Researching voluntary and community action

The potential of qualitative case studies

Duncan Scott and Lynne Russell

This study reviews the use of qualitative case-studies when researching the voluntary and community sectors.

The voluntary and community sectors (VCS) are more prominent in policy discussions than at any time since the establishment of the modern welfare state. But research to date has failed to produce a well-developed knowledge base about the sector. This study explores how qualitative case-studies have contributed to our current understanding of the sectors, and suggests ways in which their use can be further developed in the future.

The report is based on a series of case studies and evaluations of voluntary organisations and community groups in Britain. It explores:

- popular and academic conceptions of a 'case study'

- contrasting views on the analytic contribution of this type of research

- the rhetoric and reality of undertaking qualitative case studies

- the impact of these approaches in the voluntary and community sectors

- the extent to which specialist and non-specialist researchers can contribute to the use of different forms of qualitative case studies

This report is intended to stimulate greater interest in the potential of qualitative case studies on the part of policy makers and managers. It will also encourage greater confidence amongst field-based practitioners that their 'grounded knowledge' can make an increased and important contribution.

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Preface

The voluntary and community sectors (VCS) are more prominent in policy discussions than at any time since the establishment of the modern welfare state. There is therefore an urgent need to ensure that this prominence is underpinned by a well-developed knowledge base, yet in practice the research approaches most frequently used in studies of the VCS have failed to provide this. The reasons are twofold. First, there is a disproportionate attention to statistically led survey research and, second, the range of qualitative approaches remains underdeveloped.

We do not believe that statistical approaches are invalid, merely that their dominance ignores the complementary and explanatory potential of more qualitative data. An historic preference amongst policy makers for statistical data may be one reason for the relatively limited development of qualitative methods; it is almost as if research which strays too far from an accepted and apparently authoritative approach runs the risk of becoming marginal, even irrelevant. Our aims in this report are therefore to situate existing qualitative case study research alongside its quantitative counterpart and to explore how far, and in what ways, a wider and deeper conception of qualitative case studies can be achieved.

This is not a 'how to do it' text. Indeed we would emphasise that case studies are not inherently about a specific method but are more a way of framing or conceptualising a field of study. With this in mind, our principal tasks are:

- to describe and discuss contemporary examples of qualitative case studies

- to begin to suggest ways in which a wider variety of alternative qualitative approaches might be developed. We will argue in particular that while descriptive examples of qualitative case studies are relatively common, more analytic ones are rare.

The first of these tasks inevitably demands the identification and discussion of a wide variety of texts and intellectual positions, and we find ourselves walking a tightrope between producing a volume which some would describe as 'merely academic' and one which has a more 'practical' value (as if academic work cannot aspire to be of direct use to policy makers and practitioners). However, we will also be concerned with the construction and use of case studies by both lay workers and volunteers within the voluntary and community sectors and will consistently stress the need to capture their individual experiences and perspectives.

Perhaps an even greater danger in writing this report is that our advocacy of qualitative case study approaches might become uncritical and oversimplified. After all, when a particular perspective or methodology has become insufficiently recognised and undervalued there is always the temptation:

> *… to overstate the distinction between academic research and practical inquiry as a step toward improving and legitimising inquiries that are needed for understanding and problem solving but which are unlikely to produce vouchsafed generalisations.*
> (Stake, 2000, p. 25)

Despite these inherent difficulties, we hope that our descriptions and discussions will not only stimulate greater interest in the potential of qualitative case studies on the part of policy makers and managers, but will also encourage greater confidence amongst field-based practitioners that their 'grounded knowledge' can make an increased and important contribution.

Our intended audiences therefore include, but extend beyond, academic ones.

- First, there are those who promote voluntary and community sector activities and who would wish to access and undertake appropriate research. Examples here might include:
  - state departments (e.g. the Home Office in its concerns with active citizens, civil renewal and social cohesion)
  - local authorities (particularly those involved regionally and locally in constructing compacts and local strategic partnerships)
  - strategic voluntary and community sector organisations (at national level

these would include the National Council for Voluntary Organisations and the Community Development Foundation, whilst more local equivalents would include Councils for Voluntary Service and Rural Community Councils).

- Second, and just as important as the policy makers and promotional agencies, are the practitioners within the voluntary and community sectors who manage organisations and deliver services at different levels of scale and sophistication.

- Almost invisible in most of the literature is a third category – volunteers – who form associations at neighbourhood level, work in statutory settings such as hospitals and schools, and maintain so much of the administrative and service infrastructure of formal voluntary organisations.

In conclusion, this report is dedicated to all those who are interested in improving the quality of voluntary and community action.

The structure of the report

Chapter 1 The potential and limitations of case studies

The key aims of the introductory chapter are:

- to outline the variety encompassed by the term 'case study'

- to acknowledge, explain and respond to the key criticisms traditionally made of this approach

- to explore the different foci which an analytic case study might take.

The discussion will also highlight the thematic scope of case studies and their potential in informing policy/practice debates, while a final detailed example illustrates some of the challenges involved in such research.

Chapter 2 Constructing a case study: intellectual approaches, typologies and practicalities

This chapter is concerned with the theoretical, conceptual and practical aspects of constructing a case study. It is not intended to give a comprehensive picture (the References direct readers to more detailed texts); the aim is to suggest the breadth and diversity of approach which is possible and to encourage the lay practitioner, who might otherwise feel overwhelmed and confounded by the variety of theoretical positions and practical problems they will encounter. Even the experienced social researcher or academic should reflect on these issues and acknowledge, for example, the frequent unevenness of case study data and the impact of the social relationship between researcher and researched – inherent features of close qualitative research.

Chapter 3 Values, power and participation: their impact on case study construction

The voluntary and community sectors work in contexts often characterised by inequality, disadvantage, disaffection and conflict. In this environment, issues around values, power and participation are more prominent than in other areas of social, technical and scientific enquiry. This chapter will discuss and illustrate how these issues, and the values of those associated with the research, impact on the construction of the case study. Finally an illustrative example indicates the potential for qualitative research into social action located outside, and across, defined organisational boundaries.

Chapter 4 Using case studies

Throughout the report, illustrative material is presented not only from a wide range of case study approaches, but also in relation to many of the issues and contexts central to the voluntary and community sectors. In this chapter a greater number of examples are assembled to highlight the potential of this approach in informing both policy and practice. It is acknowledged first of all, however, that the perceived 'usefulness' of any research may depend on the degree of convergence between the various stakeholders (researched, researcher, funder and wider audience) in relation to their intellectual, ethical and political stances – or their 'research standpoint'. So while the final section considers how in practice the development of qualitative case studies might be encouraged and developed, the underlying questions will rarely be merely technical.

Chapter 5 Conclusions

In the final chapter we return very briefly to central themes which have recurred throughout this report:

- the significance of context, occasion and drama – whether in framing the 'case' or as important sources of non-verbal data and explanation

- the need to acknowledge and reflect upon the significance of individual values and the social relationships inherent in close qualitative case study research

- the need to acknowledge, even embrace, the inconsistencies, incompleteness and paradoxes which are as much a part of the research process and outcome as they are of everyday life

- the potential of those in the voluntary and community sectors who are not specialist researchers to construct case studies which will inform their agencies' practice, contribute to peer learning and create a wider understanding among policy makers and academics.

1 The potential and limitations of case studies

Introduction

In this chapter we begin by describing the wide variety of what are collectively termed case studies and their several purposes. The particular focus of this report, however, is on case studies which involve close, and often extended, qualitative research within a themed analytical framework. We will highlight the potential of this type of case study for enhancing awareness and understanding, but at the same time acknowledge and respond to its critics (see section 'Criticisms of case study research').

The aim is not to dichotomise quantitative and qualitative approaches. Each has an important and complementary role to play in the development of policy and practice; their value lies in their differences. This chapter will suggest, for example, that qualitative case study research, which often takes the organisation as its unit of enquiry, can also usefully focus on an individual, an event or a social interaction. At the other end of the continuum, the case study may even have the potential to illuminate wider social phenomena and provide a commentary on the political contexts for voluntary and community action (see section 'An illustrative case study').

The variety and role of the case study

Examples of different types of case study frequently appear in a wide range of policy and practice literature relating to the work of voluntary organisations and community groups. One of the most popular formats is a short (100–150-word) description of an agency, its organisation and context. The text is often highlighted or in a boxed presentation to enhance its impact. The central assumption is that such detail can locate a set of activities or issues. The case study serves to introduce or illustrate the discussion. The White Paper *Our Countryside: The Future* (DETR, 2000), for example, contained many such case studies. The example in the box was given without introduction or analysis to illustrate the potential of local community action; it prefaced a list of relevant statutory measures, such as an expansion of the village shop rate relief scheme.

> **Case study – revived village shop**
> The revival of the shop in the village of Harting, Hampshire, was a partnership arrangement between the Harting village shop association and the shopkeeper who pays a rent for shop and living accommodation. The shop has gone from strength to strength providing services such as fresh on-site baking, specialist foods and local produce.
>
> Source: DETR, 2000, p. 24.

Slightly more detailed (and perhaps most popular of all) are the 500 to 1,000 words of description used to celebrate or justify a particular organisation. Such case studies often hunt in packs as part of a campaign to win recognition or consolidate a position of influence. One example is the multi-authored *Fabulous Beasts: Stories of Community Enterprise from the DTA*, published by the Development

Trusts Association in September 2002 (Woodcock, 2002). Twenty-three case studies penned by leading journalists, and accompanied by literally dozens of coloured photographs, advocate the policy significance of community-based enterprises. These case studies are indeed 'stories' of community enterprise; the research approach did not embody a critical analytical framework and the disruption, ambiguities, conflicts and failures which are an inherent part of organisational life are not revealed. This is perfectly acceptable within the terms of reference of this particular kind of publication, but it is of limited value to practitioners and is persuasive only insofar as the resulting assertions are attractive to the reader.

Presentation and assertion have their place, but they are not often helpful in enhancing our understanding. Policy makers and practitioners are at one end of the spectrum of agencies and individuals endeavouring to make sense of the world around them. Their practical engagements can be assisted by our third category of case study – one which is integrated within an accessible framework, informed by carefully chosen concepts. An excellent example of this tradition is a collection of 28 case studies (two per chapter) in Malcolm Moseley's *Rural Development: Principles and Practice* (Moseley, 2003). We read in relation to the case studies (which are two to three pages long and comprise one-third of the book) that 'each has been chosen and written to illustrate key issues … and to help link theory and practice' (Moseley, 2003, pp. x–xi)

There is no doubt that the key issues were explored, no more so than in the chapter on 'Partnerships'. The relevant literature in relation to this particular theme was briefly outlined as a preface to setting out a 'Toolkit', a disembodied set of principles defining best practice, at the heart of which was a 'hypothetical model local partnership' (Moseley, 2003, p. 125). Two illustrative case studies rounded off an accessible and useful chapter; we learn from these that partnerships work to the extent that the central actors are persuaded to 'leave their "political baggage" outside the committee room' (Moseley, 2003, p. 134).

Moseley's report is a good example of the strengths and limitations of case studies used as supportive illustrations within a policy–practice framework. All those involved in rural community groups and voluntary organisations will gain some positive ideas from it. One criticism, however, would be that there is little reflection on the impact of organisational context – the landscape in which hypothetical models must be applied. A useful analogy might be the problem presented in changing a wheel if your car should break down on a hill; the toolkit in your boot is then of little use unless a piece of wood can be found to act as a block. Also missing from Moseley's account is a sense of the dynamics of partnership building, of the conflicts and contradictions which so frequently underpin or undermine models and toolkits.

A similar concern surrounds much of the existing literature on the 'compacts' which have been developed as expressions of government commitment to partnerships with community groups and voluntary agencies (Alcock and Scott, 2002). These codes of practice are the visible, formalised expression of statutory–voluntary sector relationships. There is a danger, however, that their prominence may mask, and divert attention from, the continued significance of more informal, unregulated, even

anarchic processes of partnership building. One example of an analytic case study which did reveal the different dramas played out in what might be seen as the front rooms and back rooms of voluntary–statutory relationships considered the experience of 'Family Friends' (a pseudonym), a voluntary agency that promotes the welfare of families with pre-school children (Scott *et al.*, 2000).

Family Friends had been prominently involved with other local voluntary organisations in lobbying the local authority. Their arguments were against widespread funding cuts and in favour of greater transparency in future strategies relating to funding. As a result of this campaign, a subcommittee involving senior politicians, local authority officers and voluntary sector representatives was established to develop a corporate strategy on voluntary sector funding. The details of this strategy were finalised at a key meeting of the subcommittee which took place in Family Friends' offices; it was agreed that in future every agency would be subject to the same process. However, at the end of this same meeting, a local authority officer remained behind to set up a meeting with Family Friends' co-ordinator – the first in a series of discussions which would lead to increased funding for Family Friends. Within minutes of agreeing transparency and consistency, the agreement had been broken. It was clear that:

> Pressures from central government to increase work with disaffected families had tight deadlines and attractive carrots attached. Thus, even while a Compact-like process had been successfully concluded, the demands from another part of the state operated to contradict this.
> (Alcock and Scott, 2002, p. 125)

There are two important observations to make about this particular case study.

- First, it reveals something of the real life of a voluntary organisation:
  - how it operates within, and responds to, contradictory external agendas
  - the conflict between its location within a voluntary sector network and its relationship with its statutory funders/stakeholders.

- Second, it illustrates the potential of close qualitative case study research to explore the private life of a voluntary organisation, as opposed to its public image, and perhaps helps develop a better understanding of its organisational dynamics. The initial telling of the story was difficult for the co-ordinator, who was not unaware of the ambiguities:

> Don't ask me where this additional money is coming from. Meanwhile a number of organisations are being cut. A few have been wiped out completely. I think to myself 'how can I represent the voluntary sector in meetings about cuts while this organisation is getting such an increase?' but it's not about me …
> (Scott et al., 2000, p. 54)

As a more general conclusion, we would suggest that case studies are valuable insofar as:

- they provide contextual detail about the different actors, agencies, events and processes

- they are able to demonstrate the dynamics of social and organisational relationships

- they are able to reveal hitherto undisclosed information

- they can locate their explanations within wider political and economic frameworks.

Criticisms of case study research

Critics of case study research (for example, Walker, 1983; Atkinson and Delamont, 1985) point to at least four interrelated areas of concern:

- manageability

- rigour

- generalisability

- ethics.

The following sections consider each of these criticisms in turn and make some response, without pretending that they are necessarily invalid or easily resolved.

Manageability and rigour

Manageability is an issue which has implications for data collection, analysis and publication. It is asserted that all but the most superficial case studies tend to be over-ambitious in their commitment to highly detailed, differentiated and dynamic accounts of organisations. What we have suggested as being the strengths of case study research are often seen as its weaknesses if the resultant research accounts are long and unreadable.

Part of the problem relates to the conceptualisation of the case which frames the study. The dominant mode is the organisation, and whether this is a small, informal

community group or a large formal, bureaucratic organisation, the interplay between internal processes, relationships and resources will inevitably be complex, as will the impact of the wider social, political and organisational ecologies in which the case study agency is located. The problem is exacerbated where the researcher has access beyond the initial gatekeeper and is able to triangulate their data, interview representatives from different stakeholder groups and so on. The volume of data grows, as does the potential to be blown off course. Each subsequent interview may disrupt the prepared research strategy and it may prove difficult to retain rigour and coherence, particularly across several case study organisations.

The criticism of unmanageability is therefore sometimes a valid one – but this is not an argument for abandoning the qualitative case study as a research tool. Instead the researcher must retain a clear sense of the analytic themes at the core of the enquiry. This will not only help to inhibit a decline into anarchy during data collection, but will also impose discipline on the level of detail presented in the final report. A more apposite selection will support and illustrate the analytic conclusions more effectively than the inclusion of a wealth of contextual information.

A second strategy might be for researchers to explore different approaches to the case study. Instead of the broader organisation, attention can be focused on an individual person. Whilst organisational context remains important, the case study may become both more manageable and more rigorous by narrowing its area of concern. At first sight, the individual approach appears to offer fertile ground; study objectives

seem more organisationally realistic and intellectual tasks achievable. After all,

> *The form of auto/biography carries with it some*
> *considerable responsibility for allowing authors to*
> *convey the impression that lives are lived in*
> *orderly and coherent ways.*
> (Evans, 1999, p. 134)

However, a note of warning must be sounded because the process of individual case study work can also prove complex. One psychosocial case study of 24-year-old 'Ron's' perceptions of crime on a council estate concluded, for example, that in interviewee responses there is likely to be:

> *… continual tension between a truthful*
> *acknowledgement of the* (emotional) *reality of a*
> *past event and defensive distortions of that reality*
> *in the service of psychological self-protection.*
> (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p. 151)

Ron's reporting of his experiences and his perceptions of crime are likely to be partially shaped by a need to minimise the traumas associated with them; such is the conclusion of a psychoanalytic perspective. A focus on the individual can therefore reduce some case study dilemmas, but it is important to make the underlying intellectual assumptions clear.

Another alternative to the organisation as 'case' can be found in anthropological writing. Instead of looking at organisational form and function, the study might concentrate on processes. One stream of writing in this tradition (Frankenberg, 1966) considers three broad forms of 'dramatic occurrences'. These are:

- social drama – where a crisis or conflict interrupts 'normal' social life, e.g. a riot (see Chapter 3)

- ceremonial drama – where individuals and groups interact, e.g. a royal visit to a voluntary agency (discussed in this chapter), a Parliamentary Select Committee visit to an organisation or town, or an annual general meeting. Descriptive examples (within a broad social science perspective) are the board meeting of a neighbourhood organisation in Boston, USA (Putnam and Feldstein, 2003, pp. 90–2) and the service of a Californian 'mega-church' (Putnam and Feldstein, 2003, pp. 122–6). The latter outlines the ways in which the music, sermon, testimonies and video screens were 'turning the crowd into a congregation' (Putnam and Feldstein, 2003, p. 126)

- customs within drama – where the resolution of a crisis/conflict and the management of ceremonial exhibit recurrent patterns, e.g. the form and content of an AGM.

Two broad approaches to the study of processes as 'cases' have emerged. First, there is a concern for the ways in which different social categories are either participants or are excluded. Are all levels of a community group or voluntary organisation involved in the drama, ceremonial or custom? Is there a bias reflecting gender or ethnicity? This approach tends to accept (and, at least implicitly, support)

existing organisational frameworks and the roles of the different actors. Some critics, however, feel it assumes that groups and organisations are more fixed, formal and rational than closer attention would suggest. Instead, they stress the potential for dramatic occurrences to illustrate the different ways in which actors re-form their meanings and relationships. Whereas anthropologists in the past might have viewed a ceremonial as a confirmation of organisational life, more recent writers might insist on greater degrees of ambiguity and negotiation (Lewis, 1999, p. 78).

