CAQDAS software, which rather than replacing current mechanical analytic processes actually enables those which have hitherto been virtually impossible. Recent developments in video-based CAQDAS (for example Qualitative Media Analyzer) may offer real opportunities for different kinds of analysis.

Fourthly, there is an interesting feature of CAQDAS software, evolving as it has within academic qualitative research, which could extend our thinking about what constitutes ‘data’. While transcripts of interviews may form the bulk of the material analysed, this is not always the case. Very often academic researchers using interviews will also incorporate field-notes, letters, press cuttings, maps, diagrams and other materials into their analysis – indeed some CAQDAS users will have no interview material at all, perhaps because they are researching entirely from historical or other documentary sources.

While commercial research is likely to remain interview-dominated, there is movement away from such total reliance and towards greater methodological eclecticism (Desai, Book 3). Conceivably, though, even in quite traditional projects, CAQDAS packages might facilitate and encourage analytic ‘bricolage’ in formally inviting different textual materials into the analysis of a project. So, within a project file using the package NVivo, one might import and give other materials the same status as transcripts and annotate and analyse them formally and consciously in the same way.
These other materials might include the client briefing document, past research, notes from briefing meetings, client and competitive packs and advertising, observations of merchandising strategies, thoughts one had whilst walking the dog, and so on.

Finally, there are possibilities opened by CAQDAS for making better use of the cumulative knowledge acquired by researchers as they conduct more and more projects, often for the same clients or in the same product fields. Pike and Thompson (1995) suggest the benefits of cumulative research data for a client. With the straightforward code-and-retrieve packages, one can easily revisit earlier material in the light of more recent projects or even re-analyse it (Catterall and Maclaren 1998), something it is currently impractical to do at any level of detail.

There may be movement of CAQDAS packages away from dominance by the code-and-retrieve model which could make them more ‘friendly’ to market researchers and to their habits and needs. The developers of one of the best-known packages have discerned, and have begun to develop software for, a different style of qualitative research/er – those with a ‘looser’ sort of approach than that served by earlier packages. While their popular software NUD•IST is highly suitable for performing code-and-retrieve analysis on large samples, the more recently developed NVivo is intended to facilitate far less structured exploration of data and the meanings and connections within it. (This may parallel Spiggle’s distinction between ‘editing’ and ‘immersion/crystallisation’ styles described above.)

One can code and retrieve in NVivo, in fact in a very flexible way. But there is no need to code and retrieve at all, just because the facility is there. NVivo can usefully be employed simply to annotate material in rich-text format (with use of fonts and colour) and create linked memos (comments linked directly to sections of text and accessed by clicking on that text). With this adaptable and ‘friendly’ software, commercial researchers might be more inclined to produce and annotate electronic rather than paper transcripts. Even if these are not initially used very differently from paper versions for any one project, cumulatively they would provide an electronic (and therefore easily searchable and re-visitable) store of data and interpretations.

Beyond this, other software packages allow the integration of multiple projects into ‘hypertext’ analyses. These represent multi-dimensional and easily manipulated ‘mental maps’ – of observations, hypotheses and the links between them – which can be built and explored like a set of websites. They are non-linear, complex webs of knowledge, meaning and connections. So one could use such a framework to store and explore cumulative knowledge and emerging theories, for example relating to a client’s business (‘domestic finances’), a product field (‘ice cream’), or field of activity (‘advertising’).

A single researcher or an agency might capture knowledge accumulated over many projects, logging it in all its complexity and extending it, by exploring and manipulating it, on an on-going basis. With all
transcripts and other raw materials stored, linked and accessible electronically, one could connect different projects and build more general theories and models, linked directly to specific source material, over a period of time. This may in fact represent the best use of computing software for the commercial researcher, making full use, as Kelle suggests, of the computer’s ability to perform complex and large-scale ‘data administration and archiving’, rather than for the performance of analytic operations per se (1997: 6.3). Hypertexts may be of debatable use as outcomes of research; in Book 7 Geraldine Lillis argues the importance of narrative in communication in organisations. (See Fielding and Lee 1998 for discussion of the status of hypertexts as academic outcomes.) However, since they ‘complement the human thinking process’ (Fielding and Lee 1998: 167), they might offer genuinely new and more effective ways for the researcher him or herself to capture and play with evolving ideas and create maximum benefit from their cumulative knowledge.

From this brief outline one can see a number of possible reasons why CAQDAS has not been widely adopted within commercial qualitative research in the UK. It is largely designed to facilitate and record a degree of repeated attention to the textual content of interviews or other material. This level of attention is neither practical, nor arguably necessary, within the practice of professional and commercially useful qualitative market research.

In addition, the currently available CAQDAS software does not seem particularly suited to the analysis of group processes nor of the interactive components of interviewing. The de-contextualisation and fragmentation of material they invite runs counter to what is considered by many to be good practice in commercial research. It is not impossible to analyse group processes and complex interaction with these packages, but they are not designed to support this, so the benefits look unlikely to outweigh the investment of time needed.

Commercial researchers have very good, effective systems in place because they do a great deal of analysis. So there may be little real opportunity at present for CAQDAS software to replace the analysis operations currently carried out by hand. However, there are a number of ways in which even the existing software could be of real use to commercial practice. It is likely that it would do this not by mechanising current activities, but by facilitating new forms of analysis and knowledge generation, adding value to research for practitioners and clients. It is also, of course, possible that developers might begin to design programs with the specific needs of qualitative market researchers in mind, or that further development away from the code-and-retrieve model will offer such researchers more attractive options.
KEY POINTS

- The role that computers can play in facilitating aspects of qualitative data analysis is established within some academic fields, but is as yet rarely accepted within commercial practice.
- Reasons for this are probably complex, but there is certainly rejection on principle. This is based both on a perceived dissonance between computing and qualitative research and on a lack of knowledge of what such packages can actually do.
- However, there is also evidence of a real lack of fit between what the software actually does and what it can facilitate and the needs of commercial researchers, at least as currently defined.
- The most popular and well-documented types of software – based on code-and-retrieve functions – effectively mechanise and enhance certain analysis operations, but these are not necessarily the key ones used by market researchers.
- There are clear arguments in favour of commercial researchers overcoming prejudice and looking more closely at these developments.
- Imaginative experimentation might well reveal alternative benefits of the popular software packages to the commercial researcher.
- Once one moves beyond the mechanisation of manual methods, software could actually enhance and extend the analysis capabilities of commercial researchers, especially in the area of storing and developing cumulative knowledge derived over many projects.
- For this and other reasons it is concluded that commercial researchers could and should take a more open-minded approach to software – but also perhaps that developers might look closely at what this kind of researcher needs.

NOTES

1 This acronym was designed by its originators Lee and Fielding (1991) to refer to the generic idea of computer analysis, i.e. ‘Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis’, but it is often now used to refer to the relevant software itself, as in ‘Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Software’.
2 I am very grateful to Professor Fielding for supplying these estimates and for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.
3 Comments made by developer Lyn Richards, from QSR, at a seminar in September 2000 preceding the conference ‘Strategies in Qualitative Research with NUD•IST and NVivo’ at the Institute of Education, London.
PART III

Issues of Quality
Quality, Validity and Value in Qualitative Market Research

Certain methods are used by qualitative market researchers themselves to subject their emerging theories to tests or evaluation, but this chapter asks what else or more they could be doing. The first part looks at how in practice market researchers try to ensure the quality of the interpretations and conclusions they reach, and suggests that these processes might be enhanced by more conscious application of these principles. The later section explores the ways in which conclusions drawn from qualitative market research are, or could be, subjected to evaluation in an ‘external’ sense and looks at the role of client knowledge in this assessment.

