



**Growing Up  
in Ireland**  
National Longitudinal  
Study of Children



**QUALITATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW  
NUMBER 1**

# Growing Up in Ireland

National Longitudinal Study of Children

## Qualitative Study

Qualitative Research Methodology: Review of the  
Literature and its Application to the Qualitative  
Component of *Growing Up in Ireland*

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## Qualitative Research Methodology: A review of the current literature and its application to the qualitative component of *Growing Up in Ireland*

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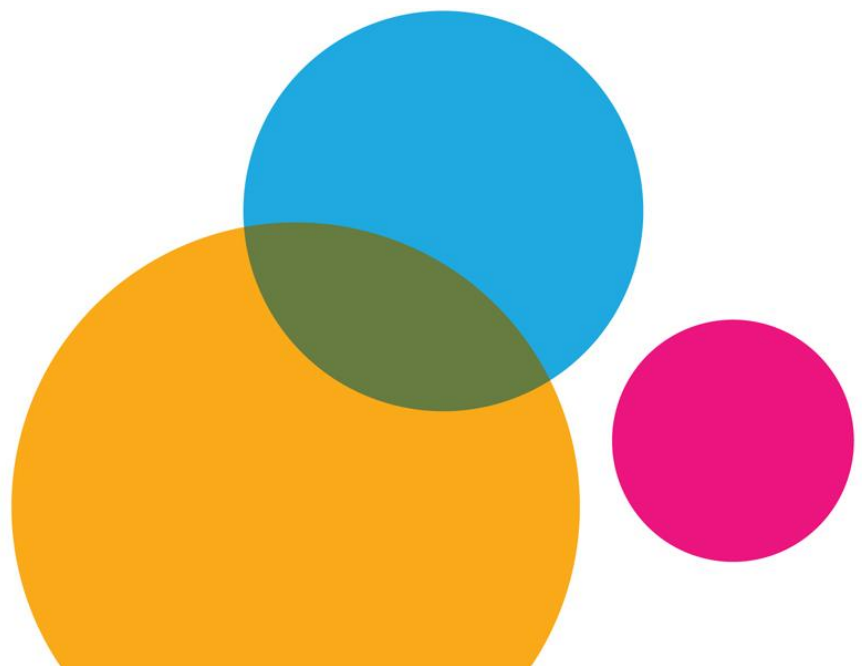
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# Executive Summary





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This review is the one in a series of papers reporting on the background literature, the conceptual framework, the design and the findings of *Growing Up in Ireland*.

The focus of this review is on the current literature on qualitative research methods and on how this literature can be used to inform the design and analysis of the qualitative studies that form part of *Growing Up in Ireland (GUI)* – the national longitudinal study of children in Ireland, launched in 2006.<sup>1</sup> This review was initially drafted in 2008 and minimally updated prior to publication.

The emphasis in this review will be on qualitative methods of research with children, since they are the main focus of the *GUI* study.

The review consists of the following chapters:

**Chapter 1:** An introduction in which the aims and objectives of *Growing Up in Ireland* are outlined and the reasons for including a qualitative study are discussed. In each of the two cohorts forming *GUI* there is an embedded qualitative study involving 120 children and their parent/s. The qualitative samples will be drawn from the main survey samples and data will be gathered on the children's and parents' experiences, perspectives and feelings about their daily lives, their relationships and their expectations of the future. These data will complement the data collected in the main quantitative study and, after analysis, will be integrated with them. While some qualitative research is theory-driven, the approach adopted in *GUI* is primarily descriptive. It is both informed by assumptions about what matters to children and their parents, as is the main survey, and – in line with a traditional grounded theory orientation – designed to permit the emergence of new issues and themes (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

**Chapter 2:** In this chapter, methodological considerations arising from the design of the study will be discussed, including the compatibility or incompatibility of qualitative and quantitative approaches, how best to integrate data from these different sources, and what models exist for conducting qualitative longitudinal studies with children. The chapter ends with a discussion on the extent to which qualitative research with children differs from that conducted with adults.

**Chapter 3:** This chapter outlines the ethical issues that arise when conducting research with child participants and specifies those principles that will be borne in mind when the qualitative studies are designed and conducted. In relation to children, they include: ensuring the children's well-being and avoiding harm; enabling and taking account of the children's right to informed consent to participate; ensuring confidentiality and anonymity; diminishing, while recognising, the power disparity between adult researchers and child participants; taking account of children's diverse backgrounds, abilities and preferences; and having procedures to handle disclosures indicative of risk to a child's welfare. Adherence to sound ethical principles is seen as central to good research practice, as is having a respectful attitude towards all participants.

Since the primary focus in *GUI* is on the children, a decision was made to take the views of children into account when designing the study. On this latter point *GUI* has benefited from the advice of children in the study's Children's Advisory Forum in relation to the design and content of the qualitative studies.

**Chapter 4:** In this chapter methods for ensuring rigour in the conduct of qualitative research are discussed. Most qualitative researchers eschew terms such as reliability, validity and generalisability but nonetheless they are concerned to ensure the quality and rigour of their research. Some of the well-

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<sup>1</sup> A copy of the qualitative protocols and procedures, including the interview schedules, is available in the Technical Report on the 9-Year Qualitative Study. Similar reports will be issued on the Infant Cohort and subsequent data waves. Key Findings will also be published on the qualitative results for both cohorts.



established considerations and techniques for ensuring rigour are described. They include approaches focused on trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability and reflexivity.

**Chapter 5:** This chapter presents an overview of the types of research encounter typically used in qualitative research with children. First, methods which involve children directly or which analyse children's written or verbal productions are described. They include one-to-one interviews, focus groups and observations. The strengths and weaknesses of each method are set out and their potential role in **GUI** is identified.

**Chapter 6:** This chapter goes into more detail on non-interview-based methods of engaging children and accessing their experience. They include: 'Draw and Write' techniques; the generation and analysis of written outputs such as essays and diaries; the generation and analysis of visual images such as photographs and videos; the use of visual prompts such as maps and ladders; and involving participants in activities which enable them to reveal their feelings and opinions. Creative and play-based techniques and the analysis of the respondent's own spontaneous productions are also discussed. The proposed use of some of these methods with the participants in **GUI** is outlined.

**Chapter 7:** The final chapter outlines some of the main approaches to the analysis of qualitative data. Methods for managing large amounts of text typically generated in qualitative research are discussed, particularly the software package, NVivo, which is being used in **GUI** to assist the analysis of the qualitative data. The need for a systematic and transparent approach at all stages of the analysis is emphasised, from the transcription of the data to its categorisation, and finally in the interpretation of the findings. A strategy for approaching the integration of the qualitative data with the quantitative data from the main survey is outlined, followed by a consideration of some of the issues that will arise in the analysis of qualitative longitudinal data.

### **In conclusion**

Based on the review of the literature on qualitative research in general and on qualitative research with children in particular, the qualitative studies that form part of **GUI** have been designed with the following considerations in mind:

- Base the design, content and conduct of the qualitative research on an understanding of the literature on qualitative research, particularly in relation to contemporary understandings of effective methods, rigour and ethics
- Develop a data collection schedule for the children in the **GUI** study that is informed by children and which is enjoyable and meaningful for the child (and, in due course, adolescent) participants
- Develop a data-collection schedule which is meaningful, productive and enjoyable for the parents and guardians of the children in the nine-month-old and nine-year-old cohorts
- Give a comprehensive picture of the life experiences of the children and the parents
- Elaborate on the themes examined in the quantitative survey, exploring through qualitative methods the thoughts and experiences of the children and parents
- Combine the quantitative and qualitative data so as to give a picture of the 'whole child'
- Collect data with a range of children, thus illustrating the diversity in children's life situations and experience
- Design the data collection with a focus on the longitudinal nature of the **GUI** study





- Observe high standards in relation to ethics and in ensuring the trustworthiness of the qualitative studies' findings

The data-collection for the quantitative and qualitative components of **GUI** is ongoing. In relation to the first-wave qualitative studies, reports will be produced on the qualitative study with the nine-year-olds and their parents and on the qualitative study with the parents of nine-month-olds, which will also include a direct assessment of the infants' developmental status. Both reports will describe the achieved sample, how the study was carried out and how the data were analysed. They will give a full description of the findings. They will then link the qualitative data to the quantitative data from the main study and draw out some of the implications of the findings in relation to policy and practice.



# Chapter 1

## THE QUALITATIVE COMPONENT OF *GROWING UP IN IRELAND*





## 1.1 Background

**GUI** is the national longitudinal study of children in Ireland, launched in 2006. The study is funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in association with the Department of Social Protection and the Central Statistics Office.

The main aim of the study is to describe the current status and the development over time of two representative samples of children in Ireland and how they are developing in the current social, economic and cultural environment. This information will be used to assist in policy formation and in the provision of services which will ensure that all children living in Ireland will have the best possible start in life. The study incorporates a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, to gain a holistic understanding of children's lives in Ireland. The first phase of the study takes place over seven years and follows the progress of two groups of children; approximately 8,500 nine-year-olds and 11,000 nine-month-olds. During this time two sweeps of quantitative data will be conducted with each group of children. Smaller-scale qualitative studies, each involving 120 children and families drawn from the main cohorts, will take place shortly after each sweep.

The quantitative approach adopted in the main study entails the collection of wide-ranging, reliable, quantifiable information regarding child outcomes and the contextual factors assumed to influence those outcomes. The first data-collection waves have achieved a unique insight into the behaviours, characteristics and contexts of nine-year-olds and nine-month-olds in Ireland. The nine-year-olds have been interviewed about their lives so that their views are captured in the quantitative study, but the data generated are numerical, except for the answers to four open-ended questions.<sup>2</sup> On its own, however, the quantitative study may not provide the kind of information needed to fully appreciate children's worlds from their own distinctive perspective. The use of qualitative methods of enquiry will enhance our ability to capture children's experience (Darbyshire, MacDougall, & Schiller, 2005; Greene & Hogan, 2005). Where the quantitative study will focus on child variables, the qualitative study will attempt to give a picture of the 'whole' child in line with the child-centred perspective adopted in the National Children's Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2000). The inclusion of a qualitative study, in addition to the main quantitative study, provides the opportunity for children and their parents to communicate their lived experiences in their own words. Qualitative data will strengthen the study by providing additional insight into the lives and experiences of the participants. As Mayall comments in relation to research on children and their childhoods, "good information on childhood must start from children's experience" (2000, p.21). In the nine-month cohort, the focus of the qualitative study (for the first wave) will be on the experiences, thoughts and feelings of the parent or parents about being the parent of a nine-month-old child.

This review focuses on methods of qualitative research with children, with some reference to qualitative research with adults. It will address also some of the issues that arise in relation to embedding a qualitative study in a primarily quantitative longitudinal cohort study such as **GUI**.

## 1.2 The objectives of *Growing Up in Ireland*

**GUI** has nine stated objectives:

1. To describe the lives of children in Ireland, to establish what is typical and normal as well as what is atypical and problematic
2. To chart the development of children over time, to examine the progress and well-being of children at critical periods from birth to adulthood
3. To identify the key factors that, independently of others, most help or hinder children's development
4. To establish the effects of early childhood experiences on later life

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<sup>2</sup> The questions are: (1) What would you like to be when you grow up? Please describe what you would like to be as fully as possible. (2) The thing that makes me most happy is ... (the first of three incomplete sentences that the child is asked to complete); (3) I am most afraid of ...; and (4) I like living in Ireland because ...



5. To map dimensions of variation in children's lives
6. To identify the persistent adverse affects that lead to social disadvantage and exclusion, educational difficulties, ill health and deprivation
7. To obtain children's views and opinions on their lives to inform policy-making
8. To provide a bank of data on the whole child
9. To provide evidence for the creation of effective and responsive policies and services for children and families

### 1.3 The conceptual framework<sup>3</sup>

The conceptual framework adopted by **GUI** emphasises children's connectedness to the world in which they live. The study embraces a dynamic systems perspective founded on five insights from different disciplines: ecology, dynamic connectedness, probabilism, period effects, and the active role or agency of the child in the developmental process. The bioecological model proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner is a key tool in operationalising this perspective. This model highlights the importance of considering the multi-faceted and multi-layered nature of the influences on development over the life course (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). **GUI** also embraces the whole-child perspective which is central to the National Children's Strategy (2000). Accordingly, in approaching the design and conduct of the study, an attempt is made to see each child as a person, not just as an aggregate of variables and outcomes. To emphasise this conceptualization of children and in recognition of their agency in their own lives, children are asked about their lives in the main (quantitative) study, and, in order to get a stronger sense of their individuality and the complexity and diversity of each child's experience of the world, a qualitative study has been added to the main survey. Although the primary focus of the qualitative studies is on the children, the qualitative approach also gives parents and guardians the opportunity to talk about their experience of being parents and will provide a rich complement to the data derived from the main survey.

The wave-one qualitative studies for both cohorts have been carried out and each will be briefly described below

### 1.4 An overview of the qualitative component

The qualitative studies complement the main quantitative studies by further exploring the same key domains.<sup>4</sup> The aspects of children's lives that are explored in the qualitative component map onto the domains of the quantitative study. Thus, where the child is old enough to be interviewed, the qualitative studies focus on the child's and, to a varying extent, the parents', experiences and perspectives in relation to: Wellness, Health and Physical Development; Child Functioning; Child Relationships; Growing Up; Family and Parenting; Community, Neighbourhood and Sense of Citizenship.

#### 1.4.1 The design of the qualitative component for wave one of the nine-year cohort

An overview of the issues and questions explored in the interview with the nine-year-old children is provided below:

1. *Wellness, health & physical development:* What is the children's understanding of the factors that help or hinder them in being physically healthy? What feelings and interpretations do they attach to being well or unwell? What is their understanding of physical development and their perception of body image?

<sup>3</sup> See Research Paper 1 in the **Growing Up in Ireland** Literature Review Series, *Background and Conceptual Framework*

<sup>4</sup> See Research Paper 2 in the **Growing Up in Ireland** Literature Review Series, *Review of the Literature Pertaining to the Child Cohort at 9 Years* and Research Paper 3, *Review of the Literature Pertaining to the Infant Cohort at 9 Months*. Both include a description of the domains covered in the quantitative studies.



2. *Emotional development*: What is the children's understanding of emotional development? How do they recognise different emotions and feelings? What perception do they have of themselves and their daily life? What hopes, fears and aspirations do these children have?
3. *Child's relationships*: How do the children perceive their relationships with friends? What is their understanding of the factors that help or hinder the positive development of friends?
4. *Growing up*: What is the children's understanding of growing up? How do they perceive the transition from nine to 13 years of age? How do they imagine they will be at age 13?
5. *Family and parenting*: What is the children's understanding of their family's dynamic, of their role and their relationships within the family? What is their understanding of the role of a parent? What do the children perceive as positive parenting?
6. *Community, neighbourhood and sense of citizenship*: How do the children perceive their local community and neighbourhood? What is their understanding of a positive community life in Ireland? What aspects of life in Ireland do they enjoy and what would they like to change?

The aim of the qualitative component with parents is to gain further understanding of the parents' or parent's perception of the child and explore the parent/child relationship. The themes explored in the parent's interview include:

1. *Parents' perception of the child*: How do the parents view their child's personality, interests, nature and temperament?
2. *Parent/child relationship*: What factors support or prevent the parent(s) and child from doing things together? What types of everyday activities do the child and parent do together? What places and spaces are important in their relationship?
3. *Perception of being a parent*: What is the parents' understanding of being a parent in Ireland? What rewards, difficulties or challenges do parents face? What supports do parents avail of to help them in their parenting role?

A total of 120 families from the nine-year cohort participated in the qualitative study. This is a small sample for a quantitative study, but is quite substantial by the standards of most qualitative studies. The qualitative sample of 120 children cannot be representative of all nine-year-olds in Ireland, so it cannot be claimed that the qualitative sample is 'speaking for' all children. The sample selected was drawn from the 8,570 child respondents forming the nine-year-old cohort with reference to the characteristics of the achieved sample. The sample was purposive and stratified according to socio-economic status, gender, urban/rural location and family type. Two qualitative data sweeps will be made over the timeframe of the study, each taking place just after the quantitative data sweeps.

The child's right to be protected by adults is upheld throughout all aspects of the **GUI** study. At the initial stage of the research process, the Study Team sought informed consent from the child's parents and the assent of the child to participate in the study. The family's right to withdraw from the study at any stage is emphasised and respected. The interviews with the child and the parents/guardians took place in the child's home and were conducted by qualified researchers, in the presence of another adult from the household. The qualitative interview is quite different to the quantitative interview in nature; this is reflected in the qualifications and experience of the staff conducting the qualitative interview. The researchers who conducted the fieldwork for the qualitative interviews are psychologists and/or social researchers with experience in researching the views of children and, if possible, in carrying out research with families. They have some previous knowledge and training in the ethics of carrying out research with children and in child-protection issues. The Study Team commissioned a specialist to provide further training to the researchers in child-protection procedures (following *Children's First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children*, published by the Department of Health and Children) and Ethical Guidelines (available on the Children's Research Centre, TCD website: <http://www.tcd.ie/childrensresearchcentre/>). Training was also provided to the researchers in handling and responding to sensitive issues that may arise during the interviews. (These issues are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.)



The schedule developed for the qualitative study consists of two components: one interview for the children and one for the parent or parents. The child interview is semi-structured and designed to be both interesting and fun for the nine-year-old participants. Thus a variety of prompts and game-like elements are interspersed with the interview questions. To ensure appeal to a wide range of children, a mixture of visual and verbal methods is used. The selection of methods has been informed by the literature and guided by an advisory panel of experts in qualitative research. Children themselves have been involved in the design of the methods, through the Children's Advisory Forum (CAF) established by **GUI**.<sup>5</sup> The developmental appropriateness of the methods has been tested by the CAF and through pilot assessment.<sup>6</sup> The parent or parents were interviewed, using photographs as prompts. Bearing in mind the longitudinal nature of the **GUI** study, the methods chosen capture the child's current views and experiences and their anticipation of life at 13, when they will be interviewed again as part of **GUI**.

#### 1.4.2 The design of the qualitative study for wave one of the nine-month cohort

In sampling and approach to the interviews, exactly the same approach was adopted for wave one of the nine-month cohort as for the nine-year qualitative study. The domains covered in the main survey are addressed in the qualitative study. A major and obvious difference in approach arises from the age of the children. It is clearly not possible to interview nine-month-olds. Therefore the focus of the interview is on the parents/guardians of the infants and on their experience of parenting their baby. Taking advantage of the opportunity to spend time with the baby, and with a view to collecting data which permit a more rounded picture of the baby's personality and competences, a developmental assessment of the infants was conducted, using a well-established measure, the Bayley Developmental Scales III (Bayley, 2005). This measure assesses cognitive, language and motor development.

The parents' interview schedule covers the following topics;

1. *Perception of baby*: The parents are asked about the baby's personality, the health of the baby, and how easy or difficult they are to take care of.
2. *Baby's routine and habits*: Does the baby have a daily routine? Is there a particular bedtime routine? What does the baby like to eat? How does the baby communicate his or her needs?
3. *Parent and child relationship*: How do the parents think they and the baby get along together? How would they describe how they feel about the baby? How have other members of the family reacted or behaved towards the baby?
4. *Service use*: Parents are asked about their experience of ante-natal services, their experiences during labour and delivery, and their experience of post-natal services.
5. *Transition to parenthood*: Mothers are asked about their experience of labour and delivery and about breastfeeding. Both parents (if applicable) are asked about becoming parents to this child, what kind of adjustments they needed to make, and how they feel they have changed since the baby's arrival.
6. *Perception of being a parent*: Parents are asked about their confidence as parents, what they enjoy and what they don't enjoy, what influences them as parents, and how the child's personality and temperament affect them.
7. *Decision-making and social support*: Parents are asked about who makes the decisions about the baby and where they find support, both within the family and outside it.

