Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods

INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

A Helpful Guide for Undergraduates and Graduate Students in the Social Sciences

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PREFACE

> "I believe you have to reach a certain age before you understand how much life really is like a novel, with patterns and leitmotifs and turning points, and guns that must go off and people who must return before the ending." -Sigrid Nunez, *The Last of Her Kind*

> "It seems to me that you need a lot of courage, or a lot of something, to enter into others, into other people. We all think that everyone else lives in fortresses, in fastnesses: behind moats, behind sheer walls studded with spikes and broken glass. But in fact we inhabit much punier structures. We are, it turns out, all jerry-built. Or not even. You can just stick your head under the flap of the tent and crawl right in. If you get the okay." -Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow*

> "When people talk about their lives, they tell stories. It is through stories that we often learn the greatest lessons for our lives – lessons about success and failure, good and evil, what make a life worth living, and what makes a society good. It is through stories, furthermore, that we define who we are. Stories provide us with our identities." -Dan MacAdams, *The Redemptive Self*

> "We live our lives according to stories." -Chuck Palahniuk, *Stranger than Fiction*

I'll tell you a secret. I've always been fascinated by what people say to each other and what they say to themselves. When I was a little girl, I had an old-fashioned tape recorder, a bulky black device with heavy keys you would press hard on to get a cassette tape working. My father was in the U.S. Army, and he would have poker parties once a week with his Army buddies. On those days, I would slide the tape recorder under the card table and press play just before they sat down to play. Oh, the stories I heard! Things a ten-year-old should probably not hear! I would listen and use my children's typewriter to recreate the dialogue. I thought I could make stories this way. I never got to the making of the stories, but this turned out to be an incredibly helpful practice for my later career as a qualitative researcher/sociologist. Although I would never record someone without their permission, I have recorded a lot of people, made transcripts of those recordings, and analyzed those stories for knowledge about the world. Now I teach other people how to do those things, too. I hope you find this textbook helpful and that it inspires you to listen to the people around you and observe the world with fresh eyes.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

"Science is in danger, and for that reason it is becoming dangerous" -Pierre Bourdieu, *Science of Science and Reflexivity*

Why an Open Access Textbook on Qualitative Research Methods?

I have been teaching **qualitative research** methods to both undergraduates and graduate students for many years. Although there are some excellent textbooks out there, they are often costly, and none of them, to my mind, properly introduces qualitative research methods to the beginning student (whether undergraduate or graduate student). In contrast, this open-access textbook is designed as a (free) true introduction to the subject, with helpful, practical pointers on how to conduct research and how to access more advanced instruction.

Textbooks are typically arranged in one of two ways: (1) by technique (each chapter covers one method used in qualitative research); or (2) by process (chapters advance from research design through publication). But both of these approaches are necessary for the beginner student. This textbook will have sections dedicated to the process as well as the techniques of qualitative research. This is a true "comprehensive" book for the beginning student. In addition to covering techniques of data collection and data analysis, it provides a road map of how to get started and how to keep going and where to go for advanced instruction. It covers aspects of research design and research communication as well as **methods** employed. Along the way, it includes examples from many different disciplines in the social sciences.

The primary goal has been to create a useful, accessible, engaging textbook for use across many disciplines. And, let's face it. Textbooks can be boring. I hope readers find this to be a little different. I have tried to write in a practical and forthright manner, with many lively examples and references to good and intellectually creative qualitative research. Woven throughout the text are short textual asides (in colored textboxes) by professional (academic) qualitative researchers in various disciplines. These short accounts by practitioners should help inspire students. So, let's begin!

What is Research?

When we use the word *research*, what exactly do we mean by that? This is one of those words that everyone thinks they understand, but it is worth beginning this textbook with a short explanation. We use

the term to refer to "empirical research," which is actually a historically specific approach to understanding the world around us. Think about how you know things about the world.[1] You might know your mother loves you because she's told you she does. Or because that is what "mothers" do by tradition. Or you might know because you've looked for evidence that she does, like taking care of you when you are sick or reading to you in bed or working two jobs so you can have the things you need to do OK in life. Maybe it seems churlish to look for evidence; you just take it "on faith" that you are loved.

Only one of the above comes close to what we mean by research. Empirical research is research (investigation) based on evidence. Conclusions can then be drawn from observable data. This observable data can also be "tested" or checked. If the data cannot be tested, that is a good indication that we are not doing research. Note that we can never "prove" conclusively, through observable data, that our mothers love us. We might have some "disconfirming evidence" (that time she didn't show up to your graduation, for example) that could push you to question an original **hypothesis**, but no amount of "confirming evidence" will ever allow us to say with 100% certainty, "my mother loves me." Faith and tradition and authority work differently. Our knowledge can be 100% certain using each of those alternative methods of knowledge, but our certainty in those cases will not be based on facts or evidence.

For many periods of history, those in power have been nervous about "science" because it uses evidence and facts as the primary source of understanding the world, and facts can be at odds with what power or authority or tradition want you to believe. That is why I say that scientific empirical research is a historically specific approach to understand the world. You are in college or university now partly to learn how to engage in this historically specific approach.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe, there was a newfound respect for empirical research, some of which was seriously challenging to the established church. Using observations and testing them, scientists found that the earth was not at the center of the universe, for example, but rather that it was but one planet of many which circled the sun.[2] For the next two centuries, the science of astronomy, physics, biology, and chemistry emerged and became disciplines taught in universities. All used the scientific method of observation and testing to advance knowledge. Knowledge about *people*, however, and *social* institutions, however, was still left to faith, tradition, and authority. Historians and philosophers and poets wrote about the human condition, but none of them used research to do so.[3]

It was not until the nineteenth century that "social science" really emerged, using the scientific method

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1. We will actually spend an entire chapter (chapter 3) looking at this question in much more detail!
2. Note that this might have been news to Europeans at the time, but many other societies around the world had also come to this conclusion through observation. There is often a tendency to equate "the scientific revolution" with the European world in which it took place, but this is somewhat misleading.
3. Historians are a special case here. Historians have scrupulously and rigorously investigated the social world, but not for the purpose of understanding general laws about how things work, which is the point of scientific empirical research. History is often referred to as an idiographic field of study, meaning that it studies things that happened or are happening in themselves and not for general observations or conclusions.

(empirical observation) to understand people and social institutions. New fields of sociology, economics, political science, and anthropology emerged. The first sociologists, people like Auguste Comte and Karl Marx, sought specifically to apply the scientific method of research to understand society, Engels famously claiming that Marx had done for the social world what Darwin did for the natural world, tracings its laws of development. Today we tend to take for granted the naturalness of science here, but it is actually a pretty recent and radical development.

To return to the question, "does your mother love you?" Well, this is actually not really how a researcher would frame the question, as it is too specific to *your* case. It doesn't tell us much about the world at large, even if it does tell us something about you and your relationship with your mother. A social science researcher might ask, "do mothers *love* their children?" Or maybe they would be more interested in how this loving relationship might change over time (e.g., "do mothers love their children more now than they did in the 18th century when so many children died before reaching adulthood?") or perhaps they might be interested in measuring quality of love across cultures or time periods, or even establishing "what love looks like" using the mother/child relationship as a site of exploration. All of these make good **research questions** because we can use observable data to answer them.

What is Qualitative Research?

> "All we know is how to learn. How to study, how to listen, how to talk, how to tell. If we don't tell the world, we don't know the world. We're lost in it, we die." -Ursula LeGuin, *The Telling*

At its simplest, **qualitative research** is research about the social world that does not use numbers in its analyses. All those who fear statistics can breathe a sigh of relief – there are no mathematical formulae or regression models in this book! But this definition is less about what qualitative research can be and more about what it is not. To be honest, any simple statement will fail to capture the power and depth of qualitative research. One way of contrasting qualitative research to **quantitative research** is to note that the focus of qualitative research is less about explaining and predicting relationships between variables and more about *understanding* the social world. To use our mother love example, the question about "what love looks like" is a good question for the qualitative researcher while all questions measuring love or comparing incidences of love (both of which require measurement) are good questions for quantitative researchers. Patton writes,

> Qualitative data describe. They take us, as readers, into the time and place of the observation so that we know what it was like to have been there. They capture and communicate someone else's experience of the world in his or her own words. Qualitative data tell a story. (Patton 2002:47)

Qualitative researchers are asking different questions about the world than their quantitative colleagues. Even when researchers are employed in "mixed methods" research (*both* quantitative and qualitative), they are using different methods to address different questions of the study. I do a lot of research about first-

generation and working-college college students. Where a quantitative researcher might ask, ***how many*** *first-generation college students graduate from college within four years?* Or *does first-generation college status* ***predict*** *high student debt loads?* A qualitative researcher might ask, ***how does the college experience*** *differ for first-generation college students?* ***What is it like*** *to carry a lot of debt, and* ***how does this*** *impact the ability to complete college on time?* Both sets of questions are important, but they can only be answered using specific tools tailored to those questions. For the former, you need large numbers to make adequate comparisons. For the latter, you need to talk to people, find out what they are thinking and feeling, and try to inhabit their shoes for a little while so you can make sense of their experiences and beliefs.

Examples of Qualitative Research

You have probably seen examples of qualitative research before, but you might not have paid particular attention to *how* they were produced or realized that the accounts you were reading were the result of hours, months, even years of research "in the field." A good qualitative researcher will present the product of their hours of work in such a way that it seems natural, even obvious, to the reader. Because we are trying to convey *what it is like* answers, qualitative research is often presented as stories – stories about how people live their lives, go to work, raise their children, interact with one another. In some ways, this can seem like reading particularly insightful novels. But, unlike novels, there are very specific rules and guidelines that qualitative researchers follow to ensure that the "story" they are telling is *accurate*, a truthful rendition of what life is like for the people being studied. Most of this textbook will be spent conveying those rules and guidelines. Let's take a look, first, however, at three examples of what the end product looks like. I have chosen these three examples to showcase very different approaches to qualitative research, and I will return to these five examples throughout the book. They were all published as whole books (not chapters or articles), and they are worth the long read, if you have the time. I will also provide some information on how these books came to be and the length of time it takes to get them into book version. It is important you know about this process, and the rest of this textbook will help explain why it takes so long to conduct good qualitative research!

Example 1*: The End Game* (ethnography + interviews)

Corey Abramson is a sociologist who teaches at the University of Arizona. In 2015 he published *The End Game: How Inequality Shapes our Final Years* (2015). This book was based on the research he did for his dissertation at the University of California-Berkeley in 2012. Actually, the dissertation was completed in 2012 but the work that was produced that took several years. The dissertation was entitled, "This is How We Live, This is How We Die: Social Stratification, Aging, and Health in Urban America" (2012). You can see how the book version, which was written for a more general audience, has a more engaging sound to it, but that the dissertation version, which is what academic faculty read and evaluate, has a more

descriptive title. You can read the title and know that this is a study about aging and health and that the focus is going to be inequality and that the context (place) is going to be "urban America." It's a study about "how" people do something – in this case, how they deal with aging and death. This is the very first sentence of the dissertation, "From our first breath in the hospital to the day we die, we live in a society characterized by unequal opportunities for maintaining health and taking care of ourselves when ill. These disparities reflect persistent racial, socio-economic, and gender-based inequalities and contribute to their persistence over time" (1). What follows is a truthful account of *how* that is so.