Criteria for the evaluation of qualitative market research outcomes are very diverse and will vary by client as well as by project type. However, any discussion of qualitative analysis and interpretation must tackle this as a general issue and consider the status of the conclusions drawn from analysis and interpretation procedures practised in the commercial sector. In what way can these conclusions be said to be ‘true’, what inferences can be drawn from them, or by what other criteria can they be evaluated? Are the traditional scientific measures of ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’ adequate and useful for qualitative enquiry, and if not, what are the alternatives?

‘INTERNAL’ QUALITY PRACTICES

This section outlines a number of ways in which qualitative market research practitioners pay attention to the quality of their analytic work. These strategies are directed at managing, and maximising the benefits of the hermeneutic process. That is, they seek to allow the best and most considered interplay between the detail of the research data – ‘what was there’ – and the conceptualisations of this detail that will make it useful and generalisable for clients. They are aware of the need to ground conclusions in data and in some kind of reality ‘out there’, without subscribing entirely to traditional measures of ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’. They know they have to ensure that any desire to tell clients ‘good news’, or to
offer neat solutions to problems, does not blind them to the cracks in an argument or fatal flaws and biases in the way conclusions have been drawn.

It seems likely that these internal checks and processes are carried out to a greater or lesser degree, and with varying degrees of conscious competence, by different researchers. Applied with more consciousness, these measures might be made to work harder in the cause of quality.

**Experience and ‘Finely-Tuned Common Sense’**

Part of what clients value most highly in experienced researchers is a validity-checking ability that comes about through repeated exposure to respondents and the qualitative process. Experience, by common consent, brings with it an enhanced intuitive ability to filter to some extent for validity within the interviewing and analysis process.

- Researchers develop what might be called a ‘finely tuned common sense’ (see Hedges 1990), using and accentuating what we all do anyway as social beings.
- Added to this is professional knowledge. Professional experience brings benchmarks about how people behave in the specific context of market research and about how people think and talk in such situations.
- Researchers also have a store of understanding of specific kinds of research topic, too, such as advertising in general, or a product field or an area of everyday life.

Using all this knowledge, researchers constantly ask, even if at a barely conscious level, ‘Is this really likely to be so outside the context of the research?’ This is why it is seen as good practice, in agencies with trainees, to have the less experienced workers alongside more experienced researchers. The ways in which these internal ‘reality checks’ are operationalised throughout the analysis and interpretation process have been discussed in earlier chapters. There can of course be no foolproof assessment of how accurately or carefully this knowledge through experience is used; it is part of the professional skill and integrity of the researcher.

**Acknowledging Preconceptions and Sources of Bias**

Some researchers explicitly begin each project by thinking through and even writing down their own beliefs and assumptions about the project – what they expect the issues to be, how they expect it to go (Wardle 1989). Researchers will almost always write some kind of discussion guide for a project, and unless they have been completely directed by the client in
terms of its form and content, the writing of this basic document will produce the first evidence of the researchers’ expectations. It will demonstrate beliefs and hypotheses (a) about what is important to look at in this study – how the issues might be framed – and (b) what might emerge and need probing or further exploration. The topic guide inevitably starts to show the choices made about how the problem is conceptualised, what forms of information from respondents might be useful to answer the problem, and how these might be framed into questions and lines of enquiry for the fieldwork.

Earlier, too, we saw how some researchers work throughout a project with quite explicit ‘rolling hypotheses’. It perhaps runs counter to the self-image of others in the industry to be so open about early ideas and hypotheses, since many feel they must maintain a stance of quasi-objectivity (see Chapter 3). To express an ‘opinion’ or acknowledge an early hypothesis might be unprofessional – they feel the researcher must be like a neutral sponge, soaking up and analysing only ‘what’s there’. Throughout this book various practical and philosophical problems with such an attempt at complete neutrality have been argued.

As Seale points out, a full awareness of one’s ‘values, prejudices or subconscious desires’ is unrealistic (1999: 163), but it would seem on balance to be better to be as open as possible about one’s starting position. It is still necessary of course, having admitted to biases and hypotheses, to look dispassionately at what actually emerges. However, the argument is that the researcher who brings their theories or prejudices fully to consciousness is in a better analytic position than someone who never does so.

**Triangulation**

Triangulation simply means trying to get a better fix on some phenomenon by looking at it in a number of different ways, or by using different methods, or by using different researchers (Patton 1990; Seale 1999). Typically, then, interviews might be used alongside observation and perhaps document analysis to look at the object of interest, whether a subgroup or a social phenomenon or a consumption occasion. For market research applications, Philly Desai discusses in Book 3 the way in which mixed methods can provide complementary and triangulating forms of information.

Griggs (1987) also discusses verification through triangulation in the context of market research. We do not routinely use respondents themselves as a way of triangulating an entire set of findings, as is sometimes done in academic work. Griggs does, however, see feedback from respondents on emergent conclusions during fieldwork, and the replication of findings between group discussions, as providing a degree of triangulation. Certainly it is usual for more than one researcher to work on a project and the added quality this gives is widely recognised.
The collaborative verification of findings with the client’s accumulated knowledge might also be seen as providing a fairly robust form of triangulation. The client in many cases has looked many times at the same target group, or area of everyday life, using different researchers and different methods and so is in a good position to provide a resource for triangulation. The importance of this in market research is discussed further below.

**Dealing with ‘Deviant Cases’**

Minority behaviours or viewpoints and other deviance from the main thrust of emerging conclusions are an awkward issue in commercial research. Some of the time, as noted earlier, qualitative researchers are using ideas of counting and the weight of response to see patterns and identify important themes and issues, even if with a degree of ambivalence. They will thus become aware of ‘deviant cases’ (Becker, quoted in Seale 1999) – people or remarks or events which run counter to the general trend.

Dealing with ‘deviant cases’ offers the commercial analyst choices:

- to ignore deviance on the grounds that it is the majority behaviour or view that will matter in real life to the client; or
- to make reference to the deviance but separate it from the mainstream, perhaps by some kind of typology; or
- to grapple with the emergent model or theory which accounts for the majority until it can be made to also account for the deviance.

The last of these is harder work and is more time-consuming, but is likely to result in a set of findings with a greater degree of generalisability for the client.

In an earlier chapter some problems with the ‘typology’ as a form of qualitative market research outcome were suggested and another is raised by this issue of minority or deviant cases. Typically, perhaps five or six ‘types’ will be identified, and these are held to account for all the variation seen within the sample interviewed. Of course, it is partly the business of market research, including qualitative research, to simplify a messy reality ‘out there’ into constructs that roughly represent it and are ‘good enough’ to assist clients make their decisions. In some cases a typology might well be a valid and useful explanation of the data, but minority ‘types’ may in fact be better used to question and reformulate the researcher’s on-going explanatory structure or framework.