Generalisability

Having outlined some strategies in response to the first pair of criticisms of case study research (manageability and rigour), we must next consider a more pervasive criticism – that it is not possible to generalise from case study data. This view has long undermined the extent to which case studies have been seen as valuable in informing the development of policy and practice. The insistence that it would be either misguided or impossible to extrapolate from the conclusions of case study research arises from the latter's frequent focus on only a small number of cases, sometimes even a single agency, an individual or a dramatic occurrence. It is certainly true that the conclusions of case study research can rarely be defended by reference to large representative samples, tests of statistical significance or comparative data emerging from a control group. It lacks this science. Nevertheless, qualitative case studies do have the capacity to enable us to look more subtly at apparent social and economic trends and their impacts, and particularly to remind us of the significance of context. Even quite limited

case study research has the potential to sensitise policy makers and practitioners to more complex realities of voluntary and community action than suggested by quantitative approaches.

Thus while surveys such as those undertaken by the Charities Aid Foundation in the 1990s usefully highlighted increasing levels of statutory funding to the voluntary sector (CAF, 1996, pp. 19–28), a closer examination of the changing funding streams of a small sample of voluntary agencies and the internal significance of these changes revealed a pattern whereby increased statutory support was in fact aimed primarily at a narrow range of service delivery priorities (Russell *et al.*, 1995). The underlying realities for the sample organisations were increasing financial constraint, an overextended infrastructure and a tendency towards the marginalisation of traditional activities. These organisations were certainly experiencing overall financial growth, but at a considerable internal cost in terms of mission and core capacity.

The problem of generalisability is compounded by the extent to which detailed case study research often reveals paradoxes such as those contained in the last statement. The research conclusions demand careful recognition of the importance of context and organisational complexity. In fact the best of the case study apologists move beyond dichotomous presentations (i.e. the either unique or generalisable conclusion) to actually embrace the paradox:

> *Paradox for me is the point of case-study. Living with paradox is crucial to understanding.*
> (Simons, 1996, pp. 237–8)

Moreover, paradox is also seen by some commentators as crucial to management practice, particularly in small or medium-sized voluntary and community organisations where:

> *Performance is often a contested concept, measurability of important dimensions is in question, cause–effect relations obscure, co-production through partnerships and collaboration common …*
> (Paton, 2003, p. 49)

> *On this basis it is a promising sign if performance is accepted as multifaceted, contested, contingent, provisional.*
> (Paton, 2003, p. 164)

Ethics

Some critics and commentators raise a number of ethical issues in relation to case study research and argue that these are more important than theoretical or methodological concerns; case studies are seen as intrusions into the back rooms or private spaces of individuals and organisations. This is a legitimate cause for concern, but it is hardly enough to invoke a defence of privacy when the focus is upon the professional practices of, for example, the police, teachers or voluntary organisation workers. The latter enjoy relatively large amounts of occupational autonomy and discretion; qualitative case studies have the potential to examine how such workers cope with the uncertainties latent in high-discretion contexts and how they create routines which assist such coping (Lipsky, 1980, p. 3).

Nevertheless, the case study researcher needs to retain a high ethical sensitivity at all times, because the very detail of case study research may contain hitherto undisclosed information. This is a central practical dilemma; why bother with more in-depth approaches if the published end results are bland? Clearly, a case study researcher whose data do contain back-room or private detail will need to argue the merits of at least some disclosure. The essential point here is about negotiation; the researcher will need to accept the authority of the respondent and the likelihood of a compromise about what is finally published.

> **The story so far…**
>
> - At one level, case studies are popular because they offer presentational and propaganda advantages to their promoters.
>
> - However, case studies which are intended to enhance understanding and inform policy and practice require more careful attention to contextual detail and organisational dynamics, especially if these dimensions can be understood within a larger picture.
>
> - Concerns about the value of case studies have concentrated on:
>
> - (a) Manageability and rigour. One set of responses to these problems is to explore different conceptions of 'case' – by defining the 'case' as an individual, as in auto/biographic approaches, for example, or exploring the processes of a dramatic occurrence such as an event or ceremonial. The social world is inherently complex and full of unresolved tensions, which will
>
> *(Continued overleaf)*

be evident regardless of the particular conception of case adopted. By utilising a wider range of possible conceptions, increased manageability may be possible and new insights can be generated.

(b) Generalisability. One response to this criticism is to suggest that case studies reveal more complex and contextualised realities than simple statistical trends and can be invaluable in the development of effective policy and practice; another is that there may be important commonalities of experience even within paradoxical and 'local' conclusions.

(c) Ethical concerns. One response is to highlight the policy significance of high-discretion contexts and the need to negotiate greater (anonymised) visibility for data that takes us beyond blandness.

An illustrative case study

The case study analysed in this section underlines some of the points made in the discussion above. It concerns the visit by Prince Charles to a local youth project. This took place while one of the authors of this report was involved in a wider study of the development of social enterprise by voluntary and community groups (see Pharoah *et al.*, 2004). The illustration is offered in the first person because we wish to underline the legitimacy and impact of 'I'-centred accounts alongside the more common third-person ones.

The case study focuses on a particular event rather than the broad organisation. Nevertheless (and without inundating the reader with superfluous detail), it usefully suggests the social and policy contexts of the work of this organisation and the networks in which it operates. Its everyday concerns will also be evident – its struggles are centred on issues of funding, human resources, infrastructure and growth. The research elements included observation of the event and the preparations leading up to it; interviews with some of the participants; and analysis of public and private responses to the royal visit. Because I had already been working with this organisation for some months, I was well placed to talk to workers about its significance, to go behind the public performance and rhetoric to the private analyses and sensibilities of those involved, and even to challenge respondents about the ambiguities and contradictions which their accounts revealed. The analysis which follows the description below also indicates how case study research can throw into sharp relief the wider social, economic and political environments in which the voluntary and community sector operates; the boundaries of the case study need be neither organisational nor parochial, and my own value systems may also be visible – themes which will be revisited in later chapters.

The event

Prince Charles arrived at 12.25 p.m. and left at 2.07 p.m., but in a number of senses he had been 'coming for months'. Four months previously, for example, a

(Continued)

pre-arranged research interview with the project director had suddenly been cancelled because she had to be elsewhere, planning the visit. Project workers told stories which reinforced the specialness of the visit; they recounted the long meetings of the internal working group, the construction of display materials, their worries about the dress and conduct of the young people who use the project, and they spoke in hushed whispers about how many Special Branch officers had come how many times.

On the morning of the 'Big Day', invited guests converged on the project HQ, exchanging their laminated invitations for name/institution badges to be pinned prominently as part of the entry ritual. About 50 young people (in project sweatshirts) and 35 adults (in unaccustomed suits) mingled self-consciously, whilst a local priest (acting as official project photographer for the day) took literally hundreds of shots. (After the event, souvenir photographs would be chosen for collective and individual use.) Suddenly, the whole group was led off in an uncertain straggle down the street and round the corner – all of 150 yards. The press weren't allowed to walk; they were shunted in a mini-bus from a number of different locations, each of which was within a few hundred yards – a hidden choreographer was clearly at work.

The target of these well-rehearsed convoys was an old, part-derelict hall, which was

the subject of a major fund-raising campaign; if all went well, it would become the main focus of the project's work. After more scrutiny of name badges and lists, around 150 young people and adults found themselves in the cavernous first floor of the hall. There were still nearly two hours to the key moment, but the working group had thought of everything. Assorted drums, tins and sticks were quickly assembled and the participatory samba band commenced. Most impressive and exciting. Ruined conversation. Half-time in the 'percussion war' consisted of a well-scripted speech from the project director. She introduced and thanked the wealthy businessman who had virtually donated the hall. Then more percussion before the arrival of HRH, two secretaries, layers of Special Branch and the uniformed Lord Lieutenant of the county (complete with huge sword).

Prince Charles was a star performer. He shook hands, talked and laughed with all the young people and many of the project staff. Nobody was missed out and every opportunity was taken. Here was the heir to the throne mixing informally with his people, playing a big drum, sitting on a tricycle and eating a cake. All the time, however, the secretaries hovered, the Special Branch glared and twitched their electronic communication devices, whilst the Lord Lieutenant extended his white-gloved hand to those of the throng who had shuffled to an inside-track position.

(Continued overleaf)

At 1.55 p.m., with events running a little late, Prince Charles, his party, the Lord Lieutenant and the project director miraculously found themselves in front of a broken stained-glass window. Jesus the Good Shepherd looked down over a short blue velvet curtain, beneath which a layer of brick dust betrayed the newly installed plaque commemorating the visit. The raised voice of the project director called for order and a series of expanding horseshoes formed in front of the window. Front-rank members included the Prince, a secretary, a Special Branch officer, the Lord Lieutenant, the project director and the project chairman; directly opposite the Prince was the Lord Mayor. There was then a series of speeches, followed by cord-pulling, cake-cutting (the Lord Lieutenant's sword was useful here, amidst much chuckling and camera-clicking), present-giving, and the rapid departure of the royal party.

Research process, data analysis and interpretation

I had been interviewing project staff for almost a year before the royal visit. I therefore had an established role which allowed considerable participation in and observation of the events, but my data inevitably remained uneven; I was still limited to a relatively small number of 'frames' from the long process of preparation and performance, and could only be in one place at a time. Nevertheless, I was able to use the event as a shared social occasion. Later I conducted a number of formal and informal post-mortems, developing lines of interviewing

which moved beyond both media rhetoric and project self-congratulation and revealed perspectives which were not suggested by a simple description of the event.

During these interviews defensive assertions emerged about the success of Prince Charles's visit; but so too did a sense that the 'royalist' flavour of the event and the responses to it were in fact accompanied by a subtle instrumentalism. The dramatic performances were full of willing actors ready to 'play the game', if this helped their organisation gain status. The project director, for example, felt that the visit 'probably made people take us a little seriously – a little leverage, a little credibility'.

The royal visit featured prominently in the local media. Front-page newspaper articles announced the Prince's impending arrival weeks in advance, and a 'Picture Special' was produced on the day after his visit. Project staff, however, were critical of the detail of this outcome. Two weeks later, a much more substantial piece appeared in the press, largely written by the project press officer. The content of this article threw into sharp focus how much of the earlier coverage had focused on the royal visitor and homely anecdotes about his interactions with local people. In contrast, the later article was about the project itself. The conclusion that the purpose of the event was to enhance the project's profile was further reinforced a couple of months later, when the project launched its 40-page Strategic Plan; its last two pages contained seven photographs of HRH, without any explicit linkage to strategic themes.

The general intention to raise the organisation's profile was also accompanied by less visible, but equally important, interactions.

Two individuals being 'courted' to join the project board accepted invitations to the event and were then able to be lobbied by the director. Similarly, the man who sold the old building came and was photographed with HRH:

> *He came and obviously enjoyed it. His parting words were 'Can I have a photograph?' I knew there were some good ones because I'd made sure – there was a wonderful one of Charles and him. I sent him the photos.*

> *We didn't get our SRB money to purchase the building on time and I'm pretty certain that visit and the photographs caused him to write off any consideration of interest payments. I feel he'll stay involved with us.*
> (Project director)

The impact of the event was not confined, however, to external audiences. It was clearly a group-building morale booster for both the project staff and young people. The reactions of a senior manager seemed representative:

> *I'm not a royalist, I'm not a fan of the royal family … I'd come here with four redundancies … to me the visit is a culmination of 15 years' work … it's more a celebration of 15 years of what I've been doing.*

At another analytical level, and particularly in relation to the work of the voluntary and community sector, it is important to reflect on the fact that this event (one of about 300 such charitable engagements performed by Prince Charles each year) affirmed existing social and economic inequalities rather than weakened them, irrespective of how much extra leverage was obtained for the project, however many individual links were cemented and however

many people felt a stronger sense of self-worth.

One of the richest men in the country had come to a provincial town battered by mass redundancies, and to a project catering for many of the young casualties of industrial decline. People had willingly fitted into the roles demanded of them, not because they were necessarily royalists, but because they could identify the different individual and institutional pay-offs of the event. Interviews revealed that they were unevenly aware of the contradictions involved in the juxtaposition of privilege and disadvantage, but they felt able to manage the inconsistencies between principle and practice.

The scale of royal patronage of charities is rarely the subject of analysis (but see Bates, 2003; www.princeofwales.gov.uk, 2003). What a case study can do, however, is to open up the contradictions at a local level. Yet even as the structures of inequality are being publicly revealed, so we can detect signs that local actors do retain degrees of autonomy. They may appear to be caught up in ceremonial processes beyond their control, but closer examination reveals more subtle responses.

The same pattern of behaviour is revealed in other local contexts. For example, a few weeks after participating in the royal visit described above, I was working in Romania where I read a case study of another royal visit – again by Prince Charles.

> *'welcome to …' in big letters is the wish which met us all the long of the way between Sibin and Mosna (the route of Prince Charles' visit). In the village, streets were cleaned, the Romanian banner was hoisted next to the British one … there was a consensus among the local elite that*

the welcoming scenario prepared for Prince Charles by the county and national authorities was unacceptable – the mayor and the other local representatives would have to play negligible roles and they were even banned from accompanying Prince Charles within the Fortress. So the scenario was changed. The leader of the Saxon community and the school principal became the central figures …
(Berevoescu and Stanculescu, 1999, pp. 13–14)

Research challenges

Implicit in the last section are a number of the challenges which any researcher encounters during the construction of a case study. First, it is clear that the participant observer must be sensitive to the possible distances between performances in public places and private, internal agendas or rationales. Second, the researcher must be prepared to have their own initial assumptions and emerging conclusions challenged. In the particular example above, my first interpretation of participants' observed behaviour – that they were confirming their place in the hierarchy by the extent of their engagement in this activity – was proved incorrect by subsequent interview responses. The ambiguities which emerged illustrate the limitations of any research which confines itself to descriptions of superficial behaviour. Observation of the event, and of the roles of those involved in it, gave only a partial picture. Critical perspectives and respondents' consciousness of contradiction were eventually revealed. However, any critique of the event by respondents did not emerge spontaneously or easily, and this takes us to our third point.

We have already said that this example illustrates how a case study can reveal a bigger

picture – the juxtaposition of deprivation and wealth, marginality and privilege, perhaps. But, in practice, much of the reported comment was primarily concerned in a straightforward way with the local benefits of the royal visit; at the centre of the story was a youth project, temporarily playing host to selected dignitaries, whilst schoolchildren, parents and passers-by crowded against barriers outside. The researcher could not have foreseen, at the outset of the post-mortem interviews, how resistant the interviewees would initially be to any critical external examination of the event. The dominant view was that the project director had pulled off a notable coup by using the visit to her advantage. There seemed at first to be little or no sense among respondents and commentators that there might be a 'bigger picture', within which local participants were more or less contained. This is a familiar interpretive dilemma in any case study of local social life. It is tempting to try to make sense of tangible, visible phenomena rather than puzzle over abstractions such as privilege, hierarchy, inequality or the state, and few qualitative case studies venture into this territory, although some examples are discussed in Chapter 3.

If the researcher does operate within a frame of reference that includes concerns about this bigger picture, but the interviewees tend to ignore or avoid it, what should be done? Some researchers begin with the assumption that their job is to extract information from social settings, and to do so without interfering in the production of knowledge. They assume that the truth lies out there and their job is to find it. Others accept that truths are constructed in the interactions between researcher and researched, and that pursuit of 'the' truth may in any case

be a misguided notion in the face of the subtleties and contradictions of social behaviour. In this particular case study the researcher argued with, and challenged, the interviewees; he did not simply report their first words. He saw his job as being to construct a more complex truth with them. His stance reflected his own biography and his belief that the business of doing case studies is not merely technical; it is also about purpose and values.

Some researchers take their construction of accounts a step further, to the point where the boundaries between social science and fiction become blurred. They do not simply change names and superficial details in order to preserve the anonymity of individuals and organisations. More controversially, they fictionalise some or all of the data where a rigid adherence to the empirical detail may result in material which falls short of its full potential or where the recorded words and experiences lack dramatic impact. Thus researchers undertaking case studies of student teaching, for example, may produce 'a fictional reconstruction of a student's experience, expressed in a letter to her friend' (Bassey, 1999, p. 158). Similar reconstructions have used fictional playlets and diary extracts, which are given a degree of 'trustworthiness' by cross-referencing to actual interview data.

However, the boundaries between qualitative social research and fiction may be blurred not just in order to communicate more dramatically with a wider audience, but also as a creative response to perceived/real data collection limitations. One of the best examples of the latter is Michael Angrosino's short stories about adults whom he describes as 'mentally-retarded' (Angrosino, 1998). He had worked as

a volunteer teacher and anthropologist, and had concluded that:

> *The imaginative act it would take to simulate the experience of a retarded person is itself an act of abstract generalization of which most retarded people are incapable.*
> (Angrosino, 1998, p. 30)

Through fictional stories (firmly underpinned in other publications by traditional ethnographic case studies: e.g. Angrosino, 1997) he created characters acting and interacting in a credible social world. The reader is allegedly 'in a better position to draw his or her own conclusions' (Angrosino, 1998, p. 41) than when confronted with a social science account. The author concludes that he is:

> *… using 'creative fiction' rather than 'creative non-fiction' to represent the ethnographic experience, in part because it helps overcome some ethical problems about disclosure, and in part because it seems a more efficient way of conveying the complexity and diversity of a community that is all too often stereotyped in terms of labels and categories …*
> (Angrosino, 1998, p. 266)

A very different example, which again illustrates how the case study is at the mercy of what is available, is Orum's historical study of Austin, Texas. Here incomplete documentation led to what he termed 'imaginary analytic induction' (Orum and Feagin, 1991, p. 125).

This is controversial territory. The use of fiction challenges social *science* research at its roots and potentially casts a further shadow over the credibility, rigour and generalisability of case study conclusions. Whether it is a legitimate or useful approach in the context of

voluntary and community sector research perhaps relates to questions of purpose. Why use qualitative case studies? Who is to benefit from them? If there is a concern among respondents that awkward and potentially embarrassing details will be uncovered by the research, there may well be objections to its publication. For example, in our experience the closeness of the researcher to the back rooms of voluntary sector life will often reveal:

- uncertainties about managerial and operational competencies

- internal conflicts – whether interpersonal or ideological

- strategic incoherence

- the marginalisation of key stakeholders.

The argument (according to Angrosino) is that a piece of creative fiction, especially when connected to traditional social research, can be more effective in informing policy and practice than the acres of censored blandness to which we would otherwise be subjected. Creative fiction may seem to provide a strange ending to our scene-setting chapter. Busy policy makers, already more wedded to the apparent certainties of quantitative research, are hardly going to be persuaded of the merits of qualitative approaches by examples from what

might be termed the 'margins' of the social research repertoire. There is much sense in such an observation, but boundaries or margins depend partly on the location of the participant or spectator. For many (or most?) workers and volunteers in the voluntary and community sectors, it is social research which appears distant and at the margins of reality. Storytelling, on the other hand, is more nearly at the centre of the lives of the majority of people. We do not wish to judge the relative merits of these approaches, but a reflection on the existence of different centres and margins is a good starting point for the chapters that follow.

Conclusion

A number of criticisms have been aimed at case study approaches. We have argued that, although there are indeed some inherent problems, these are not necessarily insurmountable; neither do they invalidate the important contribution to be made by case studies within a wider portfolio of research in the voluntary and community sector. Analytical, contextualised case studies have considerable explanatory potential and will be valuable to policy makers and practitioners alike. In the next chapter we consider different theoretical, conceptual and practical issues involved in the process of constructing a case study.