Cory Abramson spent *three years* conducting his research in four different urban neighborhoods. We call the type of research he conducted "comparative ethnographic" because he designed his study to compare groups of seniors as they went about their everyday business. It's comparative because he is comparing different groups (based on race, class, gender) and ethnographic because he is studying the culture/way of life of a group.[4] He had an educated guess, rooted in what previous research had shown and what social theory would suggest, that people's experiences of aging differ by race, class, and gender. So, he set up a research design that would allow him to observe differences. He chose two primarily middle-class (one was racially diverse and the other was predominantly White) and two primarily poor neighborhoods (one was racially diverse and the other was predominantly African American). He hung out in senior centers and other places seniors congregated, watched them as they took the bus to get prescriptions filled, sat in doctor's offices with them, and listened to their conversations with each other. He also conducted more formal conversations, what we call in-depth interviews, with sixty seniors from each of the four neighborhoods. As with a lot of **fieldwork**, as he got closer to the people involved, he both expanded and deepened his reach –

> By the end of the project, I expanded my pool of general observations to include various settings frequented by seniors: apartment building common rooms, doctors' offices, emergency rooms, pharmacies, senior centers, bars, parks, corner stores, shopping centers, pool halls, hair salons, coffee shops, and discount stores. Over the course of the three years of fieldwork, I observed hundreds of elders, and developed close relationships with a number of them. (2012:10)

When Abramson rewrote the dissertation for a general audience and published his book in 2015, it got a lot of attention. It is a beautifully written book and it provided insight into a common human experience that we surprisingly know very little about. It won the Outstanding Publication Award by the American Sociological Association Section on Aging and the Life Course and was featured in the *New York Times*. The book was about aging, and specifically how inequality shapes the aging process, but it was also about much more than that. It helped show *how* inequality affects people's everyday lives. For example, by observing the difficulties the poor had in setting up appointments and getting to them using public

4. Don't worry, we'll spend more time later in this book unpacking the meaning of ethnography and other terms that are important here. Note the available glossary

transportation and then being made to wait to see a doctor, sometimes in standing-room-only situations, when they are unwell, and then being treated dismissively by hospital staff, Abramson allowed readers to *feel* the material reality of being poor in the US. Comparing these examples with seniors with adequate supplemental insurance who have the resources to hire car services or have others assist them in arranging care when they need it, jolts the reader to understand and appreciate the difference money makes in the lives and circumstances of us all, and in a way that is different than simply reading a statistic ("80% of the poor do not keep regular doctor's appointments") does. Qualitative research can reach into spaces and places that often go unexamined and then reports back to the rest of us what it is like in those spaces and places.

Example 2: *Racing for Innocence* (Interviews + Content Analysis + Fictional Stories)

Jennifer Pierce is a Professor of American Studies at the University of Minnesota. Trained as a sociologist, she has written a number of books about gender, race, and power. Her very first book, *Gender Trials: Emotional Lives in Contemporary Law Firms,* published in 1995, is a brilliant look at gender dynamics within two law firms. Pierce was a participant observer, working as a paralegal, and she observed how female lawyers and female paralegals struggled to obtain parity with their male colleagues.

Fifteen years later, she reexamined the context of the law firm to include an examination of racial dynamics, particularly how elite white men working in these spaces created and maintained a culture that made it difficult for both female attorneys and attorneys of color to thrive. Her book, *Racing for Innocence: Whiteness, Gender, and the Backlash Against Affirmative Action*, published in 2012, is an interesting and creative blending of interviews with attorneys, content analyses of popular films during this period, and fictional accounts of racial discrimination and sexual harassment. The law firm she chose to study had come under an affirmative action order and was in the process of implementing equitable policies and programs. *She wanted to understand* how recipients of white privilege (the elite white male attorneys) come to deny the role they play in reproducing inequality. Through interviews with attorneys who were present both before and during the affirmative action order, she creates a historical record of the "bad behavior" that necessitated new policies and procedures, *but also, and more importantly*, probed the **participants**' understanding of this behavior. It should come as no surprise that most (but not all) of the white male attorneys saw little need for change, and that almost everyone else had accounts that were different if not sometimes downright harrowing.

I've used Pierce's book in my qualitative research methods courses as an example of an interesting blend of techniques and presentation styles. My students often have a very difficult time with the fictional accounts she includes. But they serve an important communicative purpose here. They are her attempts at presenting "both sides" to an objective reality – something happens (Pierce writes this something so it is very clear what it is), and the two participants to the thing that happened have very different understandings

of what this means. By including these stories, Pierce presents one of her key findings – people remember things differently and these different memories tend to support their own ideological positions. I wonder what Pierce would have written had she studied the murder of George Floyd or the storming of the US Capitol on January 6 or any number of other historic events whose observers and participants record very different happenings.

This is not to say that qualitative researchers write fictional accounts. In fact, the use of fiction in our work remains controversial. When used, it must be clearly identified as a presentation device, as Pierce did. I include *Racing for Innocence* here as an example of the multiple uses of methods and techniques and the way that these work together to produce better understandings by us, the readers, of what Pierce studied. We readers come away with a better grasp of how and why advantaged people understate their own involvement in situations and structures that advantage them. This is *normal human behavior*, in other words. This case may have been about elite white men in law firms, but the general insights here can be *transposed* to other settings. Indeed, Pierce argues that more research needs to be done about the role elites play in the reproduction of inequality in the workplace in general.

Example 3: *Amplified Advantage* (Mixed Methods: Survey Interviews + Focus Groups + Archives)

The final example comes from my own work with college students, particularly the ways in which class background affects the experience of college and outcomes for graduates. I include it here as an example of mixed methods, and for the use of supplementary archival research. I've done a lot of research over the years on first-generation, low-income, and working-class college students. I am curious (and skeptical) about the possibility of social mobility today, particularly with the rising cost of college and growing inequality in general. As one of the few people in my family to go to college, I didn't grow up with a lot of examples of what college was like or how to make the most of it. And when I entered graduate school, I realized with dismay that there were very few people like me there. I worried about becoming too different from my family and friends back home. And I wasn't at all sure that I would ever be able to pay back the huge load of debt I was taking on. And so I wrote my dissertation and first two books about working-class college students. These books focused on experiences in college and the difficulties of navigating between family and school (Hurst 2010a, 2012). But even after all that research, I kept coming back to wondering if working-class students who made it through college had an equal chance at finding good jobs and happy lives,

What happens to students after college? Do working-class students fare as well as their peers? I knew from my own experience that barriers continued through graduate school and beyond, and that my debtload was higher than that of my peers, constraining some of the choices I made when I graduated. To answer these questions, I designed a study of students attending small liberal arts colleges, the type of college that tried to equalize the experience of students by requiring all students to live on campus and offering

small classes with lots of interaction with faculty. These private colleges tend to have more money and resources so they can provide financial aid to low-income students. They also attract some very wealthy students. Because they enroll students across the class spectrum, I would be able to draw comparisons. I ended up spending about four years collecting data, both a survey of more than 2000 students (which formed the basis for quantitative analyses) and qualitative data collection (interviews, focus groups, archival research, and participant observation). This is what we call a "mixed methods" approach because we use both quantitative and qualitative data. The survey gave me a large enough number of students that I could make comparisons of the *how many* kind, and to be able to say with some authority that there were in fact significant differences in experience and outcome by class (e.g., wealthier students earned more money and had little debt; working-class students often found jobs that were not in their chosen careers and were very affected by debt, upper-middle-class students were more likely to go to graduate school). But the survey analyses could not explain *why* these differences existed. For that, I needed to *talk to people* and ask them about their motivations and aspirations. I needed to understand their perceptions of the world, and it is very hard to do this through a survey.

By interviewing students and recent graduates, I was able to discern particular patterns and pathways through college and beyond. Specifically, I identified three versions of *gameplay.* Upper-middle-class students, whose parents were themselves professionals (academics, lawyers, managers of non-profits), saw college as the first stage of their education and took classes and declared majors that would prepare them for graduate school. They also spent a lot of time building their resumes, taking advantage of opportunities to help professors with their research, or study abroad. This helped them gain admission to highly-ranked graduate schools and interesting jobs in the public sector. In contrast, upper-class students, whose parents were wealthy and more likely to be engaged in business (as CEOs or other high-level directors), prioritized building social capital. They did this by joining fraternities and sororities and playing club sports. This helped them when they graduated as they called on friends and parents of friends to find them well-paying jobs. Finally, low-income, first-generation, and working-class students were often adrift. They took the classes that were recommended to them but without the knowledge of how to connect them to life beyond college. They spent time working and studying rather than partying or building their resumes. All three sets of students thought they were "doing college" the right way, the way that one was supposed to do college. But these three versions of gameplay led to distinct outcomes that advantaged some students over others. I titled my work "Amplified Advantage" to highlight this process.

These three examples, Cory Abramson's *The End Game*, Jennifer Peirce's *Racing for Innocence,* and my own *Amplified Advantage,* demonstrate the range of approaches and tools available to the qualitative researcher. They also help explain why qualitative research is so important. Numbers can tell us some things about the world, but they cannot get at the hearts and minds, motivations and beliefs of the people who make up the social worlds we inhabit. For that, we need tools that allow us to listen and make sense of what people tell us and show us. That is what good qualitative research offers us.

How Is This Book Organized?

This textbook is organized as a comprehensive introduction to the use of qualitative research methods. The first half covers general topics (e.g., approaches to qualitative research, ethics) and research design (necessary steps for building a successful qualitative research study). The second half reviews various data collection and data analysis techniques. Of course, building a successful qualitative research study requires some knowledge of data collection and data analysis so the chapters in the first half and the chapters in the second half should be read in conversation with each other. That said, each chapter can be read on its own for assistance with a particular narrow topic. In addition to the chapters, a helpful glossary can be found in the back of the book. Rummage around in the text as needed.

Chapter Descriptions

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the Research Design Process. How does one begin a study? What is an appropriate research question? How is the study to be done – with what **methods**? Involving what people and sites? Although qualitative research studies can and often do change and develop over the course of data collection, it is important to have a good idea of what the aims and goals of your study are at the outset and a good plan of how to achieve those aims and goals. Chapter 2 provides a road map of the process.

Chapter 3 describes and explains various ways of knowing the (social) world. What is it possible for us to know about how other people think or why they behave the way they do? What does it mean to say something is a "fact" or that it is "well-known" and understood? Qualitative researchers are particularly interested in these questions because of the types of research questions we are interested in answering (the *how* questions rather than the *how many* questions of quantitative research). Qualitative researchers have adopted various **epistemological** approaches. Chapter 3 will explore these approaches, highlighting **interpretivist** approaches that acknowledge the subjective aspect of reality – in other words, reality and knowledge are not objective but rather influenced by (interpreted through) people.

Chapter 4 focuses on the practical matter of developing a **research question** and finding the right approach to data collection. In any given study (think of Cory Abramson's study of aging, for example), there may be years of collected data, thousands of **observations**, hundreds of pages of notes to read and review and make sense of. If all you had was a general interest area ("aging"), it would be very difficult, nearly impossible, to make sense of all of that data. The research question provides a helpful lens to refine and clarify (and simplify) everything you find and collect. For that reason, it is important to pull out that lens (articulate the research question) before you get started. In the case of the aging study, Cory Abramson was interested in how inequalities affected understandings and responses to aging. It is for this reason he designed a study that would allow him to compare different groups of seniors (some middle-class, some poor). Inevitably, he saw much more in the three years in the field than what made it into his book

(or dissertation), but he was able to narrow down the complexity of the social world to provide us with this rich account linked to the **original research** question. Developing a good research question is thus crucial to effective design and a successful outcome. Chapter 4 will provide pointers on how to do this. Chapter 4 also provides an overview of general approaches taken to doing qualitative research and various "traditions of inquiry."

Chapter 5 explores **sampling**. After you have developed a research question and have a general idea of how you will collect data (Observations? Interviews?), how do you go about actually finding people and sites to study? Although there is no "correct number" of people to **interview**, the **sample** should follow the research question and research design. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research involves nonprobability sampling. Chapter 5 explains why this is so and what qualities instead make a good sample for qualitative research.

Chapter 6 addresses the importance of **reflexivity** in qualitative research. Related to epistemological issues of how we know anything about the social world, qualitative researchers understand that *we the researchers* can never be truly neutral or outside the study we are conducting. As observers, we see things that make sense to us and may entirely miss what is either too obvious to note or too different to comprehend. As interviewers, as much as we would like to ask questions neutrally and remain in the background, interviews are a form of conversation, and the persons we interview are responding *to us*. Therefore, it is important to reflect upon our social positions and the knowledges and expectations we bring to our work and to work through any blind spots that we may have. Chapter 6 provides some examples of reflexivity in practice and exercises for thinking through one's own biases.

Chapter 7 is a very important chapter and should not be overlooked. As a practical matter, it should also be read closely with chapters 6 and 8. Because qualitative researchers deal with people and the social world, it is imperative they develop and adhere to a strong **ethical** code for conducting research in a way that does not harm. There are legal requirements and guidelines for doing so (see chapter 8), but these requirements should not be considered synonymous with the ethical code required of us. Each researcher must constantly interrogate every aspect of their research, from research question to design to sample through analysis and presentation, to ensure that a minimum of harm (ideally, zero harm) is caused. Because each research project is unique, the standards of care for each study are unique. Part of being a professional researcher is carrying this code in one's heart, being constantly attentive to what is required under particular circumstances. Chapter 7 provides various research scenarios and asks readers to weigh in on the suitability and appropriateness of the research. If done in a class setting, it will become obvious fairly quickly that there are often no absolutely correct answers, as different people find different aspects of the scenarios of greatest importance. Minimizing the harm in one area may require possible harm in another. Being attentive to all the ethical aspects of one's research and making the best judgments one can, clearly and consciously, is an integral part of being a good researcher.