So rather than just accounting for the ‘majority’ view and dismissing deviants as a different ‘type’, the researcher can use them in fact to maximise the generalisability of the research. By forcing a reappraisal of the explanatory model, the ‘odd’ case can help the analyst produce a more
complete and useful account (Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998; Seale 1999). In addition, taking the route of reviewing a whole model to include minority findings performs a useful function, since as Griggs (1987) comments, ‘odd’ cases can actually confirm as well as usefully refine a hypothesis or model.

Again, clients who can allow the researcher time to get beyond the ‘majority view’ and towards more general models and conclusions – and researchers who strive to do this – are likely to arrive at not just a more robust account of findings, but ones with potentially broader and longer application.

General Scepticism Regarding Emerging Theories: Looking for Counter-Evidence

Ideas of ‘refutation’ and evaluation criteria drawn from academic qualitative research may be useful, though in many cases the specific conditions of commercial research make the detail of these less relevant. Spiggle (1994), for example, suggests that the researcher should deliberately subject emerging inferences to empirical tests, seeking to challenge rather than confirm them. Searching for negative cases is viable if it means searching within already-collected data but, as we have seen, returning to the field to confirm or refute hypotheses will not fit within the qualitative market research business as it is currently constituted.

Such testing is not viable within a single project, but we often do this informally across projects, especially when working repeatedly for a particular client and where joint cumulative knowledge can be built up. To some degree, too, the idea of ‘rolling hypotheses’ described earlier acts as some form of refutation test, as long as the researcher does remain open to counter-evidence as well as supporting evidence in developing ideas throughout fieldwork. Researchers need to make sure they do not fall in love with their own theories, especially early in a project. Generally useful is the principle of ‘skepticism towards one’s developing ideas’ (Strauss and Corbin cited in Spiggle, 1994: 496). Both Patton (1990) and Seale advocate what the latter calls a ‘fallibilistic’ approach (1999: 6), involving an active search for alternative explanations, deviant cases or negative instances, and a generally self-critical stance towards one’s research. Again, it is useful here to have a friendly but critical co-researcher.

The intellectually rigorous tests of emerging theories – their internal coherence and fit with all the available data – should be kept separate in the researcher’s mind from the problem of their implications for the client’s immediate problem. However, it can be difficult to be clear about this when under commercial pressure to deliver ‘the answer’.

One problem is the researcher – in an attempt to please – will create too much order out of what is essentially a chaotic scenario. Once any form of market
If the analyst is performing the ‘pure researcher’ role properly, the client’s needs have to provide a focus for interpretation, but should not drive a false coherence into this interpretation. When research findings are really unclear or conflicting we have a duty not to build them up into an edifice of certainty: Alan Hedges points out that we do have to accept that ‘underneath that muddled, chaotic, inconsistent surface there may well lie a muddled, chaotic, inconsistent reality’ (1983: 4). However, presenting such findings can be professionally very tricky when the client needs to make decisions immediately and is relying on the research to help guide those decisions.

‘EXTERNAL’ QUALITY MEASURES

The first section of this chapter has looked at some of the ‘internal’ methods used to enhance quality; here we examine a range of ‘external’ measures of quality which seem appropriate to the commercial research situation.

Commercial Pragmatism and Market Forces

The early part of this chapter asked in what way conclusions from qualitative market research can be said to be ‘true’, what inferences can be drawn from them, and by what other criteria they can be evaluated. But why should we bother with theoretical angst about quality, evaluation and ‘truth’? Suppliers and users of qualitative market research who have read this far may well be asking the seemingly obvious question: ‘What does it matter, as long as the client is happy with the outcome of the project?’

At some level, of course, the ultimate test of the quality of qualitative market research is a kind of pragmatic validity. If the research is felt by the client to help make whatever decision is at stake, or bring about whatever change is needed, it is successful and ‘valid’ research and, frankly, the client is likely to use that researcher again in the future. The client is happy and the researcher is happy.

There is also within any commercial activity the issue of costs vs. benefits; there is an appropriate level both of analysis and of validity checking within commercial research, related to the cost of doing such work and to the significance of the decisions being taken (Gabriel 1990). This may fall short of that required by academic institutions and funding bodies. Beyond this, again it should be noted that commercial researchers are occasionally commissioned simply to stimulate and inspire. So sometimes
the lack of ‘validity’, defined as a detailed and demonstrable connection between what is presented to the client and some ‘reality’ out there, is genuinely less important than in other research fields.

However, for the enterprise that is called ‘research’, and where the parties involved believe that the research outcome will represent an external world in some legitimate way, something else is needed. Sue Robson acknowledges commercial pragmatism – pleasing the client – as a reality of the business. But she also condemns reliance on this as ‘intellectually lazy’, commenting that it opens the way to criticisms from ‘verificationists’ who often would reject the whole qualitative project (1988: 11). As Peter Jackson says of quality in market research, ‘usefulness is essential but not enough’ (1997: 40).

It is also the case that a growing qualitative industry, with a desire for increased professionalism and reflexivity, needs to rely not just on market forces. It must also develop standards and checks by which researchers may assess, as independent professionals, the validity and value of what they produce (Fournier 2000).

Attempts to Formalise ‘Reliability’ and ‘Validity’ in Qualitative Market Research

There have been several attempts to look at the evaluation of commercial qualitative conclusions in terms of the essentially quantitative or positivist concepts of validity and reliability. In this scheme:

- **reliability** approximately refers to how replicable the finding is, or how dependably it will be repeated on another occasion, or by another researcher; and
- **validity** refers to how well the test actually measures what it sets out to measure, or how well it reflects the ‘reality’ it purports to represent.

As Seale comments, ‘validity in this tradition refers to nothing less than truth’ (1999: 34).

Sykes (1990, 1991) offers a comprehensive review of the subject, extending a debate begun in a seminar held in the UK in the late 1980s (MRDF 1988). Although giving a detailed and useful analysis of these scientific concepts and how they have been applied to qualitative research, she comments ‘I feel too much effort has been made to justify qualitative research in ways that are inappropriate to the method’ (1991: 7), and begins to explore alternatives. The inapplicability of traditional or inflexible definitions of reliability and validity to qualitative methods have been asserted within academic texts, too (Hirschman 1986; Patton 1990; Seale 1999), though these writers also suggest that appropriate alternative measures are necessary and possible.
Commentators make the point that reliability in the sense of perfect replication of conclusions between different researchers misses the point of qualitative methods (Imms 1999; Robson 1988). Practical experience in commercial qualitative research also points to other dangers in taking validity and reliability measures too literally. Kirk and Miller (1986: 26) raise the issue of ‘excessive reliability’, whereby a result is found with great consistency, but which by other measures cannot be valid. All commercial practitioners are aware of the utterly consistent responses that tend to be given to certain subjects, especially at the beginning of a discussion when socially acceptable and ‘normative’ statements are likely to dominate. So people ‘never watch the adverts – always go and make a cup of tea’ (other information simply does not support this); they ‘always choose the credit card with the lowest interest rate’ (the market evidence says not); people always choose the brand of beer they drink ‘because of its taste’ (when they cannot tell it apart from others in blind tasting). These are clearly ‘reliable’ findings – but in what way are they valid? Researchers in fact learn through experience and other evidence that they have a specific validity; they tell much about social acceptability and cultural norms, but may not relate in any useful way to individual behaviour outside the research setting.