2 Constructing a case study: intellectual approaches, typologies and practicalities

Introduction

This chapter will present an overview of some of the different ways in which case studies are constructed, the apparently opposing theoretical stances which might be taken and the variety of case study typologies to be found. It will also highlight some of the operational problems which arise in design, implementation and data collection. These are rarely revealed in any depth within research accounts, but our underlying premise is that while practical, as opposed to intellectual, considerations should not dominate the explanatory process, they should at least inform it. Because of the centrality of intellectual concerns, this chapter is the one most 'polluted by the academy' (to quote one of our friends). Some readers might therefore prefer to skip to the section dealing with the case study process in practice. We hope, however, that they will return to the earlier sections at some point.

One caricature of social researchers is that they spend so much time in front of their computers that they actually lose touch with the everyday realities of data collection in the field. This distortion has an element of truth, to the extent that some researchers become successful enough to employ others to do the interviewing and participant observation for them. Working with a degree of physical, social and intellectual distance can be a strength. It allows the data to be analysed without the shadow of participant interests falling across the page. On the other hand, it can also be a weakness if the processes of analysis and interpretation are thus isolated from the research process.

The absence in research accounts of any substantial reflection on the research process may be more than the inadvertent outcome of the author's location in the research hierarchy. It is often the result of more intellectual processes:

- a deliberate intellectual focus on deriving clearly generalisable conclusions

- an implicit belief that social researchers can uncover absolute empirical truths which are uniformly obtained irrespective of the research context and irrespective of the social relationships between the fieldworker and respondent.

There is sound common sense in laying down firm intellectual foundations for any research study before confronting practicalities. Thus:

> So far … I have said little about practical matters … because it is essential that one's research design is not guided entirely by them.
> (Mason, 1996, p. 32)

However, the primacy of focus on 'generalisable explanations' may have unintended consequences:

- First, the reader never really gets to grips with the resource–skill–access issues of producing case studies.

- Second, this position does not sufficiently recognise that practical issues are influential and that the complexity of contexts may not allow the application of rigid intellectual frameworks. The impact

of the research process on research outcomes will be understated. The relegation of the social contexts of qualitative research to marginal asides about social skills and negotiating access may therefore represent a step too far from the field. In particular, while it might be possible in very controlled settings for research to be driven by intellectual frameworks alone, this will be more difficult in voluntary and community sector settings where there is not the same degree of control as, for example, a school or prison. It is even more than likely that a 're-grounding' of approach will be necessary and, to paraphrase Mason, it will be 'essential that the interrelationship between intellectual and practical matters is constantly anticipated and transparent.'

This chapter is therefore subdivided into the following sections:

- 'Contested intellectual approaches'. Debates between different academic approaches offer a range of challenges and opportunities for qualitative case study researchers. This section will contrast two established approaches which are exemplified by the work of two researchers:
  - the search for empirically based explanation, using case studies to test theories or hypotheses in a deductive or 'top-down' way – the approach adopted by Yin
  - a more inductive approach where case studies are less theoretically driven but are used in a search for understanding by building hypotheses in a 'bottom-up' way – the approach adopted by Stake.

Both authors are interested in explanation and understanding – in the causes and in the nature or characteristics of social phenomena respectively. Their differences arise from the extent to which they believe they can 'frame' or direct the cases under study. Yin specifies the circumstances under which the greatest framing and direction can be achieved. Stake is more exploratory, hoping to generate insights from within the complex social worlds of his cases.

- 'Typologies used in case study design'. The potential of different conceptions and typologies of 'case' is explored.

- 'The case study process in practice'. An illustrative example highlights the distance between the textbook linear pathway of case study construction and the more bumpy processes experienced by the qualitative researcher concerned to highlight the dynamics of organisational change and the tensions and contradictions of organisational life.

- 'Practical issues in data collection'. A number of practical issues associated with data collection are discussed; 'closeness' to the research site is revealed as bringing particular dilemmas as well as detail and insight.

- 'The problem of analysis'. Analytical techniques for qualitative data are outside

the scope of this report. This section offers some brief guidance to the non-specialist researcher.

- 'Conclusion'. A brief comment on the extent to which adherents of positivist and more tentative descriptive research approaches create a false dichotomy.

Contested intellectual approaches

The most quoted academic commentator on case study research is Robert Yin. His intellectual approach sits firmly within what is described as a positivist tradition, where the central task is:

> *… the objective collection of empirical data …*
> *within the framework of the scientific method –*
> *to develop hypotheses, collect empirical data and*
> *develop conclusions based on such data.*
> (Yin, 2003, p. 163)

Whatever the potential of other approaches, Yin is adamant that the deductive approach summarised above is most appropriate, because a mix of prior expert knowledge (of relevant research) can enable hypothesis development before what he terms 'actual experimentation' (Yin, 2003, p. 27). Figure 1 summarises the primacy Yin attaches to explanation.

Yin is a very experienced applied social researcher but most of his work has been with formal, corporate organisations, and this is perhaps evident in his approach to a case study of a neighbourhood organisation. This particular study evaluated the impact of a locally based organisation on its users and on the surrounding area (one of 40 such agencies included in a national evaluation). Even though he acknowledged the potential for a different strategy, Yin adopted a positivist model and accepted the 'mechanical' nature of his approach, which he argued enabled a more systematic coverage:

> *… rather than struggling with a more fluid, though*
> *potentially more creative, reporting structure.*
> (Yin, 2003, p. 32)

Figure 1 Explanation as the prime purpose of case study research
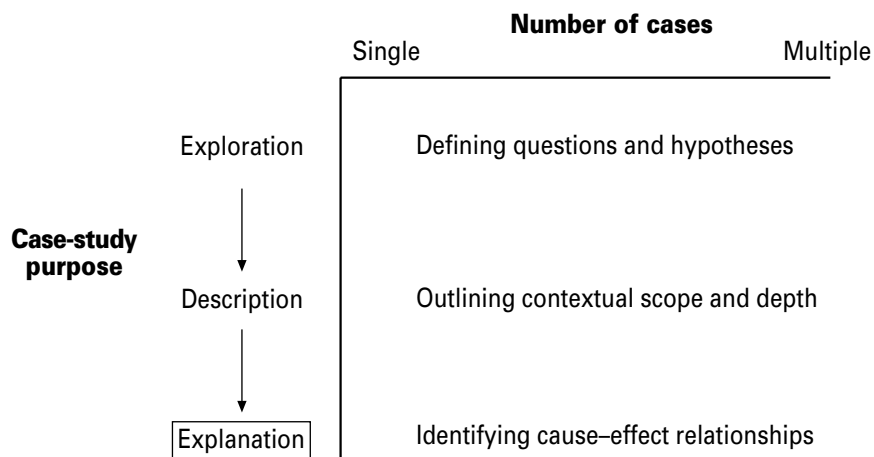
The case study was thus generated by over 20 interviews and scrutiny of several dozen documents. Framing the research was a set of 49 questions, which were said to facilitate a high degree of comparability across the 40 different sites, but which Yin admits in a revealing aside were 'rather mechanically composed' (Yin, 2003, p. 31). Nevertheless Yin's claims, that these yield richness and depth, seem at least partially confirmed. From the interview data, the reader learns about:

- organisational origins

- funding

- structural characteristics and their evolution

- activities

- external relationships

- outcomes – as perceived by users and local residents

- outcomes – as judged by Yin in relation to a list of social issues.

The strength of Yin's approach is evident in the empirical material he amassed on the neighbourhood organisation concerned. Other case study researchers, however, are less certain than Yin of the possibilities offered by this approach for *explanation*; some are less persuaded of the existence of universal laws of human behaviour. For reasons which are partly about what kinds of meaning can realistically be generated and partly contextual, they assert that:

… important human actions are seldom simply caused and usually not caused in ways that can be discovered … To the qualitative scholar, the

understanding of human experience is a matter of chronologies more than of causes and effects. (Stake, 1995, p. 39)

Stake is a prominent proponent of an alternative approach to producing case studies. He is more concerned to select an organisational case with the potential to reveal contextual detail and dynamics, rather than (but not to the exclusion of) systematically framing it in a comparison with others. He is also committed to a research strategy which addresses social policy issues in ways that are sensitive to the understandings of the people who are directly involved (as professionals and beneficiaries) in the policies and programmes under study.

Central features of Stake's case study approach include:

- The significance of context – this might include reference to the physical climate, the condition of an office and its equipment, or micro events in and around a meeting. All of these are not deemed to be mere background; rather they illuminate aspects of social action.

- The distinction between interviews which depend solely on reported events, and those which are informed by the researcher's direct observation of, or participation in, events. Here context can work in an analytic rather than descriptive way.

- The importance of 'a pride in self-challenge' (Stake, 1995, p. 159), where the researcher tries to demonstrate their readiness to be surprised, even proven mistaken.

- The possibility that the search for qualitative data may confront the researcher with a wide spectrum of role opportunities. Instead of majoring on 'theorist–interpreter–evaluator', there may be a clustering around 'biographer–teacher–advocate'.

- The importance of making the researcher visible. Stake provides an annotated report of a case study of a Chicago elementary school (Stake, 1995, pp. 137–60) in such a way as to 'establish the interactivity between researcher and phenomena' (Stake, 1995, p. 140).

There is a tension between Stake's search for validity (the so-called truth about social action) and Yin's concern for reliability, where a greater emphasis is placed on the cumulative weight of more standardised aggregate data. Exploratory and descriptive case studies are felt by Yin to be of secondary, even subservient status. In some instances they are perceived as 'sloppy' (Yin, 2003, p. 6) and 'rambling' (p. 25), because they fail to clearly specify in advance the critical components of the case and the ways in which data will be collected.

Yin cannot be regarded, however, as an ivory-tower academic – the alleged polar opposite of Stake. It is true that his approach has been to take formal organisations as a central unit of analysis, and to do so in a search for 'explanation', rather than the narratives and interpretations which underpin Stake's 'understanding'. But the differences between them as representatives of different research approaches tend to be overplayed. Both approaches involve the same bundle of characteristics – primary intellectual purposes,

assumptions, design, data production, analysis and dissemination; both have produced qualitative case studies and both have been interested in the worlds of policy and practice. Where they diverge is in their respective commitments to different degrees of conclusive certainty.

Disciples of the explanatory tradition often dismiss Stake because of what they describe as his 'pragmatic' approach towards the selection of cases; his storytelling and picture-drawing are deemed to be 'basically inconclusive' (Sanger, 1996, p. 119) in contrast with Yin's theory-seeking and testing (see Simons, 1996, p. 227). They claim it would be 'foolhardy' for new researchers to follow suit, that the 'vast majority' of researchers do not support him, but that it 'might work for journalism' (Denscombe, 1999, pp. 34–5). Such statements are clearly insensitive not only to the true potential of both traditions but also to the practical constraints on case study research.

Yin, for example, might be the first to acknowledge that his work has been in predominantly stable settings; that in unstable contexts (which are more common in the voluntary and community sectors) highly experienced researchers are required. In the event that conditions are relatively unstable or unpredictable, Yin is clear that:

> *… only a more experienced investigator will be able to take advantage of unexpected opportunities rather than being trapped by them …*
> (Yin, 1994, p. 55)

Where operational control is both necessary and possible, Yin's approach depends on teams of experienced investigators being able to screen potential cases (Yin, 2003, pp. 13–14) and he has

often had the advantage of undertaking well-resourced studies employing teams of fieldworkers.

This luxury, however, is rarely within the grasp of most voluntary and community sector organisations concerned to make their activities more effective for beneficiaries. Most specialist social research, whether in-house or bought-in, is located in those larger, more formal voluntary agencies which receive 85 per cent of the total income of registered charities, despite constituting only 5 per cent of the overall number (Halfpenny and Scott, 1996). The massive structured inequalities of resource distribution in the voluntary and community sectors have resulted in unequal research activity. Moreover, the most common form of research here has been the survey and the relatively structured interview. Whilst some qualitative case study approaches have been encouraged (e.g. Yates, 2002; Yates and Jochum, 2003), few are concerned with social process; the organisation remains the 'case'.

These trends are at least in part because of prevailing uncertainties as to what is allowable as legitimate research. For example, Yates and Jochum's excellent and clear use of conceptual material on social capital development in four rural voluntary organisations is limited to interview excerpts. Whilst these are thoughtfully handled, there is little or no sense of social dynamics (either within or between agencies), no observational detail and no use even of in-house or local documentary materials.

It should be possible, however, for smaller organisations to generate case studies without the resource of the specialist researcher or the necessity of structured interviews. Even though the majority of voluntary organisations cannot employ specialist researchers, the skills already exist within their own boundaries to undertake some version of case study work – to assemble numerical and written data, to observe individuals, groups, organisations or events, and to discuss.

In conclusion, although there will be particular research settings where a more contained case study and an incremental research strategy may be appropriate, we are persuaded of the relevance of Stake's approach because contextual issues are crucial to an understanding of contemporary voluntary organisations and community groups. Furthermore, where social contexts are less formal, and research resources limited, where there is a high expectation that the perspectives of a wide range of stakeholders should be central, it is likely that issues and problems will be at the core of case selection rather than theoretical hypotheses.

Typologies used in case study design

The discussion in the previous section centred on two influential intellectual positions in relation to case study research. There are, however, a range of other perspectives and approaches (see Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). Early qualitative case study researchers, perhaps prior to the 1960s, assumed that the whole process of constructing case studies was self-evident; they took for granted many aspects of being a qualitative researcher. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, there emerged a concern for what was termed 'grounded theory' which attempted to lay down prescriptive frameworks for how case study research should be undertaken. In the 1970s emerging feminist critiques began to challenge

these, arguing that qualitative research should be more sensitive to the perspective of the people being researched rather than the framework of the researcher. Subsequent to this, there have been a number of other contributions which emphasise the importance of social criticism as being at least as significant as theory in the development of qualitative case studies.

Given this variety of intellectual positions concerning case study research, it will come as no surprise that there is also no single answer as to what constitutes a case, and typologies of case study design have not been slow to emerge. One of the most elaborate typologies suggests six pairs of counterposed elements which are then used to construct a tabular presentation of 64 possible variations (de Vaus, 2001, pp. 228–9). These six pairs of case study characteristics (together with a gently caricatured explanatory commentary) are summarised below (de Vaus's preferred strategies always being located on the right-hand side).

- *Descriptive–explanatory*. We are told that a description 'will be more like a painting … an interpretation rather than a mirror image' (de Vaus, 2001, p. 225). The unstated implication is that theoretical explanatory approaches will more nearly approximate to a mirrored reality.

- *Theory building–theory testing.* The builder is a worthy labourer but the 'man in the white coat' (the tester) emerges as having the higher status.

- *Single case–multiple case*. Multiple cases are seen as better because they are a 'tougher test' of theory. The in-built assumptions which underpin the typology (for

example, about available research resources) accumulate as the elements unfold.

- *Holistic–embedded*. We read that holistic is a synonym for everything and is impossible; the only alternative is to work with a focus (to be 'embedded') and the best way to do this is to use explicit theories.

- *Sequential–parallel*. Sequential designs can be less resource intensive and tend to be associated with theory building. Parallel (often comparative) approaches may be more expensive but are preferable routes towards the goal of theory testing.

- *Retrospective–prospective*. Again, there is a resource issue underpinning the choice of either an historical reconstruction or a forward-tracking approach. As with the other pairs, de Vaus's preferred approach is in the right-hand column.

Sixty-four variations, neatly contained in boxes, serve as a stark metaphor for one typology and, despite de Vaus's asides about how far even the best-laid plans may go astray, the reader is left in no doubt as to the 'best' design elements. It is only a short step from this to the notion of the case as a 'bounded entity', as if the indeterminacy of natural settings could be frozen within the boxes. There is little sense that the definition of case:

> … may change both in the hands of the researcher (during the course of the research and when the results are presented) and in the hands of the researcher's audiences.
> (Ragin, 1992, p. 8)

Nevertheless, the boxes and the associated dichotomised or ideal elements are in fact useful; they do provide an initial checklist against which to plot the research design and its subsequent implementation. However, in our experience, a salutary warning might be 'try simplicity first' because, in practice, complexity will soon crowd in. This is illustrated by the following example.

Figure 2 provides a relatively simple conceptual mapping of a case and suggests a more accessible starting point for the non-academic, non-professional researcher than de Vaus's earlier typology. This case study explores an identified theme within a particular organisational context and comprises a mix of the general and specific along the horizontal axis, with empirical (descriptive) and theoretical (explanatory) perspectives shown on the vertical. (This anonymised example is described and discussed in Scott *et al.*, 2000, pp. 32–7.)

The conventional starting point for descriptive case studies is often the organisational unit. The more generic starting points for this case study, however, were twofold – the theme (the development of more managerialist cultures) and the context (small to medium-sized voluntary agencies) (I and II respectively). The research team considered a number of possible case sites in terms of their potential to both illuminate the general characteristics of the conceptual theme and to allow a more specific construction of an account. During discussion a particular voluntary organisation was identified as the site for this case study (III), and the linked issues of 'organisational corporatism' and 'individual resistance' emerged from interview data (IV).

The research account revealed two conflicting perspectives and concluded that the implementation of corporate managerialism provokes both transitional and more permanent internal responses. Recent managerial changes had included a radical restructuring of the organisation, the introduction of formal business planning, systematic project reviews and increased financial accountability through the creation of service-specific cost centres.

Figure 2 Conceptual mapping of a case

	The case as … General	The case as … Specific
Empirical unit	**Classification** e.g. Voluntary organisation	**Site** e.g. London Ethnic Support Services
	II	III
	I	IV
Theoretical construct	**Theme** e.g. Managerialism	**Account** e.g. 'Corporatism' and 'Resistance'

Adapted from Ragin, 1992, pp. 7–11.

These changes were accompanied by the appointment of a new chairman and a financial manager, both with a private sector background. Implementation of the changes was described by the chief executive as having been 'tortuous', with resistance amongst long-standing board members and staff. The solutions she identified were technical – a mix of communication and management techniques – and the problem was seen as having been temporary:

> *They don't grumble … now.*
> (Scott et al., 2000, p. 34)

The account of a service manager within the organisation, however, suggested the opposite – corporate changes had created structural demarcations which were divisive and also diminished responsiveness to clients. They were seen, together with other changes (increased professionalisation, for example, and the introduction of staff perks such as 'company' cars), as representing a new organisational culture. This retrospective, triangulated and analytical account had therefore revealed a deeper underlying problem – a mix of conflicting values and priorities at different levels of the organisational hierarchy which had been brought into sharper relief by the recent top-down changes. In contrast with the chief executive's perspective, it seemed that long-term latent resistance to corporate managerialism would persist:

> *… for as long as the organisation contains significant mixtures of managerial values and communal values …*
> (Scott et al., 2000, p. 37)

This example illustrates the interpretive challenges presented even by a relatively simple conceptualisation of a case study. It also highlights the explanatory potential of this approach.

The story so far…
- Many commentators on the relevance of case studies prioritise the testing of theories and the production of generalisable conclusions; this approach seems to echo more quantitative empirical approaches.

- Other commentators stress how social contexts can shape the process of research as much as, or more than, academic perspectives and frameworks.