Chapter 8, best to be read in conjunction with chapter 7, explains the role and importance of **Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)**. Under federal guidelines, an IRB is an appropriately constituted

group that has been formally designated to review and monitor research involving **human subjects**. Every institution that receives funding from the federal government has an IRB. IRBs have the authority to approve, require modifications to (to secure approval), or disapprove research. This group review serves an important role in the protection of the rights and welfare of human research subjects. Chapter 8 reviews the history of IRBs and the work they do but also argues that IRBs' review of qualitative research is often both over-inclusive and under-inclusive. Some aspects of qualitative research are not well understood by IRBs, given that they were developed to prevent abuses in biomedical research. Thus, it is important not to rely on IRBs to identify all the potential ethical issues that emerge in our research (see chapter 7).

Chapter 9 provides help for getting started on formulating a research question based on gaps in the pre-existing literature. Research is conducted as part of a community, even if particular studies are done by single individuals (or small teams). What any of us finds and reports back becomes part of a much larger body of knowledge. Thus, it is important that we look at the larger body of knowledge before we actually start our bit to see how we can best contribute. When I first began interviewing working-class college students, there was only one other similar study I could find, and it hadn't been published (it was a dissertation of students from poor backgrounds). But there had been a lot published by professors who had grown up working class and made it through college despite the odds. These accounts by "working-class academics" became an important inspiration for my study and helped me frame the questions I asked the students I interviewed. Chapter 9 will provide some pointers on how to search for relevant literature and how to use this to refine your research question.

Chapter 10 serves as a bridge between the two parts of the textbook, by introducing techniques of data collection. Qualitative research is often characterized by the form of data collection – for example, an **ethnographic** study is one that employs primarily observational data collection for the purpose of documenting and presenting a particular culture or ethnos. Techniques can be effectively combined, depending on the research question and the aims and goals of the study. Chapter 10 provides a general overview of all the various techniques and how they can be combined.

The second part of the textbook moves into the doing part of qualitative research once the research question has been articulated and the study designed. Chapters 11 through 17 cover various data collection techniques and approaches. Chapters 18 and 19 provide a very simple overview of basic data analysis. Chapter 20 covers communication of the data to various audiences, and in various formats.

Chapter 11 begins our overview of data collection techniques with a focus on **interviewing**, the true heart of qualitative research. This technique can serve as the primary and exclusive form of data collection, or it can be used to supplement other forms (observation, archival). An interview is distinct from a survey, where questions are asked in a specific order and often with a range of predetermined responses available. Interviews can be conversational and unstructured or, more conventionally, **semistructured**, where a general set of interview questions "guides" the conversation. Chapter 11 covers the basics of interviews: how to create interview guides, how many people to interview, where to conduct the interview,

what to watch out for (how to prepare against things going wrong), and how to get the most out of your interviews.

Chapter 12 covers an important variant of interviewing, the focus group. Focus groups are **semistructured interviews** with a group of people moderated by a facilitator (the researcher or researcher's assistant). Focus groups explicitly use group interaction to assist in the data collection. They are best used to collect data on a specific topic that is non-personal and shared among the group. For example, asking a group of college students about a common experience such as taking classes by remote delivery during the pandemic year of 2020. Chapter 12 covers the basics of focus groups: when to use them, how to create interview guides for them, and how to run them effectively.

Chapter 13 moves away from interviewing to the second major form of data collection unique to qualitative researchers – **observation**. Qualitative research that employs observation can best be understood as falling on a continuum of "fly on the wall" observation (e.g., observing how strangers interact in a doctor's waiting room) to "participant" observation, where the researcher is also an active participant of the activity being observed. For example, an activist in the Black Lives Matter movement might want to study the movement, using her inside position to gain access to observe key meetings and interactions. Chapter 13 covers the basics of **participant observation** studies: advantages and disadvantages, gaining access, ethical concerns related to insider/outsider status and entanglement, and recording techniques.

Chapter 14 takes a closer look at "deep ethnography" – immersion in the field of a particularly long duration for the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding and appreciation of a particular culture or social world. Clifford Geertz called this "deep hanging out." Whereas participant observation is often combined with semistructured interview techniques, deep ethnography's commitment to "living the life" or experiencing the situation *as it really is* demands more conversational and natural interactions with people. These interactions and conversations may take place over months or even years. As can be expected, there are some costs to this technique, as well as some very large rewards when done competently. Chapter 14 provides some examples of deep ethnographies that will inspire some beginning researchers and intimidate others.

Chapter 15 moves in the opposite direction of deep ethnography, a technique that is the least positivist of all those discussed here, to **mixed methods**, a set of techniques that is arguably the most **positivist**. A mixed methods approach combines both qualitative data collection and quantitative data collection, commonly by combining a survey that is analyzed statistically (e.g., cross-tabs or regression analyses of large number probability samples) with semi-structured interviews. Although it is somewhat unconventional to discuss mixed methods in textbooks on qualitative research, I think it is important to recognize this often-employed approach here. There are several advantages and some disadvantages to taking this route. Chapter 16 will describe those advantages and disadvantages and provide some particular guidance on how to design a mixed methods study for maximum effectiveness.

Chapter 16 covers data collection that does not involve live human subjects at all – **archival** and historical research (chapter 17 will also cover data that does not involve interacting with human subjects).

Sometimes people are unavailable to us, either because they do not wish to be interviewed or observed (as is the case with many "elites") or because they are too far away, in both place and time. Fortunately, humans leave many traces and we can often answer questions we have by examining those traces. Special collections and archives can be goldmines for social science research. This chapter will explain how to access these places, for what purposes, and how to begin to make sense of what you find.

Chapter 17 covers another data collection area that does not involve face-to-face interaction with humans: **content analysis**. Although content analysis may be understood more properly as a data analysis technique, the term is often used for the entire approach, which will be the case here. Content analysis involves interpreting meaning from a body of text. This body of text might be something found in historical records (see chapter 16) or something collected by the researcher, as in the case of comment posts on a popular blog post. I once used the stories told by student loan debtors on the website studentloanjustice.org as the content I analyzed. Content analysis is particularly useful when attempting to define and understand prevalent stories or communication about a topic of interest. In other words, when we are less interested in what particular people (our defined sample) are doing or believing and more interested in what general narratives exist about a particular topic or issue. This chapter will explore different approaches to content analysis and provide helpful tips on how to collect data, how to turn that data into **codes** for analysis, and how to go about presenting what is found through analysis.

Where chapter 17 has pushed us towards data analysis, chapters 18 and 19 are all about what to do with the data collected, whether that data be in the form of interview **transcripts** or **fieldnotes** from observations. Chapter 18 introduces the basics of **coding**, the iterative process of assigning meaning to the data in order to both simplify and identify patterns. What is a code and how does it work? What are the different ways of coding data, and when should you use them? What is a codebook, and why do you need one? What does the process of data analysis look like?

Chapter 19 goes further into detail on codes and how to use them, particularly the later stages of coding in which our codes are refined, simplified, combined, and organized. These later rounds of coding are essential to getting the most out of the data we've collected. As students are often overwhelmed with the amount of data (a corpus of interview transcripts typically runs into the hundreds of pages; fieldnotes can easily top that), this chapter will also address time management and provide suggestions for dealing with chaos and reminders that feeling overwhelmed at the analysis stage is part of the process. By the end of the chapter, you should understand how "findings" are actually found.

The book concludes with a chapter dedicated to the effective presentation of data results. Chapter 20 covers the many ways that researchers communicate their studies to various audiences (academic, personal, political), what elements must be included in these various publications, and the hallmarks of excellent qualitative research that various audiences will be expecting. Because qualitative researchers are motivated by *understanding* and *conveying meaning*, effective communication is not only an essential skill but a fundamental facet of the entire research project. Ethnographers must be able to convey a certain sense of *verisimilitude*, the appearance of true reality. Those employing interviews must *faithfully depict* the key

meanings of the people they interviewed in a way that *rings true* to those people, even if the end result surprises them. And all researchers must strive for *clarity* in their publications so that various audiences can understand what was found and why it is important.

The book concludes with a short chapter (chapter 21) discussing the value of qualitative research. At the very end of this book, you will find a glossary of terms. I recommend you make frequent use of the glossary and add to each entry as you find examples. Although the entries are meant to be simple and clear, you may also want to paraphrase the definition—make it "make sense" to you, in other words. In addition to the standard reference list (all works cited here), you will find various recommendations for further reading at the end of many chapters. Some of these recommendations will be examples of excellent qualitative research, indicated with an asterisk (*) at the end of the entry. As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words. A good example of qualitative research can teach you more about conducting research than any textbook can (this one included). I highly recommend you select one to three examples from these lists and read them along with the textbook.

A final note on the choice of examples – you will note that many of the examples used in the text come from research on college students. This is for two reasons. First, as most of my research falls in this area, I am most familiar with this literature and have contacts with those who do research here and can call upon them to share their stories with you. Second, and more importantly, my hope is that this textbook reaches a wide audience of beginning researchers who study widely and deeply across the range of what can be known about the social world (from marine resources management to public policy to nursing to political science to sexuality studies and beyond). It is sometimes difficult to find examples that speak to all those research interests, however. A focus on college students is something that all readers can understand and, hopefully, appreciate, as we are all now or have been at some point a college student.

Recommended Reading: Other Qualitative Research Textbooks

I've included a brief list of some of my favorite qualitative research textbooks and guidebooks if you need more than what you will find in this introductory text. For each, I've also indicated if these are for "beginning" or "advanced" (graduate-level) readers. Many of these books have several editions that do not significantly vary; the edition recommended is merely the edition I have used in teaching and to whose page numbers any specific references made in the text agree.

Barbour, Rosaline. 2014. *Introducing Qualitative Research: A Student's Guide.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. A good introduction to qualitative research, with abundant examples (often from the

discipline of health care) and clear definitions. Includes quick summaries at the ends of each chapter. However, some US students might find the British context distracting and can be a bit advanced in some places. Beginning.

Bloomberg, Linda Dale, and Marie F. Volpe. 2012. *Completing Your Qualitative Dissertation*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. Specifically designed to guide graduate students through the research process. Advanced.

Creswell, John W., and Cheryl Poth. 2018 *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Traditions*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. This is a classic and one of the go-to books I used myself as a graduate student. One of the best things about this text is its clear presentation of five distinct traditions in qualitative research. Despite the title, this reasonably sized book is about more than research design, including both data analysis and how to write about qualitative research. Advanced.

Lareau, Annette. 2021. *Listening to People: A Practical Guide to Interviewing, Participant Observation, Data Analysis, and Writing It All Up*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. A readable and personal account of conducting qualitative research by an eminent sociologist, with a heavy emphasis on the kinds of participant-observation research conducted by the author. Despite its reader-friendliness, this is really a book targeted to graduate students learning the craft. Advanced.

Lune, Howard, and Bruce L. Berg. 2018. 9th edition. *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences.* Pearson. Although a good introduction to qualitative methods, the authors favor symbolic interactionist and dramaturgical approaches, which limits the appeal primarily to sociologists. Beginning.

Marshall, Catherine, and Gretchen B. Rossman. 2016. 6th edition. *Designing Qualitative Research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. Very readable and accessible guide to *research design* by two educational scholars. Although the presentation is sometimes fairly dry, personal vignettes and illustrations enliven the text. Beginning.

Maxwell, Joseph A. 2013. *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. A short and accessible introduction to qualitative research design, particularly helpful for graduate students contemplating theses and dissertations. This has been a standard textbook in my graduate-level courses for years. Advanced.

Patton, Michael Quinn. 2002. *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. This is a comprehensive text that served as my "go-to" reference when I was a graduate student. It is particularly helpful for those involved in program evaluation and other forms of evaluation studies and uses examples from a wide range of disciplines. Advanced.

Rubin, Ashley T. 2021. *Rocking Qualitative Social Science: An Irreverent Guide to Rigorous Research.* Stanford*:* Stanford University Press. A delightful and personal read. Rubin uses rock climbing as an extended metaphor for learning how to conduct qualitative research. A bit slanted toward ethnographic and archival methods of data collection, with frequent examples from her own studies in criminology. Beginning.

Weis, Lois, and Michelle Fine. 2000. *Speed Bumps: A Student-Friendly Guide to Qualitative Research*. New York: Teachers College Press. Readable and accessibly written in a quasi-conversational style. Particularly strong in its discussion of ethical issues throughout the qualitative research process. Not comprehensive, however, and very much tied to ethnographic research. Although designed for graduate students, this is a recommended read for students of all levels. Beginning.