If the traditional concepts of reliability and validity do not seem to fit qualitative practice in any useful way, with what can they be replaced? Researchers need not abandon the attempt at external quality measures, but rather seek those appropriate to their specific situation.

**Qualitative Measures for Qualitative Conclusions**

The question remains of how specifically to evaluate the quality of qualitative market research inferences and conclusions. There have been numerous attempts to develop criteria for the evaluation of qualitatively derived theories (Seale 1999). Spiggle (1994), for example, first discusses ‘usefulness’, though she of course suggests very different criteria for judging this than one would use in the commercial world – an idea examined in more detail below. More directly relevant perhaps are her ideas of:

- **innovation** (adding new and creative ways to look at phenomena);
- **integration** (what commercial researchers would call going beyond reportage, i.e. beyond seeing common themes in the data);
- **resonance** (roughly, how enlightening or inspiring the work is); and
- **adequacy** (relating to how far the inferences drawn can be seen to be grounded in the detail of the research).

Also writing from an academic standpoint, Hirschman (1986) and Gabriel (1990) develop a scheme originated by Lincoln and Guba (1985):
credibility (a key measure of which is credibility to those researched);

transferability (to other settings);

dependability (the proportion of findings that are replicated between researchers); and

confirmability (supportable by data, logical, non-prejudiced, non-judgemental).

Are these useful in a commercial context? In order to answer this it is necessary to look more closely at the principles involved. These academic tests for qualitative quality seem to mix two kinds of measure:

- Those concerned with allowing examination of what has gone into the conclusions (‘adequacy’, ‘confirmability’). These allow examination of the processes of inference – they require records of such processes. The idea of a ‘paper trail’ of analysis procedures is examined more fully in the next chapter.
- Those concerned with how these conclusions, once formulated, stand up to various tests of value (‘transferability’, ‘credibility’, ‘innovation’ and so on). We will focus here on this more evaluative type of test and look at those which seem most relevant for commercial research.

First, we have to deal with the question of ‘truth’ – in what sense are any qualitative conclusions expected to be ‘true’?

‘Truth’ vs. ‘Perspective’

How can we assess the ‘truth’ of qualitative findings and settle worries about the ‘subjectivity’ of qualitative outcomes? Gabriel rejects the truth/subjectivity distinction altogether and construes all science as ‘a form of rhetoric’ (1990: 508). He suggests that in many stages of a quantitative survey interpretation clearly has a role and says it follows that ‘the acceptability of the findings of even the most positivist type of market research comes down in the end to discussion and judgement’ (1990: 512).

In Gabriel’s scheme qualitative and quantitative research are both seen as approximating a form of truth: a partial, situated, contextualised truth. This reflects an important movement in academic thinking. At the extreme, some now prefer to see their research outcomes as ‘texts’ written entirely from their own perspective, and may even use literary forms to underline this (Seale 1999; Stern 1998). While the idea of research as ‘fiction’ may be an uncomfortable and contentious line of thinking to pursue in a business or organisational context, it is breaking the surface within the market research industry (Shaw and Edwards 1998). It has long been accepted that clients buy qualitative research from individuals and arguably in doing so they accept that they are buying a perspective, not a truth.

So, rather than chasing the idea of measuring qualitative research against an external truth, we might do better to isolate various ways that
perspectives can be assessed – perhaps taking a rather more flexible view of quality and value than that offered by a scientific tradition.

Gabriel proposes that qualitative research practitioners and users, in accepting and indeed valuing the individual subjectivity of the researcher, adopt a philosophical position of ‘pluralism’ or ‘relativism’. That is, they accept and work with the idea that there may legitimately be multiple understandings of the world. He goes on to introduce the idea of ‘critical relativism’ or ‘critical pluralism’. The ‘critical’ adjective means accepting the validity of multiple readings or perspectives, but requiring an explicit examination of the methods, ideologies and values behind a finding. References throughout this book to the benefits of making explicit the assumptions that lie behind a method or a conclusion relate directly to this idea. In fact, in paying such careful attention to the possible effects of preconceptions and assumptions, qualitative research may indeed often be more ‘hard-headed’ than quantitative, which tends to play down or even discount the possible influence of these factors (Gabriel 1990; Robson 1988).

There are different ways to assess the validity of a perspective. One way is to present it back to those who informed it – to ask respondents to comment on the conclusions drawn about them. This is done at a micro level in interviewing (Chrzanowska writes in Book 2 about the way in which the moderator constantly checks his or her understanding by feeding this back to respondents for comment). Emerging conclusions will often be fed into the later groups in a series, though full presentation of findings back to respondents is rarely if ever done at the final stages of a market research project. This is potentially one area in which some fruitful experimentation might be undertaken.

However, taking a fully relativist position, even the respondent’s response must be treated not as the final authority or as ‘true’ but as another perspective, with its own agenda. So while it might be useful to know respondent’s reactions to researchers conclusions, if there is a dispute it is not that their perspective is ‘right’ and the researchers ‘wrong’ – but the researchers have another piece of data to feed into the interpretative process.

Many researchers suggest that a way to evaluate multiple perspectives is to make the process of analysis and interpretation as public and open as possible (Gabriel 1990; Griggs 1987; Seale 1999; Spiggle 1994; Sykes 1991). This way, another person might be able to draw their own conclusions from the data, or at least assess for themselves how robust, well-grounded and logical the original researcher’s conclusions seem to be.

This raises the issue of whether, and how fully, the process is written down; currently it is not common practice to record analysis and interpretation processes for such a purpose. The desirability and viability of the ‘paper trail’ as allowing a form of external quality measure is revisited in the final chapter of this book.

A third measure is how consistent the research conclusions are with what the organisation already knows from other sources. It is quite possible to assess how far the new research is believable, in reflecting at least in part what
the client already knows of the external material world, especially what the client knows of actual consumer or stakeholder behaviour.

Expert practitioner Sue Robson (1988) rejects the general principle of force-fitting quantitative measures to qualitative, suggesting instead the ‘concept of fit’. Relevant to this idea is an observation made about validity and reliability by Kirk and Miller (1986). They suggest we can think of validity as the tension between (a) holding a belief in an external ‘reality’ that can be uncovered and (b) holding a belief that ‘reality’ is socially constructed. They comment that while there is much to be said for the latter constructivist position, especially in terms of social and cultural phenomena, ‘the world does not tolerate all understandings equally’ (1986: 11–12). That is, in their stark example, the fact that you believe yourself capable of stopping a speeding train with your hand does not prevent it from squashing you flat. Social constructions of the world, in order to be useful to an organisation, do need to fit in roughly with material phenomena.

Robson alludes to something like this when she comments, ‘The findings from qualitative research should have a truth that goes beyond the research context … a truth founded in the “real world” outside’ (1988: 13). Research conceptualisations and explanations need to connect in some way with what actually happens outside the research situation (what people buy, how they behave in practice). Clients want and need to see enough of this connection when looking at a particular piece of research compared with other sources of information about this material world. Smith and Fletcher propose the real-life usefulness of this concept for the assessment of both qualitative and quantitative research: ‘with holistic analysis the notion of the “believability” of data sits alongside, in quite a respectable way, the more formal concepts of “validity” and “reliability” of data’ (2001: 179).