- Explanation (the search for causes) and understanding (the search for the essence or nature of social interaction) are more intertwined, however, than is claimed. Research which pursues the former tends to be associated with formal organisational settings and the latter with the greater organisational fluidity of most voluntary and community agencies. However, the apparent dichotomy between different academic traditions obscures the potential of utilising their respective strengths as opportunities allow and there is no inherent reason why the formulaic 'Explanation = Formal; Understanding = Informal' should be fixed. One crucial influence here will be the extent to which researcher and researched have recognised the opportunities and constraints within

(Continued overleaf)

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any particular constellation of research resources and agency priorities.

- Most case study research in the voluntary and community sectors is either conducted by academic elites or by VCS workers strongly influenced by these same elites. Relatively narrow conceptions of qualitative case study research therefore prevail and the opportunity for a broader portfolio of approaches is limited. We are not arguing to exchange one tradition for another so much as to argue for a more creative use of all approaches (even whilst recognising their separate strengths and weaknesses) and to end a situation in which the majority of voluntary organisations fall in the category of the researched rather than the researcher as a result of the perceived resource and skill requirements of undertaking case study research.

The case study process in practice: an illustrative example

Unlike the detective at the crime scene, the task facing the case study researcher is more complex than simply amassing individual clues; it is also about the process of connecting the data (or 'clues') to the context, the process of interpretation. This can be approached either in a relatively mechanical way or in the belief that:

> *There is much art and much intuitive processing to the search for meaning.*
> (Stake, 1995, p. 72)

We will discuss the extent to which observations can assist the interpretative process in more detail in the next section, but some brief illustrations indicate how they might complement or even direct the accumulation of words. Thus:

- An object as mundane as a noticeboard and its content can be a starting point for later conversation.

- Leaflets and newsletters in a reception area will suggest clues as to the needs and priorities of service users, together with the location of the organisation within wider networks.

- Plaques acknowledging benefactors will do the same.

- The fact that a minority ethnic organisation has no sign on the front of its building to advertise its presence will tell another story.

The social interactions that interrupt an interview or which are observed during a meeting are also revealing.

- The organisational culture of an agency in which the research interview is frequently disrupted by the easy access of other workers or service users, for example, will perhaps be very different from that where the latter are contained in a semi-basement set apart from project workers.

- Meetings are important social events. Some may be more about maintenance of internal relations than performances for external audiences; others will have wider significance and will often be

symbolised by elements of ritual: for example, an annual general meeting, the launch of a publication, a conference or seminar, a research or consultation exercise. Key features to note are:

- Who is present (organisational affiliation)?
- How did they gain entry (open/invitation)?
- What roles did they play?
- With whom did they interact?
- What was the nature of the interaction (friendly, neutral, hostile)?
- What were the consequences (immediate/longer-term) of their interaction?
- What insights into voluntary/community sector characteristics can be gleaned?

Those who advocate mechanical, supposedly more rational, ways of constructing their analyses are quick to specify key steps in a process. They move, for example, from identifying the explanatory problem, to deriving a possible explanation, to constructing case studies with a 'testing' brief, with a subsequent review and further case studies which develop a causal proposition. (See de Vaus, 2001, p. 263 for a summary of 'analytic induction'.) Most qualitative work, however, is less certain; the relationship between research design and implementation is more pragmatic and tentative, as illustrated in the following example.

Table 1 summarises a particular qualitative case study project in which we were involved. It was the fourth in a series of studies involving most of the same core sample. The pre-existence of strong research relationships with these agencies and detailed knowledge about them were key determinants of the research approach in a study constrained by a limited budget and timescale. (In these respects, this study more closely resembles the environment in which most voluntary and community groups might undertake their own case study research and contrasts with larger-scale or better-resourced studies.)

Table 1   Qualitative case study work – from theme to account

Research site	Allocated theme	Account detail
1. Local Care	Infrastructure	Resourcefulness
2. Health Self-Help	Values and identity	The compulsions of volunteering
3. Safety Works	Social entrepreneurs	The costs of success
4. Kids-Care	Stakeholders	Differential accountability
5. London Ethnic Support Services	Managerialism[a]	Corporatism and resistance
6. Counselling Forum	Strategic planning	Uncertain certainties
7. Money Advice Service	Networking	Wheels within/without wheels
8. Family Friends[b]	External agendas	Structured pragmatism

[a]   See the previous section in this chapter for a discussion of managerialism, corporatism and resistance.

[b]   See Chapter 1 for reference to Family Friends.

Adapted from Scott *et al.*, 2000.

The focus of this phase of our work, however, was on new analytical themes. These themes had been identified from the relevant literature as key issues for the voluntary and community sector, and had also emerged tangentially during our earlier research. Preliminary discussions among the research team in relation to each of the eight voluntary organisations or community groups (the 'sites') centred on the allocation of one of these themes to each site. However, the ways in which a site received a particular theme varied.

Some allocations were deemed appropriate because there was a strong 'fit' with known organisational experiences; these agencies therefore had the potential to illuminate a specific theme. For other sites and themes, the pairing was more tentative and in some cases the allocation of a theme emerged only during exploratory research interviews. But there was insufficient time to identify alternative new sites, negotiate access, develop confidence and undertake the necessary background document search and introductory interviews necessary in order to then be able to design the research process and interpret the data appropriately. This bumpy process proved to be the easy part; the real challenge was then to capture episodes in the experiences of the case study organisations which illustrated themes in ways that revealed processes and organisational dynamics, rather than static pictures. The 'challenge' was as difficult for the interviewees as for the fieldworkers; they were more comfortable with the idea of a formal semi-structured interview process than the request that they become analytical storytellers.

One example that may illuminate the process of constructing a case study arises from site 2. The organisation was Health Self-Help, a membership-based self-help group, entirely run by volunteers.

- The broad theme was 'values and identity'.

- In the context of this organisation, this was translated into a focus on volunteering. Why do people participate? Why do they continue? How and why do they exit? These are clearly important questions for anyone concerned with the vitality of voluntary organisations and community groups.

The challenge in any study of volunteering, however, is to arrive at more critical perspectives than are often revealed by interviews alone. The tension between truthful acknowledgement and defensive distortion (discussed in relation to the individual psychosocial case study in Chapter 1) becomes pertinent; interviewee responses are likely to be coloured both by loyalty to the group and by social conventions and expectations surrounding the value of volunteering. In this particular study, however, a dramatic event observed by the researcher created a narrative focus for the fieldwork and subsequent interviews. The event in question was the unexpected resignation of the treasurer in the course of delivering his regular report to the committee meeting which took place just hours before the AGM. This announcement was greeted with a difficult silence and, moments later, the meeting hurriedly moved on to the chairman's report.

What emerged from the analysis triggered by the treasurer's resignation was a picture of the complex but ordinary rhythm of life in a

voluntary organisation. In contrast with ideals of altruism and reciprocity, there are also more awkward reasons why volunteers stay – 'enforced loyalty' and 'indirect pressure' were reported. Exit becomes a matter of negotiation and is often harder to achieve than entry to volunteering in the first place (Scott *et al.*, 2000, pp. 13–19).

There is a considerable literature on volunteering that relies heavily on contextual information such as employment status, social group and educational background. It is dominated by aggregate survey-based detail and measurement of volunteer activity as social capital. This, however, misses the essential dynamic of why people volunteer, how their values and identities affect motivation and conversely how volunteering shapes values and identity. Even a single case study revealed the variety of reasons why and circumstances in which volunteers become involved and underscored the need for sensitive volunteer recruitment and management.

The progression from theme to account was never unilinear; the experienced researcher initially struggled to operationalise his theme and to persuade interviewees that this was both important enough to provide a focal point for discussion and sufficiently anonymised to publish. Other experienced researchers argued about the extent to which meanings were being imposed from the outside or constructed by insiders. Inevitably, the journey of understanding was a bumpy one, the final authenticity coming from the surprises in the detail. The interrelated processes of observation, interview, discussion, reflection, drafting, discussion and so on were able to paint a more multilayered, contradictory but convincing picture.

Practical issues in data collection

The present authors are clearly advocates of qualitative case studies, particularly those constructed around defined analytical themes. The strength of the case study approach is not necessarily the opportunity to access more information but to access different kinds of information and to get closer to the formal processes and informal trade-offs, tensions, contradictions and conflicts which are inevitable in organisational life and which impact on outcomes and organisational change. In addition, the closer relationship which develops between the researcher and researched in case study work (the fact that the researcher becomes better informed over time and is therefore a more focused interviewer, together with the fact that they may become a familiar and trusted face) can allow difficult truths and illuminating stories to be revealed. One example was given in Chapter 1 in relation to Family Friends' confessed 'betrayal' of their role as a key voluntary sector representative.

As already discussed in this chapter, the approaches taken even within the case study tradition vary considerably. Some qualitative researchers, for example, seek out their informants and expect to hear the truth; others are less persuaded that it is sufficient to locate the 'horse's mouth'. They also record the observed moments of error, joy, revulsion, anger and:

> *… the episodic, complex and ambivalent realities that are frozen and perhaps made too pat and ordered by realist or confessional conventions.*
> (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 119)

Irrespective of how researchers may classify themselves (and the present authors sit some distant apart from one another along the continuum!), the actual process of undertaking case study fieldwork often replaces the potential for a very clinical account (neatly framed by some of the 64 boxes which may have defined the initial approach) with a more uncomfortable position. There are a number of reasons for this which, although unsurprising in retrospect, are rarely fully anticipated at the point of case study design.

In our own qualitative case study research of voluntary organisations, we believed we could achieve illuminating 'moving pictures' (Scott *et al.*, 2000) because we would have:

- the opportunity to observe and discuss issues from different physical, social and organisational perspectives

- the advantage of being in the midst of events as they unfolded (e.g. the opportunity to observe the dramatic resignation of a treasurer or the more mundane aspects of office life on a 'typical' Monday morning)

- the opportunity to track over time the impacts of organisational changes in response to both internal and external influences.

We were confident that the relative closeness of relationships between the researcher and significant stakeholders would take us beyond mission statements, financial accounts and the chairman's review of the year – all familiar aspects of the public image of any organisation, whether located in the corporate, public or voluntary sectors. While this expectation was in fact realised, there were also a number of 'interruptions' to both the accumulation of qualitative data and its analysis. These can be summarised in two categories:

- the uneven ability (and sometimes willingness) of the researched and the researcher to know, articulate and understand

- the social context of the research dialogue and the extent to which the problems inherent in getting 'too close' to the research site replace those created by a more clinical distance.

These practical issues are illustrated in the following sections.

Uneven outcomes

Assumed knowledge

1 In a study of the impacts of the 'contract culture' (Russell and Scott, 1997), the assumption was made that volunteers would be able to comment on the changes in their role since the negotiation of service contracts between voluntary agencies and the statutory sector. In practice, over half of those surveyed were unaware that they were involved in the delivery of a statutory contract. This was a surprise to the research managers and was problematic for those fieldworkers undertaking interviews with these volunteers. However, it was also a key finding; it revealed the strategic marginalisation of volunteers in a context in which they had become operationally more significant, and it proved to be more insightful than their substantive knowledge of contracts.

This example demonstrates how, having carefully selected our case study agency, having negotiated access and having identified an appropriate sample of volunteers, the assumed knowledge was not necessarily available. The following example demonstrates that the same problem may arise at either end of the organisational hierarchy.

2 'The chief executive talked to me about what the organisation needed volunteers to do and the different type of volunteer now needed. But, in contrast to her responses to other questions, her replies on volunteers suggested that in reality she had very little detailed knowledge of that dimension of the organisation. On the other hand, she was not prepared to say "I'm not the person you need to speak to." There is a desire by the interviewee to demonstrate that they do have the knowledge you expect' (Research worker, cited in Russell and Scott, 2005).

3 Straying briefly from our theme (the practical difficulties in data collection), it is important to note that while revelation of imperfect knowledge in a research interview may be as revealing as it is problematic for the fieldworker, the same potential exists when the focus of the case study is an observed event or process, as in the consultation exercise (Select Committee on Race Relations and Immigration, 1969) which was studied as part of the qualitative research for a PhD (Scott, 1972). The Parliamentary Select Committee responsible for race relations and immigration had decided to visit a number of towns in order to investigate what they termed 'the problems of coloured school

leavers'. Their visit to one northern town was partly dependent on the ability of the Community Relations Officer (a paid employee of a voluntary body – the Community Relations Council) to assemble relevant members of different ethnic minorities. Given that her ethnic contacts were primarily with those people who had chosen to be voluntary members of her council, the processes of selection, discussion and conclusion were fundamentally flawed from the outset. As minority ethnic witnesses were interviewed, the record shows that many of them either denied that they knew much about school leavers or that they were necessarily representative of a particular ethnic minority. Yet subsequent discussion and media commentary demonstrate how quickly most witnesses 'collude' with such remarks as 'as leader of your community' or 'knowing as you do …'.

The Community Relations Officer, her voluntary council, the MPs and the local media were more or less willing actors in a political process in which politicians wanted to be seen taking a social policy issue seriously, and reaching a speedy consensus about both the causes of and responses to the employment problems of particular school leavers. Whilst the official report of the visit provided much useful detail, the qualitative case study of the event revealed some of the compromises and contradictions involved in the process.

Readiness to talk
We need to remember that research is usually a peripheral activity for most voluntary and community sector agencies and groups, most of

the time. This is a salutary, but not often fully digested, lesson for specialist researchers. However, peripherality is not synonymous with irrelevance; the research report remains potentially very damaging to the case study organisation. So interviewees may initially forget that the researcher was coming, then freely divulge 'behind-the-scenes' information and yet still seek to censor some or all of it. These apparent contradictions reflect the organisational location and role of the interviewee, as much as or more than any close relationship with the researcher. Whilst, therefore, the research issue may be important, the research team's credentials impeccable and anonymity guaranteed, intermittent interruptions to data collection and research reporting may arise from within the contexts of the case study and will not always be predictable.

Partial perspectives

It is important to be wary of the single view, whether expressed in public or in private, whether by the chief executive, her secretary or a volunteer. It is common practice for researchers to negotiate access initially through someone senior in the organisation. The influence and role of this gatekeeper, particularly in under-resourced case study research, inevitably means that the research account is at risk of being too superficial or incomplete.

Beyond words

In qualitative case study research, data should be accumulated from not only the pre-arranged interview or even the formal observation of planned events, but also the chance encounter and fortuitous foraging in the public and

private spaces of an organisation. Even the physical environment of the case study agency is a valuable component of the research data and can provide an illustrative metaphor. For example, London Ethnic Support Services, which was the site for a case study of managerialism, resembled a cross between the outpost of a social services department and an expensive bank foyer, with its reception area with glass partitioning separating 'client' (*sic*) and receptionist, its electronic security door into the office area, and the labyrinthine corridors leading upstairs to the chief executive's large office with its circular conference table, expansive polished desk and so on.

Contrast this with the small, entirely volunteer-dependent community care agency in which the research focus was on the impacts of an under-resourced infrastructure. Here the office was shared with local playgroup equipment, the toilet had no hot water, there was no fridge, and the part-time workers had an almost daily struggle with the photocopier because a maintenance contract could not be afforded. In the midst of a research interview, there was an explosive moment as the interviewee (the volunteer administrator):

> … *suddenly got up and plunged her hand into the waste-paper basket, angrily pulling out a glossy leaflet. It was a brochure advertising an expensive publication aimed at helping voluntary organisations attract charitable funding. 'We can't afford to buy things like this – we would have to fund-raise first just to afford it!'*
> (Scott *et al.*, 2000, p. 8)

This micro event and its physical context encapsulated much of that organisation's frustration in relation to the mismatch between

the increased role expected of it in a changing external policy environment on the one hand and the level of its funding and its strategic invisibility on the other. Beyond the words elicited during interviews, the data can usefully include observations and events, even expressions of emotion as above. Too often in our work, these remain hidden and the case study fails to achieve its full potential.

Thus the bus journey taken by a fieldworker on her way to interview the manager of a rural voluntary organisation, the pattern of people (mostly women) getting on and off and their conversations reveal much about social issues in the countryside – the decline of local shops and schools, the dependence of rural communities on public transport and so on. The case study researcher needs to learn to read social rituals and their local contexts.

Too close for comfort

Research relationships can become social relationships, a transition which brings a number of advantages, limitations and difficulties. On the positive side, it is often assumed that where researcher and researched share similar social characteristics (age, gender, class, ethnicity and so on) a greater social 'convergence' will facilitate initial access, lubricate first encounters and smooth the way during interviews to wider and deeper disclosures. Social convergence may even lead the way to more sensitive analytic insights. Social 'matching' has become almost a mantra, regardless of the fact that it is often impossible to separate out and quantify the relative importance of social characteristics, personal qualities, research skills and interview contingencies.

On the other hand, social convergence and/ or the development of a social relationship (particularly in longitudinal studies) may encourage greater delinquency by both parties. There will be a tendency, if not checked, to replace pre-interview preparation with assumption, discipline with indiscipline, intellectual challenge with mutual appeasement, and conceptual clarity with loosely shared frameworks and language.

In the course of one long-established research relationship, for example, interviewer and respondent had discussed over the years (albeit briefly) their children, their partners, their interests, their health scares. The researcher had even been asked to provide a job reference. How easy is it then for the researcher to pose challenging critical questions – which in this case were about the organisation's compliance with its funder's request that they withhold information from service users about the termination of a respite care contract? The personal relationship may inhibit the researcher, or it may help overcome the sensitivity around this topic in an organisation ostensibly committed to accountability, user participation and empowerment.

There are clearly a number of issues in relation to the question of 'closeness' which cannot be avoided in undertaking case study research. They demand self-consciousness and reflection by the researcher throughout the process.

The problem of analysis

Having amassed a variety of qualitative data, the problem for the case study researcher is how to analyse it. The most common approaches to qualitative analysis assume that:

- there will be large amounts of *data* (observations in field notes, interview transcripts, documents and so on)

- this data needs *sorting* and the best way to do this is to search for *categories* which can be given *labels* (or *coded*). (Fielding in Gilbert, 1993, pp. 163–4)

This is often a daunting prospect, particularly (but not exclusively) for the inexperienced researcher or non-specialist. Even the word 'analysis' can be alarming. It conjures images of a remote process undertaken in universities, think tanks or laboratories, a process whereby problems are broken down and impressive conclusions are mysteriously delivered. Considerable guidance on data analysis is available elsewhere, and this is a technical area beyond the scope of this report, but such texts are not always accessible or relevant to the emergent researcher in the voluntary and community sector. Too few examples of instruction, advice and support have been developed specifically for lay workers and volunteers. So while we want to offer guidance, we have to rely on relatively academic source materials. As a starting point we suggest:

- Hall and Hall (1996), an essentially practical text and directly related to the VCS

- Hammersley and Atkinson (2000), the best-selling British text on qualitative approaches

- a chapter by Fielding, in Gilbert (1993), a book covering all kinds of research.