Patton's Ten Suggestions for Doing Qualitative Research

The following ten suggestions were made by Michael Quinn Patton in his massive textbooks *Qualitative Research and Evaluations Methods*. This book is highly recommended for those of you who want more than an introduction to qualitative methods.
It is the book I relied on heavily when I was a graduate student, although it is much easier to "dip into" when necessary than to read through as a whole. Patton is asked for "just one bit of advice" for a graduate student considering using qualitative research methods for their dissertation. Here are his top ten responses, in short form, heavily paraphrased, and with additional comments and emphases from me:

1. Make sure that a qualitative approach fits the research question. The following are the kinds of questions that call out for qualitative methods or where qualitative methods are particularly appropriate: questions about people's experiences or how they make sense of those experiences; studying a person in their natural environment; researching a phenomenon so unknown that it would be impossible to study it with standardized instruments or other forms of quantitative data collection.
2. Study qualitative research by going to the original sources for the design and analysis appropriate to the particular approach you want to take (e.g., read Glaser and Straus if you are using **grounded theory**)
3. Find a dissertation adviser who understands or at least who will support your use of qualitative

research methods. You are asking for trouble if your entire committee is populated by quantitative researchers, even if they are all very knowledgeable about the subject or focus of your study (maybe even more so if they are!)

4. Really work on design. Doing qualitative research effectively takes a lot of planning. Even if things are more flexible than in quantitative research, a good design is absolutely essential when starting out.
5. Practice data collection techniques, particularly interviewing and observing. There is definitely a set of learned skills here! Do not expect your first interview to be perfect. You will continue to grow as a researcher the more interviews you conduct, and you will probably come to understand yourself a bit more in the process, too. This is not easy, despite what others who don't work with qualitative methods may assume (and tell you!)
6. Have a plan for analysis before you begin data collection. This is often a requirement in IRB **protocols**, although you can get away with writing something fairly simple. And even if you are taking an approach, such as grounded theory, that pushes you to remain fairly open-minded during the data collection process, you still want to know what you will be doing with all the data collected – creating a codebook? Writing analytical memos? Comparing cases? Having a plan in hand will also help prevent you from collecting too much extraneous data.
7. Be prepared to confront controversies both within the qualitative research community and between qualitative research and quantitative research. Don't be naïve about this – qualitative research, particularly some approaches, will be derided by many more "positivist" researchers and audiences. For example, is an "n" of 1 really sufficient? Yes! But not everyone will agree.
8. Do not make the mistake of using qualitative research methods because someone told you it was easier, or because you are intimidated by the math required of statistical analyses. Qualitative research is difficult in its own way (and many would claim much more time-consuming than quantitative research). Do it because you are convinced it is right for your goals, aims, and research questions.
9. Find a good support network. This could be a research mentor, or it could be a group of friends or colleagues who are also using qualitative research, or it could be just someone who will listen to you work through all of the issues you will confront out in the field and during the writing process. Even though qualitative research often involves human subjects, it can be pretty lonely. A lot of times you will feel like you are working without a net. You have to create one for yourself. Take care of yourself.
10. And, finally, in the words of Patton, "Prepare to be changed. Looking deeply at other people's lives will force you to look deeply at yourself."

CHAPTER 2. RESEARCH DESIGN

Getting Started

When I teach undergraduates qualitative research methods, the final product of the course is a "research proposal" that incorporates all they have learned and enlists the knowledge they have learned about qualitative research methods in an original design that addresses a particular research question. I highly recommend you think about designing your own research study as you progress through this textbook. Even if you don't have a study in mind yet, it can be a helpful exercise as you progress through the course. But how to start? How can one design a research study before they even know what research looks like? This chapter will serve as a brief overview of the research design process to orient you to what will be coming in later chapters. Think of it as a "skeleton" of what you will read in more detail in later chapters. Ideally, you will read this chapter both now (in sequence) and later during your reading of the remainder of the text. Do not worry if you have questions the first time you read this chapter. Many things will become clearer as the text advances and as you gain a deeper understanding of all the components of good qualitative research. This is just a preliminary map to get you on the right road.

[Untitled image] by Daniel Gonzalez on Unsplash

Research Design Steps

Before you even get started, you will need to have a broad topic of interest in mind. [1]. In my experience, students can confuse this broad topic with the actual research question, so it is important to clearly distinguish the two. And the place to start is the broad topic. It might be, as was the case with me, working-class college students. But what about working-class college students? What's it like to be one? Why are there so few compared to others? How do colleges assist (or fail to assist) them? What interested me was something I could barely articulate at first and went something like this: "Why was it so difficult and lonely to be me?" And by extension, "Did others share this experience?"

Once you have a general topic, reflect on why this is important to you. Sometimes we connect with a topic and we don't really know why. Even if you are not willing to share the real underlying reason you are interested in a topic, it is important that you know the deeper reasons that motivate you. Otherwise, it is quite possible that at some point during the research, you will find yourself turned around facing the wrong direction. I have seen it happen many times. The reason is that the research question is not the same thing as the general topic of interest, and if you don't know the reasons for your interest, you are likely to design a study answering a research question that is beside the point—to you, at least. And this means you will be much less motivated to carry your research to completion.

Researcher Note

Why do you employ qualitative research methods in your area of study? What are the advantages of qualitative research methods for studying mentorship?

Qualitative research methods are a huge opportunity to increase access, equity, inclusion, and social justice. Qualitative research allows us to engage and examine the uniquenesses/nuances within minoritized and dominant identities and our experiences with these identities. Qualitative research allows us to explore a specific topic, and through that exploration, we can link history to experiences and look for patterns or offer up a unique phenomenon. There's such beauty in being able to tell a particular story, and qualitative research is a great mode for that! For our work, we examined the relationships we typically use the term *mentorship* for but didn't feel that was quite the right word. Qualitative research allowed us to pick apart what we did

1. At the end of the chapter, you will find a "Research Design Checklist" that summarizes the main recommendations made here

and how we engaged in our relationships, which then allowed us to more accurately describe what was unique about our mentorship relationships, which we ultimately named *liberationships* (McAloney and Long 2021). Qualitative research gave us the means to explore, process, and name our experiences; what a powerful tool!

How do you come up with ideas for what to study (and how to study it)? Where did you get the idea for studying mentorship?

Coming up with ideas for research, for me, is kind of like Googling a question I have, not finding enough information, and then deciding to dig a little deeper to get the answer. The idea to study mentorship actually came up in conversation with my mentorship triad. We were talking in one of our meetings about our relationship—kind of meta, huh? We discussed how we felt that mentorship was not quite the right term for the relationships we had built. One of us asked what was different about our relationships and mentorship. This all happened when I was taking an **ethnography** course. During the next session of class, we were discussing auto- and duoethnography, and it hit me—let's explore our version of mentorship, which we later went on to name liberationships (McAloney and Long 2021). The idea and questions came out of being curious and wanting to find an answer. As I continue to research, I see opportunities in questions I have about my work or during conversations that, in our search for answers, end up exposing gaps in the literature. If I can't find the answer already out there, I can study it.

—Kim McAloney, PhD, College Student Services Administration Ecampus coordinator and instructor

When you have a better idea of why you are interested in what it is that interests you, you may be surprised to learn that the obvious approaches to the topic are not the only ones. For example, let's say you think you are interested in preserving coastal wildlife. And as a social scientist, you are interested in policies and practices that affect the long-term viability of coastal wildlife, especially around fishing communities. It would be natural then to consider designing a research study around fishing communities and how they manage their ecosystems. But when you really think about it, you realize that what interests you the most is how people whose livelihoods depend on a particular resource act in ways that deplete that resource. Or, even deeper, you contemplate the puzzle, "How do people justify actions that damage their surroundings?" Now, there are many ways to design a study that gets at that broader question, and not all of them are about fishing communities, although that is certainly one way to go. Maybe you could design an interview-based study that includes and compares loggers, fishers, and desert golfers (those who golf in arid lands that require a great deal of wasteful irrigation). Or design a **case study** around one particular example where resources were completely used up by a community. Without knowing what it is you are really interested in, what motivates your interest in a surface phenomenon, you are unlikely to come up with the appropriate research design.

These first stages of research design are often the most difficult, but *have patience*. Taking the time to

consider why you are going to go through a lot of trouble to get answers will prevent a lot of wasted energy in the future.

There are distinct reasons for pursuing particular research questions, and it is helpful to distinguish between them. First, you may be personally motivated. This is probably the most important and the most often overlooked. What is it about the social world that sparks your curiosity? What bothers you? What answers do you need in order to keep living? For me, I knew I needed to get a handle on what higher education was for before I kept going at it. I needed to understand why I felt so different from my peers and whether this whole "higher education" thing was "for the likes of me" before I could complete my degree. That is the personal motivation question. Your personal motivation might also be *political* in nature, in that you want to change the world in a particular way. It's all right to acknowledge this. In fact, it is better to acknowledge it than to hide it.

There are also academic and professional motivations for a particular study. If you are an absolute beginner, these may be difficult to find. We'll talk more about this when we discuss reviewing the literature. Simply put, you are probably not the only person in the world to have thought about this question or issue and those related to it. So how does your interest area fit into what others have studied? Perhaps there is a good study out there of fishing communities, but no one has quite asked the "justification" question. You are motivated to address this to "fill the gap" in our collective knowledge. And maybe you are really not at all sure of what interests you, but you do know that [insert your topic] interests a lot of people, so you would like to work in this area too. You want to be involved in the academic conversation. That is a professional motivation and a very important one to articulate.

Practical and strategic motivations are a third kind. Perhaps you want to encourage people to take better care of the natural resources around them. If this is also part of your motivation, you will want to design your research project in a way that might have an impact on how people behave in the future. There are many ways to do this, one of which is using qualitative research methods rather than quantitative research methods, as the findings of qualitative research are often easier to communicate to a broader audience than the results of quantitative research. You might even be able to engage the community you are studying in the collecting and analyzing of data, something taboo in quantitative research but actively embraced and encouraged by qualitative researchers. But there are other practical reasons, such as getting "done" with your research in a certain amount of time or having access (or no access) to certain information. There is nothing wrong with considering constraints and opportunities when designing your study. Or maybe one of the practical or strategic goals is about learning competence in this area so that you can demonstrate the ability to conduct interviews and focus groups with future employers. Keeping that in mind will help shape your study and prevent you from getting sidetracked using a technique that you are less invested in learning about.

STOP HERE for a moment

I recommend you write a paragraph (at least) explaining your aims and goals. Include a sentence about each of the following: personal/political goals, practical or professional/academic goals, and practical/strategic goals. Think through how all of the goals are related and can be achieved by *this particular research study*. If they can't, have a rethink. Perhaps this is not the best way to go about it.

You will also want to be clear about the **purpose** of your study. "Wait, didn't we just do this?" you might ask. No! Your goals are not the same as the purpose of the study, although they are related. You can think about purpose lying on a continuum from "**theory**" to "action" (figure 2.1). Sometimes you are doing research to discover new knowledge about the world, while other times you are doing a study because you want to measure an impact or make a difference in the world.

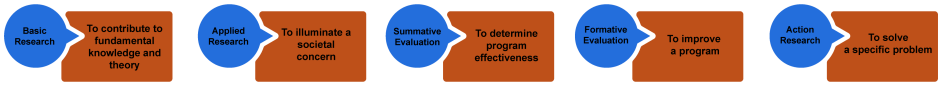

Figure 2.1. Purpose types from Theory to Action. Adopted from Patton (2002).

Basic research involves research that is done for the sake of "pure" knowledge—that is, knowledge that, at least at this moment in time, may not have any apparent use or application. Often, and this is very important, knowledge of this kind is later found to be extremely helpful in solving problems. So one way of thinking about basic research is that it is knowledge for which no use is yet known but will probably one day prove to be extremely useful. If you are doing basic research, you do not need to argue its usefulness, as the whole point is that we just don't know yet what this might be.

Researchers engaged in basic research want to understand how the world operates. They are interested in investigating a phenomenon to get at the nature of reality with regard to that phenomenon. The basic researcher's purpose is to understand and explain (Patton 2002:215).

Basic research is interested in generating and testing hypotheses about how the world works. **Grounded Theory** is one approach to **qualitative research methods** that exemplifies basic research (see chapter 4). Most academic journal articles publish basic research findings. If you are working in academia (e.g., writing your dissertation), the default expectation is that you are conducting basic research.