Ideas of truth and perspective present some options in assessing qualitative findings. What about usefulness, with which we started? While academic schemes for the evaluation of qualitative conclusions might mention usefulness, the place this criterion holds is very different in the commercial world. Here, the research is being done in order to be useful to the client and for no other purpose. We therefore need to pay rather more attention to how usefulness fits in with ideas of truth, and with ideas of perspectives, in the commercial world.

Truth, Perspective – and Usefulness
As one experienced practitioner put it, ‘Qualitative market research is not interested in truth, it is interested in being useful’ (practitioner interview). Although this comment was somewhat tongue-in-cheek, it does contain an important observation. Ultimately, it is true that research is likely to be most useful to a client if it is ‘valid’ in the traditional sense – if it represents what is actually happening in some real world outside, the world of buying, voting or whatever is the client’s concern. But if we accept that perfect truth or perfect validity is not possible, and that what we are
providing is an informed perspective on that reality, we can also look for other ways of measuring usefulness.

Although the measures now examined are forms of commercial pragmatism, they are much more complex than the crude ‘market forces’ version outlined earlier. Patton, working in applied research, suggests three ways in which research is of value to users: (1) to confirm what they know that is supported by data, (2) to disabuse them of misconceptions, and (3) to illuminate important things that they didn’t know but should know’. He adds, ‘Accomplish these things and the decision makers can take it from there’ (1990: 423). (This is ‘closely related to ideas of ‘knowing’ and ‘not knowing’ in commercial qualitative research discussed in Book 1, Chapter 3.)

These and some other ideas specific to the commercial environment translate into measures of quality and usefulness appropriate to commercial qualitative research.

Increased confidence in the beliefs they already hold is genuinely useful to clients. But reassuring clients by offering consistency with other measures is rarely enough. Client organisations are also usually building knowledges – each project has an information objective, but is also part of an on-going knowledge project and can be assessed in both these terms.

A measure of usefulness is how far the project advances the client’s thinking – how far it develops, refines or enhances existing knowledge. Kirk and Miller also comment that while there is an ‘empirical reality’ out there, in many fields ‘truth’ is also best regarded as residing in the current consensus of a (scholarly) community (1986: 12). Again, Robson echoes this when she suggests the usefulness of joint validation of research between researcher and client (1988: 14). This is a highly creative interplay between the insights or ‘truth’ of the specific project and the cumulative knowledge or ‘truth’ of the client organisation.

So, as Robson says, findings from a particular researcher on a particular project may be technically ‘invalid’ by positivist standards, in the sense of heavily reflecting the researcher’s idiosyncrasies or the particular conditions of the project. However, the interpreted findings have a real value. They have this, of course, by giving new information about the specific issues covered in the project. But good research will also have value in helping to explain or re-frame what the client already knows ‘in a new and helpful way’ (1988: 14), sometimes, as has been seen, by challenging existing beliefs or perspectives.

Significantly, Robson argues that clients are perfectly capable of assessing the contribution of individual, idiosyncratically interpreted projects to their knowledge. This position does not accept or reject qualitative research findings as being simply ‘true’ or ‘untrue’ in some external sense, but evaluates them in terms of how they challenge, enhance or add to existing knowledge.

Another measure concerns how far the client is able to generalise from the findings of a specific project. The more generalisable the findings from the small sample interviewed and the specific issues addressed, the more
cost-effective the project is likely to have been. In this area, qualitative research can be formally attacked by positivist criteria (see Sykes 1991), since it lacks theories comparable to those of sampling and probability to support the general inferences it draws from samples. In an often-cited passage, Patton offers the idea of extrapolation (rather than inference) as a more useful way of regarding the status of the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the purposeful samples of qualitative research. This offers an intelligent view of what qualitative researchers in applied fields must do.

Unlike the usual meaning of the term generalization, an extrapolation clearly connotes one has gone beyond the narrow confines of the data to think about other applications of the findings. Extrapolations are modest speculations on the likely applicability of findings to other situations under similar, but not identical, conditions. Extrapolations are logical, thoughtful, and problem oriented rather than statistical and probabilistic. (1990: 489)

It is perhaps not surprising that some of the most useful ideas about how to deal with issues of validity in commercial research come from those operating somewhere between the academic and commercial worlds – those, like Patton, in evaluation or applied social research. These researchers do have to deal formally with issues like validity since their methods are often open to critical scrutiny – but they also have to produce useful and actionable research.

Finally, one might assess qualitative conclusions in full knowledge of the actions to be taken as a consequence of them. As already noted, the level of analysis and validity checking that goes on within a market research project must balance the cost of doing this (measured in money and time) against the benefits of doing this, and against the consequences of the decisions that rest on the project. As Gabriel notes, a ‘disaster check’ on a new commercial designed to add to an existing campaign might not justify the same level of analysis as research to develop a new campaign (1990: 515). Clients rarely make multi-million pound capital investment decisions based solely on one qualitative project. But a piece of strategic development research which will guide a great deal of future work should, by these standards, be rigorously analysed and as far as possible checked for validity by the measures described.

In looking at this aspect of usefulness, we could consider other standards of ‘truth’, since there may be other useful and appropriate models. In the sense that law is a qualitative discipline, one might usefully look at standards of truth and proof in law. As Mike Imms has commented, it could be interesting to think about the concepts of ‘beyond reasonable doubt’ (required by British criminal law) and ‘on balance of probabilities’ (British civil law) for qualitative market research. These are perhaps useful ways to think about validity, being standards that are linked with some notion of the potential consequences of being wrong (comment at AQR Trends Day, London 2000).
Clive Seale comments that ‘Quality does matter in qualitative research, but … we need to accept that “quality” is a somewhat elusive phenomenon that cannot be pre-specified by methodological rules’ (1999: 7). He goes on to argue that difficulties in defining and ensuring quality do not mean that we should not care about and strive for it in everyday practice, a legitimate aim for commercial as well as academic research. Once again, Patton gives a pragmatic view that will resonate with qualitative practitioners:

There are no straightforward tests for reliability and validity. In short, there are no absolute rules except to do the very best with your full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of the study … The human factor is the greatest strength and the fundamental weakness of qualitative inquiry and analysis. (1990: 372).

**KEY POINTS**

- Qualitative market researchers employ, as a taken-for-granted aspect of professional practice, certain internally applied measures designed to enhance the quality of their conclusions. These are related to measures likely to be stated more formally in academic work.
- Diligent application of the hermeneutic circle, where emergent hypotheses are rigorously tested and re-tested against the detail of the data itself, will give the qualitative researcher the best chance of producing good-quality findings. The time allowed to do this may in many cases (dependent on the specifics of the project) be linked directly with the quality of the outcome.
- Looking at external measures of quality, it is argued that the traditional measures of research quality, those of ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’, are only partially useful when considering the quality of qualitative research, especially in the context of market research.
- Measures used to assess the quality of commercial research do need to draw in some way on ideas of how knowledge is produced (‘truth’ vs. ‘perspective’), but also need to take into account the particular conditions of commercial work.
- In this, the client has an important role to play in evaluating quality; and usefulness is a key evaluative concept. This does, however, go well beyond any simple notions of market forces and ‘pleasing the client’.
- Moving away from a feeling that researchers should be presenting clients with some kind of ‘truth’ and accepting that they offer a highly informed perspective might actually allow better use of supplier-client collaboration, as a resource to improve the quality and usefulness of qualitative research.
What Is ‘Best Practice’ in Analysis and Interpretation?