<sup>5</sup> The Children's Advisory Forum (CAF) is discussed in more detail in section 3.2.5 *Involving Children in Research Design*.

<sup>6</sup> A report on the pilot study was produced on 15<sup>th</sup> February 2008.



8. *Community and neighbourhood*: Questions focus on the places to take a baby in their neighbourhood, and whether parents perceive the neighbourhood as safe.

9. *Work/life balance*: Parents are asked about their plans for work outside the home and why they are choosing to stay at home or to work outside the home. If parents choose not to seek or return to paid employment, they are asked about how they enjoy being at home, what they find easy and what they find difficult. They are asked whether or not they have plans to work outside the home in the future and, if so, when. If parents are working, they are asked about how they cope with the demands of looking after the baby and going out to work. They are asked whether their work place is supportive to their role as parents.

10. *Childcare*: If parents use childcare they are asked about their satisfaction with their current arrangements, what their plans are for the future, and why they have chosen the childcare arrangements they are using or would like to use in the future.

11. *Current and future concerns and aspirations for the baby*: Parents are asked whether they have any concerns about their baby's development and what those might be. They are asked about their hopes for their baby's future and what they think they will be like at three years of age.

There are also three vignettes embedded in the interview which assess parents' reactions to situations focused on child discipline, handling an emergency, and parental intrusiveness. Additionally, the interviewer presented the parents with a number of photographs of babies expressing different emotional states and asked them to state what emotion the baby is feeling. This task is an adaptation of the schedule developed by Kropp and Haynes (1987) which assesses parental capacity to empathise and read the emotional states of infants.

The interviewer also completed the HOME Infant and Toddler Scale (Caldwell and Bradley, 1984), a widely used assessment of the quality of the home environment, which entails a mix of fieldworker observation and semi-structured questions.

### 1.5 The policy relevance of the qualitative data

The National Children's Strategy, launched in 2000, highlights three main goals. The first is to give children a voice in matters which affect them, by providing children living in diverse circumstances with a platform through which they can have their voices heard. In effect, the strategy affirms children as important stakeholders whose views should be taken into account in the development of policies which influence their lives. The second goal is that children's lives will be better understood. The third is that children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development.

**GUI** touches on all three goals of the National Children's Strategy. The study will collect crucial baseline statistics on children's lives and development. It differs from any previous studies in being representative of the whole population of children and being longitudinal in design. The scale and breadth of the main survey component will generate invaluable data on children's lives and the factors that influence their development. The qualitative component will provide rich data that would not be accessible using an entirely quantitative methodology. The **GUI** study is designed with a view to its value in informing policy. It is expected that **GUI** will inform our understanding of how children grow up in Ireland and provide a stronger platform for informed decision-making in relation to child-related policies and services.

The relationship between research and policy is complex and rarely direct. However, it has become widely accepted in recent decades that good policy-making should be evidence-based. In relation to children, the first requirement is good descriptive data on who the children are, where they live and with whom they live. In Ireland, the basic data on children come from a number of sources. Official data are still lacking in some areas (Fitzgerald, 2004). However, in recent years the situation has improved. The Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Hanafin et al., 2010) has collated data from many



sources to create the third biannual 'State of the Nation's Children' report. The most cited data sources are the Central Statistics Office, the Health Behaviour on School-Aged Children (HBSC) survey (Nic Gabhainn et al., 2007) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey (Eivers et al., 2007). The National Longitudinal Study of Children in Ireland (**GUI**) will complement these data, while providing a much more elaborated picture of the lives of children in Ireland and how they change over time. The design of the study will also enable some policy-driven questions to be addressed about the links of policies to outcomes, and about the outcomes of certain services and programmes. It is hoped that such data will assist the development of programmes, services and supports that can improve the overall well-being of children in Ireland.

In this context, the qualitative study is of particular relevance to the first goal of the National Children's Strategy, that "children will have a voice in matters which affect them". This goal was much influenced by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Ireland ratified in 1993. Article 12 states that "parties commit to ensuring that children can express their views freely on matters affecting them and that their views will be given due weight". While some aspects of the qualitative studies speak to the need to listen to children and to encourage their participation, the use of qualitative research has other benefits. It can be argued that, when we seek to understand children and their lives, it is essential to have some way of accessing their subjective experience and their interpretation of their worlds. The capacity of **GUI** to approximate to a complete understanding of the children is increased by finding out more about their experience of their worlds, and their thoughts and feelings.

The whole study is child-centred in that child issues and child outcomes are the primary focus, but the qualitative study will give a more rounded picture of the children as individuals. The voices of the children in the qualitative study can be quoted verbatim, with due respect of their anonymity, and a picture drawn of the children, the quality and character of their lives, and their perceptions of events and issues that matter to them. It is recognised that qualitative data can sometimes represent the lived experience of research participants more directly and more powerfully than aggregated statistics, since they can give a compelling picture of the individual participant's experience, through the medium of direct quotations or case studies.

The results of the qualitative study will be disseminated to policy-makers and practitioners, strengthening the impact of the study as a whole and drawing attention to the children's perspectives and responses to the institutions which impinge on them. It will emphasise the agency of nine-year-olds, which can readily be forgotten if people cling to the traditional view of children as passive and incompetent (Hogan, 2002; Greene, 2006). These data will also be fed back to the children themselves and their parents and be more widely disseminated to children in Ireland via the **GUI** website and child-friendly publications. The qualitative data will provide information which people can more readily, alongside the statistics generated by the quantitative studies.

It is also possible in the qualitative studies to focus attention on current policy concerns; for example, since the economic downturn of 2008, the economic circumstances of many families have changed. The second wave of the two qualitative studies, at age 13 for the nine-year cohort and age three for the nine-month cohort, will be able to examine the meaning of these changes for children and their parents, and the diverse responses to the economic downturn that will be exhibited in the two samples.







# Chapter 2

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS ARISING FROM THE DESIGN OF *GROWING UP IN IRELAND*





## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on two key features of the design of the qualitative study: first, that it is linked to a major quantitative study and should be properly integrated with that study; second, that it is a longitudinal qualitative study of children (and their parents). In both cases, there are relatively few studies reported in the literature which have the same design characteristics. Carrying out a longitudinal qualitative study of children as part of a national cohort study presents a number of methodological challenges, some of which have been discussed in the existing literature.

## 2.2 Are quantitative and qualitative approaches incompatible?

In the past there has been some evidence of a 'paradigm war' between proponents of qualitative research and proponents of quantitative research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The conflict originates in divergent premises regarding the origin and nature of knowledge (epistemology) and the nature of being (ontology). However, the perpetuation of a debate framed in terms of qualitative *versus* quantitative has been largely unproductive. It has meant that very few studies have incorporated both methodological approaches. Current thinking about research strategies, however, suggests that epistemological and ontological commitments do not have to prevent quantitative and qualitative data-collection from being combined in a meaningful way (Bryman, 2007; May, 2007). Researchers in both the health and the social sciences are now moving towards a more pragmatic approach which brings together the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Advocates of this approach adopt the label 'mixed methods research', and argue that the different methods address different questions and can complement each other, bringing different kinds of data to bear on the same phenomenon or issue (Todd, Nerlich, McKeon & Clarke, 2004).

An exploration of the strengths and weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative research can help in arriving at an understanding of where they are best applied and how they can complement each other.

### Quantitative research

Quantitative research has its origins in the physical sciences and entails measurement. Phenomena in the natural world are assumed to be amenable to quantification, to either counting or measurement on some kind of scale. Thus anything that exists is seen to exist in some *measure* and can ultimately be considered as a *variable*. Quantitative research typically involves the manipulation of variables (in experiments) or the measurement of variables (through direct observation or asking respondents to rate variables, or through measuring inferred constructs, such as intelligence or happiness), followed by statistical manipulation. Statistical methods typically test hypotheses about the relationships between different variables. The research is designed to be objective, reliable and replicable and the aim is to ensure that the results can be generalised to a larger population.

In **GUI** such an approach is ideally suited to describing many different aspects of the population of interest and examining associations between key variables. The approach enables the examination of causal hypotheses. When drawing conclusions about the distribution of variables in the population or the linkage between variables, it is important that the sample drawn from the general population be truly representative; this typically means that it is both random and large. This is the case in **GUI** where the nine-year and infant cohorts contain 8,570 and 11,100 children respectively. Due to careful sampling there can be considerable confidence that the samples are representative of the entire population of children of those ages.

### Qualitative research

Qualitative methods, on the other hand, aim to provide description, analysis and interpretation of the phenomenon of interest, eschewing measurement since measurement entails a focus on one aspect of the phenomenon – its amount or duration – rather than its quality or qualities. Although the term qualitative research has come to be associated with the human sciences, natural science has its



foundations in qualitative research, i.e. the rich description of natural phenomena. In research with human participants, many different types of qualitative research are used, but they share a commitment to understanding the quality of human experience and the meanings ascribed by individuals to events or experiences. As Bryman states, qualitative research adopts “an approach to the study of the social world which seeks to describe and analyse the culture and behaviour of humans and their groups from the point of view of those being studied” (Bryman, 1988, p.46).

Samples in qualitative research are generally a great deal smaller than those used in quantitative studies. This is in part due to the time and resources needed to analyse and interpret qualitative data. It is also due to the different purpose and capacity of qualitative research.

Neither approach should be seen as superior to the other; rather, each approach should be viewed in terms of its appropriateness to exploring particular research questions.

### 2.3 Examples of longitudinal qualitative research with children

Despite the dominance of quantitative research in the social sciences, there is a long history of qualitative research with children. The psychologist Charlotte Buhler published her work on children’s diaries in 1927. Margaret Mead’s influential work on adolescence in New Guinea and Samoa was conducted in the 1930s. Piaget’s work could be seen as primarily qualitative – his ‘clinical method’ was a good example of semi-structured interviewing with children (Piaget, 1929). Influenced by the biological sciences and the work of ethologists, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century psychologists and sociologists carried out a lot of detailed observation of children in natural and institutional settings. An example of this approach is the painstaking qualitative observations described in the book *One boy’s day* by Barker and Wright (1951). In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in qualitative research with children and a new recognition of its value (Hill, 1997; Greene and Hogan, 2005). Chapters 5 and 6 of this review will survey the methods typically used in qualitative research with children. Later publications will detail the design and the findings of the first-wave qualitative studies for both the infant and the nine-year cohorts. The design of both studies has been informed by the review of the literature and the issues discussed in this paper.

There are numerous examples of qualitative studies with children but the focus of this section is on qualitative research with children that is interested in tracking change over time. Such studies are much less frequent than once-off studies. As Henwood and Lang (2003: 52) state: “Longitudinal work is seen to be far more a part of quantitative than qualitative research.” However, there is growing interest in qualitative longitudinal research. In 2003 the *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* devoted a special issue to the topic. Research with children is specifically addressed in several of the articles. There are, for example, articles on school transitions and tracking young people leaving the care of the state. In one of the papers, Neale and Flowerdew (2003) point out that there are three different approaches to conducting qualitative studies of change over time. The first is retrospective studies, which examine historical change, using techniques such as narrative analysis (e.g. Josselson and Lieblich, 1993) or life-history analysis (e.g. Denzin, 1989). The second is the cross-sectional approach where change across time is inferred from the study of different groups of different ages. The third is by means of prospective longitudinal studies. The qualitative component of **GUI** fits into the last category.

There are some examples of prospective, qualitative, longitudinal studies of children and young people in the literature and they take many different forms. The main way in which they vary is in terms of time-scale. The time-scale may be very short (successive accounts of behaviour or subjective reports collected over hours or days, such as in the study conducted by Thelen and Smith (1994) on children learning to crawl) or very long (successive data collection waves over many years, such as that found in the work of Daniel Levinson (1978; 1996) on adult personality development). Another feature is the length of time between episodes of data-collection. The intervals may be very short or very long. **GUIs** prospective qualitative longitudinal studies, in the first instance, entail two data waves for both cohorts, with a four-year gap between time one and time two for the nine-year-olds (at nine years and 13 years)



and a two-and-a-half-year gap between time one and time two for the nine-month-olds (at nine months and three years). Most qualitative longitudinal studies extend over a shorter time-frame and collect data at more frequent intervals. For example, there are several published qualitative studies tracking children as they move through crucial times of transition, such as the transition to second level or the transition out of state care, where intervals between data waves are typically a matter of a few months (e.g., Gordon and Lahelma, 2003). Qualitative longitudinal studies have usually been conducted by sociologists rather than psychologists. Examples include the German life-history study (Bruckner and Mayer, 1998) and the studies conducted by Glen Elder on the children of the Great Depression and on farm children, and the Oakland Growth Study (Elder, 2002).

A small number of longitudinal studies involving children have collected both quantitative and qualitative data. One example is the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, which started collecting data on eight to ten-year-olds in 1961 and last collected data on the sample at age 46 (West and Farrington, 1973; Farrington, 2003). In Australia, Wyn and colleagues conducted longitudinal surveys with two cohorts of young people, tracking their transition from school to work (Wyn et al., 2008). In neither case did the authors write extensively on the challenges of combining qualitative and quantitative data in a longitudinal study.

National child-cohort studies have rarely incorporated qualitative research elements. The British National Child Development Study (NCDS), which commenced in 1958, asked the child participants at age 11 to write essays on the theme 'Imagine you are 25'. A total of 13,000 essays were written and archived, but, except for a minimalist attempt to code some of the children's career aspirations, the data remained in an archive until 2007. A preliminary qualitative analysis of these rich texts has now been published by Elliot and Morrow (2007), 28 years after the data were collected. The findings derived from the essays can be linked to the longitudinal quantitative data but the qualitative collection of data was not an ongoing part of the NCDS, as the long neglect of the data indicates.

The potential in incorporating qualitative data-collection into nationally representative cohort studies has been recognised, though Henwood and Lang (2003) fear that merely adding a few open-ended questions might be seen as the way forward. They proposed, in a paper written for the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), that the ESRC should conduct a feasibility study on a stand-alone qualitative cohort study (2003). The ESRC has funded a group of qualitative longitudinal studies, called 'Timescapes', which is intended to provide a qualitative longitudinal resource for the social science community. Two of the studies belonging to the 'Timescapes' project involve children and young people. They are: the 'Siblings and Friends' project which will track 50 children aged 9-17 at two-year intervals, exploring their relationships with siblings and friends, and the 'Changing lives of teenagers' project which will follow approximately 29 teenagers aged 14-15 "using a range of ethnographic methods and visual mapping techniques to build up a cultural inventory of young lives" ([www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk](http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk)). These studies will not typically combine quantitative and qualitative data but will focus on what can be learned from qualitative longitudinal data.

Thus, at this point in time, there are still not many examples of cohort studies with children that have attempted to combine longitudinal quantitative and qualitative data. In a summary of existing child-cohort studies, Hansen and Joshi (2007) comment that "a number of the current national and sub national cohort studies include one-off, often qualitative studies, which use the cohort as a sampling frame and its data as the quantitative basis for the spin-off studies" (2007, p. 321) An example of such a study is a qualitative study of the experience of growing up in step families where the sample of 50 participants was drawn from the UK 1958 National Child Development Study (Gorell-Barnes et al., 1998). It may be that some of the recent studies that currently have pre-school-age participants will incorporate qualitative data derived from the children when they are older.

In 2010 the Centre for Longitudinal Studies in the UK published a newsletter summarising research that combines quantitative longitudinal research with qualitative data, and research that adopts a longitudinal approach to collecting qualitative information (Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2010). The authors



comment that, despite the huge value of the British cohort studies, they all “lack the perspective of the respondents themselves” (p. 1). They describe qualitative biographical information as “a different kind of narrative resource that can be analysed alongside, and in tandem with, existing quantitative information” (p.1).

The newsletter describes four UK studies. Three of them concern ageing and one includes a sample of children and young people. The three studies on ageing combine quantitative and qualitative information, but the study involving children is ‘Timescapes’, which entails qualitative data alone.

The first study started with children born in 1958 but did not introduce qualitative data-collection until much later. As part of the age 50 sweep of the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS), 240 interviews were conducted with a sub-sample of cohort members, stratified by geographic location, social mobility and sex. The NCDS also asked participants how they felt about being interviewed and how they felt about being part of the cohort study.

The newsletter also summarised results from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA), which has an ongoing qualitative component. They aim to compare results from the quantitative survey to insights drawn from the qualitative work, and state: “The value of linking longitudinal survey data with a qualitative study lies in the potential for both approaches to illuminate how and why people’s lives change in different but complementary ways. The linked qualitative data allow for exploration of how people narrate their experiences of change.” (p.5).

The third study of ageing is part of the Healthy Ageing across the Life Course (HALCyon) programme, where in-depth qualitative interviews are being carried out on a sub-sample of respondents drawn from three participating cohort studies. They comment that “a focus on subjective experiences and beliefs can provide insights not obtainable by quantitative methods alone” (p.5).

The fourth study is ‘Timescapes’, already mentioned. This is the only longitudinal study included in the CLS newsletter that uses solely qualitative methods. In this publication, the study’s principal investigators comment on the “enormous creative potential to link insights from qualitative longitudinal and large-scale longitudinal studies” (p.2). They have set out in ‘Timescapes’ to align the socio-demographic descriptors in ‘Timescapes’ with those used in several longitudinal surveys, such as the NCDS, to permit a bridge across the datasets.

## 2.4 Adopting a mixed-methods approach

Quantitative and qualitative approaches are increasingly being used in tandem, where it is called for by the research questions and where it is practical to do so (Carr, 1994; May, 2007). Method triangulation – combining the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches – is not always feasible due to the resource constraints imposed on many studies. The aims and objectives of **GUI** require the adoption of an innovative mixed-methods approach to address the research questions. The magnitude of the resources invested in the study make this a worthwhile and feasible research strategy.

Mixed methods have become more popular as the value each method can play in adding to the full picture is recognised (Brannen, 2005); however, the research strategy adopted by **GUI** is rather unique at this point in time, as noted earlier.

## 2.5 Integrating quantitative & qualitative data

Linking the data analyses from both approaches is typically conducted in one of four ways (Brannen, 2005; Bryman, 2001; Hammersley, 1996; Rossman & Wilson, 1994). The four main modes of combining the two approaches, according to Brannen (2005), are:

1. *Elaboration or Expansion*: This can occur where the data analysis of one approach assists in the further understanding of the findings arising out of the other approach (e.g. the qualitative data



might demonstrate how the outcomes from the quantitative data apply in particular cases). They might serve to cast light on conflicting or puzzling findings.

2. *Initiation*: This can occur where the first approach opens up new research questions or hypotheses that can be explored in the follow-up approach (e.g. the quantitative data analysis might inform the research questions to be explored in the qualitative component). In the past, qualitative research has been seen by some quantitatively inclined researchers as suited only to mapping a territory (e.g. via focus groups) which will then be researched ‘properly’ through quantitative research (Todd et al., 2004).
3. *Complementarity*: The quantitative and qualitative data analyses are placed beside each other to enhance the understanding of the phenomenon of interest.
4. *Hybrid methods*: A number of research methods are essentially a cross between quantitative and qualitative. Examples are Q sort methods and content analysis leading to quantification (Stenner & Stainton Rogers, 2004).

To those discussed by Brannen it might be useful to add another category:

1. *Sequential, iterative*: This approach may be best suited to a longitudinal or cohort study such as **GUI**. Both approaches are used to inform the next stage of the study, whether that be quantitative or qualitative. The same participants are seen over time. This approach sees qualitative and quantitative methods as complementary but there is a further recognition of the phased nature of the study and the iterative nature of the relationship between the quantitative and qualitative elements of the study and their phasing over time, rather than being carried out contemporaneously. In the **GUI** study there is a partial version of this approach only, since, initially at least, the quantitative data will not be analysed in time to inform the design of the qualitative study. However, the design of the qualitative study is informed by the design of the quantitative study and both sets of data will be combined (see Chapter 7). Also, the results of the wave-one qualitative studies will be fed into the design of the next quantitative data-collection waves, at age 13 for the nine-year cohort and age three for the infant cohort.