Applied research in the social sciences is research that addresses human and social problems. Unlike

basic research, the researcher has expectations that the research will help contribute to resolving a problem, if only by identifying its contours, history, or context. From my experience, most students have this as their baseline assumption about research. Why do a study if not to make things better? But this is a common mistake. Students and their committee members are often working with default assumptions here—the former thinking about applied research as their purpose, the latter thinking about basic research: "The purpose of applied research is to contribute knowledge that will help people to understand the nature of a problem in order to intervene, thereby allowing human beings to more effectively control their environment. While in basic research the source of questions is the tradition within a scholarly discipline, in applied research the source of questions is in the problems and concerns experienced by people and by policymakers" (Patton 2002:217).

Applied research is less geared toward theory in two ways. First, its questions do not derive from previous literature. For this reason, applied research studies have much more limited literature reviews than those found in basic research (although they make up for this by having much more "background" about the problem). Second, it does not generate theory in the same way as basic research does. The findings of an applied research project may not be generalizable beyond the boundaries of this particular problem or context. The findings are more limited. They are useful now but may be less useful later. This is why basic research remains the default "gold standard" of academic research.

Evaluation research is research that is designed to evaluate or test the effectiveness of specific solutions and programs addressing specific social problems. We already know the problems, and someone has already come up with solutions. There might be a program, say, for first-generation college students on your campus. Does this program work? Are first-generation students who participate in the program more likely to graduate than those who do not? These are the types of questions addressed by evaluation research. There are two types of research within this broader frame; however, one more action-oriented than the next. In **summative evaluation**, an overall judgment about the effectiveness of a program or policy is made. Should we continue our first-gen program? Is it a good model for other campuses? Because the purpose of such summative evaluation is to measure success and to determine whether this success is scalable (capable of being generalized beyond the specific case), quantitative data is more often used than qualitative data. In our example, we might have "outcomes" data for thousands of students, and we might run various tests to determine if the better outcomes of those in the program are statistically significant so that we can generalize the findings and recommend similar programs elsewhere. Qualitative data in the form of focus groups or interviews can then be used for illustrative purposes, providing more depth to the quantitative analyses. In contrast, **formative evaluation** attempts to improve a program or policy (to help "form" or shape its effectiveness). Formative evaluations rely more heavily on qualitative data—case studies, interviews, focus groups. The findings are meant not to generalize beyond the particular but to improve *this* program. If you are a student seeking to improve your qualitative research skills and you do not care about generating basic research, *formative evaluation* studies might be an attractive option for you

to pursue, as there are always local programs that need evaluation and suggestions for improvement. Again, be very clear about your purpose when talking through your research proposal with your committee.

Action research takes a further step beyond evaluation, even formative evaluation, to being part of the solution itself. This is about as far from basic research as one could get and definitely falls beyond the scope of "science," as conventionally defined. The distinction between action and research is blurry, the research methods are often in constant flux, and the only "findings" are specific to the problem or case at hand and often are findings about the process of intervention itself. Rather than evaluate a program as a whole, action research often seeks to change and improve some particular aspect that may not be working—maybe there is not enough diversity in an organization or maybe women's voices are muted during meetings and the organization wonders why and would like to change this. In a further step, **participatory action research**, those women would become part of the research team, attempting to amplify their voices in the organization through participation in the action research. As action research employs methods that involve people in the process, focus groups are quite common.

If you are working on a thesis or dissertation, chances are your committee will expect you to be contributing to fundamental knowledge and theory (*basic research*). If your interests lie more toward the action end of the continuum, however, it is helpful to talk to your committee about this before you get started. Knowing your purpose in advance will help avoid misunderstandings during the later stages of the research process!

The Research Question

Once you have written your paragraph and clarified your purpose and truly know that *this* study is the best study for you to be doing *right now*, you are ready to write and refine your actual research question. Know that research questions are often moving targets in qualitative research, that they can be refined up to the very end of data collection and analysis. But you do have to have a working research question at all stages. This is your "anchor" when you get lost in the data. What are you addressing? What are you looking at and why? Your research question guides you through the thicket. It is common to have a whole host of questions about a phenomenon or case, both at the outset and throughout the study, but you should be able to pare it down to no more than two or three sentences when asked. These sentences should both clarify the intent of the research and explain why this is an important question to answer. More on refining your research question can be found in chapter 4.

Chances are, you will have already done some prior reading before coming up with your interest and your questions, but you may not have conducted a systematic literature review. This is the next crucial stage to be completed before venturing further. You don't want to start collecting data and then realize that someone has already beaten you to the punch. A review of the literature that is already out there will let you know (1) if others have already done the study you are envisioning; (2) if others have done similar

studies, which can help you out; and (3) what ideas or concepts are out there that can help you frame your study and make sense of your findings. More on literature reviews can be found in chapter 9.

In addition to reviewing the literature for similar studies to what you are proposing, it can be extremely helpful to find a study that inspires you. This may have absolutely nothing to do with the topic you are interested in but is written so beautifully or organized so interestingly or otherwise speaks to you in such a way that you want to post it somewhere to remind you of what you want to be doing. You might not understand this in the early stages—why would you find a study that has nothing to do with the one you are doing helpful? But trust me, when you are deep into analysis and writing, having an inspirational model in view can help you push through. If you are motivated to do something that might change the world, you probably have read something somewhere that inspired you. Go back to that original inspiration and read it carefully and see how they managed to convey the passion that you so appreciate.

At this stage, you are still just getting started. There are a lot of things to do before setting forth to collect data! You'll want to consider and choose a research tradition and a set of data-collection techniques that both help you answer your research question and match all your aims and goals. For example, if you really want to help migrant workers speak for themselves, you might draw on feminist theory and participatory action research models. Chapters 3 and 4 will provide you with more information on epistemologies and approaches.

Next, you have to clarify your "units of analysis." What is the level at which you are focusing your study? Often, the unit in qualitative research methods is individual people, or "human subjects." But your units of analysis could just as well be organizations (colleges, hospitals) or programs or even whole nations. Think about what it is you want to be saying at the end of your study—are the insights you are hoping to make about people or about organizations or about something else entirely? A **unit of analysis** can even be a historical period! Every unit of analysis will call for a different kind of data collection and analysis and will produce different kinds of "findings" at the conclusion of your study.[2]

Regardless of what unit of analysis you select, you will probably have to consider the "human subjects" involved in your research.[3] Who are they? What interactions will you have with them—that is, what kind of data will you be collecting? Before answering these questions, define your **population** of interest and your research setting. Use your research question to help guide you.

Let's use an example from a real study. In *Geographies of Campus Inequality*, Benson and Lee (2020) list three related research questions: "(1) What are the different ways that first-generation students organize

2. For example, if your focus is *society and culture*, you might collect data through observation or a case study. If your focus is *individual lived experience*, you are probably going to be interviewing some people. And if your focus is *language and communication*, you will probably be analyzing text (written or visual). (Marshall and Rossman 2016:16).
3. You may not have any "live" human subjects. There are qualitative research methods that do not require interactions with live human beings - see chapter 16, "Archival and Historical Sources." But for the most part, you are probably reading this textbook because you are interested in doing research with people. The rest of the chapter will assume this is the case.

their social, extracurricular, and academic activities at selective and highly selective colleges? (2) how do first-generation students sort themselves and get sorted into these different types of campus lives; and (3) how do these different patterns of campus engagement prepare first-generation students for their post-college lives?" (3).

Note that we are jumping into this a bit late, after Benson and Lee have described previous studies (the literature review) and what is known about first-generation college students and what is not known. They want to know about *differences* within this group, and they are interested in ones attending certain kinds of colleges because those colleges will be sites where academic and extracurricular pressures compete. That is the context for their three related research questions. What is the population of interest here? *First-generation college students*. What is the research setting? *Selective and highly selective colleges*. But a host of questions remain. *Which* students in the real world, *which* colleges? What about gender, race, and other identity markers? Will the students be asked questions? Are the students still in college, or will they be asked about what college was like for them? Will they be observed? Will they be shadowed? Will they be surveyed? Will they be asked to keep diaries of their time in college? How many students? How many colleges? For how long will they be observed?

Recommendation

Take a moment and write down suggestions for Benson and Lee before continuing on to what they actually did.

Have you written down your own suggestions? Good. Now let's compare those with what they actually did. Benson and Lee drew on two sources of data: in-depth interviews with sixty-four first-generation students and survey data from a preexisting national survey of students at twenty-eight selective colleges. Let's ignore the survey for our purposes here and focus on those interviews. The interviews were conducted between 2014 and 2016 at a single selective college, "Hilltop" (a **pseudonym**). They employed a "purposive" sampling strategy to ensure an equal number of male-identifying and female-identifying students as well as equal numbers of White, Black, and Latinx students. Each student was interviewed once. Hilltop is a selective liberal arts college in the northeast that enrolls about three thousand students.

How did your suggestions match up to those actually used by the researchers in this study? It is possible your suggestions were too ambitious? Beginning qualitative researchers can often make that mistake. You want a research design that is both effective (it matches your question and goals) and doable. You will never be able to collect data from your entire population of interest (unless your research question is really so

narrow to be relevant to very few people!), so you will need to come up with a good sample. Define the criteria for this sample, as Benson and Lee did when deciding to interview an equal number of students by gender and race categories. Define the criteria for your sample setting too. Hilltop is typical for selective colleges. That was a research choice made by Benson and Lee. For more on sampling and sampling choices, see chapter 5.

Benson and Lee chose to employ interviews. If you also would like to include interviews, you have to think about what will be asked in them. Most interview-based research involves an interview guide, a set of questions or question areas that will be asked of each participant. The research question helps you create a relevant interview guide. You want to ask questions whose answers will provide insight into your research question. Again, your research question is the anchor you will continually come back to as you plan for and conduct your study. It may be that once you begin interviewing, you find that people are telling you something totally unexpected, and this makes you rethink your research question. That is fine. Then you have a new anchor. But you always have an anchor. More on interviewing can be found in chapter 11.

Let's imagine Benson and Lee also observed college students as they went about doing the things college students do, both in the classroom and in the clubs and social activities in which they participate. They would have needed a plan for this. Would they sit in on classes? Which ones and how many? Would they attend club meetings and sports events? Which ones and how many? Would they participate themselves? How would they record their observations? More on observation techniques can be found in both chapters 13 and 14.

At this point, the design is almost complete. You know why you are doing this study, you have a clear research question to guide you, you have identified your population of interest and research setting, and you have a reasonable sample of each. You also have put together a plan for data collection, which might include drafting an interview guide or making plans for observations. And so you know exactly what you will be doing for the next several months (or years!). To put the project into action, there are a few more things necessary before actually going into the field.

First, you will need to make sure you have any necessary supplies, including recording technology. These days, many researchers use their phones to record interviews. Second, you will need to draft a few documents for your participants. These include **informed consent forms** and recruiting materials, such as posters or email texts, that explain what this study is in clear language. Third, you will draft a research protocol to submit to your **institutional review board (IRB)**; this research protocol will include the interview guide (if you are using one), the consent form template, and all examples of recruiting material. Depending on your institution and the details of your study design, it may take weeks or even, in some unfortunate cases, months before you secure IRB approval. Make sure you plan on this time in your project timeline. While you wait, you can continue to review the literature and possibly begin drafting a section on the literature review for your eventual presentation/publication. More on IRB procedures can be found in chapter 8 and more general ethical considerations in chapter 7.

Once you have approval, you can begin!

Research Design Checklist

Before data collection begins, do the following:

- ☐ Write a paragraph explaining your aims and goals (personal/political, practical/strategic, professional/academic).
- ☐ Define your research question; write two to three sentences that clarify the intent of the research and why this is an important question to answer.
- ☐ Review the literature for similar studies that address your research question or similar research questions; think laterally about some literature that might be helpful or illuminating but is not exactly about the same topic.
- ☐ Find a written study that inspires you—it may or may not be on the research question you have chosen.
- ☐ Consider and choose a research tradition and set of data-collection techniques that (1) help answer your research question and (2) match your aims and goals.
- ☐ Define your population of interest and your research setting.
- ☐ Define the criteria for your *sample* (How many? Why these? How will you find them, gain access, and acquire consent?).
- ☐ If you are conducting interviews, draft an interview guide.
- ☐ If you are making observations, create a plan for observations (sites, times, recording, access).
- ☐ Acquire any necessary technology (recording devices/software).
- ☐ Draft consent forms that clearly identify the research focus and selection process.
- ☐ Create recruiting materials (posters, email, texts).
- ☐ Apply for IRB approval (proposal plus consent form plus recruiting materials).
- ☐ Block out time for collecting data.