In an earlier chapter it was suggested that discussions of best practice in analysis and interpretation can easily become antagonistic or defensive. These processes are seen as highly personal and as intimately related to the expertise, experience and indeed the very personality and intelligence of the researcher. Despite this, having examined and analysed issues raised by the practice of analysis and interpretation, this final chapter explores some of these in terms of the implications they might have for definitions of good or best practice.

WHAT IS THE POINT OF DOING ANALYSIS?

It has been stated repeatedly that the slightly different physical and mental activities often known as ‘analysis’ and ‘interpretation’ are interrelated and to a large extent happen simultaneously. For the purposes of this present discussion, though, ‘analysis’ is used as shorthand to refer to the general activity of working on research materials after fieldwork, sometimes known as formal analysis.

Why do it? Is it strictly necessary? With skill and experience, it is occasionally argued, a practitioner can draw robust and useful conclusions simply from conducting the fieldwork stage of a project and analysing ‘on the hoof’ – so why spend time and money trawling through the detail after the event? First, it should be observed that within commercial research this is a legitimate question, not the scandalous one it might be in other research fields.

- There are forms of consultancy (facilitating direct contact and problem-solving sessions between a manufacturer and its customers, for example) carried out by commercial qualitative practitioners which legitimately do not require revisiting of data or formal analysis. In these cases it is the experience and learning of the participants on the occasion itself which is the outcome and this will lead directly and rapidly to the next client action. ‘The analysis happens as you go ... there is no way you would want to revisit the data, you haven’t got time... [but] you wouldn’t want to, you are actually living the data’ (practitioner interview).
Some more conventional research projects may also provide their own ‘answers’ and the necessary analysis is legitimately carried out entirely within the fieldwork itself. This might happen, say, in a piece of evaluative work where the client has attended all the groups and the major conclusion – to go ahead or not with whatever is at stake – is blatantly and perhaps painfully obvious to all concerned. Indeed, in such a case a formal analysis may actually be counter-productive in over-analysing and theorising detail, when what is needed is a complete change of direction.

Finally, it is a commercial reality that sometimes the client would rather have the ‘informed view’ of the researcher the day after the fieldwork (or even ten minutes after the fieldwork), obviously without the benefit of formal analysis, than a considered view even a few days later. The decisions resting on the research will sometimes not wait even that long.

It is the last of these, where analysis is clearly sidelined, that causes most debate and gives cause for concern about the erosion of professional skills and standards.

Generally, all parties are aware that this is an extreme situation and does not constitute good or best practice. Qualitative researchers in general, and many clients, believe that post-fieldwork analysis is central to the activity we call ‘research’ and that the examples above should be seen as exceptional.

However, in an increasingly pressured business environment, there is some doubt about how far formal analysis is actually treated as necessary by clients, in how far it is allowed for in the ways projects are bought and set up. There is evidence that clients in today’s environment are far from interested in the detail of the researchers’ methods (Lillis, Book 7). What they often want is ‘insight’ and inspiration, usually very quickly, and the source of these may be seen – or perhaps treated – as relatively unimportant. Clients, it is said, are just not interested in process. This puts enormous pressure on researchers who see formal analysis as crucial to the quality of the insight and inspiration they provide and who therefore do care about process.

It is also the case that a few researchers are proud of their ‘creative’ ability to solve the client’s problem without any formal analysis at all, and so will not do this even if there is time to do so. They will simply conduct fieldwork and then assemble a set of ‘findings’, conclusions and recommendations.

The difficulty here is that, as seen in Chapter 5, some analysis operations can be carried out mentally (and with experience very quickly) but leave little or no written record. We cannot reliably tell from the outside whether the researcher writing a set of conclusions (whether or not there
was time for formal analysis) has carried out any analysis operations in order to come to these conclusions or not.

Is ‘invisible’ analysis sloppy and unprofessional – or pragmatic and legitimate? What is actually considered essential in ‘best practice’? There is a strong feeling amongst many expert practitioners that:

- Some form of revisiting and working on the data after it is gathered is essential to the activity called ‘research’, even when ‘insight’ and ‘creative thinking’ are the desired outcomes.
- This is likely to be accompanied by the production of some written materials, but there is less agreement about the form of these records and the degree to which they are essential (Glen 1997; Griggs 1987; Hedges 1990; Robson 1988; Robson and Hedges 1993).

Analysis and interpretation is acknowledged as a rolling process that goes on throughout the project, but at some point there is seen to be a task to be done. Sue Robson describes this as:

that necessary, thorough and detailed stage of going through the discussions, using transcripts and putting the data together – looking for patterns, seeking anomalies, checking out hypotheses – in all interrogating the data thoroughly before pulling it together into one coherent framework. Some call this analysis, some interpretation. The label does not matter but the process does. (1988: 14)

Roddy Glen is similarly clear about the role of this formal stage of analysis (here he calls it ‘content analysis’) to the production of good qualitative work:

In summary, the process of content analysis is one for which there are no short cuts. It takes time and concentration. It cannot be rushed or skimped. Only when it is done thoroughly can you be confident that you have not been superficial or impressionistic. Your understanding may not be the same as someone else’s but it is based on sound procedure. (1997: 129)

Through the process of writing this book, I have come very much to share this view. Whenever we conduct fieldwork, we implicitly undertake to base any recommendations we make to a client at least in part on a consideration of that fieldwork – and if we do not analyse we cannot fulfil this undertaking. I would argue further that regularly exercising our analytic and interpretative expertise en route to providing insight or inspiration actually constitutes our authority as marketing, business or organisational consultants, an assertion explained more at the end this chapter.

The difficulty is that these theoretical reasons for doing analysis get tangled up with a set of practical and moral questions. These come down
to how much time and effort we can and ‘ought’ to spend on our work and thus what might be the ‘right’ way to do it.

**IS THERE A ‘RIGHT WAY’ TO ANALYSE?**

There have been occasional public arguments amongst commercial researchers about the ‘right’ way to analyse qualitative material. At the AQRP seminar on analysis and interpretation in London in 1983, for example, a number of well-known British qualitative practitioners were invited to describe details of their own practice. At least some of the resulting discussion focused on debates about, for example, whether or not it is ‘necessary’ to listen to tapes or whether transcripts are an adequate method. This is why earlier chapters have sought to separate the function of analysis procedures from different manifestations, to allow better and more useful discussion of particular approaches to handling data.

Chapter 5 has pointed out that there are many different ways to go about analysis operations, but suggested that all the theoretical operations (selection, categorising and so on) are likely to be carried out by all researchers all of the time as mental processes. The different practical routines isolate and record different things, give certain things priority, or compress operations into each other. While each of the various practical procedures for analysis has benefits, disadvantages and implications, the final choice may legitimately be left to the individual researcher and evaluated within the context of each project. There seem few grounds on which certain common analysis procedures can be regarded as more ‘right’ than others, though one might hope that researchers could make conscious and informed choices and be prepared to explain and if necessary defend their approaches.

The contentious issues seem to concern two questions:

- Do we have to revisit data in order to be able to come to legitimate conclusions on a project?
- Do we have to produce written records of what we do?