It has been argued that the degree to which mixed-methods researchers can genuinely integrate their findings has not been addressed in the literature to a significant extent. Brannen (2005) comments on the recent popularity of mixed-methods research and also on its risks. One of the risks she identifies is the fact that research training often results in “entrenchment of researchers in particular methods of types of research” (p.5). In **GUI** this has been recognised and will be addressed through training. Another risk arises when researchers are required to combine two very different modes of communicating findings, which may “sit awkwardly together on the page” (p 6). This will be a challenge for the **GUI** Study Team but every effort will be made to communicate the integrated findings as coherently as possible. It is likely that there will be challenges ahead in conducting a qualitative longitudinal study, effectively and productively, as an integral part of a primarily quantitative child-cohort study, especially since there is a lack of road maps in the current literature.

## 2.6 Are there different considerations in researching adults as opposed to children?

As stated earlier, the primary focus of this review is on the planned qualitative research with the children. However, at each stage it is intended to conduct some qualitative work with the child’s parent or parents also. This will explore issues around the parents’ views on being a parent and their experience of the parenting role. The data will flesh out data collected in the main surveys. Given the importance of parents in influencing their child’s life, it is important to reach an in-depth understanding of this critical contextual element of the child’s life and major influence on their development.

To date, most qualitative research has been conducted with adults. Many key texts in the area do not address research with children at all (Silverman, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In Chapter 3, ethical issues arising when carrying out research with children will be discussed, followed by two chapters



outlining some of the typical methods used in qualitative research. Many of the ethical considerations outlined apply as much to research with adults and, likewise, many of the methods described can be used with adults just as well as with children. However it is important to be aware of some of the possible differences as well as the similarities.

### 2.6.1 Are there some methods suitable for use with adults that are not suitable for use with children?

Social science research with children has been fraught with assumptions about what children can and cannot do, using adult competence as the yardstick.

One major issue in the literature is the argument between those who take a traditional developmental perspective and those who adopt 'a new sociology of children perspective'; the latter have argued against what they see as the straightjacket of 'developmentalism' which, in the realm of research, has positioned children as less competent and less capable than adults (Alderson, 1995; Christensen and James, 2000). Developmental psychologists would respond that it flies in the face of the reality of development to see all children at all ages as being as competent as adults and as equally capable of understanding and communicating their thoughts, feeling and perspectives (Hogan, 2005). If one accepts that children develop competencies and capacities over time, the question arises as to when they reach a level of competence comparable to that of the average adult, and when they can cope with being treated as research participants in the same way as adults – from the point of view of methods, if not research practice and ethics.

The most commonly used method of collecting qualitative data with adults is the semi-structured interview (Kvale, 2008). It is only comparatively recently that this method was adopted for qualitative research with children (rather than adolescents) since there was a widely held view that young children were not capable of coping with a one-to-one interview. There is still dispute on this issue (see, for example, Clarke, McQuail & Moss, 2003), but there are certainly examples in the literature of children as young as four and five being interviewed in a meaningful and productive manner. For example, Dickins, Emerson and Gordon-Smith (2004) used interviews with children in a nursery to find out about children's food preferences at snack-time. The main consideration in interviewing very young children appears to be the level of language used and the length of the interview. Simple language and short interactions suit the young child's language competence and attention span. That said, young children are very capable of offering profound insights into their world and their experience of it.

Punch (2002) asks the question: "If children are competent actors, why are special 'child-friendly' methods needed to communicate with them?" (p. 321). She notes that, among those who promote the view of children as competent and mature, there is often an apparently contradictory commitment to so-called 'participatory methods' where children are encouraged to express their views through active, play-like or creative activities such as pictures and diaries (Nesbitt, 2000), sentence completions and writing (Morrow, 1999) and other activities (described in Chapter 5 of this review).

Although such techniques are often presented as child-friendly or child-centred, many of them have also been used with adults. Diaries and written narratives have been analysed for many years, as have photographs and other visual methods of depicting reality (Pink, 2006). What distinguishes those methods suitable for use with adults and those suitable for use with children seems more a matter of degree than strict lines of demarcation. Many of the more creative, interactive methods now used widely in participatory research with children were originally used by researchers working in settings (often in under-developed countries) where they did not share the language of the adult research participants. Participatory Action Research and Participatory Rural Appraisal are examples of such approaches (Fals-Borda, 2001).





## 2.6.2 Are there different ethical considerations in researching adults rather than children?

It is the responsibility of all researchers to conduct research in an ethical manner whether their research subjects are children or adults. The ethical issues discussed in the next chapter, concerning research with children, all apply to research with adults. The core principles are to: protect the well-being of the participants; do no harm; respect the rights of the participants; treat them fairly and respectfully; and adopt practices that do not exclude or disadvantage participants on the grounds of disability, ethnicity, gender, etc.

A possible area of difference arises in the area of 'child protection' in the sense that, in recent years, good practice precludes adult researchers from being alone with child participants. This difference in practice arises from the perceived vulnerability of children to abuse by adults (but also the vulnerability of adults to being accused falsely by a child of abuse). Clearly, it is important to follow child-protection guidelines assiduously in the conduct of research with children and young people. However, it is also possible for adults to abuse vulnerable adults in the research situation, and the principle of doing no harm should be observed with appropriate stringency.

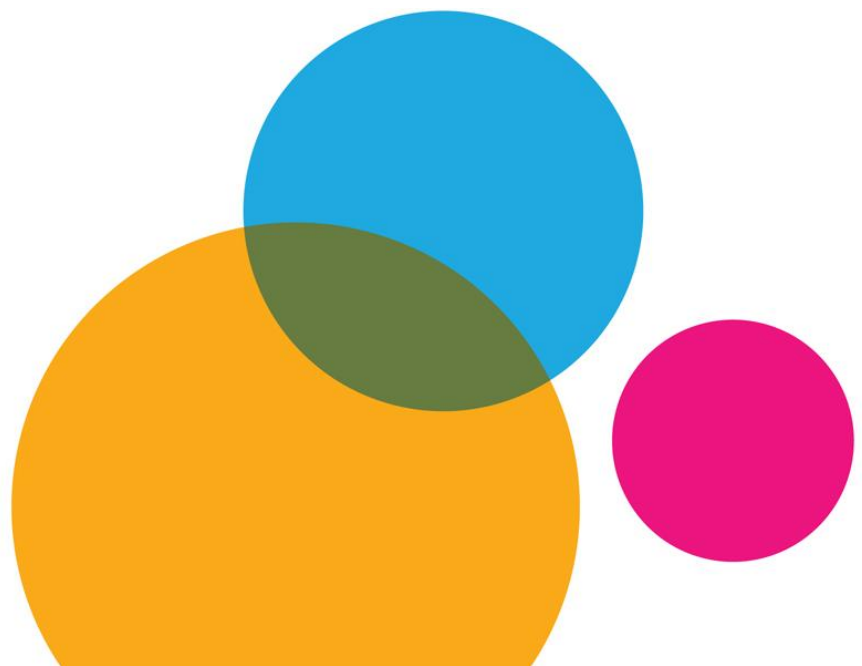
Another perceived difference between children and adults is the power differential, children being seen as intrinsically less powerful than adults (Punch, 2002). This relates to child protection in that children are weaker and less knowing, but it has broader implications. Even where there is no question of explicit abuse of power, the relative lack of power of a child participant can lead them to acquiesce in participating in research where they do not want to and giving replies that do not reflect their true thoughts and feelings because they are afraid of not saying the right thing or of repercussions that might arise if they tell the truth as they see it. Strategies to get around the power discrepancy include the adoption by researchers of the 'least adult' role, whereby the researcher ensures that she/he comes across as a (relatively) powerless adult (Mandell, 1991; Morrow, 1999). The extent to which many adult research participants also feel disempowered in the research situation is probably widely underestimated. In working with both adults and children, practices which encourage informed consent and permit non-participation and withdrawal at any time should be observed. Reflexivity on the part of the researcher should help to keep in mind issues around power and how it can potentially interfere with the validity of the research findings.

All told, concentrating too much on perceived adult/child differences may exaggerate differences which are usually ones of degree rather than kind. It may also cloud other critical differences – such as those of class, ethnicity, gender, etc – that should equally be taken into account when conducting research with human participants.



# Chapter 3

## AN ETHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE QUALITATIVE STUDIES





### 3.1 Introduction

Good research practice will strengthen the quality of the outcomes of the qualitative research process and ensure that a trustworthy, credible account of the child's experience and viewpoint is produced. To follow good practice in qualitative research with children, a number of ethical and practical issues must be addressed. Ethical concerns relate to the safe and respectful treatment of participants and the reduction of and/or careful management of the burden on respondents. Other aspects of good practice are valued because they enhance the likelihood that participants, in this case children and parents, will be enabled to engage meaningfully with the research process. Some very practical considerations, such as the child being provided with a chair suited to their height and age when sitting with the researcher, can ultimately influence the quality of the data produced. This chapter will focus primarily on children and will describe the ethical concerns which arise when conducting research with children, as well as some practical issues which need to be borne in mind to enhance the quality of the research encounter.

### 3.2 Ethical principles and good research practice

The issues of ethics and safety must be considered when conducting research with children. Research ethics is concerned with ensuring the safety of research participants throughout each project, partly by using agreed standards. Ethical frameworks are typically concerned with duty, rights, harm and benefit (Alderson & Morrow, 2004). The researcher has a duty to ensure that the child is respected at all stages of the research process and that the degree of intrusion on their lives is minimised.

The Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin, in its published ethical guidelines, proposes five principles of duty that the ethical researcher must uphold, namely: beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, fidelity and inclusivity (Whyte, 2004; 2006).<sup>7</sup> *Beneficence* recognises the researcher's duty to protect the well-being of those participating in the research process. *Non-maleficence* concerns the researcher's duty to do no harm. *Autonomy* recognises the researchers' duty to respect the rights of the participants, including the right of individuals to take responsibility for themselves. *Fidelity* stresses the researcher's duty to adopt a child-centred approach and treat children fairly and respectfully. The final principle, *inclusivity*, highlights the need for the researcher to be inclusive and to support and enable the participation of children who might be at risk of non-participation without the availability of additional supports.

Although these considerations apply to all forms of research with children, some of the issues may be intensified in qualitative research where the child could reveal more about their personal lives than in a quantitative research study. The practical application of these five duties and the implication for **GUI** is discussed further below.

#### 3.2.1 Beneficence, non-maleficence and autonomy

The well-being of the children participating in the research process should be the core consideration when undertaking research with children. Researchers must ensure that the child is protected, that their rights as individuals are respected at all stages of the research process, and that no harm is caused to the child by participating in the research. In practice, the duty to protect and uphold the well-being of participants involves a number of key considerations such as: child protection, informed consent, confidentiality and disclosures, and dealing with sensitive issues.

##### 3.2.1.1 Background checks on researchers

One core practical consideration for **GUI** in observing the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence is adhering to high standards in child protection. Children's rights organisations have long campaigned for the vetting of all adults working with children, so that they undergo stringent background checks, including police checks. In Ireland, it is now the policy of many organisations working with children to request that all staff and volunteers working with children be vetted. Best practice advocates that all

<sup>7</sup> See [www.tcd.ie/childrensresearchcentre](http://www.tcd.ie/childrensresearchcentre) for further information.



researchers conducting research with children undergo background checks and obtain Garda clearance (Whyte, 2006). This is a practical step that can minimise the risks in research with children. All researchers, including the interviewers and field workers involved in both the quantitative and qualitative components of **GUI**, have been vetted by the Garda Central Vetting Unit prior to becoming involved in the study.

### 3.2.1.2 Informed consent

One of the key issues in conducting research with children is obtaining the informed consent of both the individual child and their parent(s) or guardian(s) to participate. In **GUI** the issue of child consent arises for the nine-year-olds but not for the nine-month-olds, though some level of age-appropriate consent might be sought from the children in the nine-month cohort when they reach the age of three). Consent can only be informed when full information about what is involved in the study, what this means for the respondent and what potential risks might arise are explained and understood by the child. Lindsay (2000) suggests that the factors that must be considered in ensuring that the child is informed include: age, general cognitive ability, emotional status and knowledge. In practice, securing informed consent will involve providing potential participants with age-appropriate written information about the study, what is involved for them if they agree to participate, and obtaining completed consent forms. (Appropriate procedures should be put in place for children with literacy problems.) Whyte (2006) suggests that information leaflets should include: a description of the nature of the study and data-collection, how the child and family was selected to participate, how the data will be stored and who will have access to it, how the data will be used, and information on the ethical and safety requirements to which the researchers must adhere, including confidentiality. **GUI** provides information leaflets to both the parents and the children in a way that is appropriate to age and ability, using suitable language. The child's right to refuse to participate will be respected even in the case where the parent's consent for the child to participate is obtained. In a longitudinal study, it is particularly important not to assume continued consent. **GUI** will check with the children and parents that they are willing to continue with the subsequent stages of the research process and respect their right to withdraw at any time.

### 3.2.1.3 Confidentiality and disclosures

Children and their parents should be assured that the information they give will be confidential and that their identity will not be revealed. Normally, concealment of identity is achieved by the assignment of ID numbers and by keeping identifying information in a secure location, with access restricted to a small number of people, typically those on the research team. Such reassurances about confidentiality and anonymity will be given to the children and parents who participate in the qualitative studies. Qualitative research also presents additional problems in relation to confidentiality and anonymity. These issues arise in relation to the identifiability of quotes. Even though names are not used, it might be possible for a reader to identify the source of the quote, using information contained within it. Thus, if a girl in the study talks about her twin it might be possible to identify her with a high degree of probability. Also, children or parents may recognise their own quotes and be upset by the context in which the researcher presents them. The researchers will have to scrutinise quotes before using them and be confident that they do not reveal the identity of participants.

There is one major exception to the adherence to the principle of confidentiality. In Ireland, researchers are obliged to follow the protocols of the *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (DOHC, 1999). These guidelines outline the responsibility of any person who suspects that a child is being abused, or at risk of abuse, to report their concerns to the Health Service Executive (HSE). **GUI** has clear procedures for disclosures. All researchers, including interviewers and fieldworkers, have received training on the HSE guidelines and are trained in child-protection procedures, including mandatory reporting and the process to adhere to if a disclosure around a child-protection issue is made. The qualitative researchers will receive the same training and follow the same child-protection policies, and explain the policy of mandatory reporting to all participants. This information will be included in the information leaflets for the qualitative component and also explained to participants



at the outset of the interview. In particular, this information will be communicated to the child in a manner that is age-appropriate and understandable.

#### 3.2.1.4 Privacy

The context and location of the interview is an important ethical consideration for the researcher. A number of key questions need to be addressed, including: Where should the child be interviewed (in familiar or neutral surroundings)? Should the child be interviewed alone or with a trusted adult? With regard to the location of the research in the context of child protection, it is important to strike a balance between giving the child the privacy they need to express themselves comfortably and confidentially, and maintaining best practice in terms of child protection. In their Irish study of student perceptions and definitions of bullying, Guerin and Hennessy (1997) used semi-structured interviews with children aged 10–13. These interviews were conducted in a school-room. In this study, the researchers had initially intended to conduct the interviews with just the child present, but, at the teachers' request, a second child was present in the room. To maintain confidentiality, the researchers adopted an unusual strategy of asking the second child to sit in the room and listen to music through headphones while the child's interview was conducted. In the quantitative study of nine-year-olds in **GUI**, while one parent was present in the same room, sensitive questions on the child questionnaire were presented to the child via headphones and they could record their answers privately on a computer.

To safeguard both the child and the researcher, it is important that the researcher does not spend time alone with a child; it is advisable that the research be conducted in a room where a trusted adult can easily see the researcher and the child (Whyte, 2006). **GUI** adopts this practice and, as with the quantitative component, the qualitative interviews with the child will be done in the family home, ensuring that a parent or guardian is present with the child and the interviewer. Under no circumstances should the interviewer be alone with the child in the room. Negotiating privacy during interviews can be a delicate matter when conducting research in the family context. The presence of another family member may affect the research. The child may offer a particular response depending on who is present or within earshot during the interview. Hill et al. (1996) found that the location of the interview in the home environment can affect the child's ability to feel relaxed and forthcoming. They reported that, when they interviewed children in their own homes, with a parent in the next room or coming in and out with tea and biscuits, some children seemed to be inhibited from talking about family matters. In contrast, they found that, in the few individual interviews that were (for convenience) carried out at school, the children seemed particularly relaxed and open. Thus, in relation to **GUI**, interviewing the child with another adult in the room might place some constraints on the child's freedom of speech, in terms of their fear of being overheard by the adult or indeed the adult interfering with the child's responses.

#### 3.2.1.5 Sensitive issues

Some of the questions are of a potentially sensitive nature. Some children may find certain issues difficult to engage within the one-to-one interview. Researchers must be aware of early indicators that a child is reluctant to talk about an area that is difficult or distressing for them. Alderson and Morrow (2004) devised a technique that can be used during the interview, which encourages sensitivity to the child's reluctance. The authors suggest using road traffic signs which can be used to help children show that they want to stop or withdraw (red disc), pause (amber) or continue (green) with the interview questions (Alderson & Morrow, 2004). **GUI** will provide training to the qualitative researchers on dealing with sensitive issues, recognising discomfort in a child and knowing when to discontinue the interview if necessary. It may also be necessary to provide participants with access to relevant local services or refer participants to follow-up support from other agencies. This will be done by the Study Team where appropriate. A list of local agencies will be drawn up for the fieldworkers to give to parents.

### 3.2.2 Fidelity and inclusivity

The researcher's duty to adopt a child-centred approach and treat children inclusively, fairly and respectfully has a number of key implications in practice for **GUI**.



### 3.2.2.1 *The research relationship*

Each stage of the research process must promote an ethos of respect for the child and sensitivity to his or her individual needs and preferences. Westcott and Littleton (2005) suggest that the first step involves the researcher putting themselves in the position of the child. In the case of the **GUI** qualitative study, a strange adult will come into their home to interview them. It is important for researchers to consider the kind of expectations that children might have. Do they see the researcher as they might see a teacher, or as a family friend, or, for those who have been in contact with the social services, as a social worker? How has the research been presented to the child and how does the researcher help the child to feel at ease? The outcomes of the research can be negatively or positively influenced by the relationship that is established in the first few minutes of the interview. It is critical that the researcher establishes a rapport and gains the trust of the child.

Researchers who are skilled in communicating with children and have access to relevant information regarding the child (such as the existence of any disabilities or special needs) before a first meeting will find relationship-building less challenging. Detailed information on each family will be available from the quantitative data, thus enabling the qualitative researchers to be aware of any special needs or family circumstances before they meet with the child and his or her parents(s). Each of the researchers involved in the qualitative component of **GUI** will have had extensive experience of conducting research with children.