CHAPTER 3. A SHORT CHAPTER ON EPISTEMOLOGY (HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT WE KNOW?)

What Is Epistemology? A Short Introduction

Epistemology is the name we give to the cluster of questions we have about how we (humans) know things about the world. As beings made up of matter with various sensory organs, our ability to "grasp" the world out there is constrained by those sensory organs and the matter (e.g., brain) we use to process what our senses take in. How do we know that what we see with our eyes is actually out there in the world and not an image that our brain projects or manipulates? How do we know we are not living in someone else's imagination or having images and thoughts live-streamed into our consciousness? What, after all, is our consciousness? Those are difficult questions, impossible to answer, which is one of the main conclusions of those who ask epistemological questions. It is difficult to know what is real! On a more prosaic level, closer to home, we are asking epistemological questions when we address the shortcomings of our ability to know what someone else is thinking or what some social fact or circumstance actually means to other people.

Qualitative researchers tend to ask these kinds of questions all the time. They are at the heart of why we engage in the kinds of methods we engage in. For example, we are sometimes skeptical of large-scale surveys because we think that people's answers are not so clearly understood as a yes-or-no response or multiple-choice answer would have us believe. Take a question that asks college students to rate their satisfaction with their university's response to COVID, on a scale of one to ten. First of all, we don't know how people are using the scale and what a particular number ranking means to them. Second, we don't really know what aspects of the university response different people will be responding to. Maybe one person didn't like the mask policy, so they scored a two, while someone else really enjoyed remote learning, so they scored a ten, and yet another person didn't have time to complete the survey, so they quickly answered all questions with a five. How do we know that the average response of seven reflects a reality that the response was, overall, more positive than negative? What do we really know from this about the university's response? To be fair, a skilled survey researcher will be able to write questions that reduce some of these ambiguities, but they will never be able to completely get at the reality of the situation. Nor will a qualitative researcher, although at least they will be able to sit down with a person, ask follow-up questions as needed, and urge the person to explain their answers as thoroughly as possible to get closer to the truth.

The above example also helps explain why we sometimes use quantitative and sometimes qualitative

research methods. Surveys are terrible at capturing subtle and personal evaluations because they do not allow for probing questions and follow-up conversations. They are much better at recording simple data, such as "Did your university move to remote learning during COVID?" There is less ambiguity possible there, as the meanings of the various words and the question overall are less subject to multiple interpretations. When we are interested in the meanings of actions, evaluations, and personal understandings, qualitative research methods are more likely to get us closer to the "truth" of the matter we are pursuing.

They will still not get us to the full truth, however, as the full truth is unknowable. This is an epistemological statement with which most qualitative researchers would agree. This is in contrast to how much natural science proceeds. [1] Quantitative research attempts to follow a scientific model, where reality may be difficult to know but remains possible. Qualitative researchers also follow a scientific model but are less prone to positivist thinking. They are sometimes more like historians than biologists in that they acknowledge that, at least for people, there is no one single reality but refractions of reality through multiple perspectives.

Epistemological Approaches

At some point, every qualitative researcher has to grapple with the limits of our knowledge and come to terms with that limitation. Over time, various approaches to this problem, or *epistemological perspectives*, have been developed. As a beginner, you might find one of these perspectives more attractive than others, but it is probably best to use this section as a reference for later, when you yourself begin to wonder what it is you can really know about the questions you are asking, the people you are listening to, and the context in which you have situated your study. Think of this chapter as a companion and guide for when those questions inevitably come up in your research. Each of the following perspectives provides a grounding for deciding what knowledge is even possible and then how you, the researcher, can best go about acquiring that knowledge as accurately and reliably as possible.

Epistemological Perspective 1: Objectivism

Basic statement of knowledge: Meaning and reality exist independently (outside) of any particular consciousness.

Objectivism holds that there is a reality independent of our minds. Researchers are tasked with finding

1. Actually, there is more "unknowingness" in the natural sciences now than there has been since Newton and Bacon, as those working in quantum physics will tell you!

that independent reality and reporting back to the rest of us about what it is. This perspective is widely adopted by quantitative researchers (see the survey question example above). Those who adopt this perspective believe that it is possible to get at some objective truth if the appropriate tools are used well.

Epistemological Perspective 2: Subjectivism

Basic statement of knowledge: There is no meaning or knowable reality independent of the meaning or reality constructed by particular consciousnesses.

Subjectivism holds the opposite of objectivism: there is no reality we can know independent of our minds. Now, this is not a statement about reality itself. That is an *ontological* ("being") question. It is only a statement about what is knowable (this is what makes it an *epistemological* issue). Take the film *The Matrix*. Neo, the protagonist, is offered a red pill to "wake him up" to the reality that his entire existence has been an illusion, implanted while he slept attached to tubes, his body providing an energy source for an entirely other reality than the one he has been "dreaming." What is actual reality is not known reality at all. Those who adopt a constructivist perspective recognize that we don't have access to red pills that allow us to see "what is really real." Our knowledge is only of what we think is true, putting aside what might actually be true. When we talk to Neo, it will be a Neo without access to a red pill. We can still learn a lot from Neo about the world he lives in, even if it is more properly only the world he *thinks* he lives in.

Epistemological Perspective 3: Constructivism

Basic statement of knowledge: People construct meaning from facts, events, and the reality out there.

Like subjectivism, **constructivism** rejects the idea that we can know reality independently of the people who interact with it. Unlike subjectivism, constructivism places the stress not on the individual consciousness but on the interaction between thought and the world. There is something out there, but I can only partially grasp it and thus partially understand it. What I see (hear, taste, sense) will be influenced by the context I find myself in and the historical forces that help shape my understanding of the world. We are using this perspective when we talk about people seeing different realities, as in the case of a police officer shooting an unarmed Black man, where each perceives a mortal threat. One may be more "accurate" than the other in their perception of reality, but that is a value judgment (**axiology** issue) separate from the epistemological issue. Researchers try to understand the reality as apprehended by various others. They do not presume to know the actual reality, as that is, epistemologically speaking, impossible to do.

Epistemological Perspective 4: Critical Realism

Basic statement of knowledge: People cannot know "reality."

This is a genuinely alternative approach to reality and social science, one that argues that the line between epistemology (how we know) and **ontology** (what we know) cannot be properly defined by us. So all of the various epistemological perspectives are flawed. Derived from the work of Roy Bhaskar, this approach was meant to stand apart from both positivist/objectivism and interpretivist/subjectivism. Critical realists distinguish between an unobservable "real" domain (see fig. 3.1), an "actual" domain, and an "empirical" domain. The empirical domain is the one we can "see." It comprises the everyday experiences of our lives. It is possible to look beneath the surface and apprehend the power and impact of unobservable social structures and organizations. This is the level at which critical realists operate.

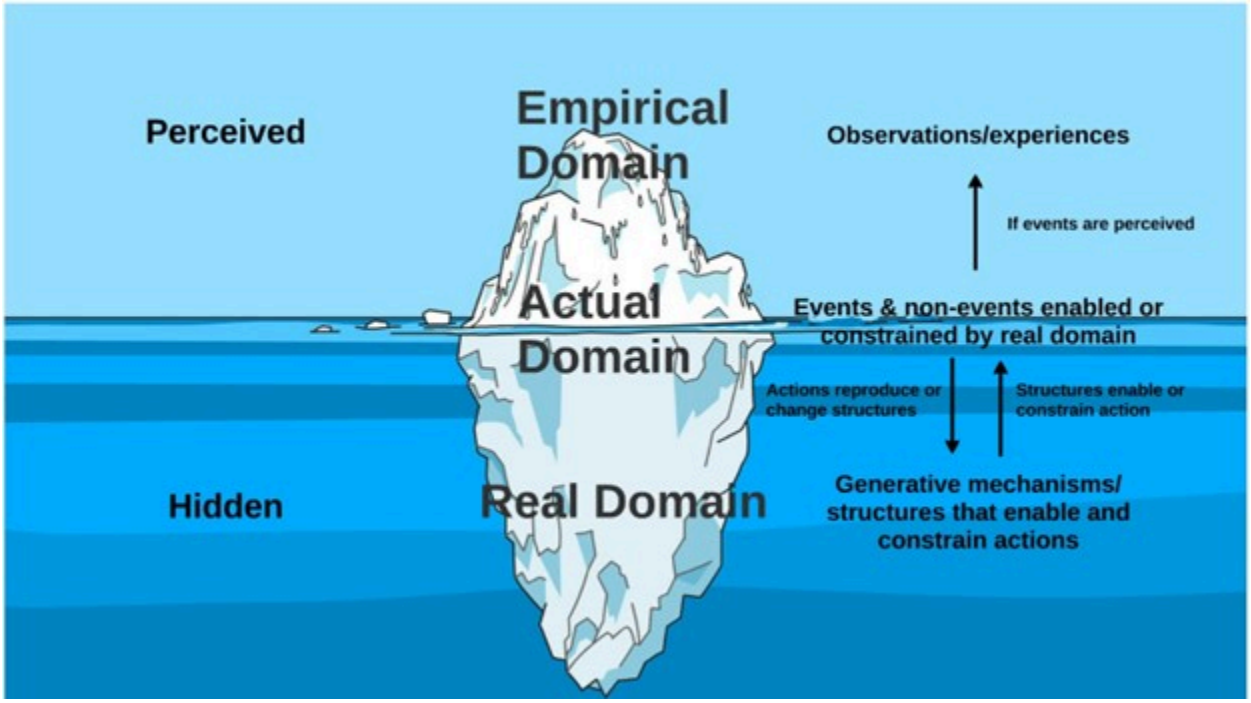

Fig. 3.1. Critical Realism's Stratified Reality by Brad C. Anderson is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 / A derivative from the original work.

If this makes your head swim, don't worry! I've included **critical realism** here because you should know this approach exists, not because you need to fully grasp it to conduct good qualitative research. Even critical realists don't always agree with one another on what this all means. If you want to know more about this approach, I've included some relatively accessible articles and books in the "Further Readings" section.

Other Ways of Knowing

In the course of the last fifty years or so, there have been a series of critiques against dominant forms of knowledge that presume to be universal. For example, Mary Field Belenky and her colleagues (1997)

developed five models of "women's ways of knowing" that are distinct from the ways that men know the world. This can be viewed as a particular instance of **Standpoint Theory**, developed by feminist philosophers in the 1970s and 1980s. Standpoint Theory posits that one's social location delimits one's understanding and experience of the world. This "standpoint epistemology" has been applied to various persons on the margins; some phenomenological qualitative research can even be understood as capturing the epistemology of those with little power (e.g., first-generation college students, undocumented immigrants, Indigenous persons, women). Articles and books that reference "ways of knowing" generally lie within this tradition. Theorists associated with this position include Patricia Hill Collins (also a pioneer of Intersectionality Theory), Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, and Dorothy Smith (the originator of institutional ethnography).

According to standpoint epistemologists, a standpoint is a place from which persons view the world. This standpoint influences how the person socially constructs the world. We see here the connection to the third epistemological perspective, constructivism. But for standpoint epistemologists, inequalities in the social world create differences in standpoints, which means that the world as constructed is differentiated. There is no one universal world that has been socially constructed by the combined actions and interactions of its denizens. Instead, there are many social worlds. All standpoints, including the dominant standpoint, are partial.

Quick Philosophical Terminology Recap

- Epistemology = how we know things
- Ontology = what exists
- Axiology = values

Qualitative Research Practices and Assumptions

Regardless of which epistemological perspective one adopts, qualitative researchers engage in certain practices and assumptions that attempt to get at reality, despite the limitations imposed by imperfect knowledge. They do this by being conscious of those knowledge limitations.

The first, and probably the most important of these, is to recognize the importance of viewpoint. Whether or not reality exists or is out there like we think it is out there, we can only get at the social world through people, and people are located differently in society and will consequently have different vantage

points from which to apprehend reality. You might consider the parable of the blind men and the elephant (fig 3.2) . This parable originated in the Indian subcontinent and may be older than 500 CE, when it first appeared as part of a Buddhist text. The story goes like this: Several blind men come across an elephant for the first time. Having no reference for such a creature, they attempt to use their remaining senses to describe it. Each takes one part of the elephant—the smooth curved tusk, the round pillar-like legs, the softly swishing tale, the rough wrinkly hide of the torso, the large and surprisingly delicate ears—and tells the others what the elephant is. You might see this parable as highlighting the difference between what is (ontology: there is an elephant) and what is knowable (epistemology: what can be known of the elephant). Because each man has his own context and his own vantage point, what each makes of the elephant is uniquely different. All descriptions are true and accurate, but none of them actually describe "the elephant" itself. The moral of the parable is usually presented as telling people not to take their own truth for the whole truth, to admit the limitations and fallibility of their own perceptions, and not to ignore other people's limited (but accurate) truths of a situation or an event.