We would add three qualifications. First, there is no single best approach. Qualitative

research may be rooted in the particular concerns of an end user, for example, in which case there may well be a different and less abstract starting point to the process of analysis than in more academically driven enquiries. Thus:

> *The best way to think about analysis for practical social research is to work backwards from the final use of the material through the stages of categorisation and dissection.*
> (Hall and Hall, 1996, p. 193)

The key word is 'use'. When there are non-academic sponsors of the research, it is clearly appropriate to begin from *their* puzzles, questions and specifications. When there are academic sponsors, the question of end-use may be less tangible. For the academic researcher, therefore,

> *… the analysis of data is not a distinct stage of the research. In many ways it begins in the pre-fieldwork phase, in the formulation and clarification of research problems and continues through to the process of writing reports, articles and books.*
> (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2000, p. 205)

Second, but often associated with the issue of end-use, it is important to acknowledge the extent to which research standpoints and individual values will influence the analytical process and research outcomes. This is discussed more fully in the following chapter.

Third, the production of the final research account is, at its best, an incremental process (as suggested in Figure 3), involving the sharing of initial drafts with colleagues and / or research subjects and other stakeholders. A narrow elitism which does not embrace these later

stages of this process ignores the possibility of a final litmus test for the research conclusions and the opportunity to further enhance both the data collection process and the analysis.

A last work of encouragement: analysis is simply what happens when individuals select information to describe, explain and understand social action. The extent to which each of us in everyday situations is confronted with having to break down a problem and evaluate possibilities or seek explanations, before drawing conclusions and subsequently defining a course of action, demonstrates a high degree of analytical competence. Analysis is a much

Figure 3 Making meaning from qualitative case study research

Initial knowledge/understanding
from previous research

↓

Negotiating sites/themes

↓

Focused interviews/observations

↓

Analysis and preliminary accounts

↓

Team work

↓

Editorial work

↓

Agency responses

↓

Final draft
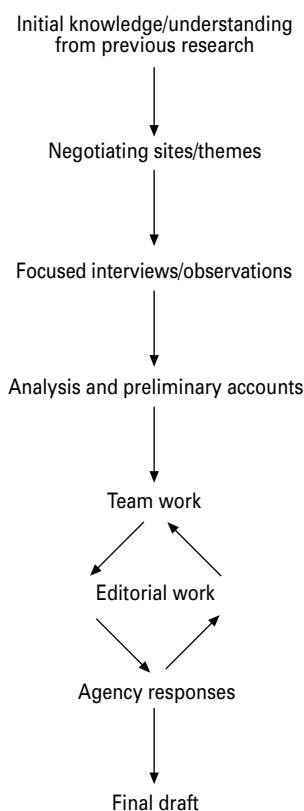
more common activity than we first realise, and the development of qualitative case studies is not necessarily a sphere of activity best left to the experts.

Conclusion

Case study approaches which seek 'explanation' and more exploratory and descriptive approaches which seek 'understanding' are much less distant than some commentators imagine. Explanation and understanding are both present in the specialist work of academic elites and in the everyday experiences of VCS workers and volunteers. Both (over-dichotomised) groups of researchers clearly have more in common than they realise. When a schematic presentation of the processes involved in undertaking qualitative case study research is outlined (Figure 3), the resemblance to the 'key steps of analytic induction' is striking. Where it differs from other approaches is in the degree of acceptance of negotiation, the mix of words and observation, and the collective or participative elements in design, drafting and editorial work.

It is not peculiar to case studies as such for they are not methodologies, rather ways of framing social life. What is clear, however, is that the qualitative researcher will be most effective to the extent that he or she realises the importance of social, alongside intellectual, skills. All the conceptual and theoretical sophistication in the world will not be sufficient to identify and gain access to particular sites, to make and maintain relationships, and to negotiate sense and understanding.

3 Values, power and participation: their impact on case study construction

Introduction

Case study research is not driven solely by theoretical and conceptual frameworks, such as those outlined in Chapter 2. The voluntary and community sectors work in contexts often characterised by inequality, disadvantage, disaffection and conflict. Not surprisingly, issues around values, power and participation are more prominent than in other areas of social, technical and scientific enquiry.

This chapter will illustrate some of the ways in which research values impact on the construction of the case study. It will discuss different degrees of participation by the researched in the design and execution of the research strategy – from traditional 'extractive' processes to more radical 'activist' positions. It will also look at critical research perspectives which locate the case study within wider societal frameworks.

However, as already suggested in an earlier chapter, the construction of the case study is an interactive process. In this chapter it will be evident that individual and organisational values (and value conflicts) within the research site will also be important in the construction of the case study, and that data collection may be disrupted by the distribution of power between different interest groups.

Finally, an illustrative example will indicate the potential for qualitative research into social action located outside, and across, defined organisational boundaries. A case study of political protest (around issues of race and immigration) will highlight the wider scope of case study research and also its limitations in terms of empowering or emancipating the researched.

It must be emphasised that much of the material in this chapter relates to social research in general and only secondarily to qualitative research; connections with case study approaches are made wherever possible. There are two reasons for this emphasis. First, there are relatively few commentary texts on qualitative case studies (in contrast to the popularity of descriptive case study). Second, because case studies do not comprise a specific and separate method, it is inevitable that only weak distinctions will be made between it and qualitative research.

Values

Many case study researchers (such as Yin and de Vaus) endeavour to pursue a research approach which they see as being value free; they aim to be detached and to remove or minimise the impact and influence of their own position. Their own social and political values are rarely acknowledged or made visible; the underlying concern is with perceived rigour and the delivery of credible conclusions. Some researchers, however, insist on an explicit declaration of their values; a number of examples where these are evident will be discussed in this chapter.

There are also others who argue for an intermediate position, whereby the researcher recognises their closeness to the research subject, even whilst seeking to retain a degree of distance. For example, feminist writers talk of the 'outsider within' in a 'distinct position of marginality in the center' (Pels, 2004, p. 281).

The search here is, therefore, neither for a

distanced academicism nor for the uncritical acceptance of insider knowledge; rather for what is described as a double consciousness, which negotiates for indigenous data, yet maintains a critical and reflective stance in relation to them. The notion of a 'double consciousness' applies wherever researchers consciously share social roles with the researched (via mixtures of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, disability) *and* try to handle these reflectively, rather than assume that the sharing of social roles and experiences is an unproblematic route to understanding.

Irrespective of the researcher's stance in relation to the incorporation and declaration of their individual social and political values, other (research) values explicitly inform the research strategy – specifically:

- views about the purposes of case study research

- values in relation to levels of participation by the researched.

Traditional research approaches (which might be summarised as being 'extractive' rather than participative), for example, involve relatively limited degrees of commitment to engaging the researched in research design or in data analysis and perhaps least of all in the dissemination stage. In many such studies, the role of the research respondent is at the level of assistance and is merely a technical and localised relationship.

This is in marked contrast to those researchers who encourage high degrees of participation and those with a more 'activist' orientation who argue that the search for knowledge must be underpinned by a

commitment to action, not just investigation. According to radical versions of this latter perspective, really worthwhile research must challenge injustice by creating cultures of resistance *in the very acts of researching*. As the author of a study of participatory research by a West African non-governmental organisation concluded:

> *only by linking participatory approaches to wider and more difficult processes of democratization, anti-imperialism and feminism will long-term change occur.*
> (Mohan, 2001, p. 166)

The differences of perspective described above are derived from, and sustained by, individual values, sets of ideas about the relative worth of particular academic and policy/practice approaches. They are illustrated in relation to studies of people with learning disabilities (see box).

Alternative research approaches and people with learning disabilities

- A *traditional* academic approach might attempt to interview those learning-disabled people judged to be most articulate, and perhaps supplement this by observing behaviour and/or interviews/surveys with non-disabled people involved as family or carers. Disabled people therefore have a (limited) voice, but have relatively little to do with the design and conduct of the research.

- Still within the traditional school, *interpretists* would employ a portfolio of

(Continued overleaf)

strategies and tactics to create a more inclusive research process; they also believe in capturing a variety of perspectives. Typical ingredients of such a study would be attention to the style and speed of meetings, facilitated contributions, auto/biographic approaches with attention to different combinations of storytelling, 'Life Books', multimedia and sign language. In these ways the researchers would provide a greater range of opportunities for the voices of learning-disabled people to be heard. Nevertheless, the overall terms of reference for the research – its design, data collection, analysis and dissemination stages –still remain within the control of the researchers.

- *Emancipatory** researchers try to challenge researcher dominance; some attempt to completely reverse the traditional academic approach by transferring overall direction and control to individuals and groups from within the researched community. Others promote the centrality of the researched throughout all stages of the research, but simultaneously attempt to retain a critical perspective.

* The ideas in this section owe a debt to Kathryn Boxall's PhD thesis (Boxall, 2004).

Critical perspectives

Research values will not just inform the research process; they will also determine the extent to which the researcher takes a 'critical' perspective. Critical perspectives locate the words and behaviour of individuals and organisations within a broader, societal framework. They are 'critical' to the extent that they explicitly describe and analyse the complex ways in which unequal structures are reproduced and extended. Qualitative researchers would not take for granted, or necessarily accept, the existing order of things. They would, instead, draw attention to inequalities, their causes and the mechanisms for their maintenance and replacement.

Butters and Newell, for example, undertook an evaluation of the ways in which volunteer youth and community workers are trained. Applying a critical perspective shaped by their own political stance, they discuss how 'the symbolic power of a dominant culture is conserved and regenerated in a particular discourse' (Butters and Newell, 1978, p. 210).

From 24 'episodes' or fragments of observed training sessions, they claim to have identified how what they term the 'Social Education Repertoire' lies at the heart of the training curriculum and how the trainer's task is to secure the reproduction of a particular set of values and ideologies. One training episode, for example, focused on delinquency and the Criminal Justice System. Having reproduced parts of the discourse that took place, the authors conclude (about the trainer) that:

> Everything he said about crime and the law was mediated by a picture-language in which the righteous (magistrates, youth workers)

confronted the forces of cultural disruption (juvenile impulses towards aggression and gratification.
(Butters and Newell, 1978, p. 233)

A fundamental problem for critical researchers, when doing work with a voluntary agency, is to decide how far, and in what ways, their own values should shape their work. Another problem arises, however, when the values of the researched community are themselves in conflict. Both of these issues are exemplified by a case study of the need for an Asian women's refuge which revealed instances of physical abuse by related men. Some of the women involved were nervous of making this public because of the possibility of sanctions within their own social worlds. On this occasion, the researchers took a critical stance and decided that they would 'publish' their findings – but in verbal, not written, forms – an approach which also minimised the risk of the findings being manipulated by racist elements in the wider society (Everitt and Gibson, 1994).

Critical researchers, it is argued, recognise that different people hold different values and that these might be expressed in contested (even conflictual) ways. Ultimately, the sources of conflict are seen as related to social inequalities characterised by class, gender, race/ethnicity, age, disability or sexuality.

The story so far …
- It will be difficult for case study researchers working closely with voluntary and community-based organisations to detach themselves from their own social and political values.

These, and their research values in particular, will inform the research process.

- Different mixtures of principle and pragmatism lead to different degrees of involvement in the research on the part of the researched.

- Most commonly, traditional 'extractive' researchers keep the researched informed via letters outlining their design and progress, and then by offering written drafts for discussion.

- More rarely, participatory or emancipatory strategies are central principles throughout the whole research process.

- Some commentators are critical of so-called 'participative' approaches where these are merely concerned to facilitate the generation and analysis of data. They would argue that greater attention should be paid to the researcher–researched relationship and to wider structural questions such as the causes of inequality and injustice. This can be either a critical, reflective activity – whereby the researcher's whole approach is explicitly informed by these issues – and/or a transformative, active approach whereby the researcher tries to operationalise more egalitarian and just strategies by involving researched individuals and groups in the knowledge gathering and dissemination.

Power and participation

Values – about the degree of participation or the pursuit of critical and transformative approaches – are clearly important and it will be for the individual researcher to define their own position. In practice, however, it is important to realise that it may not always be possible to translate research values into practice; contexts and contingencies will ultimately shape choices.

- First, the individual researcher or research team is rarely autonomous. The values and objectives of the research commissioner/funder will influence, or even determine, the scope of the study and perhaps even its conduct.

- Second, the nature of the power gradient between researcher and researched is frequently presented in too simple and dichotomised terms. In practice, researchers find themselves conceding space and influence to the researched; the threat of sanctions such as a premature exit from the research process can prove effective.

- Third, implementation of the research process may be disrupted by the demands of particularly powerful stakeholders within the case study site.

The latter two points are exemplified by a case study of 'Kids-Care' (a pseudonym). This project provides support for families who have a child or young person with either physical or learning disabilities, its core activity being the provision of respite care by trained volunteers in their own homes. Kids-Care began life as a small, local self-help group. It subsequently

became one of many children's projects run by a large national charity, but its original ethos of user and volunteer participation remained central under its new governance. Over the years the scope and scale of its services grew, but against a backdrop of precarious funding. The national body eventually succeeded in negotiating substantial statutory funding; dependence on charitable trusts was replaced by a social services contract.

This change preceded a gradual shift from large-scale user and volunteer involvement to their relative marginality. It was clear that, whilst different stakeholders were still represented in the various fora that underpinned the project, some interests had become more powerful than others. The plurality of stakeholders had become less an equal partnership and more a reluctant and compulsory contractual arrangement. This is best exemplified by the absence of consultation and negotiation when social services finally decided to end the contract and to manage the service in-house. Project workers and senior management were not even permitted to inform service users and volunteers that such changes were being discussed, and:

> … *when families were later notified of the change of provider, we (the project workers) had to remind social services that they had not written to a single volunteer.*
> (Scott et al., 2000, p. 31)

Both the process and the outcome (the change of provider) caused considerable unhappiness amongst service users, volunteers and project workers. This organisation was well known to us, having participated in three

previous research projects, and it was selected as the site for a case study concerned with stakeholders and issues of accountability. The organisation agreed to be involved and managerial perspectives were readily accessible (subject to certain conditions – such as seeing the draft report and the organisation having a right of veto over the material included). The initial case study design had also anticipated individual or group discussion with service users and volunteers. However, assistance in gaining access to these key stakeholders was refused by senior managers, who appear to have had two broad areas of concern:

- the sensitivity of the issue and a desire not to reopen old wounds – perhaps reflecting their own unease about their perceived collusion with social services whose demands had undermined the organisation's long-standing values around user participation and empowerment

- the maintenance of their relationship with an important statutory funder.

These priorities were not shared to the same extent by workers at a lower level in the organisational hierarchy who identified themselves with the service users and volunteers:

> *If I was to use one word to describe the impact on workers, users and volunteers of all the changes which have taken place since the project was first set up, it would be disempowerment. It sums it up really that you are having to talk to us, rather than being able to talk to our service users or carers.*
> (Project worker, quoted in Scott et al., 2000, p. 26)

Clearly, research contexts have the potential to determine the research approach; in some contexts the possibility of participative and activist strategies will depend both on how the key interest groups are initially accessed and on the distribution of power between them. In this particular example, control of the case study remained with powerful organisational interests who were also the gatekeepers.

One further illustration of the ways in which participatory strategies are shaped relates to recent practice in the field of learning disability, where a brief consideration of the shifts in emphasis over a 15-year period provides the case study researcher with insights of wider relevance. This example demonstrates how early statements concerning the empowerment of research subjects have become increasingly qualified by references to the specifics of context and contingency. Furthermore, as researched communities begin to 'find a voice' or become more politicised over time, the power gradient between researcher and researched may shift, different and more complex research strategies may be necessary and it may prove impossible, depending on the diversity of the researched community, to achieve any cohesion or even collaboration.

A landmark study in the field of learning disability was published in 1990 (Atkinson and Williams, 1990). It contained around 200 contributions from people with learning difficulties of different types and degree. The authors' roles were enabling and editorial. An exciting array of data collection approaches was unveiled, in the search to give 'a voice to people who are rarely heard' (Atkinson and Williams, 1990, p. 240). During the 1990s, numerous

attempts were made to explore how these participatory principles could be operationalised. Examples of participatory approaches were:

- the construction of visual portfolios (photographs, documents etc.) rather than accounts which depended on the written word

- focus groups – with or without facilitators

- the dedication of space in journals for contributions by people with learning disabilities which were not subject to the normal refereeing criteria.

Whilst value positions around collective partnership remained, arguments for increased differentiation gradually emerged. Thus, whereas early advocates of participatory approaches emphasised disabled people in general, later commentaries noted how disability was often shaped by race or ethnicity, gender or class. A common conclusion stressed that

> *… it is our complexity that makes us what we are … In research, it is therefore important to ensure that we not only 'hear' one version of a person's story, but also allow for contradictions and nuances.*
> (Stuart, 2000, pp. 148–9: research in a convent with 30 women, many of whom were labelled 'learning disabled')

Similarly, changes in the researcher–researched relationship have evolved. One early position asserted the primacy of the disabled 'knower', but this was often overlain with reference to partnership. Later accounts, however, spoke of meetings 'torn by dissent'

(Atkinson *et al.*, 2000, p. 6), and how the intended collaborative book was 'a task even beyond partnership' (Atkinson and Cooper, 2000, p. 16). At best, there emerged

> *a compromise between the collaborative work originally visualised and a complex and diverse collection of both life stories and topics …*
> (Atkinson et al., 2000, p. 8)

Value commitments to transparency and participation can therefore be disrupted by contexts and contingencies. Even where there is great goodwill and experience (as in the work of Atkinson and her colleagues), it is possible that differences and contradictions will throw the research off course to such an extent that fundamental realignment may be necessary. Qualitative case study research can play a vital role in charting such changes; by providing sufficiently detailed and dynamic accounts, researchers can move beyond normative statements to a more realistic understanding of the ideological and material forces shaping their work.

Before concluding this section it is important to add a brief commentary about the assumed value of participatory approaches. At the heart of the participatory perspective is a belief in consensus; that with the appropriate procedures, goodwill and maybe some tough bargaining, beneficial collective action will ensue. We have seen above that this is not always the case. However, social criticism approaches are sceptical as to whether participation is even the appropriate strategy. An anthropological case study of charitable volunteering in Calcutta, for example, presents a (Marxist-oriented) critique of what the author calls 'liberal conceptions of helping'. He argues

that 'the "poverty stricken" reputation of Calcutta is being used by charitable organisations as a kind of advertisement to attract funding for a world-wide franchise' (Hutnyk, 1996, p. 75) and that the interventions of individuals such as Mother Teresa and agencies such as Oxfam may in fact deflect attention away from the structural issues underpinning poverty. More broadly, it is argued that voluntary agencies do not simply deflect attention; their ways of organising and thinking reinforce rather than reduce inequality. This is perhaps an appropriate introduction to the final substantive section of this chapter, which considers the potential of case study research for exploring more diffuse and fragmented political responses to social phenomena.

Research strategies and socio-political action

Voluntary organisations and community groups are, to differing degrees, relatively formal agencies whose boundaries and behaviours are more or less identifiable by the researcher. Much social action, however, takes place across and beyond organisational boundaries. While it may be difficult to frame and undertake research in such environments, an observational, interpretive approach presents a potentially powerful vehicle. A well-known example of such research concerns the social action of the street corner (Whyte, 1981). Whyte observed the social networks of groups and gangs in an inner-city ethnic neighbourhood of south Boston and his study is widely viewed as a classic in its field.