Many authors have advised that there should be an initial introductory meeting between the child and the researcher before the formal research process commences. Alternatively, familiarity with the researcher could be increased if the researcher spends time observing the children in their environment before embarking on one-to-one interviews (Emond, 2002; Maunsell, 1997; Rogers, 2005; Smith & Dunworth, 2003). In **GUI**, introductory meetings or observations prior to collecting data will not be possible. There will be one 90-minute opportunity to collect the qualitative data in each wave. A number of measures have been devised to ease both parents and children into the research interview. Researchers will make an initial introductory phone call to the families before calling to the house to conduct the interviews. At the outset of the interview, the researcher will spend some time getting to know both the child and parent(s) through informal conversation, or, in the case of the nine-month-olds, playful interactions. For nine-month-olds, there are additional considerations to bear in mind. Children of this age are often wary of strangers and the best approach may be a very low-key one, giving the baby a chance to see the stranger interacting with the parents and giving them time to appreciate that the stranger does not represent a threat. Also, the first interactions should be similarly low-key, with the researcher taking cues from the baby as to how much engagement is tolerable and how quickly. For the nine-year-olds, it is also important not to start the interview with demanding tasks or questions. A number of practical strategies to break the ice with respondents have been developed. Ice-breaker activities and games can help to reduce the power imbalance, promote a sense of togetherness and establish a more equitable relationship (Kirova & Emme, 2006). In the case of **GUI**, the data generated by ice-breaker activities, such as the child 'passport' used with the nine-year cohort, will be analysed and form part of the Study.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.2.2.2 *The issue of 'adult authority'*

Children can and do feel a sense of obedience towards adults, seeing them as the experts, and consequently they can be inclined to provide answers that they think the researcher expects to hear (Hill, 1997; Mahon, Glendinning, Clark & Craig, 1996; Mayall, 2000). More critically, from an ethical perspective, they can feel obliged or forced into taking part in the research. This power imbalance is likely to exist in the research relationship. To limit the impact of this sense of adult authority, researchers must try to gain the trust and confidence of each child. Attempting to develop a rapport before engaging with the child in the formal research process is fundamental to limiting the impact of the power imbalance. Alderson and Morrow (2004) highlight the importance of trying to develop intimacy during the interview. The authors advocate a number of sympathetic techniques, which **GUI** will employ, such as

<sup>8</sup> A copy of the qualitative protocols and procedures, including the interview schedules, is available in the Technical Report on the 9-Year Qualitative Study.



sitting at the same eye-level as the child, asking the child's permission to take notes or tape-record, and encouraging the child by talking clearly, fairly slowly and not too loudly, keeping eye contact, and looking and sounding interested (Alderson & Morrow, 2004). To elicit the child's views, the researcher must demonstrate an awareness of how he or she could influence the research encounter. One practical implication for **GUI** is that the researchers must not, consciously or unconsciously, lead the child. Inadvertent affirmations and judgments made in conversation with the child can lead the child to offer responses based on what he or she thinks the researcher wants to hear, which can ultimately reinforce the power imbalance and undermine the validity of the research findings. To build a rapport, the **GUI** researchers will be instructed to use a warm tone, and offer reassurance and gratitude to the respondent. However, he or she will engage with the child without using positive or negative affirmations, to ensure that the child can securely put forward their own view independent of how they perceive this will be received by the researcher. Children are told at the outset of the interview and will be reminded during the interview that they can withdraw at any time.

### 3.2.3 Using multiple methods of qualitative data-collection

In the context of all research encounters, children will vary in terms of their maturity. Researchers must be cognisant of this and adapt the research encounter to suit the developmental needs of the individual child. The child's cognitive, emotional and social development will influence their ability to give an account of particular experiences. Methodological approaches can be selected which are developmentally and age-appropriate, and support the child's participation in exploring the research question at hand.

Each method of qualitative data-collection can have particular strengths and weaknesses depending on the child and the situation. France, Bendelow and Williams (2000) suggest that traditional processes of engaging research participants – the questionnaire and interview – can, for certain groups of young people, be alienating. However, the in-depth interview is the most appropriate research encounter to adopt given the one contact meeting that is available to us in **GUI**. However, to limit this sense of alienation that some children might feel, other activity-based techniques will be used throughout the child interview.<sup>9</sup> As children are usually more used to communication through drawings, games and exercises, using these tools during the interview can be particularly helpful to engage with children who may sometimes find it hard to convey their feelings and opinions readily in words, and especially to a strange adult (Hill, Laybourn & Borland, 1996; Kirova & Emme, 2006). It is important to bear in mind that methods such as drawings may not necessarily enable children to express themselves clearly (Backett-Milburn & McKie, 1999) and that information derived from drawings should be interpreted with caution. **GUI** recognises that different methods can suit different children and purposes; the schedules thus include a range of different qualitative methods which can support children with varying degrees of abilities, interests and preferences.<sup>10</sup>

### 3.2.4 Supporting diversity

A number of issues are important in ensuring the comfort, safety and meaningful participation of children in the research project. It is important to take into account the fact that the child participants have diverse backgrounds and abilities. Hill (2006) suggests that differences in age, physical and mental ability, ethnicity and culture will be crucial in determining the most appropriate method of data-collection. To create an inclusive research environment in which all children can actively and meaningfully participate, a number of barriers have to be removed and the research tools must be adapted to meet the individual requirements of the children.

The voices of children with impairments, including communication, cognitive, visual and physical disabilities, have been stifled in research and consultation processes in the past, by the double jeopardy effect of both age and disability (Whyte, 2005). One useful approach to facilitating and supporting the

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 6 for further details on the creative techniques to be used.

<sup>10</sup> A copy of the qualitative protocols and procedures, including the interview schedules, is available in the Technical Report on the 9-Year Qualitative Study.



involvement of children with impairments involves the researcher asking questions in advance of the interview about the child's individual requirements, to ensure that the necessary supports can be made available for the child to actively participate. In her UK study seeking to explore the views and opinions of children and young people with disabilities, Morris (2003) found that the main barriers to identifying and meeting young people's communication needs rested with the adult gatekeepers. In some instances, the person with whom the researchers were negotiating access did not have enough knowledge of the communication needs of the child. In other cases, the researchers were informed by adult agents that particular children should be excluded as they would not be able to tell the researchers anything. In some cases, adult agents underestimated the amount of assistance that participants required in order to meaningfully participate (Morris, 2003). Whyte (2005) has developed a useful set of guidelines for those doing social research with children. She outlines good practice at all stages of the research process, from planning to implementing the research design, to analysing the data and finally disseminating the research findings. Whyte (2005) recommends that information about the child's impairment and the impact on the child's ability to participate in the research must be gathered at the outset of the research process. In **GUI**, supports will be put in place to ensure that consent is informed and those methods which are appropriate for the individual child can be designed or adapted.

Cultural diversity, including language differences, among children may also have implications when researching children's views. An awareness and understanding of cultural differences at the planning stages can help the researcher to better support the child throughout the research process. The researcher should actively seek information about ethnic traditions and meanings, and language differences. In **GUI**, where necessary, as in the quantitative study, materials will be translated and translators employed where needed.

### 3.2.5 Involving children in research design

The development of child-centred research methods seeks to emphasise the empowerment of children in the research process, overcome the power imbalance between the child and the adult researcher, and reduce any sense of intimidation that can be evoked by more traditional methods. Such methods aim to be child-friendly and inclusive, and to support the development of a rapport with participants.

Researchers may with the best of intentions perceive their methods to be child-centred, but in reality the children themselves may view things very differently. Children have a key role in advising researchers on the suitability of qualitative methods. It is only by hearing the voice and advice of children themselves regarding methods designed for research with children that one really discovers the degree to which a qualitative technique is child-centred and appropriate for researching a particular group of children. Involving children in designing research promotes good research practice, science and ethics (Alderson & Morrow, 2004). Consulting children on actual and potential research methods will improve the quality and outcomes of individual research studies (Hill, 2006). More and more commonly, children are being included in research advisory committees to facilitate their involvement in the design stages of the research process. For example, an Irish study exploring the impact of disability on family members invited children and young people to participate on a panel of experts advising the researchers (ISPC, 2006).

**GUI** established a Children's Advisory Forum (CAF) in October 2006 to ensure that children are provided with a direct platform to have their voices heard in the design, development and implementation of the study and, by doing so, to enhance the significance and relevance of **GUI**. The CAF is made up of 84 children who sit on 12 committees in schools across Ireland. Seven boys and girls sit on each committee. The schools in which these committees sit are spread across several regions including Limerick, Cork, Westmeath, Dublin and Wicklow. These regions were chosen in order to represent a diverse mix of schools and communities. In the initial year of the study it was envisaged that the CAF would provide input on a range of issues, including:

- instrument design
- the qualitative schedule
- information and consent forms





- communication methods and materials, including website design, information packs and media launch
- publications targeting children and young people
- dissemination strategies

The CAF has played an integral part in the development of the instrumentation for both the quantitative and qualitative components of **GUI**.<sup>11</sup> For the quantitative component, the CAF advised the Study Team on research questions the children felt were important to children in Ireland, the language and vocabulary to be used in the children's surveys, and the refinement of paper and audio questionnaires. The CAF children spontaneously asked for more focus to be given to open-ended questions and welcomed the inclusion of the qualitative component. The children have participated in the development and refinement of the qualitative protocols and in testing out materials and procedures before final decisions were made on the design and content of the pilot study. In relation to the appropriateness of the schedule to the developmental status of the children, the responses of the CAF children to the proposed techniques and interview questions were very important in establishing both what they understood and what they found interesting and enjoyable.

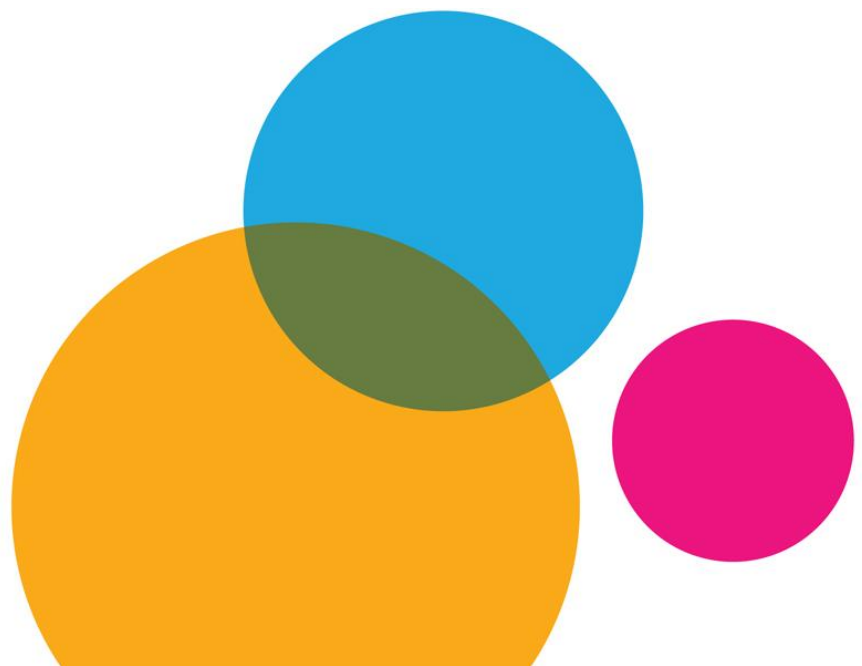
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<sup>11</sup> A report on year one of the Children's Advisory Forum (CAF) process and an external evaluation report on the CAF process are available from the Study Team.



# Chapter 4

## ASSESSING RIGOUR IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH





## 4.1 Introduction

It is important to ensure that qualitative research is conducted in such a way as to demonstrate its value and its credibility. Do the data collected through the chosen qualitative methods address the research questions, and are the findings trustworthy and reflective of the views of the children and adults involved? This chapter will explore the issues which must be borne in mind when assessing rigour in qualitative research.

## 4.2 Criteria for measuring research quality

Arriving at a set of criteria for measuring quality in qualitative research is a complex task. Researchers take different approaches to assessing rigour in qualitative research and there is no one set of standards, agreed by all researchers in the field (Agar, 1986; Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Silverman, 2000; Sparkes, 2001). Some qualitative researchers resist the idea that clear criteria for assessing quality should be specified, arguing that qualitative research “must resist the temptation to provide a rigid checklist of rules that qualitative research must follow if it is deemed to be valid” (Murphy et al., 1998, p.178). While accepting that rigidly applied criteria may not be appropriate and that any one list may well be the subject of contention, it is desirable that every effort should be made to ensure rigour and that sensible and generally agreed guidelines should be drawn up and adhered to.

### 4.2.1 Traditional criteria

The dominant scientific perspective on how we should approach the acquisition of knowledge about human nature and human behaviour privileges quantification and experimentation. From this perspective, the primary interest is in arriving at universal laws or at the very least principles, similar in standing to those which are at the heart of physics and the other natural sciences. Establishing causal connections between independent and dependent variables is seen as a key goal, and accurate identification and measurement of the relevant variables is crucial. Any measurement device or procedure must be both valid (it measures what it purports to measure) and reliable (accurate) (Trochim, 2006). On the other hand, qualitative research does not seek to establish universal principles, nor to reduce human behaviour and experience to variables. Measurement and quantification are not of central relevance to qualitative research, so the application of criteria relating to validity and reliability is approached differently in qualitative research.

### 4.2.2 Alternative criteria

Qualitative researchers attempt to access the subjective world of the people whom they study, to illuminate and understand the richness and diversity of human experience. Concepts such as trustworthiness, credibility, transparency, transferability and confirmability have been used by qualitative researchers from various theoretical standpoints to pinpoint the desirable features of good qualitative research. The challenge for **GUI** is to adhere to these principles, to represent the unique perspectives of the research participants and to provide interpretations that are trustworthy.

## 4.3 Principles for improving quality in qualitative research

### 4.3.1 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is by far the most important criterion for judging the value of qualitative research. It is a matter of convincing the reader that the findings are authentic and well-founded.

Establishing trustworthiness entails a number of different processes. According to Guba (1981) and Guba and Lincoln (1994), trustworthiness has four key elements: credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. Although there are other conceptualisations of how best to ensure confidence in qualitative data, the Guba and Lincoln analysis has been widely accepted. In addition to the considerations originally discussed by Guba and Lincoln, we have added two more: the provision of an



audit trail and the incorporation of a reflexive orientation. The provision of a clear audit trail will be dealt with separately as a manifestation of the general obligation to communicate clearly how exactly all the credibility-enhancing and trustworthiness-assuring mechanisms have been implemented. Likewise, reflexivity will be dealt with separately. The researcher's scrutiny of his or her own positioning in relation to the research process is seen as an important overarching orientation, based on the assumption that the personal will always be part of the picture and that it should be made explicit.

Some authors would see the establishment of trustworthiness as synonymous with establishing rigour. Also, although two extra mechanisms for increasing the overall rigour of qualitative research (audit trail and reflexivity) are listed here as separate processes, they too feed into an ultimate decision about the trustworthiness of any piece of qualitative research.

### ***Credibility***

Credibility pertains to the extent to which the research findings are believable as a reflection of the phenomena under consideration. It can be enhanced by a number of different strategies, which include: locating the research in its context; transparency in relation to process; member checking; triangulation of method or informants, as well as other strategies described below.

#### *Contextualization*

First, researchers can ensure that strenuous efforts are made to get to know the key aspects of the phenomena and their context. Thus, in working with children and their parents, the individuals and their context should be well understood and well described (Yardley, 2000). The review of the quantitative data already collected on each family that we will conduct at the outset of the qualitative component of **GUI** will ensure that we have a good understanding of the characteristics of respondents and so be able to appropriately contextualise the qualitative findings.

#### Transparency

An essential requirement for credibility, discussed in various ways by different researchers but widely agreed upon, is to give a full account of the research process, often referred to as transparency. This will include a clear rationale for why the research is being carried out, what assumptions have framed the research questions, and what theoretical frameworks are used to generate research questions and shape interpretations of the data.

#### *Thick description*

'Thick description' is a term first used by Kuzel and Like (1991) to describe the process of documenting the methods and procedures employed during data collection, analysis and interpretation. Thick description is the first step in the provision of an adequate audit trail. The audit trail, which will be discussed later, is a mechanism for demonstrating that the researcher has observed best practice through the research process, from start to finish.

#### *Triangulation*

To increase the credibility of their approach, researchers should use triangulation. The goal of triangulation is to use multiple angles of approach to gain a deeper understanding of the research question and thus to enhance the credibility of the data. Triangulation can take different forms. It can involve the use of multiple methods, multiple informants, multiple researchers and/or multiple theories. In terms of methods, the mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, adopted by **GUI**, will ensure that the two methods of data-collection can be used in a complementary fashion, giving different perspectives on the same phenomena or issues.



Another form of triangulation is to seek the views of multiple informants on the same phenomenon – for example, asking the child, the teacher and the parent about the child’s happiness in school. This form of triangulation is being incorporated in the quantitative component of **GUI**.

#### *Peer debriefing*

Peer debriefing is a further useful strategy to ensure credibility. It entails asking a disinterested peer researcher to probe the interpretations made and the possible biases of the researcher. Interpretation of data can be strengthened by involving more than one researcher in coding and/or interpreting the same data-set (this in itself qualifies as a type of triangulation, focused on interpretation of the data). In quantitative research, inter-rater reliability is established quantitatively, aided by the fact that each researcher is working with numbers. A comparable process can be carried out with qualitative data, although it does not typically result in a numeric assessment of the degree of concordance between the researchers. A team of qualitative researchers will be involved in the data-collection, analysis and interpretation in **GUI**. This should limit the impact of researcher bias.

#### *Negative case analysis/looking for disconfirming evidence*

A further strategy is labelled negative case analysis. This entails the close examination of material which goes against the grain of the other findings, thus testing the researcher’s favoured line of interpretation and possible biases. In general, strenuous efforts must be made to look for alternative explanations of the research findings. Kuzel and Like (1991) suggest that adopting the principle of seeking disconfirming evidence helps to ensure that the researcher’s final interpretations have credibility. Looking for disconfirming evidence entails including both complementary and conflicting data (Kuzel & Like, 1991).

#### *Member checking*

Member checking, or respondent validation, is an important mechanism for testing credibility. It entails returning to the research participants to ask them to comment on the data and on the researcher’s interpretation of the data. This can take place when the findings are in draft format or can be incorporated into the research process at an earlier stage. In working with children, as with adults, it is important that the researcher’s interpretations are checked back against the respondents’ own views and that the researcher’s own views do not take precedence. Nonetheless, researchers should be aware that respondents do not always recognise their own motivations or recall important events in their own lives with accuracy (Greene and Hill, 2005). The capacity to employ this strategy in **GUI** is constrained by the structure of the qualitative component. The fact that there is only one point of contact with respondents in each wave of the qualitative component limits our ability to return to respondents to validate our interpretation of their responses. However, **GUI** researchers will use active listening skills such as repeating, summarising and paraphrasing during the qualitative interviews to confirm with the child and the parent(s) that the researcher has heard and interpreted the responses correctly. Where non-verbal data is collected, such as drawings and photographs, the researcher will ask the child and the parent to interpret their productions so that the potential risk of misinterpretation by the researcher is reduced.

#### *Verbatim quotation*

Quoting the participants’ own words is a common approach in qualitative research. It keeps faith with the view that qualitative research should allow participants to express their experience in their own way, but also serves as a further credibility check since the reader can make up his or her own mind about the intentions of the speaker and whether the researcher’s interpretations are justified. **GUI** will include anonymised quotes from participants in the qualitative reports to support the findings. One of the dangers in selecting quotations is that the researcher picks quotations which confirm biases held by the researcher and that quotations are selected because they are dramatic or interesting. For example, quotations from relatively inarticulate children may be avoided. Another danger is that a respondent might be recognised from the content or even the style of their quote.



### **Dependability**

Dependability is basically about consistency. As with trustworthiness, it is founded on careful description and transparency in the reporting of the research project. The reader should be confident that the reporting is accurate and that, if they followed the steps of analysis and interpretation with the same data-set, they would arrive at the same conclusions. Dependability requires honesty and full disclosure about changes in the circumstances surrounding the research, problems with the implementation of methods, drop-out rates, etc.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the research findings can be confirmed or corroborated by others. This implies openness on the part of the researcher to alternative interpretations. It may be assisted by the researcher's capacity for reflexivity, and alertness to their own biases and their own failures in terms of recognising important themes or issues inherent in the data. **GUI** will adopt a systematic and comprehensive approach to data analysis which may help to ensure that selection biases on the part of the researcher do not prevail. The use of second coders or readers can help in increasing confidence in the data and their interpretation.