Fig.3.2. Blind Men and the Elephant.

Qualitative researchers take the parable to heart and build the lessons of the story into their research design. They might include comparisons of people differentially situated, for example, to gauge the strength or ubiquity of a culture or set of opinions. They will be skeptical of taking one group's statements of an event as an accurate depiction of that event, especially if that group is located in a privileged position or position of power. For example, asking White people only about the existence of racism today is surely a poor way of getting at the actual reality of racism.

Related to this recognition that reality is multiply apprehended and that vantage point matters is an ethical practice to acknowledge others' understanding of the world, even if you personally might disagree with that understanding. Going back to the above example, we might want to know why White people recognize and acknowledge the existence of racism less often than people of color. You might think you have the obvious answer already, but good research often pushes past the obvious answers. Acknowledging

and respecting the multiplicity of vantage points and hence multiple "realities" opens up a lot of interesting research questions. Sometimes the epistemological questions bleed into axiological questions of value. For example, have you ever wondered, "How in the world could they think that?" or "Are they misbehaving because they don't know any better (i.e., they have a different understanding of what is right or the impact of their actions) or because of something else (i.e., they like acting badly)?" These are the kinds of questions that can only be answered, albeit imperfectly, through qualitative research. They are not appropriate questions for a survey.

Finally, we ourselves are located in a particular position and have a particular vantage point on the social world we inhabit. We do not live outside it. We can't ever truly isolate the variables or study whatever it is we are studying as a completely neutral observer. We are blind men too. We can take steps to minimize our influence on the study and the influence of our position on what we apprehend, but we can never completely do either. One way we improve our research is to be constantly reflective on these issues. Writing down our own beliefs, suppositions, expectations, and values before we begin is actually quite helpful. I encourage you to keep a journal for research where you consciously reflect on your motivations and expectations as you work through your research (and the journal can be used for so much more, as will be discussed later). Do not think of this as supplemental to the research or as egocentric navel-gazing. It's quite important. So important that we are devoting an entirely separate chapter to it (chapter 6).

Further Readings

The following are a few books and articles that explore epistemology in qualitative research in general or that highlight and explain particular epistemological viewpoints (e.g., critical realism). Asterisked works are engaging qualitative studies that can serve as models of good qualitative research. Note that the articles in particular are drawn from a wide range of disciplines; graduate students might want to read those related to their areas of study.

Bhaskar, Roy. 2008. *A Realist Theory of Science*. London: Routledge. The classic statement of critical realism by its founding theorist. A difficult read.

Bowleg, Lisa. 2017. "Towards a Critical Health Equity Research Stance: Why Epistemology and Methodology Matter More Than Qualitative Methods." *Health, Education & Behavior* 44(5):677–684. Includes a discussion of epistemological stance and its influence on all aspects of the research process.

Bryman, Alan. 1984. "The Debate about Quantitative and Qualitative Research: A Question of Method

or Epistemology?" *British Journal of Sociology* 35(1):75–92. Questions whether epistemological paradigms are clearly linked to qualitative versus quantitative research methods.

Collier, Andrew. 1994. *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy*. London: Verso. Perhaps a slightly more accessible introduction to critical realism than reading Bhaskar but nevertheless quite difficult going.

Gorski, Philip S. 2013. "'What Is Critical Realism? And Why Should You Care?'" *Contemporary Sociology* 42(5):658–670. A special review essay on several books on critical realism (mostly by Bhaskar). Although the material is difficult, this is probably the best introduction to the subject.

Gringeri, Christina, Amanda Barusch, and Christopher Cambron. 2013. "Epistemology in Qualitative Social Work Research: A Review of Published Articles, 2008–2010." *Social Work Research* 37(1):55–63. Explores the epistemological foundations of qualitative social work research through a metareview was completed of one hundred articles from social work journals. This covers a lot of ground in an interesting way and may be appropriate for all readers.

Harding, Sandra. 1992. "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is 'Strong Objectivity'?" *Centennial Review* 36(3):437–470. An important article in the history and development of Standpoint Theory. More readable than most articles in this vein.

Haverland, Markus, and Dvora Yanow. 2012. "A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Public Administration Research Universe: Surviving Conversations on Methodologies and Methods." *Public Administration Review* 72(3):401–408. An attempt to clarify some of the misunderstandings that can occur when researchers mix different methodological positions in their research designs due to their lack of awareness of distinctions between different ways of knowing and their associated methods.

Juutilainen, Sandra A., Melanie Jeffrey, and Suzanne Stewart. 2020. "Methodology Matters: Designing a Pilot Study Guided by Indigenous Epistemologies." *Human Biology* 91(3):141–151. Demonstrate how Indigenous epistemologies, such as nonhierarchical approaches to relationship, can be incorporated into qualitative research.

Luttrell, Wendy. 1989. "Working-Class Women's Ways of Knowing: Effects of Gender, Race, and Class." *Sociology of Education* 62(1):33–46. Based on participant observation in classrooms and in-depth interviews with female students in an adult education program, Luttrell describes how Black and White working-class women "define and claim knowledge."*

Martínez, Theresa A. 1996. "Toward a Chicana Feminist Epistemological Standpoint: Theory at the Intersection of Race, Class, and Gender." *Race, Gender & Class* 3(3):107–128. An engaging and readable exploration of one application of Standpoint Theory.

Miller, Thaddeus R., Timothy D. Baird, Caitlin M. Littlefield, Gary Kofinas, F. Stuart Chapin, and Charles L. Redman. 2008. "Epistemological Pluralism: Reorganizing Interdisciplinary Research." *Ecology and Society* 13(2):45–62. The authors argue for the recognition of multiple ways of knowing when designing collaborative interdisciplinary research, particularly in the area of ecological/social studies.

Sayer, Andrew. 2000. "Introduction." Pp. 1–28 in *Realism and Social Science*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. This is a terrific introduction to critical realism.

Sayer, Andrew. 2011. *Why Things Matter to People: Social Science, Values and Ethical Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A highly recommended book for anyone who wants to understand how people make ethical judgments and how these are connected with epistemological stances. This is an applied version of critical realism that is compelling and impassioned.

Scheurich, James Joseph, and Michelle D. Young. 1997. "Coloring Epistemologies: Are Our Research Epistemologies Racially Biased?" *Educational Researcher* 26(4):4–16. Discusses the possibility of "epistemological racism" and what we can do about it.

Smith, Dorothy E. 1989. *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*. Boston: Northeastern University Press. A classic work in which Smith develops a method for analyzing how people view contemporary society from specific gendered viewpoints. Long heralded as a breakthrough feminist text articulating a sociology developed "from the standpoint of women."

Trosow, Samuel E. 2001. "Standpoint Epistemology as an Alternative Methodology for Library and Information Science." *Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 71(3):360–382. Discusses the problem of perceived "**neutrality**" in library sciences and how Standpoint Theory might prove a more rewarding alternative for studies in this area.

Yilmaz, Kaya. 2012. "Comparison of Quantitative and Qualitative Research Traditions: Epistemological, Theoretical, and Methodological Differences." *European Journal of Education* 48(2):311–325. A nice overview of the differences between quantitative and qualitative research that includes a section on epistemological disagreements. Good for beginning students wanting to get a handle on the split between quantitative and qualitative research in the social and behavioral sciences.

CHAPTER 4. FINDING A RESEARCH QUESTION AND APPROACHES TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

We've discussed the research design process in general and ways of knowing favored by qualitative researchers. In chapter 2, I asked you to think about what interests you in terms of a focus of study, including your motivations and research purpose. It might be helpful to start this chapter with those short paragraphs you wrote about motivations and purpose in front of you. We are now going to try to develop those interests into actual research questions (first part of this chapter) and then choose among various "traditions of inquiry" that will be best suited to answering those questions. You've already been introduced to some of this (in chapter 1), but we will go further here.

[Untitled image] by Evan Daniels on Unsplash

Developing a Research Question

Research questions are different from general questions people have about the social world. They are narrowly tailored to fit a very specific issue, complete with context and time boundaries. Because we are engaged in empirical science and thus use "data" to answer our questions, the questions we ask must be answerable by data. A question is not the same as stating a problem. The point of the entire research project is to answer a particular question or set of questions. The question(s) should be interesting, relevant, practical, and ethical. Let's say I am generally interested in the problem of student loan debt. That's a good place to start, but we can't simply ask,

General question: Is student loan debt really a problem today?

How could we possibly answer that question? What data could we use? Isn't this really an axiological (values-based) question? There are no clues in the question as to what data would be appropriate here to help us get started. Students often begin with these large unanswerable questions. They are not research questions. Instead, we could ask,

Poor research question: How many people have debt?

This is still not a very good research question. Why not? It is answerable, although we would probably want to clarify the context. We could add some context to improve it so that the question now reads,

Mediocre research question: How many people in the US have debt today? And does this amount vary by age and location?

Now we have added some context, so we have a better idea of where to look and who to look at. But this is still a pretty poor or mediocre research question. Why is that? Let's say we did answer it. What would we really know? Maybe we would find out that student loan debt has increased over time and that young people today have more of it. We probably already know this. We don't really want to go through a lot of trouble answering a question whose answer we already have. In fact, part of the reason we are even asking this question is that *we know* (or think) it is a problem. Instead of asking what you already know, ask a question to which you really do not know the answer. I can't stress this enough, so I will say it again: *Ask a question to which you do not already know the answer*. The point of research is not to prove or make a point but to find out something unknown. What about student loan debt is still a mystery to you? Reviewing the literature could help (see chapter 9). By reviewing the literature, you can get a good sense of what is still mysterious or unknown about student loan debt, and you won't be reinventing the wheel when you conduct your research. Let's say you review the literature, and you are struck by the fact that we still don't understand the true *impact* of debt on how people are living their lives. A possible research question might be,

Fair research question: What impact does student debt have on the lives of debtors?

Good start, but we still need some context to help guide the project. It is not nearly specific enough.

Better research question: What impact does student debt have on young adults (ages twenty-five to thirty-five) living in the US today?

Now we've added context, but we can still do a little bit better in narrowing our research question so that it is both clear and doable; in other words, we want to frame it in a way that provides a very clear research program:

Optimal research question: How do young adults (ages twenty-five to thirty-five) living in the US today

who have taken on $30,000 or more in student debt describe the impact of their debt on their lives in terms of finding/choosing a job, buying a house, getting married, and other major life events?

Now you have a research question that can be answered and a clear plan of how to answer it. You will talk to young adults living in the US today who have high debt loads and ask them to describe the impacts of debt on their lives. That is all now in the research question. Note how different this very specific question is from where we started with the "problem" of student debt.

Take some time practicing turning the following general questions into research questions:

1. What can be done about the excessive use of force by police officers?
2. Why haven't societies taken firmer steps to address climate change?
3. How do communities react to / deal with the opioid epidemic?
4. Who has been the most adversely affected by COVID?
5. When did political polarization get so bad?

Hint: Step back from each of the questions and try to articulate a possible underlying motivation, then formulate a research question that is specific and answerable.

It is important to take the time to come up with a research question, even if this research question changes a bit as you conduct your research (yes, research questions can change!). If you don't have a clear question to start your research, you are likely to get very confused when designing your study because you will not be able to make coherent decisions about things like samples, sites, methods of data collection, and so on. Your research question is your anchor: "If we don't have a question, we risk the possibility of going out into the field thinking we know what we'll find and looking only for proof of what we expect to be there. That's not empirical research (it's not systematic)" (Rubin 2021:37).

Researcher Note

How do you come up with ideas for what to study?

I study what surprises me. Usually, I come across a statistic that suggests something is common that I thought was rare. I tend to think it's rare because the theories I read suggest it should be, and there's not a lot of work in that area that helps me understand how the statistic came to be. So, for example, I learned that it's common for Americans to marry partners who grew up in a different class than them and that about half of White kids born into the upper-middle class are downwardly mobile. I was so shocked by these facts that they naturally led to research questions. How do people come to marry someone who grew up in a different class? How do White kids born near the top of the class structure fall?