In some ways, the status of this work has paradoxically inspired and also undermined further versions of a greater or lesser scale. Common concerns are about the time and resources (financial and academic) needed to 'study the street', even as people aspire to do just that. Such research may indeed seem daunting to the aspirant case study researcher, but it may not be a resource issue so much as a question of, first, reconceptualising what will constitute the 'case' or the segment of social behaviour to be studied and, second, what frameworks to use in order to make the study possible. Another case study which focused on street behaviour (summarised in the box on page 42) began with political meetings in a public square and concluded with what the local press were quick to label a 'riot'. Street disturbances involving political organisations and community groups rarely figure in published case studies; the elusiveness and sensitivity of social action usually discourage researchers and practitioners alike.

As with the royal visit in Chapter 2, the narrative in this case study focuses on an event, but the interpretation and analysis were supported by a variety of additional engagements with the research context. Thus between 28 May 1970 and the General Election on 18 June, the researcher attended 35 press conferences, five adoption meetings of parliamentary candidates, five indoor rallies and 11 open-air hustings.

The summary is provided within a conventional framework of

- context

- rumours and preparations

- the meeting and its participants

- implications (for qualitative case studies).

A longer version is available in Scott (1972, pp. 312–35).

Context

In the immediate run-up to a general election, the issue of immigration was central. At a national level, the former Conservative Minister of Health (Enoch Powell) had achieved a high profile as a result of his remarks about the likelihood of civil conflict and 'rivers of blood' because of larger numbers of people arriving from the Caribbean and South Asia. In this northern town, there were two conflicting local responses. On the one hand, the May 1970 municipal elections included the town's first-ever 'coloured'/ minority candidates (a Pakistani shopkeeper for the Liberals and a Sikh shopkeeper for the Communists) – neither of whom were elected. At the other extreme, the neo-fascist National Front and fringes of the Conservative Party were increasingly active both in electoral politics and in more ad hoc disturbances (disrupting meetings and distributing fly-posters and provocative leaflets/ newsletters).

Rumours and preparations

A small network from the far right, fronted by a former Conservative councillor, placed an advert in the local paper in which it was implied that Enoch Powell would appear in a public square on the edge of a mixed-race neighbourhood. Within a day or so, counter-demonstrations were being organised by the tiny local Communist Party which included a small number of Sikhs from the Indian Workers Association. In the last week of May, the public square chosen for the Powell meeting had been the site of small crowds of Black Power supporters; seemingly linked to these events were press references to skinhead/Paki-bashing incidents, arrests, alleged police assaults and court cases. The scene was set for confrontation.

On the morning of the meeting, only the Communist Party's regular press conference concentrated entirely on Powell and his local supporters.

Powellism represents that section of the bosses which would … divide us on the basis of the colour of our skin.
(Party spokesman, quoted in Scott, 1972, p. 315)

When the police heard that two opposed minorities were preparing to meet in the same square at the same time, they began negotiations with both about cancellation. Neither minority would withdraw without the promise of rhetorical statements about how the other was endangering democracy. The police were initially unaware of the numbers who might turn up, and even though they privately (Interview with head of local CID, 6 October 1970) felt under-strength for what might arise, they were not prepared to

(Continued)

admit this publicly. In the event, it appeared as if the combustible materials were to be allowed to gather. In the eyes of the former Conservative councillor, this was motivated by the 'fact' that

> … *the police are always interested in who it is that supports Black Power and the Communists … They wanted to flush them out …*
> (Party spokesman, quoted in Scott, 1972, p. 316)

The meeting and its participants
At two minutes before 7 p.m., a convoy of Communist Party vans rattled up and members occupied the 'speaking plinth' and unloaded their frail and inadequate loudhailing equipment. Six or seven minutes later, the official National Front car, with similarly limited loudspeakers, made a circuit of the square, then drove off to the furthest corner of the constituency. (They would return later at 9 p.m. with two cars, talk to some residual police and disappear.)

Inside the largely Irish pub, on the north west corner of the square, about 20 men were deep in drinking, dominoes and discussion (but not about race-related politics). Less than 200 yards up 'Pennine Road', outside the Punjabi café, around 40 Asian men stood talking in twos and threes whilst at least a further 100 men (mainly Pakistani) were outside the three Punjabi stores, looking towards the square. At exactly 7.15 p.m. the Communist Party agent began speaking and, although most

of what was said was indecipherable, the booming speakers drew people in. By 7.30 p.m., about 200 Asians, 50–60 Afro-Caribbeans and over 150 English people were being loosely overlooked by at least 40 uniformed/plain clothes police. When the numbers *not* in the square are added in, an overall total of 600 is possible.

The Communist speaker tried to develop an argument, but was soon drowned by chants of 'Enoch, Enoch' (white youths) and 'Smash Enoch' (white and Sikh Communist). Ironically, the overall sound became a persistent 'Enoch', even amidst the Communist ranks. Around 7.40 p.m., two white men tried to rush the plinth, scuffles followed and the first police vanload was on its way. The Chief Inspector ordered the dispersal of the crowd.

Implications for case study research
Three dimensions of the above narrative have particular implications for the design and implementation of participative case study research, particularly where this is undertaken outside controlled, formal structures. These are:

- the boundaries of the case
- the rules of engagement
- the limited participatory capacity.

Boundaries
Street-based social behaviour can exhibit considerable pattern and regularity; many ethnographic studies of street corners and neighbourhoods attest to this. But, in the

charged atmosphere of political struggle, for example, it is clear that there are greater fluidities across space and over time. The small cores of activists and the larger, looser collections of spectators who variously heckle, scuffle, fight, arrest or run do not easily lend themselves to research processes encouraging participatory involvement. Perhaps the most that a researcher can do in this respect is to ensure that no important perspective is left out of their account. This is particularly important when they disagree with the values and practices of certain groups, such as the National Front.

Rules of engagement
Many studies where a participatory approach is taken assume degrees of common ground about the social behaviour being researched. Few studies begin with the assumption that there are fundamental value conflicts within the subject group. However, where attempts are made to involve traditionally excluded people, sharp differences are often discovered. In this example, different views existed between Muslim and Sikh, and within the Muslim community – where factional differences proved stronger than fears of the far right and undermined attempts to create a single Pakistani organisation.

Also cutting across the Muslim community were growing generational differences. About 100 Muslim young men had driven around in vans and on motor

cycles during the 'riot'. The view of the older shopkeeper (who had stood for the Liberals and was seen as a local leader) seemed representative:

> *They are not part of your world, but neither are they members of the Pakistan Association or the mosque … They are the in-betweens.*
> (Party spokesman, quoted in Scott, 1972, p. 321)

Participatory capacity
In these contexts clearly there is very little capacity for participatory research; even the supposedly powerful institution of the police admitted (in private) that it lacked sufficient resources to manage events in a relatively orderly way.

The example in the box, like the earlier discussion of research involving people with learning disabilities, suggests that participatory styles of research require greater 'boundedness' of social action and relatively convergent values. Once again contextual issues can be seen to shape the structure and content of social research as much or more than academic frameworks.

Nevertheless the case study *does* successfully demonstrate the potential of participant observation in highly contested social contexts, which in this example were the formal and non-formal political responses to issues of race and immigration. Unlike any of the other agencies and individuals involved, the fieldworker had access to a wide range of perspectives; he was in a position to be able to understand the complexities of the event and to reveal to the

various stakeholders in this contested environment aspects of social action hitherto hidden from them.

In contrast with the above account, for example, press coverage led to an association between ethnic minorities and disorder; over-inflated numbers were reported to have been involved (1,500 as opposed to a figure closer to 600); and an exaggerated impression was given of coherence within the black community. The chief editor stated candidly that 'we haven't a large enough pool of experienced reporters who know how to give opinions in a controlled way' and claimed that 'we get over the problems by straight reporting' (Personal interview, 2 July 1970, in Scott, 1972, p. 329). However, the outcome, despite a professed impartiality, was that racial stereotypes were inadvertently reinforced, alarm was generated, not defused, and the far right gained massive publicity for their much-quoted view that black/Communist militancy had stopped a legitimate political meeting – despite the fact that the far right activist core had not even been present.

Conclusions

Faced with the complexities and contradictions of social life, it is hardly surprising if researchers retreat to their room, if not an ivory tower. In the context of case study research, these complexities include:

- the variety of research values which exist and which give rise to different positional statements about idealised research strategies

- the dangers of assuming that there will be a convergence of values within the case

study site, and that the pursuit of participative and activist research strategies will be either easy or possible

- the extent to which the data collection process will be disrupted by the distribution of power and by the influence of different interest groups within the research context. In the debates about how to maximise the strengths of qualitative case study research, it is clear that 'there is no neutral transmission of "voice" … It does mean being realistic about the differences in power between different participants' (Bennett and Roberts, 2004, p. 54).

The extent to which qualitative researchers become more or less involved or participatory will, it is argued, depend primarily on a balance between sets of values about their responsibilities as knowledge producers and choices about method mixes. We are urged to avoid 'rigid or invidious distinctions … using as many research strategies as needed … The "best" method is the one that is well conceived and carefully executed' (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002, p. 222).

From an academic's room all of this makes sense: it is the bedrock of a professional researcher's creed. But on the ground, especially where fewer professionals tread, life's contingencies may be as influential as conception, choice and execution. From the perspective of one young, self-professed 'naive' researcher (perhaps closer to the life worlds of most voluntary sector workers and volunteers who might begin to conduct case studies?), a more appropriate dictum might be that:

Much like the rest of the population in their everyday lives, researchers must make the best judgements they can in the circumstances, roles and relationships they find themselves a part of.
(McCormick, 2000, p. 11)

4 Using case studies

Introduction

To a large extent, the qualitative case study of voluntary and community sector activity remains a 'pale and sickly child', lacking movement and achieving far less than its full potential. Even when an explicitly qualitative approach has been adopted, the full range of qualitative techniques is rarely used. Instead, slices of interview material are presented with little sense of the interviewee or the various contexts of the interview – whether the room, organisation and locality or wider socio-economic frameworks.

One reason for this underdevelopment is the continuing dominance of more limited positivistic and structured approaches, which are still perceived by busy managers and policy makers as the best sources of knowledge and understanding. An indication of the extensive use of the managerial case study is provided by the work of the European Case Clearing House (ECCH); in the late 1990s, 430,000 cases were supplied to it in a single year, and it was said to be 'the largest single source of management case-studies in the world' (Heath, 1999, p. 33; see also http://www.ecch.cranfield.ac.uk).

Whilst these materials do not exclude qualitative approaches, their primary focus on the needs of business managers in formal organisations tends towards the promotion of harder data for specific instrumental purposes. As discussed earlier (Chapter 2), the dominance of this kind of case study research is reinforced both by the uneven distribution of resources in the voluntary and community sector (where relatively few organisations and groups are able to secure research expertise) and by uncertainty in relation to the legitimacy of alternative strategies. However, a pragmatic approach that harnesses stakeholders' own abilities to observe, discuss and record participant perspectives can successfully reveal everyday detail, dynamics and contradictions and can perhaps tap more of the knowledge and understanding of users, volunteers and workers than is accessible to the specialist researcher.

In the previous chapters we proposed and discussed the development of wider and deeper approaches to qualitative case studies (see Figure 4):

- 'wider' in relation to focus. The traditional emphasis on the organisation can be complemented by biographical perspectives on the one hand and by cases with societal implications on the other. The assumption that the case study is inevitably a relatively local one, of group, family or community, would give way to a perspective in which 'people's lives are neither wholly global nor wholly local – they are "glocal"' (Eriksen, 2001, p. 302). The royal visit or the race riot then becomes a case study in which local social relations can be seen to be caught up in structures and processes not entirely of their own choosing or control.

- 'deeper' in relation to their purpose and scope, which may range from rhetoric or propaganda to a search for critical reflection, even to greater conceptual and theoretical clarity.

Figure 4 Widening and deepening the case study
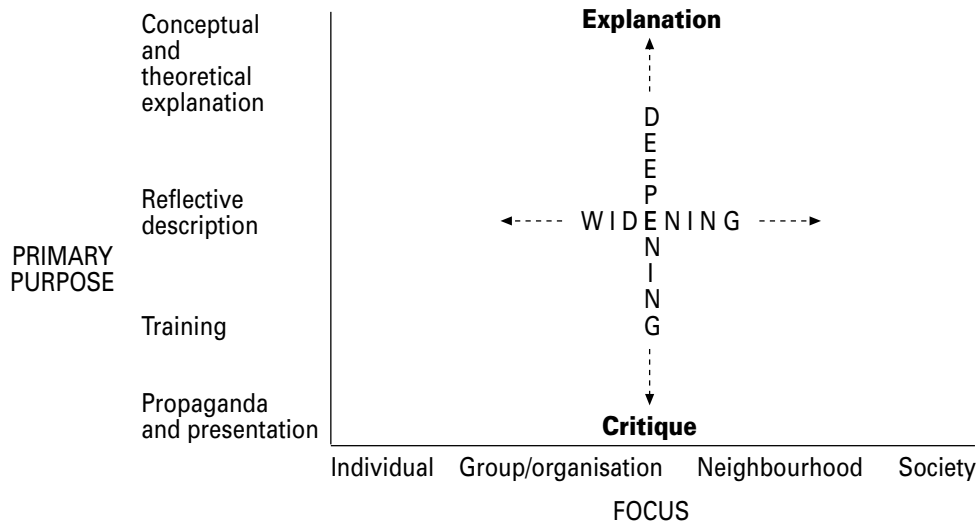
The construction of a case study (see Wengraf, 2000) thus begins with some definition of its purpose and focus, but these will also be located within an explicit identification of how such research will be useful. Many traditional conceptions of research utility adopted what came to be known as a 'social engineering' approach, whereby analysed data were seen as having a relatively uncomplicated direct utility. Critiques of this, however, have pointed out how research is usually just one source of influence, and that it may not be easy, or even possible, to separate out its impact; research is best seen as having more indirect, fluid and unpredictable uses (Bulmer, 1982, pp. 153–64; Thomas, 1985, p. 99). The idea of the researcher as engineer, with its connotations of inherent reliability, is therefore an oversimplification.

Furthermore, judgements about the usefulness of research will depend on the interests of those concerned and on the degree of balance or imbalance between the different standpoints of researchers, stakeholders and wider audiences. Individual research standpoints are shaped by three key elements,

each of which have been shown in previous chapters to embrace conflicting views:

- the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of the research: these relate to *academic* matters such as the nature of evidence

- the relevance of context to the design and conduct of the research: this is more about *practical* matters such as sources of evidence and their accessibility

- the impact of views about the relative merits of detached, participatory or emancipatory approaches towards the researched population: these refer to *ethical* and *political* matters, such as the underlying purposes of the whole research endeavour.

The example in the box illustrates the different mixes which might be contained in different research standpoints and highlights the potential for conflicting perceptions of usefulness.

An illustration: research standpoint and perceptions of usefulness

In a comparative case study designed to illustrate the relevance of qualitative approaches to the evaluation of community action, Howard Richards (1985) focused on a community education programme in southern Chile – the Parents and Children Program. In his report he presented the reader with two 'Prologues', the first of which took place on the 32nd floor of the United Nations Plaza in New York.

The reader is introduced to the 'reasonable social scientist' (RSS) by way of a semi-fictionalised account with dialogue. For example, there is a conversation about the meanings of 'cost-effectiveness' in relation to the rural programme. The RSS is seen to operate with great reasonableness, within a 'systems approach'; she accepted that not everything could be measured, but required evaluative data which would be useful in bureaucratic decision-making processes. Richards accepted the need to provide her (the funder) with a report, but considered her

> an unreformed positivist, a part of the ideological apparatus of the bourgeoisie, a focalist (i.e. one who focuses on small problems in order to conceal broader political issues).
> (Richards, 1985, p. 11)

The second 'Prologue' took place 'in the mud', at Osorno in the rainy south of Chile. Very quickly, we are in the back of a Land Rover, bumping along a rutted dirt road. Instead of the shiny office in the big city, the reader is invited into the Los Hualles community building which is just 15 feet wide and 21 feet long, and is totally inadequate to shelter 50 or so local people from the incessant rain. In contrast to the earlier discourse on cost-effectiveness, the case study describes a series of presentations by local people:

- A young man in a tattered blue suit leads the Chilean national anthem.
- A list of donations is presented (land, nails, wood, logs).
- A poem about 'para el campesino el progreso' (for the peasant progress) is read out.
- The (Dutch) priest makes a speech.
- The man who donated the land tells an allegorical story.
- Tape-recordings for the local radio station are played.

The prologue concludes with an extract from the following day's radio news programme (*The Voice of the Coast*):

> … with iron unity … we shall continue forward … to show our children that we are people.
> (Richards, 1985, p. 23)

Richards concludes that quantitative estimates of change are 'important but secondary' (1985, p. 242), and that cultural action must be studied by qualitative

(Continued overleaf)

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approaches if the meanings which underpin it are to be understood. The reasonable social scientist remained frustrated, because she found such talk 'useless for planning' (1985, p. 241). Again, via a fictionalised conversation, Richards engages with the RSS and her boss. It is clear they are not going to agree. Richards's fundamental position is the importance of expressing his work in both the language and context of the people at the heart of the programme.

The rest of the chapter is divided into three main sections: 'Qualitative case studies and policy', 'Qualitative case studies and practice' and 'Developing the use of qualitative case studies in the voluntary and community sectors'.

Illustrations of use will be taken from existing published materials, but because qualitative case studies remain relatively underdeveloped, two initial qualifications are necessary. First, a generally narrow conception of 'case' prompts us to insert additional suggestions and commentary around the edges of the illustrations. Second, many of the examples of use are relatively unrelated to the 'bigger picture'; even when helpful, reflective descriptions are provided, there is often little sense of the different influences of unequal and oppressive structures or the different dimensions of power. For example, the contemporary enthusiasms for 'partnerships' (between the voluntary and community sectors and the state or corporate institutions) tend to dwell on technical details to the relative exclusion of the way resources are defined and apportioned. (For a general introduction to these issues, see Everitt *et al.*, 1992, pp. 116–33; for a general application to the community sector, see Onyx and Dovey, 1999; for a specific qualitative case study illustration from within the voluntary sector, see Russell and Scott, 1997, pp. 65–8.)

Qualitative case studies and policy

Critics of case study research claim that case studies can be long-winded, over-subjective and parochial (Argyris, 1980). We have argued, however, that case studies are potentially useful to the extent that they provide data about a variety of views and an understanding of complexity, difference and contradiction. In addition, if researchers are able to spend time, or make a series of visits, there is every chance that changes (in behaviour, policy content, decision making) may be observed and discussed.

The potential explanatory capacity of case study research extends beyond the microcosm of the individual agency. It has a valuable role to play in informing wider policy frameworks and debates. One (perhaps surprising) example is in the construction of classificatory frameworks for different types of voluntary organisation, particularly where the social contexts of these are initially little known. It is thus possible for qualitative case studies to arrive at order and clarity out of complexity and diversity.

For example:

(a)   the development of four types of co-operative organisation and their differential success (Thomas, 1998, pp. 309–10)

(b)   the classification of non-governmental organisations and their differential impact on environmental policy in ten countries (Thomas, 1998, pp. 317–9, 327–9).

    The following discussion of two contrasting case study approaches will demonstrate that it is also possible to achieve greater analytical insight from a very limited qualitative case study than from more extensive quantitative data. The theme here relates to the development of networks and the identification of appropriate policy responses.