### **Transferability**

Generalisability is an important attribute of quantitative research. Random selection of research participants is often used in order to ensure that the results of the study can be generalised to the population of interest. This is a very important feature of the main quantitative component in **GUI**.

Given the nature of qualitative studies, it is often not possible to generalise findings to a population. Furthermore, generalising is usually not the aim of qualitative research; rather the focus is on providing a full account of the perspectives of a particular group of respondents. Transferability, as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1981), is a concept similar to the principle of external validity, or generalisability, in quantitative research, and is concerned with the degree to which the results of the research can be seen as relevant to other participants in other settings. To highlight transferability, Guba and Lincoln suggest that the researcher thoroughly document the research methods, context and any assumptions that have been made so that the audience can judge how viable and meaningful a transfer of the results to a different setting might be (Krefting, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Some qualitative researchers adopt what has been termed a saturation strategy whereby they keep adding to their sample until they are confident that no new or surprising information on the phenomenon of interest is likely to emerge. In a sense, many qualitative researchers adopt this strategy in their selection of a sample where they will typically choose a group who represent, in the loose sense of the word, the population of interest. Thus, in **GUI**, the qualitative sample will be selected with reference to the key parameters of the achieved sample in the main study.<sup>12</sup>

#### **4.3.2 Audit trail**

A mechanism which can be used to increase the trustworthiness and dependability of a piece of qualitative research is the audit trail (Rodgers and Cowles, 1993). Some elements of the audit trail have already been mentioned in the previous sections since it is ultimately about a complete description of the research, such that every step is explained and described. An audit trail provides signposts for the reader to not only what was done but why it was done. In some ways it makes explicit the researcher's thought process as well as the decisions and practical steps the researcher has taken. When an audit trail is provided, independent audits of the research are, theoretically and practically, enabled. Someone other than the researcher can follow the logical progression from the research question to the data to the final report, to ascertain for themselves if the findings are justified (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Smith & Dunworth, 2003; Yin, 1989). It implies a careful paper trail of all that was done and a record of why things

<sup>12</sup> In some qualitative studies the group of participants or indeed the single case study may be chosen because they are atypical or *sui generis* and the level of transferability is thus very limited.



were done, the latter being labelled the 'decision trail' by some authors (Koch, 2006). Keeping raw data so that they can be re-analysed or re-interpreted can also be seen as a matter of good practice in constructing an audit trail. Without a clear audit trail, gaps or ambiguities can compromise the quality of the data and any interpretations based on them can be questioned. With this in mind, all raw data, transcriptions and coding structures from the qualitative component of **GUI** will be securely stored.

Each stage of the qualitative component of **GUI** will be fully documented. Researchers will record detailed notes and observations on the context of each interview with both the child and the parent(s). These field notes will be coded and entered into NVivo and linked to the qualitative and quantitative data analysis. A full description of the relevant characteristics of the research participants allows readers to understand who the participants are and ultimately to decide whether or not the findings relating to these participants might transfer to other children and parent(s) in other contexts. Full but precise description carries through to later stages of the research process. Just as in quantitative research, the reader should be able, theoretically, to replicate the research process, but, unlike in quantitative research, there is no expectation that the research findings will be replicable in another setting. The uniqueness of qualitative research encounters does constrain our ability to claim that the qualitative findings can speak for all children in the study; nevertheless, the strengths of the rich data generated by qualitative research when integrated with the quantitative component will complement and contextualise our overall understanding of the analyses.

### 4.3.3 Reflexivity

The qualitative researcher should be reflexive, that is, aware of how his or her own conscious and unconscious biases may interfere with the research process. Most qualitative researchers do not subscribe to the view that complete objectivity is attainable. Instead they attempt to minimise the inevitable intrusion of the researcher's own subjective processes and biases. The researcher must consider his or her role in the research process and the potential impact of personal ideology and dispositions on the research findings. Some aspects of being reflexive may be very personal such as recognising that your political beliefs may be directing your selection and leading you to highlight some findings to the exclusion of others. Other aspects of reflexivity may be more general but still demand self-awareness on the part of researcher. For example, the power relationship between adults and children and its effects on the research relationship are relatively well understood (Hill, 2006). A researcher who is not aware of how his or her adult status may be perceived by children may fail to adopt strategies which can minimise the negative effect of the power differential. The extent of the researcher's reflexivity may also be demonstrated in the audit trail. As mentioned in the previous chapter, **GUI** will make use of ice-breaker exercises to aid rapport and the researchers will refrain from leading participants and react in a neutral manner to the child's and the parents' responses. Strategies such as triangulation and peer-debriefing (discussed above) will be used in **GUI** to avoid biased interpretations of the data.

### 4.3.4 Other approaches to defining criteria

A number of contemporary writers have asserted that there is no one agreed set of criteria for judging the rigour and quality of qualitative research. We have selected the Guba and Lincoln criteria, supplemented by the audit trail and the application of reflexivity.

Although the criteria offered by Guba and Lincoln are reasonably widely accepted, there are many other specifications of the criteria for judging the adequacy of qualitative research. Oakley (2000) discusses eight frameworks which she divides into two categories, those which adhere to 'quantitative' principles (such as reliability and validity) and those which have developed new 'qualitative' criteria, Guba and Lincoln (1989) being an example of the latter. In general, among those who seek to develop criteria that fit the qualitative paradigm, there is more correspondence than dispute, although they may use different vocabularies or emphasise different criteria. For example, Yardley (2000) presents her criteria under three broad headings: sensitivity to context; commitment, rigour, transparency and coherence; and impact and importance. The first two categories map onto criteria outlined by Guba and Lincoln and



those who have elaborated on their system such as Krefting (1990). The last category represents an interesting addition, in that it emphasises an assessment of the extent to which the research findings open up a new means of understanding the topic at hand and the extent to which change has been facilitated by the research. Taking a rather different approach, Parker (2004) emphasises three overarching criteria for good research, and makes the case that these criteria should apply to both qualitative and quantitative research. His criteria are: a clear grounding of the work in existing research; coherence in the argument of the study; and accessibility of the presentation. All told, there are many mechanisms which may improve rigour and it is important to incorporate as many as possible into one's research practice. Adopting a clear framework such as the one offered by Guba and Lincoln, with some additional considerations culled from more recent literature, should provide a strong foundation for establishing the quality and value of the qualitative component of **GUI**.

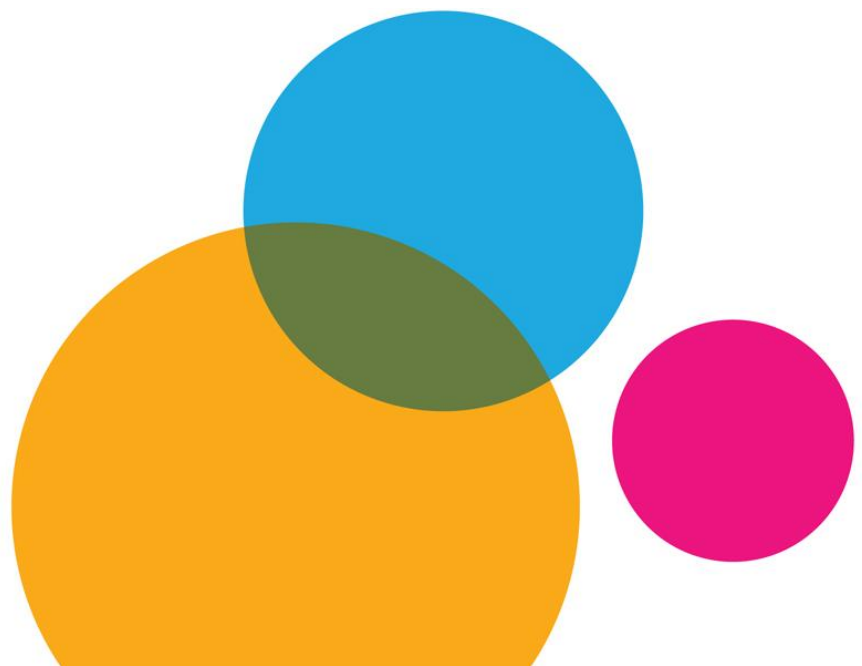






# Chapter 5

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ENCOUNTERS





## 5.1 Introduction

Social constructions and interpretations of childhood have a strong impact on how children's views and opinions are listened to and valued by society. In the past the child's perspective was often ignored, because children were seen to be incapable of giving reliable information or because they were assumed to have an inferior understanding of their lives to that of the adults responsible for them (Smith, Taylor & Trapp, 2003). The identification of children as a distinct group with human rights has only recently come to the fore in Ireland (Devine, 2003). Prior to the 1960s, discourses about childhood were highly paternalistic, reflecting the view that children were ultimately the property of their parents, without rights or any special position in society (Rankin, 2002). Subsequently the children's rights movement sought to alter the position of the child in society and promote the view that children are entitled to independent legal rights. With the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992 and the development of the National Children's Strategy in 2000, Ireland has acknowledged children as rights-holders. The UNCRC enshrines many different rights, including the right to have a voice in matters which are of direct concern to the child. The concept of children's participation in decision-making processes is important as it acknowledges a shift in the view of children as beneficiaries of adult interventions towards respecting them as rights-holders who are key 'makers and shapers' of their own destinies and that of their own societies (Stevenson, 2003). It is now widely accepted that adults cannot always be used as reliable proxies for children's views; assuming that adults will always know best and will act in the best interests of children has failed many children (Beresford, 1997; Lansdown, 2001). Since the early 1990s a new emphasis has emerged on valuing the child's perspective and understanding their lived experience.

Qualitative research provides an avenue for children's experiences and perspectives on their life situation to be articulated. Methods used by qualitative researchers are seen as more effective in enabling children to communicate in their own terms and to express their own understanding of their worlds (Barker & Weller, 2003; Greene & Hogan, 2005). As discussed in Chapter 2, research approaches and methods should be critiqued in terms of how effectively they answer the research questions and succeed in doing what they claim to do. And, as outlined in Chapter 4, some research issues present themselves differently when the participant is a child; the challenge for researchers is to facilitate a research encounter in which the child is encouraged to express their views authentically. Some qualitative researchers working with children label their approach 'participatory research', arguing that it differs from traditional research practices by actively engaging children as participants in the research process and acknowledging and dealing with issues such as power, control and authority. O'Kane (2000), for example, argues that such an approach allows the child to participate on their own terms and enables children's voices, needs and interests to be articulated. This view that 'participatory research' is empowering to children is not unproblematic since it can often oversimplify what is happening when children engage in the research process, however friendly and well-meaning the adult researchers. Some children will have had negative experiences of talking to adults which will make them wary of sharing their views with them openly and honestly. Some will have difficulty in articulating their views or may be swayed by the context to say things they do not mean or say things that they meant at that moment but which do not represent their normal point of view. There are many reasons why 'giving children a voice' is a project that needs interrogation (Greene and Hill, 2005; James, 2007).

Qualitative research with children typically relies on four main forms of encounters for gathering information directly from the child: focus groups, observations, children's own productions, and interviewing one to one. Within the structure of the research encounter, the researcher may employ other indirect methodological approaches to support the child in putting forward their perspective (e.g. drawings, photographs, role plays and puppetry). Although many researchers thoroughly document their methodological approaches, there is a dearth of literature providing critical accounts of these approaches, including the rationale for choosing a particular methodology, the strengths and weaknesses of a method, and the method-specific ethical and practical problems encountered when researching children's experiences (Greene & Hogan, 2005). In this chapter we will attempt to critically explore the application of these four research encounters in the context of **GUI**.



## 5.2 'Participatory' research with children

Qualitative research is attractive in terms of hearing the voice of the child, using their own language. This approach can allow room for children to describe their own views, unique experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences from their own perspectives and through their own words (Hogan, 1997; Orford, 1995; Smith & Dunworth, 2003). This is often termed 'participatory' research, though this may be a somewhat misleading and misguided term since any research that involves children directly (including surveys and experiments) is essentially participatory. It is often a synonym for qualitative research directly engaging with children (as opposed to qualitative research on children that examines texts, observes children from a distance or uses proxy informants). Champions of this kind of qualitative research with children emphasise treating the child as expert, with an active agentic role in the research encounter (Christensen & James, 2000; Greene & Hogan, 2005; Hill, 1997, 2006; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000).

The individual and diverse nature of children and their developmental status must be considered when designing methodological approaches for researching children's experiences. Researchers must take into account developmental differences such as the child's age, levels of understanding and knowledge, and cognitive and communicative abilities, along with characteristics such as personality, individual interests and cultural background. This must be balanced with the researcher's core responsibility to safeguard and protect the child's welfare. To research children's views requires methodological approaches that can capture the nature of children's lives as lived (Greene & Hill, 2005). Some researchers ally themselves with a particular theoretical position and one favoured method of enquiry, such as phenomenology or symbolic interactionism. But many qualitative researchers use a variety of qualitative methods in their studies with children, adopting what might be termed methodological pluralism. A concern which applies to all methods is to ensure that the research is conducted within an ethical framework and that the techniques used offer the best means of engaging with children in a way that is right for them.

## 5.3 The one-to-one interview

The one-to-one interview is the most commonly used direct technique to elicit the child's perspective. Interviews have been used with children in educational, social and psychological research on a range of themes, including highly sensitive issues (Edmond, 2002; Guerin & Hennessy, 1997; Hoot, Tadesse & Abdella, 2006; Maunsell, 1997; Rogers, 2005). The interview allows the researcher to collect detailed information from the child on their experiences, views and feelings. Given that we have a single opportunity to collect data from the child and his or her parents in the family home, the one-to-one interview is the most appropriate research encounter for us to adopt in the qualitative component of **GUI**.

### 5.3.1 Conversational methods

Little is documented in the literature regarding conversational methods for use in interviews with children; however, researchers must adapt their communication to cater for the child's cognitive development and linguistic ability. Smith and Dunworth (2003) suggest two general guidelines for interviewing children. First, they call for researchers to be flexible to meet the needs of each child and to respect individual capabilities. The sequence of data-collection from the quantitative and qualitative components of **GUI** means that we are afforded the opportunity to collect a large bank of quantitative data before commencing the qualitative fieldwork. This means that the researchers will have access to a lot of information about the individual characteristics of each child before each interview. This allows us to adapt our approach to meet the needs of each child, within the constraint of having to address the same issues with all children and families. Secondly, the authors recommend that the researcher take care when interviewing and analysing data to check the accuracy and reliability of the researcher's understanding of the child's account (Smith & Dunworth, 2003). As outlined in Chapter 4, active listening skills such as repeating, summarising and paraphrasing during the qualitative interviews will be used to confirm with the child and the parent(s) that the researcher has heard and interpreted the responses correctly. The strength of the semi-structured interview is that it permits prompts and further enquiry to either clarify what the respondent means or to explore a new facet that the respondent has introduced.



Where non-verbal data is collected in **GUI**, such as drawings and photographs, the researcher will ask the child and the parent to interpret their productions so the potential risk of misinterpretation by the researcher is reduced.

Eliciting the child's authentic perspective may be inhibited or truncated by poorly worded questions on the interview schedule (Lewis & Lindsay, 2000). Christensen and James (2000) emphasise the need to pay attention to how children use language, their conceptual meanings and their actions in order to understand their social interactions. Children can provide invaluable assistance to the researcher in developing the interview schedule. Consulting children about the design of interview questions and appropriate language can result in an interview schedule suitable to the respondents' developmental status. This is something that **GUI** has had the opportunity to do. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the Children's Advisory Forum (CAF) has played an integral part in the development of our instrumentation for both the quantitative and qualitative components. The CAF advised the Study Team on language and vocabulary to be used in both the survey of nine-year-olds and the qualitative interview schedule, and guided the researchers on the logical ordering of questions on the interview schedule.<sup>13</sup>

### 5.3.2 The impact of a single meeting

In some studies using one-to-one interviews, multiple meetings between the researcher and the child have taken place to facilitate the development of trust and familiarity. In an Irish study exploring what children know about the legal system, which relied on one-to-one interviewing with school-children aged between four and 12, the researcher visited each classroom before the child was interviewed; one day was spent as a classroom assistant so that the children could become familiar with the interviewer (Maunsell, 1997). The children were also brought on a group visit to the interview room to familiarise them with its content and location (Maunsell, 1997). Rogers' (2005) exploration of children's relationships involved three meetings with individual children. In the first instance, the interviewers went to meet the children with drawing materials, cards, jokes and puppets with the sole purpose of forming a relationship and developing trust (Rogers, 2005). Furthermore, some researchers have used extended time-frames to enable the researcher and child to meet on several occasions so that they become familiar, build a relationship and establish trust. Emond (2002) interviewed young people in care – about their educational experiences – over a six-month period to allow a sense of trust and familiarity to evolve within the research encounter. Although in these studies the researchers document the process of holding informal meetings with the children before the formal interview, it is not evident how these multiple meetings affected the data-collection process. It is difficult to ascertain how the quality of data-collection might have been affected if a single meeting between the child and researcher had taken place. The structure of the qualitative component of **GUI** does not allow multiple meetings to take place. However, having taken part in the quantitative component, the children will be familiar with the process of having an adult come into their home to ask them questions.

### 5.3.3 Breaking the ice

Even where time may be limited to one meeting, activities can be conducted as a means of 'breaking the ice'. An ice-breaker can be an activity such as a story or a game that helps the children to feel relaxed (Boyden & Ennew, 1997). Ice-breaker exercises or warm-up exercises can be used at the start of the interview to help children to relax and develop a rapport with the interviewer. Hill, Laybourn and Borland (1996) used 'about myself' worksheets at the start of their individual interviews with 28 primary school pupils in their study of children's emotions and well-being. Bonnell and Gauntlett (2004) conducted an art and identity project with young people, in which the young people were given a blank passport, art materials and a polaroid camera and asked to create a document recording aspects of themselves called 'The Passport of Me'. Similar techniques, such as creating a personal scrapbook, have been used in the context of therapeutic work with children as a means of breaking the ice and easing the children into talking about more sensitive topics (NFCA, 1999). The techniques are intended to allow the researchers to get to know the children in an unthreatening way by asking them to write some details about

<sup>13</sup> A report on year one of the Children's Advisory Forum (CAF) process and an external evaluation report on the CAF process is available from the Study Team.



themselves; for example, their likes and dislikes concerning food and pop stars. With the nine-year-old children, **GUI** will start with a fun-oriented task, 'The Time Capsule'. The child will be invited to create a time capsule from a cardboard poster tube and be given time later in the interview to illustrate it. All their work during the interview will be placed in the time capsule and returned to them when **GUI** sees them again at age 13. This has proven to be a non-threatening way of starting the interview and helping the child to understand what is involved. It is followed by the 'My Passport' task which helps the researcher to get to know the child's interests.

## 5.4 Focus groups

The focus group is a qualitative research encounter that brings together respondents in a group situation to discuss the research questions in an interactive group setting. In some cases, focus groups can be a useful method of alleviating the pressure created by a one-to-one situation by offering a more supportive, non-threatening climate for respondents. Depending on the individual nature of the parent or the child, a one-to-one encounter might be seen as intimidating and quite daunting. Some individuals may be more confident in a group and find the focus group a more comfortable encounter. Research exploring young people's views on how they would like to be consulted has highlighted that small discussion groups can help young people to feel less shy and that listening to other people's ideas can prompt individuals to remember their own experiences or clarify their own thoughts (Stafford, Laybourn & Hill, 2003). The use of focus groups in the qualitative component of **GUI** is not appropriate given the nature of our research questions, our commitment to confidentiality and anonymity regarding individual answers, and the household context within which we are collecting data. However, the focus group has been a particularly useful context in which we have consulted and collected data from the Children's Advisory Forum (CAF).