Crudely, these focus on the really time-consuming and potentially tedious parts of the job. They thus relate directly to a general moral question of how much time and effort we really have to put in, to underpin our authority in presenting to our clients, and to justify our fee.

It is useful to be clear about the difference between revisiting or working on the data and the production of forms of written record of these processes. Some form of revisiting and active analysis is indeed essential if we continue to call what we do ‘research’, but the issue of what must (in ‘best practice’) be committed to paper or computer file is less easily resolved.
**Do we Have to Revisit Data?**

Revisiting and analysis of qualitative data are not specifically covered by the market research industry quality standard BS7911, although the Market Research Society Code of Conduct for qualitative and quantitative researchers does demand that conclusions must be ‘adequately supported by the data’ (2001: B14). This is far from specific and the reality of practice is even less clear. As already noted, ever-increasing time pressure from clients – along with apparent lack of interest in the process of research amongst some clients – is putting thorough revisiting of qualitative data under pressure.

Although professional experience does indeed compress and refine analytic and interpretative processes, allowing fast interpretation with minimal revisiting where necessary, this does not make revisiting data a routinely expendable luxury. The rush of thoughts, impressions and provisional conclusions which fill a researcher’s mind during and just after fieldwork are to be valued and indeed captured. Mary Goodyear (1998: 201) comments on the ‘freshness’ of day-after debriefs and suggests that these can usefully be tape-recorded and fed into further analysis – but also strongly advocates thorough analysis for the development and checking of these first conclusions. Similarly, Robson and Foster (1989: 87) credit the role of experience and acknowledge how much useful material can emerge before analysis – but they also propose reasons for doing full analysis.

But revisiting data through tapes or transcripts is time-consuming and thus expensive and can be deeply tedious. There is anecdotal evidence that ‘full’ analysis has begun to look boring and old-fashioned to new researchers and its crucial role in underpinning this particular kind of business is missed. It may seem to run counter to the move towards providing insight and creative solutions for clients.

So, why should the researcher not just think back to the interviews or groups, make some notes and start developing interpretations and conclusions? There are several compelling reasons to regard revisiting of interview materials as a necessary standard.

If the researcher does not go back to the groups or interviews in some way, there may be various specific problems, including:

- Loss of material through problems with memory.
- Loss of ‘immersion’ and ‘incubation’ as productive processes.
- Loss of the opportunity to share learning or train others.

Whether or not data gets revisited on a particular occasion within a specific client–researcher contract, it is an essential part of the professional skill of the researcher to know how to do it with an appropriate degree of rigour, to regard it as the default or standard process and to be able to make informed and specific judgements about the implications of not doing so on a particular occasion.
Problems with Memory and Information Overload

The unreliability of the human memory is well documented in psychological and other literature.

We will inevitably forget a proportion of the input from the respondents who took part; a significant amount of material is produced in the average project and it is impossible to remember it all. This is simply wasteful. As Alan Hedges points out, ‘qualitative evidence is expensive to collect, but it usually holds an enormous range of possibilities. Value for money is better if more is squeezed out of it’ (1990: 5).

More problematically, we may believe that we can remember what is important, but there are many forms of memory distortion, any or all of which may affect what is recalled in a particular case. We tend to see and remember what we expected to find; but we also recall that which is very odd. We remember that which came first and that which came last. We recall things which mean something emotionally to us; but may ‘choose’ to forget that which is uncomfortable. All of these effects may influence in a quite unpredictable way what even an experienced professional practitioner actually remembers from a series of groups or interviews.

Added to this are the problems of actually listening to the content of an interview or group whilst running it. Most moderators will acknowledge that the listening and filtering they do during the group discussion or interview (to steer the discussion in the desired direction, keep respondents on-task and follow up interesting and relevant avenues of thought) is very different from the more relaxed and analytic listening or reading that takes place after the event. Listening to the tape, when the pressures of managing group dynamics, client observers and the discussion guide are over, often reveals previously unnoticed comments, anomalies, changes of mood, pace and so on – all of which have been seen to be invaluable to the processes of interpretation.

Immersion and Incubation as Productive Processes

Earlier in this book the processes by which interpretation takes place were explored; they are complex and subtle and difficult to pin down. However, it does seem that one thing practitioners habitually use to aid the process is some degree of immersion in detail, along with opportunity for the mind to incubate or work on this detail. Although listening to hours of taped discussion (much of which may be boring, irrelevant or plain irritating) or trawling through a huge pile of transcripts is arduous and time-consuming, it does achieve that first aim – getting the mind accurately immersed in detail.

In addition, some researchers explicitly value the sense of reliving, not just revisiting, the interview experience (see for example Gordon and Langmaid, 1988) in order to capture what may have been very subtle cues in the responses of participants. It is as if these researchers need to re-connect emotionally to their own experience of the group, in order to bring these cues to consciousness and examine them in the light of the project’s objectives.
The mind exposed to all that is 'there' might suddenly notice something which was initially discarded but which turns out to be critically useful in reaching consistent and valid – and indeed insightful and creative – conclusions. The analytic mind works in subtle ways and it is only by exposing it to all that is there that it can, at various levels of consciousness, sift and sort and synthesise towards a 'best fit' and genuinely insightful conclusion.

**Opportunities for Training**

One of the difficulties in writing and thinking about qualitative analysis and interpretation, and a theme running through this book, is the way in which practice and experience make the process faster and make it look easier. But experience makes practitioners less, rather than more, consciously aware of what they are doing. They can rapidly sift and sort data during fieldwork and immediately afterwards, and begin to form what will be ‘good’ and valuable conclusions, in advance of doing much of the slog of reading transcripts or listening to tapes – and without really being able to describe what they have done.

There are good research and business reasons to revisit and work on research materials for some projects and not others; reasons including the kind of research question being asked and the time constraints put on the project. However, if senior researchers *never* do this, they are not modelling the full process for juniors and trainees. They have no way to train the skills and show younger colleagues that they do not, as it may appear, ‘just make it all up’, but do go through some kind of analytic activity, albeit in a compressed way. Without witnessing some kind of revisiting and analysis, these new researchers might be quite justified in believing that qualitative market research is about doing a few groups, then giving the client some marketing advice. Confusing ‘consultancy’ (Hedges 1990; Lillis, Book 7) with ‘research’ on a regular basis potentially debases and ultimately erodes the analytic expertise on which the industry has been founded and which is still of vital use to clients.

These constitute several real arguments for making and demanding time from clients for the revisiting of data.

**Does it Have to Be Put Down on Paper?**

The issue of how far in ‘best practice’ analysis activities need to involve paper or computer records is much less clear. The production of full records, such as those required for some academic work, would be very expensive indeed since executive time is by far the most costly component of any project. There is no evidence currently that clients need or value this kind of recording of the process enough to be willing to pay for it. Should researchers attempt to make it matter to them?

The commitment of analysis operations to paper (and throughout this section this is taken to include computer records) does at least four things.
These four functions are very different indeed and we should not confuse them in assessing the role of paper records in ‘best practice’.

First, making paper records provides a physical method by which intellectual processes are ‘fed’; making notes or annotating transcripts are ways of systematically scanning and reviewing the data and allowing it to enter into the intellectual activities of interpretation.

Secondly, summaries and displays of data reveal things that would otherwise be difficult to see; rearranging data into patterns of response and into displays like matrices allows the analyst literally to see things not immediately obvious in the raw material.