Bassetlaw CVS (BCVS)

The first case study is of Bassetlaw CVS (BCVS) in Nottinghamshire. It was part of the largest programme of case studies of the local voluntary sector in Britain. Conducted by Konrad Elsdon and colleagues, from the Department of Adult Education at the University of Nottingham, six years of research produced three volumes of case studies (30 in total) (Elsdon, 1991; Stewart *et al.*, 1992; Elsdon *et al.*, 1993), a study of voluntary networks in Retford (Reynolds *et al.*, 1994) and a commentary text (Elsdon *et al.*, 1995).

    Figure 5 attempts to describe and discuss the major inter-organisational relationships and networks relevant to BCVS. It identifies the important sources of funding within Bassetlaw District Council (BDC), two county council (CL) departments, the National Health Service (NHS) and the Employment Service. Some attempt is

Figure 5 Bassetlaw CVS: organisational networks
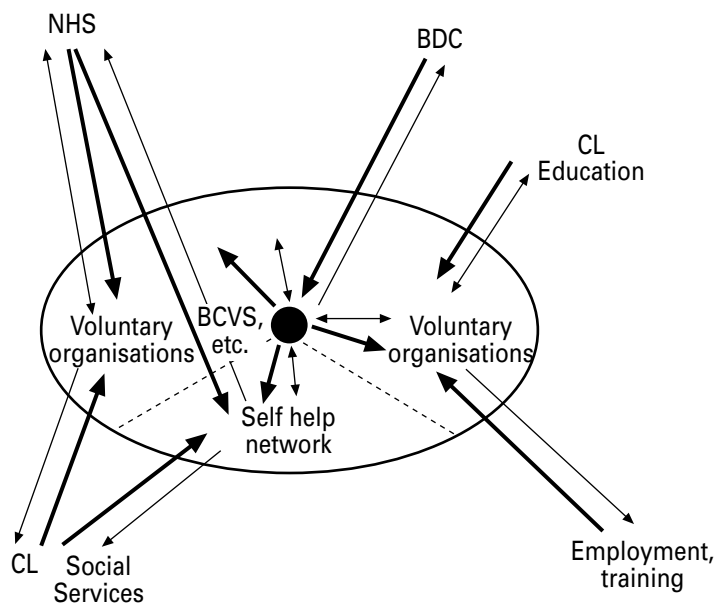
Source: Reynolds *et al.*, 1994, p. 23.

then made to suggest the relative strengths of relationships with these distant agencies by way of various lines. Its core network relationships, however, give the impression of BCVS as a '(benevolent) spider presiding over a large network of organisations' (Reynolds *et al.*, 1994, p. 22) where its role is suggested as being more influential than its relationships with its statutory funders.

Subsequent sections of their report describe the networks of other voluntary organisations in Retford, but the authors then conclude that 'these quantitative data need to be enriched by adding the qualitative dimension of the *content* of interaction' (Reynolds *et al.*, 1994, p. 27).

Unfortunately the sheer scope of the overall project, across a whole town and with reference to 30 case studies, restricted the depth of qualitative inquiry. Their conclusions, admittedly tentative, appear superficial and uncritical. There are no references to political groups, trade unions or campaigning organisations. There is much talk of co-operation, little sense of state incorporation and control and not a little purple prose, as the networks become 'something far denser and firmer … a kind of permanent ground bass to the community symphony' (Reynolds *et al.*, 1994, p. 45).

The overwhelming impact of these case studies derives from their descriptive and reflective detail about adult learning in a diverse range of voluntary organisations. With reference to networking, however, it is asserted in the final commentary text (Elsdon *et al.*, 1995) that qualitative data is difficult to obtain, except in larger organisations (Elsdon *et al.*, 1995, p. 119); the limited attention to qualitative approaches here ultimately precludes analysis of the

dynamics and contradictions of organisational networks.

Money Advice Service (MAS)
In contrast, a qualitative case study of Money Advice Service (Scott *et al.*, 2000, pp. 44–9) provides a more detailed analysis of networks in the voluntary sector. One episode of networking between MAS and a government department was summed up by one of the workers involved thus: 'god, what a tangled web' (Scott *et al.*, 2000, p. 44). The case study in fact identified three main types of network relationships – 'emergency', 'strategic' and 'service delivery'. Within each of these, the relationships might be more or less superficial, and each demanded different amounts of social skill and offered varied benefits. The research concluded that the simple existence of networked relationships was less of an uncomplicated blessing than the Nottingham studies implied and a number of policy issues emerged. For example:

- Membership is resource intensive; for the worker or volunteer this will often (usually) involve time and space away from the so-called 'normal' activities. Unless this is recognised by funders and policy makers, mature networks will reflect resource-rich parts of the voluntary and community sectors.

- Networks germinate and grow over time; they are not a simple function of informational and resource flows between agencies.

- The positions and trajectories of networks are rarely fixed; rather there is flux as

flows of resources and people wax and wane.

Much case study energy has been devoted to the organisation; much less to the characteristics of networks. It is imperative that this imbalance is addressed, particularly as policy makers continue to pin so many hopes on notions of partnership.

Discussion of case study organisations, small towns in Nottinghamshire and local networks can unwittingly reinforce the stereotype of the case study as a narrow parochial creation, disconnected from the 'bigger picture'. There *are* case studies (in the loosest sense) at a global level – for example the Johns Hopkins University Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (http://www.jhu.edu/~ccss/). A typical volume describes quantitative data gathered from 22 countries (eight in Western Europe; four in other developed countries; five in Central and Eastern Europe; five in Latin America), using five common dimensions around which to gather statistical data (Salamon *et al.*, 1999). The classificatory ambition of these societal level comparisons is impressive. We read that the 22-country project 'is quantitative, seeking not just general impressions but solid empirical data' (Salamon *et al.*, 1999, p. 7).

Our emphasis on 'solid' and 'general impression' may just be a function of our commitment to a broader spectrum of data collection approaches. However, a random look at a detailed volume from one of the 22 countries (France) deepens concern. Many conclusions are described as being 'tentative', with 'gaps … filled by assumptions' (Archambault, 1997, p. 237). In relation to particular voluntary sector 'industries', data are

'not reliable' (culture and recreation) (Archambault, 1997, p. 243) or not available (civil and advocacy organisations) (Archambault, 1997, p. 258). Yet there are no signs that complementary qualitative approaches were considered relevant, merely calls for better statistical data. While its vast range of quantitative data do make a strong argument for the policy significance of voluntary organisations, it is also true that (as in the case study of Bassetlaw CVS) the usefulness of this international study is potentially lessened by too singular a research approach. Comparative research on a large scale is faced with huge dilemmas, particularly around the tensions between the focus on a small number of common dimensions and the inevitability of relatively superficial generalisations. But if we are left with gaps, assumptions and unreliable or absent data, then the argument for selected qualitative case studies does seem at least worthy of more explicit discussion. Of course such case studies *on their own* would fatally undermine the comparative project, but that is not being argued.

Policy makers are currently confronted with a number of deep social, political and economic changes – changes which also have both direct and indirect implications for the voluntary and community sectors. In order to develop appropriate policy responses, it is important to be aware of the impacts of contextual complexity and social differentiation and to understand the dynamics of change. There is therefore a stronger case than ever for qualitative case studies to be included in the research portfolio of social researchers, policy makers and practitioners. Brief consideration of current societal changes identifies the following

key shifts (see also Alcock and Scott, 2002, pp. 113–19).

- *Economic*. The globalisation of economic markets has encouraged movements of labour to, and voluntarisation in, labour-intensive, low-wage sectors. Parts of the welfare service industries (residential and domiciliary care) have experienced both these phenomena.

- *Social and demographic*. Family fragmentation, income and ethnic segregation in housing provision, and an ageing population have led to the disruption and diversification of traditional patterns of kin/friend/community-based care. Policy makers are being forced to move away from monolithic policy responses in favour of greater differentiation, but the development of appropriate services is limited by resource constraints.

- *Political and civil*. One reflection of the economic and social changes taking place is a greater unpredictability of relationships between individual citizens and with the state. Commentators detect a changing balance between levels of 'trust' (the acceptance of particular mixes of rights and responsibilities) and 'risk'. The latter is deemed to be on the increase to the extent that individuals and institutions proactively plan for the eventuality of lower levels of trust. For example, individual litigation in response to accidents leads to defensive behaviour on the part of institutions. For voluntary organisations and community groups

such behaviour is manifest in more explicit procedures and regulatory frameworks.

- *Social policy and voluntary organisations*. These various changes are experienced within the highly diversified voluntary and community sectors in terms of a greater formalisation of roles and relationships. As the state increasingly seeks to encourage the delivery of services by low-paid workers and volunteers, it also attempts to regulate these processes by contracts, compacts and partnerships. It is argued more widely that:

We are in an age of rationalism where economic criteria dominate educational ideals, where training philosophy and the managerial imperative would exert greater influence by the day upon the complex life of the workplace. Where every human act is reduced to competency and skill.
(Sanger, 1996, p. 103)

This drive towards rationality and regulation, to 'manage performance without managing organisations' (Paton, 2003, p. 21), is particularly expressed in the ways in which performance is measured in practice. Paton identifies two main polarised responses, the committed 'rationalist' and the 'cynic'. The first attempts to embrace measurement in an uncritical way, whilst the latter goes through the motions without genuine engagement. Ultimately, both positions are seen as unhelpful. A third approach is proposed as a way forward. This would

take the form of a 'grounded' narrative (Paton, 2003, p. 166), based upon particular contexts and processes, rather than a universal toolkit applied with little variation across the organisational diversity which is the voluntary sector. What Paton labels the 'reflective' approach (Paton, 2003, p. 166) appears very similar to qualitative case study work. Paton's conclusions are important because they derive from the most thoughtful review yet available of the impact of regulation on the voluntary sector.

To sum up, it is clear that traditional survey approaches, *on their own*, will not penetrate the diverse and dynamic organisational worlds of the contemporary voluntary and community sectors. Neither will they illuminate the various social changes and contradictions, at different levels of scale, which are being experienced by voluntary sector agencies, workers and volunteers. The potential of case studies to help us understand some of these issues is illustrated by the following series of brief examples.

1 New Deal and the voluntary sector
A qualitative case study in Greater Manchester concluded that the local managing agent (the Employment Service) did not fully appreciate the different characteristics and partially divergent relationships of the two umbrella voluntary organisations contracted to operate New Deal. It was noted that:

The pressure from external agencies, particularly central government, to

produce 'success' weakened compliance management … faced with the need to create and accelerate the volume of voluntary sector placements, the primary management agent struck a deal with one of the umbrella bodies … The problem was that the other umbrella body saw this arrangement as an insensitive incursion into its own territory.
(Scott *et al.*, 2002, p. 22)

2 Social enterprise and the voluntary sector
Social enterprise (trading for a social purpose) has recently received considerable government attention. In June 2001 a Minister for Social Enterprise was established in the Department of Trade and Industry, followed four months later by a Social Enterprise Unit. The Development Trusts Association published a set of brief case studies (see Chapter 1) featuring 'flagship' social enterprises, one of which was 'Enterprise Action'. Enterprise Action is a well-known exemplar among social enterprises in the voluntary sector and has experienced recent rapid growth. Its status, however, masks a number of organisational contradictions, such as the uneven capacity to manage a growing and diverse 'family' of sub-projects. Such details have only become available via a longitudinal qualitative case study research programme.

(Continued overleaf)

Thus, for example, when Enterprise Action's information systems manager began a data collection exercise shortly after the DTA publication had featured his agency, he commented:

> *This is probably the first time that Enterprise Action management have had real figures regarding the ratio of staff to trainees. This is very serious stuff.*
> (Pharoah *et al.*, 2004, p. 42)

A mix of participant observation and semi-structured interviews also revealed ambiguity about:

- the number of 'live' sub-projects

- the number of sub-projects within Enterprise Action's managerial control

- the number of dormant sub-projects

- the relationship between the core administration and sub-projects.

It was clear from the research that social enterprises were

> *… neither monolithic nor static. Senior staff constantly sought to identify potential for growth, but the journey from vision to funding to project activity with core administrative support was never a linear or uninterrupted one.*
> (Pharoah *et al.*, 2004, p. 43)

3 Social entrepreneurs: workers or volunteers?

One of the 'big ideas' within government policies towards the voluntary sector is

that of the social entrepreneur; he or she is often pictured as a heroic figure, moving mountains and pulling together human and financial resources for little or no personal reward. The focus is on an individual rather than on developing opportunity structures (which may confine or encourage creativity), on addressing systems of governance (which may lose touch with the mercurial nature of everyday entrepreneuring) or on acknowledging individual overload (which may mean that a build-up of stress and resignation can be unexpected).

Gwen was the 0.8 (full-time equivalent) manager of 'Safety Works', an organisation which repaired and recycled nursery and safety equipment. As the project expanded, her role became more complex and more demanding, but the core administrative infrastructure had not matched this growth. One day she threatened to walk out.

> *I was getting here earlier and earlier and I was taking work home at night. And I thought 'hang on'. I was beginning to think 'no way', and either doing half a job or panicking because of doing half a job. And I was sort of getting agitated and I wasn't sleeping. I kept waking up in the night and thinking that 'I must do this and this and this'.*
> (Scott *et al.*, 2000, p. 20)

Work-related stress and burn-out are familiar issues within the for-profit sector, but often the culture of voluntary agencies

(Continued)

(misplaced notions about 'soldiering on') and their systemic resource constraints prevent fuller discussions of how contemporary voluntary sector action feels. Ultimately, it is people like Gwen who appear to be the 'ball-bearings' upon which much government (and voluntary sector) rhetoric depends. In addition to the statistics of input and output, we need multilayered accounts of how all this enthusiasm has specific impacts on those who are supposed to make it work.

4 Infrastructure needs in the voluntary sector

While Enterprise Action operated with a portfolio of six-figure sums, 'Local Care' had recently doubled its budget to only £20k, largely as a result of a three-year contract with social services to deliver a range of community care services. The organisation depended on the support of a large number of volunteers co-ordinated by two part-time administrators, who had to work in a very frustrating operating environment:

> *Imagine it's Monday morning … first of all you have to get everything out – everything had to be put away on Friday so the church could use the room at the weekend. So you've got to put the desk and chairs back into position, pull the computer back to where it should be, take the divert off the phone – calls are diverted to me at home at the weekend because sometimes the church switches the power off at 4 p.m. on a Friday – and*

> *remember to switch the phone back on …* [During the week, the luncheon club] *often have a sing-song and we can't hear a thing in here – on the other hand we have to try not to go through and disturb them. So if you need to go to the toilet, you have to try and sit here. Most of the time we manage it – but sometimes you just have to go!*
> (Scott *et al.*, 2000, p. 10)

In the first six months of its contract, this organisation met 3,500 service requests (transport, befriending, shopping), but the capacity of this small voluntary sector care agency to fulfil its (under-resourced) local authority contract depends on a mix of solidarity, ingenuity and desperation. The reality of its infrastructure needs is demonstrated more vividly by the above account than an evaluation of income and expenditure could have revealed and is a description which will be recognised by the many small voluntary and community groups providing similarly important levels of local services.

Qualitative case studies can clearly illuminate critical contradictions between policy initiatives and practice. A key issue in the further development of case studies has to do with the ways in which voluntary sector staff become trapped in a public commitment to respond to new policy initiatives, to accept new money and deliver new services, even while these changes make organisational life more turbulent and further stretch managerial and operational capacity. Where policy initiatives

and subsequent evaluation of their implementation are reliant on quantitative measures alone, it is all too easy to tidy up, to appear contract-compliant, competent and professional, worthy of promotion and extra resources, to hide ambiguity and confusion. Perhaps a first step will be the identification and discussion of case studies of *practice* within individual agencies. Next stop a 'clearing house' with thousands of exemplars.

Qualitative case studies and practice

Case studies have been used in formal organisations to help managers plan strategically, cope with growth and change, and maintain organisational values even whilst managing deviance or resistance. Different levels of detail, often from divergent perspectives, allow decision-making exercises to be enacted and discussed. Much of the material has authority in the eyes of those using it to the extent that there is sufficient detail, and that this is presented in ways which accord with their expectations. Conventionally, those who use such case studies are managers searching for rational, formal pictures which mirror the internal worlds of their organisations. More rarely, the material will pay closer attention to the relative unpredictability of organisational life, the informal and the contradictory. Much more rarely, there will be case study material that considers individuals or communities, and moves outside the organisational framework to include observational data related to social processes or events.

One set of insights beyond the organisation has been edited by Paul Hoggett (1997). At the heart of his book is the notion that community is a continually contested concept, underpinned (or undermined) by a 'heterogeneity and complexity … that policy makers and practitioners still seem to be largely unaware of' (Hoggett, 1997, p. 15).

Five case studies illustrate this central thesis. The reader learns about patterns of coping, the gendered nature of much community activity, the inevitability of splits within any community, the centrality of ambivalence, the possibilities of struggle, and the strengths and resources of older people. This complexity will inevitably frustrate the busy manager; nevertheless, there is great utility in learning about the characteristic features of group interactions and how to anticipate differential patterns of local involvement.

A contrasting response to the dominant focus on the organisation is to move down in scale, to use biographic approaches. One (surprising) qualitative case history outlines the experience of Michele Hagard, a middle-class mother of three, who befriended a young man deemed to be at risk. The surprises lie in a startling honesty about how the befriending 'worked' in practice, despite the mistakes she made. We read about her:

- resorting to quick-fire questioning, despite warnings to the contrary from professional social workers (Hagard and Blicken, 1987, p. 35)

- initial avoidance of eye contact to hide nervousness (Hagard and Blicken, 1987, p. 36)

- mistakes in social skills (Hagard and Blicken, 1987, p. 58)

- limited understanding of what was happening (Hagard and Blicken, 1987, p. 102).

Instead of an itemisation of professional expertise, there are insights into the value of spontaneity, showing interest, creativity and sympathetic understanding (Scott, 1997, p. 99). Her approach appeared to be effective. Two years after the publication of the book, the young man's 'Nan' died; he invited Michele Hagard to the funeral:

> *… and he made sure to introduce me to everyone who attended. At the graveside he stood between Vicky* (girlfriend) *and me; he put an arm around each of us and had a good cry.*
> (Michele Hagard: personal correspondence to D. Scott, 2 April 1990)

A range of personal records (photographs, diaries and letters, for example) and public documents (such as directories and annual reports) have long been recognised as providing valuable insights (Plummer, 1983), despite recognition of the inherent problems – such as the way in which a diary can be distorted, both by the original author and subsequent writers (Scott, 1990, pp. 181–5). Yet, even as the case study as auto/biography becomes increasingly popular, we are warned that it is:

> *… in urgent need of reclassification; that its place on the library shelves is not with non-fiction but very much closer to fiction.*
> (Evans, 1999, p. 143)

Here again we encounter the tensions between so-called 'facts' and 'fictions' which underpin all writings on the human condition.

A remarkably insightful case study of a voluntary organisation's residential home for deaf people relies instead on historical documents (Sainsbury, 1989). The central theme concerns the nature of relationships between the home's management and two statutory agencies – the Charity Commission and the local social services department. What the careful scrutiny of historical material reveals is the extent to which a local authority social services department was prepared to trust a voluntary sector organisation, even as the evidence mounted against it. Social services policy towards the home is characterised as having been one of 'somnolent non-intervention' (Sainsbury, 1989, p. 123).