### 5.4.1 Preparing the group

Developing trust, rapport and familiarity within the group context is as important in the focus group encounter as it is in the one-to-one interview. In the group situation, as with the one-to-one interview, introductory sessions and ice-breaking exercises play a useful role in warming up the participants. Buckley, Whelan and Holt's (2006) study of children's experiences of domestic violence involved ice-breaking sessions, including activities, games and snacks, a day before focus groups were held. These sessions offered participants the chance to meet the researchers, find out more about the project, what their own participation involved and, in some cases, to get to know the other children taking part. **GUI** held an introductory focus-group session with the CAF in each of the 12 schools involved in the process. The aim of the onsite focus group in each school was to introduce the children to the two CAF facilitators and the external evaluator, and give them the chance to learn more about the background and objectives of the study and the role of the CAF, before collection of the children's perspectives on some preliminary issues relating to the design of the study.

### 5.4.2 The group dynamic

In the group context, how participants interact will affect the responses collected and ultimately the research outcomes. The dynamic of the focus group may be influenced by the size of the group, peer pressure within the group, the gender balance, development stages within the group, and the skills of the researcher in facilitating the focus group. Due to the group nature of this method of data-collection, some degree of 'showing off' can occur. Studies have documented how the focus-group situation can capture the child's natural competitiveness (i.e. their willingness to compete for attention during discussions) and shown the power dynamics that can be at play in a group situation which can invariably silence particular children (Lalor, 1997; Reay, 2006). Group participants, both adults and children, have diverse personalities and the group dynamic can lead to competing voices. In our own focus-group work with the CAF, it was evident that power differentials among the peer group can marginalise some quieter children and prevent them from putting forward their views in a group context. To encourage all of the children to have a chance to have their voice heard, we found it useful to have more than one facilitator per focus group, so that while one adult took the lead in facilitating group discussion, a second adult could focus on supporting those children who were quieter within the group in putting forward their views. It can also be helpful to introduce techniques such as the 'talking stick', in which a physical prompt such as a stick or a



microphone is passed around the group and each child gets the chance to have their say when they are holding the prompt.

### 5.4.3 Facilitating optimum responses

It has been suggested that focus groups and one-to-one interviews elicit different types of responses from participants. Some authors argue that the group interaction can result in more spontaneous responses from children, whereas responses in the one-to-one interview are more measured (Hill, Laybourn & Borland, 1996; Lalor, 1997). It can be argued that the group interaction, allowing children to hear the views of others, helps them to develop their own ideas and put forward new suggestions. However, the other side of the argument is that group discussions can lead respondents, particularly children, to follow the group norm (Heary & Hennessy, 2006). Determining which method – the interview or the focus group – results in the child's optimum response is difficult to calculate. Children are not a homogenous group and individuals will respond differently in various research encounters. The focus-group encounter can be a difficult forum in which to raise personal or sensitive issues. Researchers conducting both individual interviews and focus groups with children as part of their study found that individual interviews led to more complex and in-depth exploration of feelings (Hill, Laybourn & Borland, 1996).

A UK study, the 'Ethical Protection in Epidemiological Genetic Research: Participants' Perspectives' (EPEG) project, which seeks to explore children's perception of their involvement in the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), employed a focus-group method in the first phase of its research with children (Goodenough & Williamson, 2003). In terms of supporting the active participation of respondents in the focus group, the researchers found considerations such as the age and gender of participants to be less significant than differences in the children's experiential knowledge base (Goodenough & Williamson, 2003). One strategy the researchers found useful was to split the group according to experience. These authors also refer to the researcher's gender as having an impact on the participation of respondents in the focus group. They felt that the children would identify more closely with a same-sex facilitator (Goodenough & Williamson, 2003).

Choosing between focus groups and the one-to-one interview will depend on the research question and the individual nature of the children being researched. From the small number of studies exploring the child's perspective on research methods, it appears that there is no one best method; rather, children recognise that different methods suit different people and purposes (Heary & Hennessy, 2006; Hill, 2006). Focus groups can be more useful than the one-to-one interview for exploring new topics and establishing typical discourses or vocabulary on particular issues with children. In this context, they have been particularly useful for **GUI** to consult with the CAF on the design and development of the instrument for the quantitative study and the pilot qualitative protocols.

## 5.5 Observation

Observation involves recording events and behaviours in the context of a particular social or laboratory setting. Observations are a useful tool to allow researchers to gain insight into how individuals behave and interact in real-life situations. Data can be documented on paper, audio or video. Observational techniques are popular in the fields of anthropology and sociology, and are often the chosen methods to understand different cultures (Silverman, 2000). Observations can be non-interactive or participatory. Observations are termed non-participant where the researcher does not take part in the situation being studied, but is present in the environment. In non-participant observations, the idea is that the behaviours and interactions in the study setting continue as they would if the researcher was not there (Adler & Adler, 1998). The researcher maintains a distance from the events and simply observes the flow of interactions and behaviours within the setting. This research method is particularly suited to describing how life is in a particular context. Participant observation or ethnography involves the researcher taking part in the situation being studied, while observing. Participant observation is a process; the researcher often spends a long time in the field and develops relationships with respondents, usually incorporating interviewing and focus groups into the fieldwork. Corsaro (1997; 2003) has used ethnographic methods



for over thirty years to observe pre-school children's peer cultures and educational processes in such settings as sandboxes, play areas and queues?? outside the bathroom. His ethnographies have offered detailed explanations of the ways children learn to adjust to social situations and cope with the realities of childhood (Corsaro, 1997; 2003). Observational studies have been used in psychology to explore children in the context of the world in which they develop. Psychologists have used observations in studies to provide rich data on children's worlds, including their relationships, their behaviour within the family, their capacity to understand emotions, and their concepts of intelligence (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995; Dunn, 2005; Dunn & Plomin, 1990; Keogh & Whyte, 2006; Weisner, 1993). Observational techniques are labour-intensive and require a lot of time to be invested in the field. These methods also require an extensive time commitment on the part of the research participants, who allow the researchers to observe them over long periods of time. Observational methods will not suit all research questions. Research questions related to children's feelings, attitudes and perceptions may be more suited to one-to-one interviews or focus groups, whereas observational techniques may facilitate the exploration of children's behaviours, play and interaction. In practice, the extent to which the presence of the observer will affect the context they are observing is not clear, so the naturalness and validity of the behaviours and interactions being observed can be called into question. Non-participant observational studies have been critiqued for ignoring the voices, views and interpretations of the children themselves (Hill, 2006; Hill, Laybourn & Borland, 1996). With regard to children's experience, the analysis and interpretation of observations require a level of inference beyond that which is needed when the child is reporting directly on his or her experience (Greene & Hill, 2005).

An observational technique alone is not an appropriate data-collection method for **GUI**. The main study requires the collection of a large amount of self-reported quantifiable information that would not be accessible through an observational method. The qualitative component is seeking to gather the perspectives, thoughts, attitudes and feelings of the child and the parents around a range of domains central to the child's life. Observation would not capture this type of data. Furthermore, we are collecting data in the household context, with a 90-minute window for data-collection which limits the activities and observations that might be possible. However, during the qualitative component we will ask our researchers to make field notes of their observations within the household context. The researchers' observations in the field are very useful in supporting the transparency and credibility of the research outcomes and as such should be thoroughly documented (Boyden & Ennew, 1997). Our researchers will record their notes to form the basis of a researcher's diary, including their ideas, thoughts and feelings about the interview process with both the child and the parents. Also, in the nine-month qualitative study, the HOME schedule will be used, which entails some observation by the researcher of parent-child interaction and the general home environment (Caldwell & Bradley, 1984).

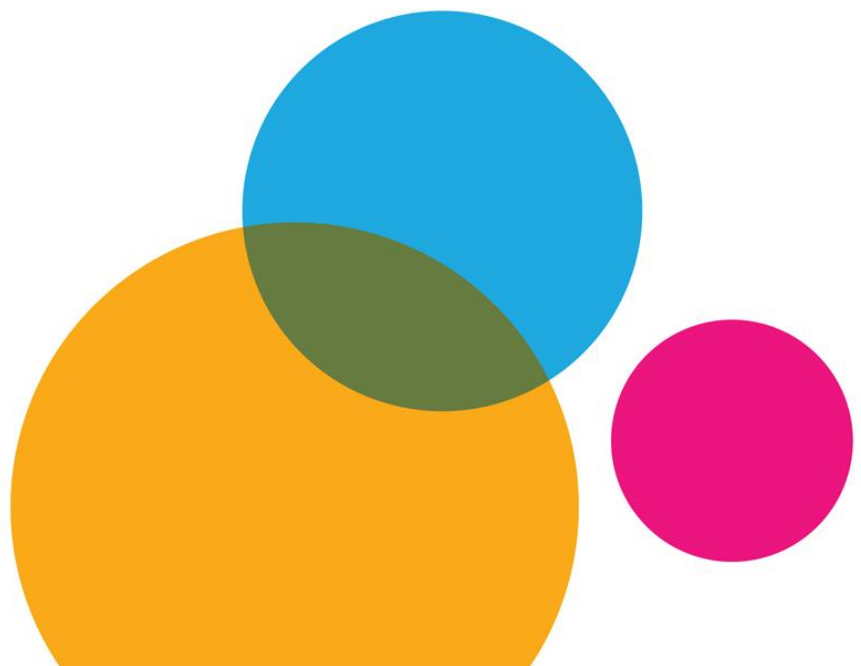






# Chapter 6

## VISUAL, CREATIVE AND PLAY-BASED TECHNIQUES





## 6.1 Introduction

In the research encounter, a number of techniques can be used to help the respondent express his or her perspective. Tools developed by practitioners interested in enabling children's participation have been used in qualitative one-to-one interviews to aid communication with children (Hill, 2006; Hill, Laybourn & Borland, 1996; McAuley, 1996).

Techniques other than the traditional interview encompass both verbal and non-verbal techniques. They include: draw and write techniques; written methods; visual imagery; visual prompts; exercises and activities; and play techniques. Using a variety of techniques and formats for discussing topics can evoke interest and hold children's attention. A lengthy one to one interview relying only on conversation can be quite tiring for respondents, in particular for children. Of course this depends upon the age and personality of the child or children: for example, a very verbal teenager may thrive in an extended one to one interview. In order to engage and sustain the child's motivation and interest in the research process, it is often useful to employ some methods do not rely on verbal communication. In the context of therapeutic and educational work with pre-adolescent children, non-verbal methods of communication are often employed as children seem to respond well to these techniques. Some children may find it hard to express their opinions or feelings in words and may be more comfortable using methods such as drawing, games or exercises. Hill, Laybourn and Borland (1996) note that children are used to communicating through drawings, games and exercises and indeed some may find it difficult to express their feelings and opinions through words alone. In complex studies exploring a number of different types of research questions, a combination of indirect techniques can enable children with diverse abilities to flourish in the research encounter.

## 6.2 Draw and write technique

The draw and write technique involves inviting participants, particularly children, to draw or write a response to a research question. The choice is intended to accommodate both children who enjoy drawing and those who prefer writing. This technique is useful to broach topics with children and can elicit meaningful responses from them, provided the researcher allows room for the children to interpret their work and is skilled at delving below the surface of the issues raised (Backett-Milburn & McKie, 1999; Nevison, 2001). Drawings have been used in many studies with primary school children and teenagers to explore research questions in the fields of health, psychological, social and geographical research (Barker & Weller, 2003; Dunn, O'Connor & Levy, 2002; Gauntlett, 2004; Piko & Bak, 2006). Many children are familiar with drawings from both school and home. Drawing can be empowering for them as they can feel in control of the process. Not all children will feel comfortable with drawing and they vary in their capacity to communicate in this medium (Backett-Milburn and McKie, 1999). They have varying degrees of artistic skill and confidence, as well as interest in drawing as part of the research process. Furthermore, some older children may have outgrown their interest in drawing. In Barker and Weller's (2003) study, drawing proved to be more popular with children aged seven to 11 and less acceptable with children aged 13 (Barker & Weller, 2003).

Critics of the draw and write technique argue that researchers have in the past failed to consider how different research contexts can affect what data children produce. We must be aware that the material produced by children is influenced by how they define and perceive the research task and what it means to them (Backett-Milburn & McKie, 1999). Some children may try to replicate through their drawings what they feel the researcher wants to hear or the common thinking around the issue being researched. Furthermore, some children may only draw what they find easy to portray, so the data produced may be affected by their drawing ability. To overcome this, researchers should encourage the child to write the concepts that they find difficult to draw. It should be made clear to the child that their ability to spell correctly or draw well is not under scrutiny by the researcher. From the outset of the research encounter, the researcher should explain to the child that the interview is not a test, that there are no right or wrong answers, and that we are interested in finding out what the individual child really thinks about the research questions.



The nine-year-old children in **GUI** will be asked to complete one draw and write exercise on what keeps them well and what makes them unwell, and another on their hopes and fears for the future.

### 6.3 Written methods

Written methods can include essay and letter writing and diaries. Boyden and Ennew (1997) argue that the most productive form of written research with children is essays on specific topics. This can work particularly well with older children who communicate more frequently through written exercises (for example, in classroom and homework activities). In an Irish study of fifth-class children's definitions of geography, children aged between 10 and 11 were given a 'writing frame' style sheet with the question 'What is geography?', followed by a number of lines on which to write their answers (Pike, 2006). They were not given a time limit. Their ideas were then grouped across themes for analysis. In 1999, the 'Write Here, Write Now' project funded by the National Millennium Committee as part of the millennium celebrations invited all Irish students in 5th class in primary school and Transition Year in post-primary to write one page about their life, including their thoughts, dreams and fears. They were then encouraged to use the other side of the page creatively for drawings, poems, songs and lyrics. Over 4,000 individual pieces of text were analysed to gain an understanding of the insights of children and young people in contemporary Ireland concerning love, work, time, space, themselves and their lifestyles (O'Connor, 2007). Notably, during the analysis of the essays, the opportunity was not presented to the young people to explain their texts or creative work; consequently, the interpretation of the essays is solely from an adult perspective.

Diaries are another tool that have been used to explore research questions with children. Barker and Weller (2003) used time-use diaries over a week with children to research how they spent their week and their participation in and exclusion from school and wider community life. The researchers found this technique worked well with older children (those over 13). However, the resulting diaries demonstrated wide variation in how individual children engaged with this method. Some diary entries were voluminous while others diminished as the week progressed, and some children wrote only one or two entries for the whole week (Barker & Weller, 2003). The researchers also noted the influence of parents on the diary as a research tool, noting that many parents had apologised about the lack of entries or about grammatical errors, while some had written their own entries.

As is the case with the studies mentioned above, written methods such as essays, letters and diaries can reveal a lot about children's ideas. However, it is important to provide children with an opportunity to interpret their written work. They may have problems communicating exactly what they mean in words, so talking to the child about what they have written makes it more likely that the researcher's interpretation reflects what the child intended to say. The one-to-one interview can provide this context.

**GUI** will invite children to write a letter to the Minister for Children and a short essay on 'When I am 13 years old'.

### 6.4. Visual imagery

Creative methodological approaches where participants are asked to develop visual materials (such as photographs) themselves, have been used in qualitative research with children. Gauntlett (2004) argues that conversation-based methods can be time-pressured, requiring a participant to give an answer straight away, whereas creative tasks take longer and lead to a more reflective process, since time is allowed for thinking about what is to be produced (Gauntlett, 2004). These methods can be a very different way of engaging participants in a research question and allow them to offer a wide range of responses, thus shaping the researchers' agenda. Traditionally, the interpretation of visual methodologies rested with the adult researcher. However, contemporary researchers and therapists stress the importance of participant interpretation (Gauntlett, 2004; Malchiodi, 1998). Asking the child to explain what he or she has created and the rationale behind it reduces the risk of misinterpretation and strengthens the validity of the findings.



### 6.4.1 Photography

A visual research method such as photography can be very useful for engaging with both adults and children and maintaining their interest in the research process. Photography can also be a particularly constructive method for use with adults and children with literacy or learning difficulties.

There are many examples of studies where photography has helped children to express themselves. One well-known example, which gave us the 'Mosaic' approach, was developed by Clark (2004) for use with pre-school children (under-5s) to elicit their views and experiences of everyday life in their early childhood institution. The children were asked to use a camera to take photographs of their favourite things. Cook and Hess (2007) explored the use of cameras as a method of data-collection with children from an all-ages special school. The study explored what pupils considered important to them enjoying their school life and to feeling included in their environment. They were asked to think about why they liked being at their school and what made it important to them. They were then asked to take photographs of 12 things for a book of photographs that would be a memory of their school. Given a disposable camera with 24 frames, they took two copies of each photo, one to keep for themselves and the second for the researchers. Cook and Hess (2007) found that the children were enthused by this exercise, while subsequent discussions using the photographs as visual prompts revealed more in-depth feelings than the researchers would have expected from a more traditional research method (Cook & Hess, 2007).

In the Irish context, disposable cameras have been used as an effective participatory method for engaging with children regarding their understanding of well-being in the development of National Child Well-Being Indicators (OMCYA, 2006; Nic Gabhainn & Sixsmith, 2005). The researchers asked children to take photographs of things that made them well or kept them well. Once the photos had been developed, the children labelled each to describe their interpretation of what the photograph demonstrated. These photos were then categorised into themes by other children to develop schemata of well-being. Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith accessed the children for this study through schools and had the opportunity to introduce them to the cameras in the classroom; this may have helped to encourage high levels of participation (OMCYA, 2006; Nic Gabhainn & Sixsmith, 2005). A study by Barker and Weller, exploring children's sense of belonging within their local communities, highlights the varying degrees to which children might engage with photography (Barker & Weller, 2003). The authors used photography to explore children's journey to and from school. Although they found photography to be a popular choice among children of all ages and abilities, the initial novelty of using the camera wore off quickly with some children; others found it difficult to get inspiration and took only a handful of photos and some appeared embarrassed about their photography skills (Barker & Weller, 2003).

Photography has worked well in some studies where children were interested in and felt comfortable with the method. Variation in their interest and comfort levels will affect the findings. Using photography as a method of data-collection requires that respondents invest some thought and time into capturing their perspectives visually. From the studies we have reviewed where the respondents were children, this method appears to work best when parents, teachers or researchers provide the children with guidelines and support for taking their photographs.

Typically, research studies involving adult respondents tend to focus on more traditional verbal methods. However, Clark and Zimmer (2001) included a photographic component with adults in their ethnographic study of Latino children's health. Using photography as a data-collection method, the authors aimed to capture more of the children's home environment and activities by asking the child's mother to take photographs.

Undoubtedly, some of the research questions we are seeking to explore in **GUI** would benefit from the collection of photographs relating to family context, the child's perception of their community and the activities in which they are involved. However, we are constrained in how we would administer such a method by the limited contact we have with the children and our duty to promote their safety and protection. To incorporate a photographic method into the qualitative component, we feel that it is



imperative that we have the participation and support of the parents. We propose to invite both parents and the child to participate together in a photographic element of the **GUI** qualitative study, in order to explore the relationship between the parent and the child.

It should be noted that video and film are also becoming popular ways of helping children to inform adult researchers about their world view and their experiences. For example, Marshall and Woollett (2000) asked their adolescent participants to keep video diaries.