Before going on, note that these two functions appear to be of primary use to the analyst him or herself – and researchers vary in how far they feel paper methods do actually help their analysis. To this extent, then, perhaps it is legitimate to see paper records as optional, although it is worth being aware that certain projects may benefit from them. In a particular kind of project, for example, a matrix approach might really help separate out sub-group issues, even if the researcher is of a ‘holistic’ inclination and not generally disposed to use matrices.

A third function of a written record is to allow others to inspect and evaluate the conclusions drawn from the data by the original researcher (this might be done for the purposes of training, but it could also be done to assess the validity of the conclusions).

Finally, a written, paper record proves that detailed rigorous analysis has been done and that time really was spent.

These second two functions of paper records of analysis are of much more contentious value in commercial research. They might be seen effectively to cast doubt upon the professional integrity and expertise of the practitioner. In contrast, it is accepted in much academic qualitative research that leaving a ‘paper trail’ (a record of the analysis and the mental steps taken to arrive at conclusions) is a professional requirement and that it is done specifically for these last two reasons. Spiggle, writing for an academic audience, stresses that analysis records should include not only summary sheets, matrices and so on, but also ‘records that preserve the construction of inference’ (1994: 496–7). One of the advantages of computer assisted analysis is that the software facilitates the keeping of such a trail.

Writing in a market research journal, the academic Clive Gabriel (1990) advocates a ‘tape and paper trail’, which he sees as essential to allow the application of tests of validity to qualitative conclusions. Griggs (1987), also referring to commercial research, argues that a paper trail leads to greater reliability and sees as inherent to his central theme the idea that the process should be public not private.

Is a ‘paper trail’ desirable or practical in a commercial environment? Currently it is largely a matter of personal choice as to how far analytic and interpretative processes are committed to paper. In practice, this may mean that very little of the analysis is available for anyone else to see, or
from which anyone else could form their own view of how reasonable are the researchers’ conclusions, or even how much work went into them. Tim Evans, writing about his own commercial analytic practice, comments

I am a great reader–analyser, I read and re-read each transcript at least half a dozen times often scribbling cryptic notes to myself in key passages. The data swims around in my head and emerges in a torrent as first run presentation charts. I then modify, restructure, reorder the data into final presentation charts. On some projects, apart from the presentation charts there is no written record of the data other than the transcripts. (1989: 92; emphasis added)

On the one hand, routine record-keeping would make more room for assessment of quality and accountability of processes, should such things start to matter to clients or to researchers themselves. It would also of course have positive implications for training and development of researchers; there would simply be more material to look at and discuss. However, there are reasons, apart from simple shortage of time, why not all analysis steps get committed to paper. For example, Evan’s ‘holistic’ analysis routines (above) might be severely altered and arguably disrupted if he were required to produce extended notes, or even matrices, to ‘support’ what are in practice professionally and systematically derived conclusions. Researchers’ individual routines may not be recorded in detail, but they can be methodical and thorough, even when of the ‘immersion/crystallisation’ style.

Gabriel (1990) argues that even if researchers do not carry out full validity checks on every job, they should have the skills to do them and to judge and agree when they do not need to. In current business practices, clients treat the quality of analysis and interpretation as issues entirely within the researcher’s professional domain. Unlike their academic colleagues, commercial researchers are unlikely to be required to provide full records of processes, not least because it is difficult to imagine a client with the time and interest to inspect such records. However, if analysis and interpretation do become more important in principle in negotiations between clients and researchers, there may also be some movement in the direction of accountability and transparency.

It seems unlikely to be in anyone’s interests to attempt to control or police procedures at a detailed level. Perhaps a viable alternative to a full paper trail would be to apply an appropriate version of the ‘as if’ model (Miles and Huberman 1994: 282). That is, there should be sufficient record of the analytic and interpretative stages that led the researcher to a set of conclusions such that the researcher could, if necessary, him or herself reconstruct and demonstrate the line of thinking and its connection with aspects of the data. This would ensure that there would be some way for a client or other person to make their own assessment of the conclusions drawn, without making the researcher engage in unrealistically detailed record-keeping.
that would in practice rarely be required. It would have the added benefit of generally providing materials to aid training.

Looking at 'best practice' in analysis, it is important to look at the function of different activities, especially those of revisiting data (seen here as crucial to the process) and of committing all or some analysis and interpretation processes to paper (seen here as of more variable value in the commercial context). More fundamentally, though, this chapter has examined the very purpose of analysis practice in commercial qualitative research.

There is apparent lack of concern amongst research users about the connection between a researcher’s recommendations and his or her expert analysis of data. In one sense this reflects a significant evolution of the researcher’s role as consultant, involving high levels of trust. It has also opened up new non-research opportunities to use researchers’ skills and knowledge more flexibly. However, ‘research’ remains the core activity of qualitative researchers, and for this a focus on outcome at the expense of process by researchers themselves may result in a real skills loss. This in turn threatens ultimately to erode the base on which this particular form of business consultancy has been built. A similar argument is put forward by Philly Desai in Book 3 in this series.

Commercial researchers are not primarily marketing consultants with expertise in marketing (nor policy consultants with expertise in politics or social policy) – they are research consultants with expertise in mediating intelligently between worlds that clients know and ones they do not. The value of what qualitative market research offers comes from researchers fulfilling their ‘committed partner’ role and taking on the client’s issues as if they were their own. But even for the most imaginative and client-responsive pieces of work, the authority through which they do this lies within what they do as researchers in analysis and interpretation. The expertise which warrants the researcher’s claim to a role in business or organisational decisions depends on a privileged knowledge of the respondent’s world from which creative and applied interpretations are derived. But this knowledge relies on expert analysis and interpretation of materials that reflect that world.

Without some professional procedures by which researchers can underpin their claim to this particular knowledge there is loss of that which justifies the researcher’s role as consultant. If commercial researchers are keen on pursuing other forms of data – other ‘texts’ to ‘read’ – in the form of ‘bricolage’, they also need to convince themselves and their clients that it is applied analytic skill, not just interviewing skill or the ability to present material well, which is central to what clients already get from qualitative research. Analysis and interpretation matters.
KEY POINTS

- There is a degree of consensus, strongly supported in this book, that no matter how intuitive creative or insightful the outcome, analysis and interpretation absolutely underpin the activity known as qualitative market research.
- It may seem obvious that ‘research’ requires ‘data’ and ‘analysis’ – but the situation is muddied in commercial research since all concerned recognise that researcher experience is a key factor in producing usable and really useful consultancy from the research data. There are occasions where this is genuinely more important than the detail of the data collected.
- It is argued here though that whenever researchers conduct fieldwork, they implicitly undertake to base any recommendations they make to a client at least in part on a consideration of that fieldwork – and if they do not analyse, they cannot fulfil this undertaking.
- This means that some degree of formal analysis following fieldwork should be regarded as standard, and deviations from this as less than ideal.
- It is less clear, however, exactly what has to happen in order to fulfil this idea of ‘analysis’.
- The conclusion drawn here is that some form of revisiting of the data is essential.
- However, the degree to which analysis is performed or recorded on paper (or on computer) is less important, although there are good reasons for recording at least some of these operations to make the process accountable and to assist in training this highly complex skill.
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