Despite bureaucratic rhetoric about regulation and transparency, an informal culture of neglect prevailed. Because of this, the quality of care and standards of financial management were deficient but hidden. It took a radical policy shift, and the resulting sale of the home in the mid-1980s, to precipitate closer examination of inter-organisational relationships and the initiation of more transparent monitoring regimes. Although these insights have been gained after the event, they alert us to the potential of taken-for-granted, and opaque, systems of accountability.

Whatever potential exists for widening the scope and approach of qualitative case studies, the most common form in the voluntary and community sectors retains a formal organisational focus. Three different examples are described and discussed below, and reference is then made to two sources of related educational and training materials.

Example 1 Measuring performance in large voluntary agencies

The most comprehensive use of analytic case studies to examine management and measurement in (larger) non-profit agencies has been made by Paton and colleagues at the Open University Business School. Based on interviews and the scrutiny of documents over several years, they have examined, for example:

(a) the use of social audit by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) (Paton and Payne, 2002)

(b) the work of Groundwork Trust (Paton *et al.*, 2002)

(c) performance measurement at Pioneer Human Services (Paton *et al.*, 2002).

Paton has summarised this work in a wide-ranging commentary text, which contains somewhat briefer references to case study approaches (Paton, 2003). The main findings are:

- Complexity of organisational contexts constrains the emergence of universal measures.

- Progress has been restricted by:

    – different definitions of 'performance'

    – lack of clarity about criteria

    – the absence of a consensus about the relative weighting to be given to different stakeholder views.

- A turnover of measures used over time.

- Weak links to unit-level decision making.

- In some cases high costs were cited as a constraint.

- Finally, in relation to NEF, the most prominent agency in the application of social audit, the startling conclusion that so much of the 'measurement' material contained 'a lot of padding … little of which is interesting or problematic' (Paton and Payne, 2002, p. 14).

In view of the emphasis on regulation and measurement by successive governments, these findings have enormous implications both for current forms of evaluative activity and for the potential for alternative approaches that are more flexible and more context-specific.

Example 2 Capacity building in small voluntary agencies

The most relevant, accessible material about capacity building and management issues in small agencies, which also utilises case study material, has been produced by Rochester and colleagues. During one period (1997–99), from what was then the Centre for Voluntary Organisation (CVO) at the London School of Economics (now the Centre for Civil Society), they produced five brief publications (downloadable from www.lse.ac.uk/depts/ccs). Two of these are particularly relevant to our discussion of the use of case studies, namely:

(Continued)

(a) *Juggling on a Unicycle: A Short Guide to Organising a Small Voluntary Agency* (Rochester, 2000)

(b) *Case Studies for Small Voluntary Agencies: A Resource for Trainers and Consultants* (Hutchison, 2000).

In its 18 pages, *Juggling on a Unicycle* asserts that there are four 'key principles' (concerned with tensions between informal and formal organisation; short- and long-term planning; core activities and potential new recruits; local and external resources). These principles are then related to two sets of five internal and external organisational challenges. The material is crisply presented and easily understood at a general level, but there are no supportive references or empirical material. As a result, the impact of the case study format is weakened; the reader is left without the necessary detail against which to discuss and assess the commentaries.

Hutchison then offers eight case studies with explicit reference to the aforementioned principles and challenges. Each case study is contained within one A4 page and accompanied by the trainer's guidance notes of similar length. The structure is the familiar organisational one; there are hints of the people and their dilemmas but readers of these materials must bring their own experiences and use the open-ended questions as discussion prompts.

The strength of the latter group of case studies in relation to practical organisational issues is that they will not be found threatening by the majority of those who are unfamiliar with more analytical materials. With the presence of an experienced trainer, and a range of experience in the trainee group, these materials will stimulate discussion. But the simplicity must be approached with a degree of caution; the authors refer to a rational world in which clarity and discussion will win out. The contrast with Paton's work could not be greater, not primarily because he is writing for an academic audience or because he relates to larger, more formal voluntary organisations. What is at stake is a conception of the social reality which case studies are meant to describe and discuss. Whereas the CVO materials are excellent in their accessibility, their avoidance of detail may prevent students from grappling with those contradictory processes which are at the heart of voluntary action. In addition, their frame of reference remains firmly within the local and organisational; wider critical perspectives are absent.

Alongside the CVO package, more directive materials may be necessary, with explicit analytical and philosophical frameworks, and grounded in exemplars. However, *if* the CVO case studies could be used within a developmental approach that led to the production of such material by the workers and volunteers themselves (perhaps with help), then they may indeed be a more useful starting point for their target constituency. All of which is to say that the process of using case studies should pay as much attention to context as was necessary during the earlier processes of design, data collection and analysis.

Example 3 Case studies and community action – Community Operational Research (COR)

Publications about how to use case studies in community-based practice have emerged from a variety of loose networks, typically involving a small number of academics, a small national base and a scattering of practitioners. One example is that of the Community Operational Research network (Ritchie *et al.*, 1994). Operational research had its origins within formal systems such as military and industrial organisations; the emphasis was on structuring problems in order to explore and implement practical solutions. Some of this enthusiasm to apply systematic approaches to specific problems 'leaked' out to the less structured contexts of voluntary organisations and community groups. By the late 1980s in the UK, between 100 and 200 people were attempting to apply quantitative and qualitative approaches to the resolution of community issues. Out of their work came an eclectic collection of 26 case studies (Ritchie *et al.*, 1994).

Whilst the COR material covered a familiar range of organisational types, issues and skill areas (from anti-racist work and feminist collectives to village appraisals and school protest; from getting organised to campaigning and evaluating), three basic assumptions* lend it a degree of uniqueness:

(a) a strong acknowledgement that complexity and uncertainty will characterise both the context of case studies and the processes involved in their use

(b) an acceptance that case study practice must be primarily responsive to the priorities of the community group, not the researcher, that these priorities may change and that the researcher will need to work flexibly

(c) relationship building is neither an 'add-on' to good research design nor a marginal extra; the process of producing and using cases of social behaviour will require a high level of social skill.

While these assumptions denote a serious and sensitive approach to the development of case studies, two developmental dilemmas emerge which have important implications for their use, namely:

• The extent to which the perspectives and priorities of other major stakeholders (not least local authority departments) can be integrated with those which emphasise the concerns of community groups. Failure to contemplate or begin a process of integration can reinforce the marginality of COR.

• How far it is possible to build 'realistic developmental pathways' out of the eclectic, complex and uncertain qualitative data. Again bridges need to be built between the proponents of qualitative case studies and the policy

(Continued)

worlds of those often more comfortable
with simpler pictures.

* Illustrations of the three assumptions
  can be found in reflective accounts of
  community housing groups (Ritchie *et
  al.*, 1994, pp. 21–31); a civil rights away-
  day (pp. 32–8); parents and teachers
  against school closure (pp. 84–90);
  community health (pp. 137–45, 146–53).

Developing the use of qualitative case studies in the voluntary and community sectors

Qualitative case studies can inform many facets
of voluntary and community sector practice. For
example, there is increasing interest in the
development of performance improvement
measures, sometimes termed 'quality systems'.
One illustration is provided by a pioneering
review completed (2002–04) by the Centre for
Voluntary Action Research (CVAR) at Aston
University Business School. The details and
observations outlined below owe much to the
privileged position of one of the present authors
as a member of the review advisory group.

Perhaps the central (ironic) lesson of the
review is that an exercise which set out to
'uncover the actual experience of voluntary
organisations in responding to the quality
agenda' (CVAR, 2003, p. 7) concluded with a
relatively high reliance on survey data and, to a
lesser extent, interview material. No doubt the
sheer ambition and originality of the research
may have proved operationally difficult. But the
limited use of qualitative case study data, in
what was generally excellent reporting and
presentation, raises questions about why the

'actual experiences' of voluntary organisations
proved so hard to capture. We tentatively
conclude that the relative dominance of tabular
data and micro case material (50–150-word
snapshots), rather than a greater sense of
contexts, behaviour, processes, events etc.,
represents an acceptance of existing reporting
conventions. The potential of wider and deeper
conceptions of 'case study' remained
underdeveloped.

Paton's research, which did include case
study evaluations of some of the same training
material, e.g. the Practical Quality Assurance
System for Small Organisations (PQASSO)
(CES, 2000), suggests the need for more
interpretive approaches. Despite the fact that
PQASSO is the best-selling training package for
small to medium-sized voluntary organisations
(6,778 copies were sold to 2,658 agencies by the
end of 2002: CES, 2003, p. 5), Paton concluded
that:

> *… the meanings and purposes for which models
> were originally intended to be vehicles are being
> reconfigured in line with the evolving
> preoccupations and purposes of those who use
> them.*
> (Paton, 2003, p. 134)

In other words, qualitative case study
research is able to identify the salience of
context, and the recurrence of unpredictability,
in ways not picked up by other research
approaches. Rather than PQASSO being a
relatively unproblematic quality tool, Paton
characterises it in more political (small 'p')
terms, as a mediating device between funders
(whose concerns about accountability appear to
be addressed) and projects (whose desires to get
a strategic 'grip' appear likewise) (Paton, 2003,

p. 159). He even ventures to suggest that the use of formal systems by smaller agencies and groups may be a misplacement of their time and energy (Paton, 2003, p. 123)!

Whilst Paton's arguments are intellectually convincing, policy makers and managers may not find them palatable. In a culture of accountability, the minimalisation of risk becomes a priority. Any system of monitoring, evaluation or training which appears to offer greater transparency, more possibilities for measurement and the attainment of so-called 'best practice' will attract sponsorship and funding. The attractions of statistical surveys, what one well-placed voluntary sector research director called 'brute-force research' (Karl Wilding, NCVO, in a personal communication, 14 February 2005), are understandable. The logic of the usefulness of qualitative case studies will, therefore, be at least partially refracted by the policy environment. Securing greater support for that logic will be as much a political process as an intellectual one. Moreover this process will take place in a number of different arenas and at different levels.

Within the voluntary and community sectors there will need to be an identification of the 'developmental ingredients' for the greater use of qualitative case studies. Figure 6 presents a simple matrix of the actors (vertical axis) and their actions (horizontal axis). In relation to producers of knowledge, two idealised types represent the spectrum of possibilities – the academic researcher and the lay researcher (the indigenous worker or volunteer).

Figure 6 assumes that workers and volunteers have considerable knowledge of the dynamics and contradictions of their contexts, but that their stories are often relatively marginalised in the production of knowledge. A widening and deepening of the conception of qualitative case studies, without in any way devaluing or abandoning other forms of case study, would ensure a stronger place for participant perspectives. Their experience of uncertainty and contradiction could contribute to richer, more realistic pictures of the potential of voluntary organisations and community groups, not simply as uncritical service-delivery agents but more crucially as sites for a creative

Figure 6 Developing case studies in the voluntary and community sectors*

Ideology and interest	Dominant case study discourse	Policy and practice	What is to to be done?
ACADEMIC	Interviews and organisations	Specialists Researchers	Widening and deepening via
LAY	Experience and processes	Marginalised storytellers	qualitative case study research

* There is a faint connection between this figure and a much more ambitious graphic about professional discourse and craft knowledge in educational case study research (Bassey, 1999, pp. 50–1).

and critical non-conformity. Then the contemporary enthusiasm for measurements of 'quality' and 'performance' can be enriched by a wider range of qualitative data, produced by academic and lay researcher alike.

Three linked practical steps are necessary to confirm such a shift in emphasis:

1   The indigenous knowledge and understandings of the lay majority of workers and volunteers should form a central part of qualitative case studies.

2   The deeper involvement of researchers with different voluntary sector research populations should be prioritised; the notion that qualitative researchers can automatically build appropriate social relationships must be demystified. The issue of social skill needs at least as much attention (in the context of genuinely qualitative case studies) as conceptual and theoretical frameworks.

3   Attention must be given to how research findings are structured and written. Three linked debates exemplified below concern:
    (a)   the structure of reports
    (b)   the content of reports
    (c)   the form of reports.

They are presented in such a way as to minimise any sense that there are clear, uncontested formulas about how findings can best be disseminated.

Structure

Constructing a qualitative case study might involve the following elements:

- an introductory vignette, which then facilitates…

    – identification of the issues; therefore the

    – purpose of the report; and its

    – basic methods

- narrative – ensure that this provides sufficient contextual and process detail

- development of the issues – illustrate social dynamics, continuity and change

- discussion of the 'trustworthiness' of the approach – try to show different data collection and analytic strategies

- conclusions

- a micro-vignette – which will leave the reader with a lasting impression.

Adapted from Robert Stake, in a discussion about qualitative case studies (Stake, 1995, p. 123).

Content

Consider the relevance of the following (partially contradictory) conclusions from qualitative researchers:

- '… an important and neglected part of any researcher's training, and perhaps an element which should be included in courses even at undergraduate level, is

(Continued overleaf)

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a component on report writing, both scholarly and popular' (Roberts, 1984, p. 210).

- 'In trying to be objective in my written account I had avoided using value-laden terms and in their view failed to present a positive account of the school' (H. Burgess, 1985, p. 192).

- '… case study presentations should be basically inconclusive accounts of what happens' (Sanger, 1996, p. 119).

Writing skills also need to be contextualised; the ability to know when to present more or less neutral/positive inconclusive accounts is more likely to be derived from grounded knowledge and understanding than from textbooks alone.

Form

One of the biggest ironies in relation to qualitative reporting is its continued reliance on prose and print. Alternative formats could include, for example, audio-visual material, posters, artwork, photographs, poetry or ethnographic drama (Richardson, 2000, p. 931).

An important source of audio-visual materials which use case study approaches to voluntary and community sector issues is the Media Trust. At the time of writing (mid- 2004) they have, since 1997, produced five sets of video(s) plus booklets. Although the written case studies are essentially descriptive,

presentational devices, their impact is doubly reinforced by the accompanying films:

- *Voluntary Matters I* (12 case studies)

- *Voluntary Matters II* (six case studies)

- *Voluntary Matters III* (six case studies)

- *Voluntary Matters IV* (four case studies)

- *Voluntary Matters V* (two case studies)

  See www.mediatrust.org

Concluding comment

Our experience of life in the voluntary and community sector convinces us that there is a real richness barely being captured by many current case study approaches describing themselves as 'qualitative'. The workers and volunteers within these organisations and groups deserve better. Policy makers, politicians and managers concerned to harness the potential of this sector – whether in service delivery, regeneration, the promotion of active citizenship or the development of social capital, for example – should demand better.

5 Conclusions

Qualitative case studies can widen and deepen our understanding of the varied worlds of voluntary organisations and community groups. However, if they are to realise their undoubted potential three main challenges must be continually addressed:

- academic – making the case

- evaluative – the courage of convictions

- imaginative – the embrace of paradox.

Making the case

We have already emphasised elsewhere the two main linguistic dimensions within the concept of 'case' (Scott *et al.*, 2000, p. 56). The most popular is *casse* (Old French), the root of which derives from 'to take or hold'. Case studying is, thereby, associated with relatively formal, well-defined boundaries – the organisation is frequently at the centre of our attention. In some tension with this definition is *cas* (Old French), which refers to an event or happening. Here the boundaries are less well defined, even fluid. Instead of organisational structures being in focus, we are urged to consider social dynamics.

Whatever mix of *casse* and *cas* is chosen for study, it will be important to contextualise the case. Many so-called qualitative case studies fail to do this to any great extent. The reader tends to be presented with fragments of interviews, embedded in a decontextualised commentary. Too often, the text resembles one of those faded sepia postcards of a suburban scene, where no one is visible. The intrepid photographer must have crept out at dawn in order to avoid being disturbed by people. Even with dramatis personae in full view it will still be important to

imbue them with life and movement; we can then move from a snapshot to a filmstrip. Whether this movement consists of the mundane (morning coffee in a community centre kitchen) or the dramatic (an explosive and personalised debate), the interview approach can nearly always be enhanced by observation.

The courage of convictions

Most truly qualitative research requires a degree of interaction between the researcher and the populations being studied. In most situations, it is likely that these social interactions cannot just be conceptualised as technical and neutral, free from the values of the researcher. Rather, the latter may well affect both the choice of research approach (e.g. whether to prioritise explanation or understanding) and its overall purposes (whether to prioritise social commentary or to combine this with an emphasis on social change) to the extent that the researcher makes his or her values transparent, so the audience is likely to be more trusting of the messages being delivered.

The embrace of paradox

It is a commonplace to note that most human behaviour reveals random inconsistencies as well as more systematic contradictions. We seem unwilling and/or unable to practise what we preach. The same holds true for groups, organisations and larger social systems. Yet because researchers want to appear competent, there is often a tendency for their accounts to appear more trouble-free, more consistent and more complete than the actual situation

warrants. As a general rule, we would suggest that totally smooth accounts may mask a refusal to admit how much social life is shot through with unfinished business. It is probable that individuals, groups and organisations reveal as much about their central characteristics through paradox and contradiction as through logical and consistent actions.

Case studies will gain credibility, therefore, to the extent that they reveal the unexpected and the incomplete. Interviews get cancelled, interviewees are less available or co-operative than had been anticipated, social life stubbornly refuses to march in time to the research design. Even when details are more or less complete, there may be sound ethical and political reasons for limiting disclosure. If these characteristics are transparent, the reader can feel more confident that the research took place in real social worlds.

The politician, policy maker and manager may 'appreciate' all the talk of paradox, but continue to favour systems of measurement which appear to offer a more predictable outcome. Proponents of qualitative approaches will need to hold their nerve and continue to point to the inherent instabilities and surprises of everyday individual and institutional life. In the face of these recurrent realities, qualitative research has great potential.

In search of sustainable research: 'going with the flow'

Although our text has been primarily informed by the discussions and debates published in relatively academic places, we are convinced that much more developmental attention needs to be paid to harnessing the knowledge,

understanding and skills of lay workers and volunteers in the voluntary and community sectors. Here we are referring to the huge majority of people who are not specialist researchers, but whose everyday experiences can often provide the bases for wider and deeper case studies. Instead of assuming that the only legitimate form of case study has its roots in academic institutions and/or that it demands the expertise of the professional researcher, we borrow an approach developed by sports psychologists. They use the phrase 'going with the flow' to suggest that the measurement of optimum performance should not begin (or end) by reference to elite standards, but in relation to the capacity of individuals. 'Flow' is said to result when capacity is in harmony with task, when what is expected of an individual accords with their capacity. More sustainable qualitative case study work will be achieved as greater care is taken to identify the range of lay capacities in any organisation or group. Of course it will be important to bring in traditional expertise, but the skewed distribution of resources in the voluntary sector means that only the largest agencies can afford the support of specialists on a regular basis. In such a situation of structured inequality, the development of more qualitative case study research should go hand in hand with the development of lay capacities.

At the end of the day, the greatest potential contribution of these forms of case studying will be to reveal whole worlds in small spaces, and in so doing to throw off the lazy criticism that case studies are inherently parochial. Most of the inhabitants of these spaces have great stories to tell, if only we will let them.

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