## 6.5 Visual prompts

Visual prompts can be used to generate interest and involvement and engage children in discussions. Studies have used tools such as still photographs or drawings to spark discussions and explore more abstract or sensitive issues with children. Visual prompts have been used widely with children to explore aspects of socio-emotional behaviour, in particular feelings. Photographs or drawings illustrating facial expressions have been used to examine children's perceptions of feelings (Hill, Laybourn & Borland, 1996; Hogan, Halpenny & Greene, 2002; ISPCC, 2006; Maunsell, 1997).

Pictorial vignettes (pictures which portray a situation, with emotional connotations) and written vignettes or trigger stories have also been used as prompts to broach topics with children. A vignette is a story which provides a concrete example of people and behaviours on which participants can comment and offer their opinion (Hazel, 1995). Vignettes can be presented through the use of words, picture cards, flipbooks, comic-books, video and audio (Cohen & Strayer, 1996; Leierer, Strohner, Leclere, Cornwell, & Whitten, 1996; Peterson & Pfof, 1989; Stolte, 1994; Vitkovitch & Tyrell, 1995). Some researchers have found vignettes to be a useful tool to explore sensitive topics with young people. Barter and Renold's (2000) research into violence among children and young people in residential children's homes in the UK used written vignettes during semi-structured interviews to depict different forms of violence. The researchers found that this worked very effectively in allowing the young people more control over when to introduce personal experiences and enabled their own definitions, meanings, evaluations and value judgments to be represented (Barter & Renold, 2000). When devising vignettes for use with children, the authors emphasise, it is important to ensure that the vignettes are easily followed and understood and are consistent and not too complex. An Irish study of children's experience of domestic violence used vignettes in focus-group interviews with children to prompt discussion. Three 'letters' sent to an agony aunt by children living in situations of domestic violence were read out to children aged between 12 and 14, years followed by questions (Buckley, Whelan & Holt, 2006). It is unclear from this study what value the vignettes added to the findings other than they may have helped to broach a sensitive subject with the children.

Pictures adapted from a practitioners' workbook were used in a small-scale study by the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC), as a tool to aid individual interviews with young children, including those with disabilities, in a study exploring family relationships and dynamics (ISPCC, 2006). Hill, Laybourn and Borland (1996) used pictorial vignettes in focus groups with participants aged between five and 12, to encourage the children to consider and discuss emotions and responses. Maunsell (1997) used vignettes with pictures to enhance interviews exploring children's understanding of the legal system. With all of these studies, it is not possible to measure the impact of the vignettes on the findings, but it is evident they are valuable as a lead into a research question and an opener for discussion.

In the qualitative study with nine-year-olds, **GUI** will present the children with pictures of children showing different emotions ('My Feelings' photo cards) and will ask them to describe the emotions being experienced by the child. This will be used as prompt to discuss their own emotions and feelings.

## 6.6 Exercises and activities

In therapeutic and educational work with pre-adolescent children, non-verbal methods of communication are often used as children respond well to these techniques. Some can find it hard to express their



opinions directly and may be more comfortable using methods such as games and exercises. Activities and worksheets have been used during interviews and focus groups with children to evoke interest, facilitate discussion, and boost concentration. Studies have used tasks involving worksheets, charts, mapping and collages as methods of qualitative data-collection with children (Christensen & James, 2000b; Hill, Laybourn & Borland, 1996; James, 2005; McCallion & Trew, 2000; Nevison, 2001). In these studies, visual methods were a useful tool to help the child to concretise abstract ideas, such as the concept of time. They also help to energise children, particularly during a lengthy interview, by giving them an alternative means of expression other than talking.

A number of charts and maps will be incorporated into the schedule for the nine-year-olds, including 'Body Image' cards, a 'Life Ladder' and a 'My Family and Me' map. All are described in full in the Technical Report on the 9-Year Qualitative Study.

### 6.7 Play techniques

Play techniques such as games, play materials and glove puppets have been used in qualitative studies with young children (Aldgate & Bradley, 2004). Role play has been used in individual interviews or focus groups to encourage children to demonstrate particular scenarios. Role-play methods can include individual or group mimes and improvisations and also plays written and performed by children, or using puppets (Boyden & Ennew, 1997). Role play can be empowering and enjoyable for children. It can also be a useful method to enable children to discuss sensitive or potentially distressing issues without asking them to answer direct questions. Hill, Laybourn and Borland (1996) asked children to perform short role plays to illustrate what they saw as typical interventions by adults when a child presented as unhappy, fearful or worried and looked for help. The authors state that most of the children seemed to enjoy the role play and it also provided them with a useful opportunity to move around and have a break from discussions (Hill et al., 1996). The authors also used role play in individual interviews, with the researcher taking on one role and the child another. They found that even children who were otherwise not very communicative appeared to enter into the spirit of the role play. On the other hand, some children can find role play intimidating. Fortier's (2006) study of children's perception of poverty involved role playing using puppets and stuffed animals to elicit the children's views on topics such as family holidays, sports, school and homework. The researcher found this technique to be only partly successful as some children became anxious and self-conscious when using puppets. Role play and puppetry have for the most part been used in research with children younger than the nine-year-old cohort involved in **GUI**. For this reason we would not anticipate that introducing these techniques would add value to our exploration of the research questions with the nine-year-old children but they may well have a part to play in future data waves with the nine-month cohort.

### 6.8 Respondents' spontaneous productions

This approach to collecting qualitative data – for which there is no definitive term in the literature – involves minimal contact with respondents by researchers and instead relies on content analysis of products created by children (or adults) independently, such as spontaneously produced drawings, photographs, diaries, stories or collages. There is no direct contact with the child (or adult). Access to these creative outputs may be negotiated through a gatekeeper such as a teacher, youth worker or practitioner. Such data can provide vivid illustrations of participants' lives. However, this method relies heavily on the researcher interpreting the child's work. Bypassing the opportunity to have the children (or parents) interpret their own work brings into question the reliability and validity of the research outcomes as the researcher can misinterpret or over-interpret the children's (or parents') productions. Such data will not form part of the qualitative component of **GUI** at this stage.



# Chapter 7

## THE ANALYSIS OF THE QUALITATIVE DATA







## 7.1 Introduction

The approach taken to analysis of qualitative data depends on a number of factors:

- the nature of the data
- the theoretical orientation adopted by the researcher
- the time available to the researcher

Qualitative data analysis has been described as a “dynamic, intuitive and creative process of inductive reasoning, thinking and theorising” (Basit, 2003). It is a process that has room for the unexpected and that demands skills from the researcher, such as the capacity to recognise significant findings and openness to new ways of seeing the phenomena under scrutiny. It is important that every stage in the analysis of data is carefully documented and that the researcher observes the principles outlined in Chapter 3.

## 7.2 Types of data

Qualitative data can be of many different types. Most data are based on language productions, which can be generated through many different means but arrive at the same output – a transcribed text. In qualitative research in general, texts are not always based on direct engagement with participants but may entail the analysis of texts concerning children. Thus the work of a researcher such as Erica Burman is focused on children but often involves analysis of texts about children and childhood, such as media reports, policy documents, child charity advertisements and child-development textbooks (Burman, 2008).

In qualitative research *with* children, as opposed to *on* children, texts can be based on:

- Interviews
- Contemporaneous notes about and observations of children’s behaviour
- Children’s diaries
- Children’s spoken or written narratives

Visual materials may also be treated as texts. Photographic and video material, drawings and maps can all be analysed and interpreted.

## 7.3 Data management

The data created in qualitative research will need to be recorded, stored and categorised in a way that facilitates analysis and interpretation. The data-set may include data derived from spoken utterances that require transcription.

### 7.3.1 Transcription

The raw data used in qualitative research is typically used in its complete form. For example, an interview will usually be used in its entirety; otherwise there are questions to be asked about why the researcher has taken up the respondent’s time, generating data that will not be used. The researcher is interested in exactly what has been said and how, so that precise transcription is necessary. Transcription is a time-consuming and sometimes tedious process. It can, however, form a useful part of the research process in that the transcribers become familiar with the content of the text.

There are some precise and painstaking transcription methods that attempt to capture every feature of the spoken utterance (e.g. Atkinson and Heritage, 1984 on conversation analysis) but these are not used in full by all qualitative researchers. Unless the focus is on the actual use of language, such detail is usually unnecessary. Thus, most qualitative research, which focuses more on the content of what is said, involves transcriptions that record the words spoken plus pauses, non-linguistic vocalisations,



interruptions and other obvious features of the recorded utterance. Clearly the decision about what exactly to transcribe, and how, is a value judgment. It is important that all transcribers in any particular project use an agreed system, which captures all that needs to be captured (Edwards, 2001).

### 7.3.2 Using NVivo to aid data analysis

In recent years a number of software packages have been developed which aid the management of qualitative data. They include such packages as Qualrus, MaxQData and ATLAS.ti.5 (Darmody & Byrne, 2006). **GUI** will use the NVivo software package, in its 8<sup>th</sup> edition (QSR, 2008, see [www.qsrinternational.com](http://www.qsrinternational.com)). NVivo was chosen because of its suitability to the task (see below), its general popularity in the field and because of the level of support available for users in Ireland and in Trinity College, Dublin. The researchers on **GUI** have been trained on NVivo7 and will continue to use this package which does not differ significantly from the latest version.

NVivo7 was developed by QSR to assist researchers in carrying out analysis of qualitative data. The software allows the researcher to manage and shape unstructured data. It can assist the analysis of data by facilitating the classification of information across codes to aid the researcher in identifying patterns and themes within the data (Bazeley, 2007).

NVivo is a very useful data-management tool for a large-scale longitudinal project such as **GUI**. The study is collecting a large volume of qualitative data from both cohorts of children and their parents. In the nine-year cohort interviews are being conducted with 120 children and their parents, and in the nine-month cohort with parents only. Data such as audio files, interview transcriptions, photographs, drawings and written documents are being generated from these interviews at the first wave of data-collection for both cohorts. Subsequent waves will add substantially to the amount of data generated by the study. Management, organisation and classification of such a voluminous data-set would be incredibly arduous without the use of information technology.

The NVivo software acts as a secure virtual storage tool for the **GUI** qualitative data. An NVivo project file has been established to house the complete data-set. The technology allows for two strands of the project to be established, with one folder space for the data generated by the nine-year cohort and a second for the data generated by the nine-month cohort. Within each folder, the project team is building a database of documents relating to the particular cohort, including verbatim transcripts, visual materials and memos containing researchers' fieldnotes and observations.

In addition to managing the qualitative data, the software facilitates the classification of the data to aid thematic analysis. It allows the creation of a coding structure for each cohort to categorise the data across various topics. For example, for the nine-year cohort, a coding structure has been generated for the child and parent interviews. The coding structures are based on the topics covered by the interview schedules (outlined in Chapter 1), which map onto the domains of the quantitative study.

Each coding structure contains overarching themes known as 'tree nodes'. The topics on each tree node relate directly to the topics covered in the interviews. As the content of each interview is analysed, each tree node can be further divided into smaller branches of nodes, thus highlighting emerging themes. This allows the researcher to gain more understanding of the data. NVivo also allows linkage of the content across the same theme for different children as well as coding of any new themes emerging from each child's interview. *Figure 7.1* illustrates the NVivo coding structure for both the child and parent interviews for the nine-year cohort.



Figure 7.1: NVivo Coding Structure for the Nine-Year Cohort

Name	Sources	References	Created	Modified
Child's Interview Themes	0	0	20/03/2008 12:06	20/03/2008 12:06
Body Image	112	121	15/07/2008 15:44	18/11/2008 14:45
Community, Neighbourhood,	112	117	20/03/2008 12:06	18/11/2008 14:47
Family Relationships	112	123	20/03/2008 12:06	18/11/2008 14:47
Feelings	112	114	15/07/2008 15:43	18/11/2008 14:46
Gender Differences	86	87	15/07/2008 16:01	18/11/2008 14:45
Growing Up	112	118	20/03/2008 12:06	18/11/2008 14:46
Hobbies & Activities	112	131	20/03/2008 12:06	18/11/2008 14:46
Life Satisfaction	112	114	15/07/2008 15:43	18/11/2008 14:46
Parenting	112	115	20/03/2008 12:06	18/11/2008 14:47
Passport	111	112	15/07/2008 16:20	18/11/2008 14:44
Peer Relationships	108	135	20/03/2008 12:06	18/11/2008 14:47
Self Perception	112	115	15/07/2008 15:45	18/11/2008 14:45
Wellness & Health	112	114	15/07/2008 15:44	18/11/2008 14:45
Wishes & Fears	108	110	15/07/2008 15:42	18/11/2008 14:46
Parent's Interview Themes	0	0	20/03/2008 12:06	20/03/2008 12:06
Family Decision-Making	109	110	20/03/2008 12:11	18/11/2008 14:57
Parent & Child Relationship	113	117	20/03/2008 12:08	18/11/2008 14:56
Parents Aspirations for Child	112	115	20/03/2008 12:12	18/11/2008 14:57
Parents Concerns for Child	105	108	20/03/2008 12:12	18/11/2008 14:58
Parents Perception of Being	115	129	20/03/2008 12:09	18/11/2008 14:57
Parents Perception of Child	114	117	20/03/2008 12:07	18/11/2008 14:56
Photographs	90	90	15/07/2008 15:46	18/11/2008 14:54

Similarly, for the nine-month cohort, the overarching coding structure will include the following themes relating to the parent interviews:

- Perception of the Baby
- Baby's Routine and Habits
- Parent and Child Relationship
- Service Use
- Transition to Parenthood
- Perception of Being a Parent
- Decision-Making and Social Support
- Community and Neighbourhood
- Work/Life Balance
- Childcare
- Current and Future Concerns and Aspirations for Baby

The use of NVivo speeds up the classification process for the researcher by making it easy to search the data, run queries, generate reports, highlight relationships and build models of analysis. Furthermore, different perspectives on the data can be obtained from multiple researchers who can feed into the master copy of the NVivo project, using the standardised coding structures, but who can also contribute new thematic codes where identified in the data. NVivo can be used to identify conceptual links across the data as well as exceptions to general patterns in the data. A 'by eye' inspection of data could never hope to interrogate all the data as systematically and comprehensively. However, it is important to bear in mind that a technological device such as NVivo does not substitute the researcher's role in deciding what matters in the interpretation of the data.



## 7.4 Some approaches to analysis

### 7.4.1 Deductive vs inductive approaches

Deductive and inductive approaches are often presented as though they are distinct and incompatible approaches to the incorporation of theory into data collection and interpretation. For example, grounded theory adherents would claim that their approach to data is inductive, allowing the important themes to emerge from the data rather than imposing a theoretical framework from the outset (Glaser & Strauss, 1976). Theory-driven qualitative research, on the other hand, is usually explicitly deductive. In qualitative research there is usually a mix of both approaches. It could be argued that no research is entirely inductive since we always have some theory or set of assumptions that drives us to collect data in the first place. At the same time the inductive stance is typical of and intrinsic to most qualitative research. The researcher is open to the new meanings and new issues that the openness of the qualitative method permits and generates.

### 7.4.2 Theory-driven approaches to analysis

Some of the many different theoretical approaches to qualitative research are associated with a very specific approach to data collection and analysis. A selection of these approaches will be briefly outlined, with reference to research with children, to give a flavour of the range within this field.

#### *Ethnography of children and childhood*

Ethnographic methods are associated with anthropology but have been widely used by sociologists interested in the cultural spaces in which children live their lives. Theoretically, this approach involves a distinctive perspective on children, seeing them as shaping and controlling their own worlds, which are different and separate from adult worlds. The researcher stance is typically as participant observer, the stranger who is exploring and aiming to understand a new culture. Children are positioned as experts on their own lives. Ethnographic research typically involves a long time commitment, sufficient for the researcher to get to know the children or young people from the inside. An example of this approach is the work of Emond, who spent a year living with young people in residential care (Emond, 2002). A prolonged encounter of this kind generates a large amount of data, usually in the form of observations, audio recordings and fieldnotes. The focus in analysis is on description of the young people's worlds, their strategies for negotiating their position in this world, and the implicit or explicit rules that shape the practices associated with membership of this sub-culture. Other examples can be found in the work of Corsaro on the world of the pre-schooler (Corsaro, 1985) and Bennett's work on youth music scenes (Bennett, 2003).

#### *Relational theory*

Carol Gilligan and her colleagues have been associated with the development of a theoretical framework focused on the centrality of relationships and social connection in female development. It has served also to highlight the extent to which traditional psychology has neglected the role of relationships with others in both male and female psychological development (Gilligan, 1982; Brown and Gilligan, 1992). This approach connects broadly with that of a number of researchers who can be seen to advocate a theoretical standpoint often labelled as 'relational'. They see each individual (child or adult) as enmeshed in relationships, and thus oppose the traditional psychological viewpoint which positions us all as autonomous individuals. Gilligan and co-workers developed an approach to analysis that they call the 'Listener's Guide'. They used this approach in their work on the psychology of girls. The Listener's Guide involves multiple readings of a text in order to identify its multiple voices. The analysis tracks the multiple voices that the adherents of this method claim all humans have as scripts for living their lives. These voices are introjected from experience of relationship with important others and may be in conflict with each other. Brown (1997) suggests that the researcher asks questions such as 'Who is speaking?', 'Who is she directing her voice towards?' and 'Who is listening?' The method also draws attention to the social and relational features of the research context and the interpretive role of the researcher as a listener.



The Voice-Centred Relational Method adopted by Byrne and colleagues in their study of early school-leavers in Galway is a good example of a voice-centred relational approach to data collection and analysis (Byrne et al., 2004)

#### *Grounded theory*

The grounded theory approach, associated with the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967), has been very influential in qualitative research. These authors and their many followers advocate developing hypotheses from the data as the data dictate rather than starting with hypotheses. In both data collection and analysis, an iterative approach is taken, each stage informing the next, culminating in a theoretical model about the topic being researched. Although grounded theory is one of the most widely applied theories informing qualitative research, it has not been used very often in work with children. A recent study exploring the use of grounded theory with children involved the analysis of children's attitudes to physical activity (Buckley & Waring, 2009). The approach was used by Alderson in her study of children undergoing surgery (Alderson, 1993).

#### *Discourse theory*

Discourse theorists hold that our behaviours and thoughts are dictated by prevalent discourses. They are influenced by the work of Foucault and his use of the term discourse to cover public understandings of the social fabric and how it is construed and managed. Power, which is central to the operation of society, is exerted by those who frame the dominant discourse. Discourse is fundamentally cultural rather than individual and discourse analysis is seen as a "culturally situated account of cultural meanings and practices ('discourses')" (Alldred and Burman, 2005:175). From this perspective, children, no less than adults, experience the world through the lens of discourse; their experience is structured by discourse. Discourse analysts resist the distinction between data collection and analysis because they see all stages of research as analytic and interpretive. Examples of discourse analytic studies of children include those by Edwards and Alldred of children's views of social research (Edwards & Alldred, 1999) and Marks (1996) on young people's moral narratives and their experience of social exclusion.

These are just some of the theoretical approaches that researchers adopt in their work with children and the associated approaches to analysis. Many researchers, on the other hand, adopt an eclectic or a pragmatic, atheoretical approach to addressing the issues that interest them.

### 7.4.3 Content analysis

In qualitative research some forms of analysis are strongly linked to the theoretical framework that shaped the collection of the data. Such approaches to analysis include grounded theory analysis, phenomenological analysis, discourse analysis, and semiotic analysis. One main form of analysis widely used with data from a variety of theoretical persuasions and none is content analysis. This involves the identification of words, phrases or themes within a text. It can result in either qualitative or quantitative outputs. Quantitative content analysis involves counting the number of times a particular word or phrase occurs. It can also translate qualitative into quantitative material by categorising data through numerical classification, typically nominal or ordinal. Thus data can be coded as belonging to one, two or more pre-decided categories. For example, the researcher might want to know if children are positive, negative or neutral in their attitude to sport. Having analysed the content and coded it, the researcher is able to arrive at statements such as '53% of the children are positive, 21% neutral and 26% negative'. Or children's responses may be coded so as to draw conclusions about the sports they like most and the sports they like least. **GUI** will not use a fine-grained quantitative approach to the analysis of the qualitative data but will offer very broad frequencies, such as 'the majority of the children...' or 'only two children felt ...' A predominantly quantitative approach to coding and presenting the qualitative data is not in keeping with the objectives of the qualitative method, which is primarily designed to explore the meaning of children's and parents' experience.



#### 7.4.4. Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis, a sub-set of content analysis, broadly conceived, is a common approach to data analysis and is used by researchers with different theoretical orientations. It offers an accessible and theoretical flexible approach. In **GUI** thematic analysis will be used to analyse the data since the approach to the data-collection is question- but not theory-driven. Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight the theoretical freedom of thematic analysis as one of the key advantages of this approach, suggesting that thematic analysis can adopt the following perspectives:

- *Essentialist or realist*: reporting the experiences, meanings and reality of participants
- *Constructionist*: examining the ways in which events, realities, meanings and experiences are the effects of a range of discourses operating in society
- *Contextualist*: sitting between essentialism and constructionism and characterised by theories which acknowledge the ways individuals make meaning of their experience and thus also the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings

Thematic analysis entails the examination of data in order to identify patterns in respondents' behaviours or responses. A theme is thus a pattern discernible in the data that captures something important in relation to the research question. Some themes are imposed from the start and some emerge. This analytical approach allows for a rich description of the entire data-set and subsequent more detailed and nuanced analyses of one particular theme or set of themes. Thematic coding can be 'inductive', in that the themes identified are data-driven and do not fit a pre-existing coding frame, or more 'theoretical', in that the researcher's theoretical interests drive the analysis.

Miles and Huberman (1994) identify three concurrent activities in qualitative data analysis that can be usefully applied when approaching the analysis thematically:

- *Data reduction*: This process helps to organise the data and sharpen the focus of the analysis. It involves identifying the data to be categorised across a particular theme, summarising the content of this data and paraphrasing.
- *Data display*: Once the data has been reduced, it can be displayed in an organised and compressed way that allows the researcher to follow the patterns and look at relationships within the data. Matrices can be useful at this stage.
- *Conclusion drawing and verification*: At this stage the researcher identifies regularities, patterns, similarities and differences, and draws possible configurations, causal flows, explanations and propositions.

A computer package such as NVivo is a useful tool in carrying out these analytical activities and organising data according to themes, but guidance and decision-making as to what themes should be highlighted and explored further is up to the researcher. In **GUI** the themes are already partly dictated by the domains tapped and questions asked in the semi-structured interview. Clearly, it is important to link the interpretation back to the goals of the study and its design and content. As well as elaborating the meanings of children's and parents' experience in the domains identified as important, a further goal of the qualitative study is to present the children's experience in their own words. This will be done through a selection of quotes. The analytical approach in **GUI** will progress from description of the qualitative data organised across themes, to show the content of the data in relation to the research questions, to a more interpretive approach which attempts to theorise the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications.



## 7.5 Interpretation of findings

The qualitative studies in **GUI** are not driven by any one specific theory about children's lives and development. The goal is primarily descriptive. However, some assumptions underpin the design of the studies. They focus mainly on what matters to nine-year-old children and their parents, and to the parents of the nine-month-olds. The questions asked of the participants are in part framed by hypotheses derived from the literature about what influences children's lives and the course of their development.<sup>14</sup> Making sense of the data occurs within this framework. As Denzin and Lincoln state: "All research is interpretive, guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be studied" (1994, p.13). These beliefs, feelings and assumptions should be open to correction. The partially open approach adopted in the qualitative studies should permit some totally new categories of experience to emerge, causing an unsettling of the researchers' expectations.

As stated in the previous section, the approach to the data analysis for the qualitative studies in **GUI** will be thematic. Once organised by the software package, a process of 'reading' the data can commence. This can be done literally, interpretively and reflectively (Mason, 2002). In **GUI** all forms of reading will apply.

First, the findings will be described and common and divergent themes brought out. Quotes from children and parents will be used to illustrate themes and to demonstrate the diversity within the sample. Connections between children's responses to different topics and between children's responses and their parents' responses will be described, with reference to the literature. For the infants, data on the Bayley Scales will be fed into NVivo and related to the parents' responses. Possible explanations of findings, expected and unexpected, will be explored. This approach adopts a feature often associated with the grounded theory perspective, that of being flexible and open enough to allow new themes to emerge from the data.

In the first instance, the **GUI** team systematically read and re-read the interview transcripts, and examine the visual data and fieldnotes. The team compare and contrast the data and look for patterns and themes that emerge in relation to the key research questions, identify similar and divergent cases, and categorise. Team meetings are held to discuss the data analysis and consensus is reached on the data and the key themes. It is important to bring researchers together to gain other insights on the data and use secondary readers to leave an audit trail.

Following this top-level qualitative analysis, a more in-depth analysis is conducted for each emergent theme. Sub-groups of team members meet to focus more specifically the data relating to a particular research question.

It is possible to look at the qualitative data in two directions at Wave 1:

- Analysis within the family: The first direction looks at the data generated by the whole family unit (child, mother and father). The data is analysed in terms of the multiple perspectives of each family member. Interview transcripts from all three members of the family are looked at in terms of how they relate to each other. The transcripts are compared and contrasted for common themes and divergent viewpoints.
- Comparative analysis: A comparative analysis looks at participant in relation to each other. For **GUI** this would mean exploring a child in comparison to other children, a mother in relation to other mothers, and a father in relation to other fathers. The children's transcripts are placed side by side and compared for commonalities and differences, and we can explore how these are linked to factors such as gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background. The same comparisons are made among the mothers' and fathers' transcripts.

<sup>14</sup> The literature relevant to the nine-year-olds and the nine-month-olds has been reviewed: see Research Papers 2 and 3 in the *Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) Literature Review Series*.



Some case studies will be compiled to give a stronger sense of the ‘whole child’ and the diversity in the life experiences of the children and parents in the two studies.

The reflection stage entails a critical examination of the strengths and weaknesses of the data. There are inevitably limitations in the design of the study. For example, the once-off nature of the meeting with the nine-year-old children does not give much time to establish rapport or help the child to feel at ease. The fact that the interviews with the children are in their own home in the presence of a parent, or parents, may mean that there are things they will not reveal to the researcher. Although the protocol for both qualitative studies will have been carefully piloted, it is only at the end of a study that the strengths and weaknesses of the design can be fully appreciated. It will be possible to conduct a critique of each study and to use the findings to inform the next waves of the longitudinal qualitative studies.

A reflexive orientation also encourages the researcher to examine his/her own interpretive biases and reactions to the data. As mentioned in Chapter 3, without a reflexive orientation the researcher is in danger of imposing their own ideologies and expectations onto the data, while failing to understand how and when this might be happening.

After the full analysis of the qualitative data, the links between the qualitative findings and the main survey will be examined. In order to realise the value in adopting a mixed methods approach in **GUI**, a strategy has been devised to connect the data analyses from the main quantitative study and the follow-on qualitative component in an integrated manner. The four stages involved in this strategy are outlined below.

## 7.6 Integrating the quantitative and qualitative data for GUI

A fundamental issue that must be addressed in the first wave of the study is the analytical strategy that can be adopted to integrate the quantitative and qualitative data so as to realise the value of **GUI**'s mixed-methods approach. A strategy is needed to connect the data analyses from the main quantitative study and those from the follow-on qualitative component so as to provide an integrated analysis.

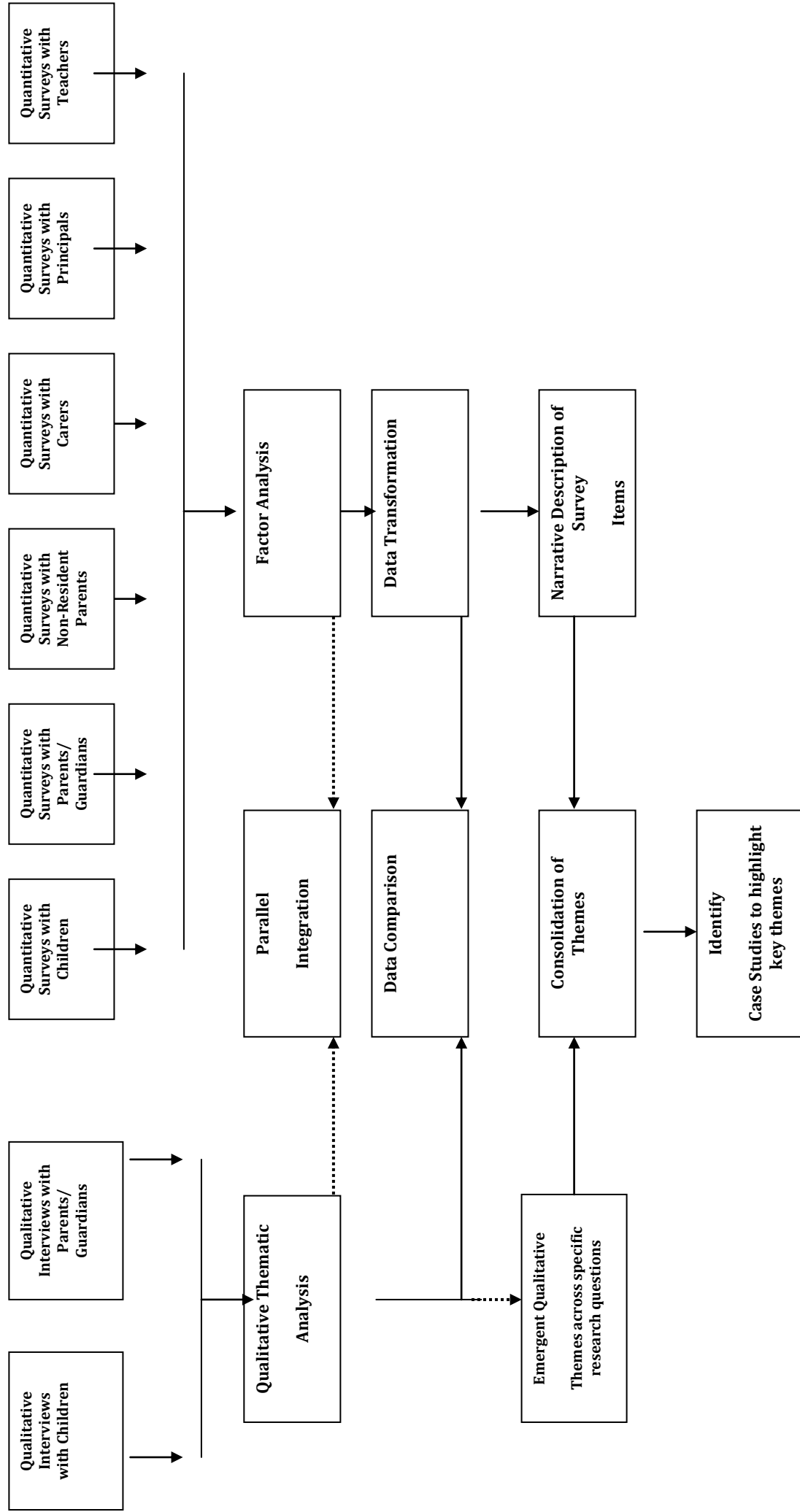
**GUI** has generated a complex multi-dimensional data-set. Quantitative data has been collected from children, resident and non-resident parents, carers, principals and teachers. The qualitative interviews have explored the perspectives of multiple family members, including children and resident parents, and generated audio files, verbatim transcriptions, text, photographs and drawings. The interviews with parents have also generated audio files, verbatim transcriptions and photographs. Such a complex data-set from a range of sources will require the analysis to be innovative and cross-cutting.

**Figure 1** illustrates a model of mixed-methods data analysis for the data collected for the nine-year-old cohort. This approach adopts a concurrent methods design where the quantitative and qualitative strands are treated independently throughout data collection and analysis (Jang, McDougall, Pollon, Herbert & Russell, 2008). In the first instance, a parallel analysis is carried out of each strand. Then, following independent analysis of both strands, an integrative analytical approach is taken that synthesises the results from both strands to gain an in-depth understanding of the data to identify any overlapping aspects and additional information, and to observe inconsistencies and confirmations.

To implement this strategy, the initial stage involves an independent analysis of the quantitative and qualitative strands. For the qualitative data, the analysis follows a number of key stages as described in the previous section.



**Figure 1: A Model of Mixed-Methods Data Analytical Procedures for the 9-Year Cohort**





The next stage adopts an integrative analytic approach, using data comparison between the quantitative and qualitative results to consolidate themes, and using case analytic strategies to gain an in-depth understanding of the causes of common patterns, divergent themes or inconsistencies.

#### *Presenting mixed-methods findings*

A major challenge facing **GUI** is how best to write and present the findings to ensure an integrated analysis. This is a task that is not addressed fully in the literature on mixed-methods research. Merging the findings from mixed methods requires careful consideration to ensure that the quantitative and qualitative components do not appear as standalone studies. Bryman (2007) has identified a number of barriers to integration from his analysis of the literature and interviews with social researchers. First, he suggests that different audiences may prefer one approach over the other and this can lead to researchers promoting one set of findings and making only minimal use of the other. Secondly, the researcher's own methodological preferences or familiarity with one approach may encourage an over-emphasis on one set of findings. Furthermore, Bryman (2007) suggests that the particular skills of the researchers may constrain the integration of data and he calls for research teams to be made up of researchers who are familiar with different approaches. In the integration process, instances may occur where the qualitative and quantitative data appear to contradict each other and the issue will arise as to which sources of data are most trustworthy. Such occurrences can spark further hypotheses for investigation, both thematic and methodological. In **GUI**, it is expected that more often than not the data will complement each other, and together contribute to a deeper understanding of the lives of the children and their families.

The **GUI** team brings together specialists with a range of expertise in both quantitative and qualitative research and will aim to give appropriate emphasis to both sources of data. However, given the scale of investment in the quantitative survey and the numbers in the two survey samples, it is likely that the quantitative survey will attain more dominance when the **GUI** findings are disseminated.

It is anticipated that each of the first reports on the qualitative studies will have a substantial section pointing out the links between the two sets of findings and that later reports on the quantitative studies for each cohort will incorporate a section on what has been learned from the preceding qualitative study.

### **7.7 Qualitative longitudinal analysis**

There is a clear need for **GUI** to take a structured approach to the longitudinal qualitative data analysis. This section will outline the analytical strategy for qualitative longitudinal analysis for both cohorts as we move into the second wave of data-collection.

The analysis of Wave 1 will be mainly exploratory, to describe the current moment in time – e.g. the children at nine years or nine months of age. Analysis will be synchronic or cross-sectional. Data will be coded descriptively, thematically and conceptually. This will enable comparisons across the sample on the basis of factors such as age, gender, social class and location. This analysis can then be compared for change over time. Longitudinal qualitative research is an iterative process and the findings of Wave 1 will inform the design of data-collection at Wave 2.

A structured analytical approach is needed to track change over time. Longitudinal analysis will involve following individual trajectories to identify critical moments and change. This is known as *diachronic* analysis, where the researcher follows individuals, themes and groups over time longitudinally. It is important to note that, in longitudinal studies, findings are always provisional as the analysis is constantly moving on with each wave of data-collection.



### *Stage 1: Develop case histories*

One approach to longitudinal analysis involves building up a case history of each participant. Each case profile will include all transcripts and data generated from this respondent over time, including the researcher's interview notes. The aim of the case study is to explore why and how events took place as they did. The process will involve analysing each individual's interview transcription, identifying key themes and mapping the themes across each wave. For example, in **GUI** at Wave 1 we explore John's perception of body image and his physical development at nine years of age. At Wave 2, we can map how John's perception of body image and his physical development appear when he is 13. Each case history is compared between time periods for continuity and change. The outcomes for each case can be the analytical starting point and the researcher can work backwards to discover explanations or gain more understanding and identify the contexts and mechanisms that make an outcome possible. Due to their unique nature, the case studies are used to generate in-depth insights into change over time and identify how the individual is involved in creating that change in a specific time and social context, rather than producing generalisations. This case history or life history approach aims not to predict how a life will develop but explain why a life was lived at it was. It will not be possible to include all 120 case studies in the report, so we will need to consider the selection of case studies in relation to the wider data-set and also the quality of the data available. Among the ethical issues, we will need to consider throughout the analytical process the issue of a participant recognising herself or himself in the report (even after identifying information is removed) and consider how reading the researcher's interpretations of them might affect their well-being.

### *Stage 2: Place case histories in conversation with each other*

Following on from this individual perspective, case histories can then be juxtaposed to explore common and divergent pathways. In this respect the analysis is two-directional, following the individual life story over time and reading it in relation to wider social categories and other cases. This level of analysis is needed as the data is dynamic and multi-faceted. By contrasting the case histories, similarities and differences are identified. As each case study is unique, direct comparisons can be difficult but it will be possible to contrast how each child develops and changes over time and identify typologies of change, pathways and strategies. At this level we can begin to theorise stages of the life course of the child and the impact on parenting. Data can be interrogated using analytical categories from theoretical models to cross-compare and identify the processes at play.

An alternative approach could be driven by the analysis of the outcomes from the quantitative data. Key issues could be identified in the quantitative survey, and change over time in status or outcomes relevant to this issue could be tracked within the qualitative sample. For example, changes in family type could be tracked over time with a view to understanding children's reaction to and feelings about change in their parents' marital status, patterns of cohabitation, and family size and composition. Differences within the sample could be examined on a group basis. For example, children who were overweight or obese at age nine could be specifically followed up at age 13 to see how they are dealing with weight issues and whether they have changed their weight status and why. Contrasting sub-groups could be selected, based, for example, on whether they scored high or low in cognitive tests or tests of socio-emotional functioning, such as the SDQ. Qualitative longitudinal data is ideally suited to following the dynamics of change over time – just as much as quantitative longitudinal research, but with a different emphasis.

Wave 2 of data-collection will present a range of challenges and new sensitivities. For example, in the nine-year cohort, at the second wave of data-collection with the children aged 13, it is intended that the researchers use the Time Capsules created by the child at Wave 1 as a visual lead into the narrative.<sup>15</sup> However, the content of the Time Capsules may uncover some sensitive issues for the children as some of them may have experienced changes in their lives that they did not envisage at age nine, such as bereavement, separation, illness or disability.

<sup>15</sup> A copy of the qualitative protocols and procedures including the interview schedules are available in the Technical Report on the 9-Year Qualitative Study.



All the qualitative data collected in **GUI** will be lodged in the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA), housed in the National University of Ireland, Maynooth (see [www.iqda.ie](http://www.iqda.ie).) They will be prepared for deposition using the IQDA guidelines and be available to researchers for further analysis and dissemination.

## 7.8 Conclusion

It is anticipated that, from both a cross-sectional and a longitudinal perspective, the qualitative data will provide a rich complement to the quantitative data collected in **GUI**, allowing the children and their parents to speak in their own voices, and enabling some sense of who the participants are, in all their complexity and diversity, to emerge. This important cohort study will also elaborate on themes highlighted in the quantitative survey, probing for individual perceptions, interpretations and experiences that cannot be elicited readily through survey data. It will be possible through qualitative enquiry to focus in on policy-relevant issues, uncovering the reasoning and the feelings behind children's and parents' reactions and choices.

Incorporating qualitative studies into a large-scale cohort study presents numerous challenges, not least that such an approach is relatively novel and there are not many well-established precedents and models of best practice. The qualitative approach adds an extra perspective to **Growing Up in Ireland** that has the potential to add to understanding of the lives of children in Ireland, one of the primary goals of **GUI** and the National Children's Strategy that promoted its establishment.



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