—Jessi Streib, author of *The Power of the Past* and *Privilege Lost*

What if you have literally no *idea* what the research question should be? How do you find a research question? Even if you have an interest in a topic before you get started, you see the problem now: topics and issues are not research questions! A research question doesn't easily emerge; it takes a lot of time to hone one, as the practice above should demonstrate. In some research designs, the research question doesn't even get clearly articulated until *the end of data collection*. More on that later. But you must start somewhere, of course. Start with your chosen discipline. This might seem obvious, but it is often overlooked. There is a reason it is called a discipline. We tend to think of "sociology," "public health," and "physics" as so many clusters of courses that are linked together by subject matter, but they are also disciplines in the sense that the study of each focuses the mind in a particular way and for particular ends. For example, in my own field, sociology, there is a loosely shared commitment to social justice and a general "sociological imagination" that enables its practitioners to connect personal experiences to society at large and to historical forces. It is helpful to think of issues and questions that are germane to your discipline. Within that overall field, there may be a particular course or unit of study you found most interesting. Within that course or unit of study, there may be an issue that intrigued you. And finally, within that issue, there may be an aspect or topic that you want to know more about.

Researcher Note

How do you come up with ideas for what to study?

When I was pursuing my dissertation research, I was asked often, "Why did you choose to study intimate partner violence among Native American women?" This question is necessary, and each time I answered, it

helped shape me into a better researcher. I was interested in intimate partner violence because I am a survivor. I didn't have intentions to work with a particular population or demographic—that came from my own deep introspection on my role as a researcher. I always questioned my positionality: What privileges do I hold as an academic? How has public health extracted information from institutionally marginalized populations? How can I build bridges between communities using my position, knowledge, and power? Public health as a field would not exist without the contributions of Indigenous people. So I started hanging out with them at community events, making friends, and engaging in self-education. Through these organic relationships built with Native women in the community, I saw that intimate partner violence was a huge issue. This led me to partner with Indigenous organizations to pursue a better understanding of how Native survivors of intimate partner violence seek support.

—Susanna Y. Park, PhD, mixed-methods researcher in public health and author of "How Native Women Seek Support as Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence: A Mixed-Methods Study"

One of the most exciting and satisfying things about doing academic research is that whatever you end up researching can become part of the body of knowledge that we have collectively created. Don't make the mistake of thinking that you are doing this all on your own from scratch. Without even being aware of it, no matter if you are a first-year undergraduate student or a fourth-year graduate student, you have been trained to think certain questions are interesting. The very fact that you are majoring in a particular field or have signed up for years of graduate study in a program testifies to some level of commitment to a discipline. What we are looking for, ideally, is that your research *builds on* in some way (as extension, as critique, as lateral move) previous research and so adds to what we, collectively, understand about the social world. It is helpful to keep this in mind, as it may inspire you and also help guide you through the process. The point is, you are not meant to be doing something no one has ever thought of before, even if you are trying to find something that does not exactly duplicate previous research: "You may be trying to be too clever—aiming to come up with a topic unique in the history of the universe, something that will have people swooning with admiration at your originality and intellectual precociousness. Don't do it. It's safer…to settle on an ordinary, middle-of-the-road topic that will lend itself to a nicely organized process of project management. That's the clever way of proceeding.… You can always let your cleverness shine through during the stages of design, analysis, and write-up. Don't make things more difficult for yourself than you need to do" (Davies 2007:20).

Rubin (2021) suggests four possible ways to develop a research question (there are many more, of course, but this can get you started). One way is to start with a theory that interests you and then select a topic where you can apply that theory. For example, you took a class on gender and society and learned about the "glass ceiling." You could develop a study that tests that theory in a setting that has not yet been explored—maybe leadership at the Oregon Country Fair. The second way is to start with a topic that

interests you and then go back to the books to find a theory that might explain it. This is arguably more difficult but often much more satisfying. Ask your professors for help—they might have ideas of theories or concepts that could be relevant or at least give you an idea of what books to read. The third way is to be very clever and select a question that already combines the topic and the theory. Rubin gives as one example sentencing disparities in criminology—this is both a topic and a theory or set of theories. You then just have to figure out particulars like setting and sample. I don't know if I find this third way terribly helpful, but it might help you think through the possibilities. The fourth way involves identifying a puzzle or a problem, which can be either theoretical (something in the literature just doesn't seem to make sense and you want to tackle addressing it) or empirical (something happened or is happening, and no one really understands why—think, for example, of mass school shootings).

Once you think you have an issue or topic that is worth exploring, you will need to (eventually) turn that into a good research question. A good research question is *specific, clear,* and *feasible*.

Specific. How specific a research question needs to be is somewhat related to the disciplinary conventions and whether the study is conceived inductively or deductively. In deductive research, one begins with a specific research question developed from the literature. You then collect data to test the theory or hypotheses accompanying your research question. In inductive research, however, one begins with data collection and analysis and builds theory from there. So naturally, the research question is a bit vaguer. In general, the more closely aligned to the natural sciences (and thus the deductive approach), the more a very tight and specific research question (along with specific, focused hypotheses) is required. This includes disciplines like psychology, geography, public health, environmental science, and marine resources management. The more one moves toward the humanities pole (and the inductive approach), the more looseness is permitted, as there is a general belief that we go into the field to find what is there, not necessarily what we imagine we are looking for (see figure 4.2). Disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and gender and sexuality studies and some subdisciplines of public policy/public administration are closer to the humanities pole in this sense.

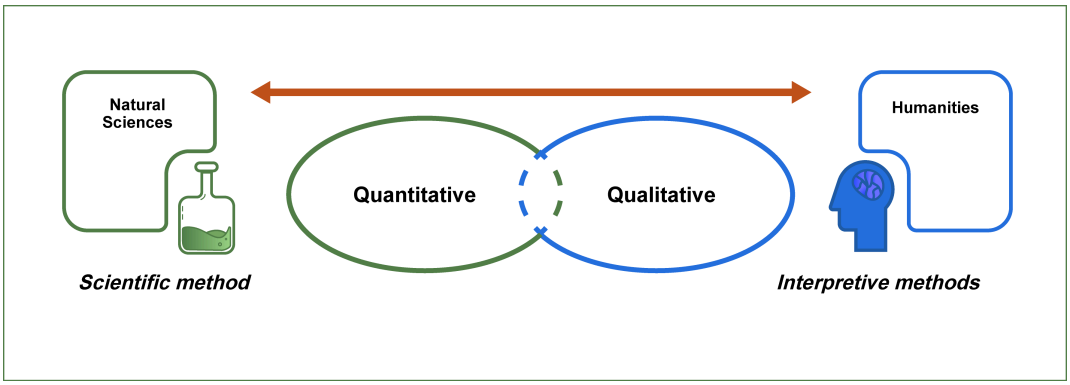

Figure 4.1. Quantitative/ Qualitative Continuum

Regardless of discipline and approach, however, it is a good idea for beginning researchers to create a research question as specific as possible, as this will serve as your guide throughout the process. You can tweak it later if needed, but start with something specific enough that you know what it is you are doing and

why. It is more difficult to deal with ambiguity when you are starting out than later in your career, when you have a better handle on what you are doing. Being under a time constraint means the more specific the question, the better. Questions should always specify contexts, geographical locations, and time frames. Go back to your practice research questions and make sure that these are included.

Clear. A clear research question doesn't only need to be intelligible to any reader (which, of course, it should); it needs to clarify any meanings of particular words or concepts (e.g., What is excessive force?). Check all your concepts to see if there are ways you can clarify them further—for example, note that we shifted from impact of debt to impact of high debt load and specified this as beginning at $30,000. Ideally, we would use the literature to help us clarify what a high debt load is or how to define "excessive" force.

Feasible. In order to know if your question is feasible, you are going to have to think a little bit about your entire research design. For example, a question that asks about the real-time impact of COVID restrictions on learning outcomes would require a time machine. You could tweak the question to ask instead about the long-term impacts of COVID restrictions, as measured two years after their end. Or let's say you are interested in assessing the damage of opioid abuse on small-town communities across the United States. Is it feasible to cover the entire US? You might need a team of researchers to do this if you are planning on on-the-ground observations. Perhaps a case study of one particular community might be best. Then your research question needs to be changed accordingly.

Here are some things to consider in terms of feasibility:

1. Is the question too general for what you actually intend to do or examine? (Are you specifying the world when you only have time to explore a sliver of that world?)
2. Is the question suitable for the time you have available? (You will need different research questions for a study that can be completed in a term than one where you have one to two years, as in a master's program, or even three to eight years, as in a doctoral program.)
3. Is the focus specific enough that you know where and how to begin?
4. What are the costs involved in doing this study, including time? Will you need to travel somewhere, and if so, how will you pay for it?
5. Will there be problems with "access"? (More on this in later chapters, but for now, consider how you might actually find people to interview or places to observe and whether gatekeepers exist who might keep you out.)
6. Will you need to submit an application proposal for your university's IRB (institutional review board)? If you are doing any research with live human subjects, you probably need to factor in the time and potential hassle of an IRB review (see chapter 8). If you are under severe time constraints, you might need to consider developing a research question that can be addressed with secondary sources, online content, or historical **archives** (see chapters 16 and 17).

In addition to these practicalities, you will also want to consider the research question in terms of what is

best for you now. Are you engaged in research because you are required to be—jumping a hurdle for a course or for your degree? If so, you really do want to think about your project as training and develop a question that will allow you to practice whatever data collection and analysis techniques you want to develop. For example, if you are a grad student in a public health program who is interested in eventually doing work that requires conducting interviews with patients, develop a research question and research design that is interview based. Focus on the practicality (and practice) of the study more than the theoretical impact or academic contribution, in other words. On the other hand, if you are a PhD candidate who is seeking an academic position in the future, your research question should be pitched in a way to build theoretical knowledge as well (the phrasing is typically "original contribution to scholarship").

The more time you have to devote to the study and the larger the project, the more important it is to reflect on your own motivations and goals when crafting a research question (remember chapter 2?). By "your own motivations and goals," I mean what interests you about the social world and what impact you want your research to have, both academically and practically speaking. Many students have secret (or not-so-secret) plans to make the world a better place by helping address climate change, pointing out pressure points to fight inequities, or bringing awareness to an overlooked area of concern. My own work in graduate school was motivated by the last of these three—the not-so-secret goal of my research was to raise awareness about obstacles to success for first-generation and working-class college students. This underlying goal motivated me to complete my dissertation in a timely manner and then to further continue work in this area and see my research get published. I cared enough about the topic that I was not ready to put it away. I am still not ready to put it away. I encourage you to find topics that you can't put away, ever. That will keep you going whenever things get difficult in the research process, as they inevitably will.

On the other hand, if you are an undergraduate and you really have very little time, some of the best advice I have heard is to find a study you really like and adapt it to a new context. Perhaps you read a study about how students select majors and how this differs by class (Hurst 2019). You can try to replicate the study on a small scale among your classmates. Use the same research question, but revise for your context. You can probably even find the exact questions I used and ask them in the new sample. Then when you get to the analysis and write-up, you have a comparison study to guide you, and you can say interesting things about the new context and whether the original findings were confirmed (similar) or not. You can even propose reasons why you might have found differences between one and the other.

Another way of thinking about research questions is to explicitly tie them to the type of purpose of your study. Of course, this means being very clear about what your ultimate purpose is! Marshall and Rossman (2016) break down the purpose of a study into four categories: exploratory, explanatory, descriptive, and emancipatory (78). Exploratory purpose types include wanting to investigate little-understood phenomena, or identifying or discovering important new categories of meaning, or generating hypotheses for further research. For these, research questions might be fairly loose: What is going on here? How are people interacting on this site? What do people talk about when you ask them about the state of the world? You are almost (but never entirely) starting from scratch. Be careful though—just because a topic is new to

you does not mean it is really new. Someone else (or many other someones) may already have done this exploratory research. Part of your job is to find this out (more on this in "What Is a 'Literature Review'?" in chapter 9). Descriptive purposes (documenting and describing a phenomenon) are similar to exploratory purposes but with a much clearer goal (description). A good research question for a descriptive study would specify the actions, events, beliefs, attitudes, structures, and/or processes that will be described.

Most researchers find that their topic has already been explored and described, so they move to trying to explain a relationship or phenomenon. For these, you will want research questions that capture the relationships of interest. For example, how does gender influence one's understanding of police brutality (because we already know from the literature that it does, so now we are interested in understanding how and why)? Or what is the relationship between education and climate change denialism? If you find that prior research has already provided a lot of evidence about those relationships as well as explanations for how they work, and you want to move the needle past explanation into action, you might find yourself trying to conduct an emancipatory study. You want to be even more clear in acknowledging past research if you find yourself here. Then create a research question that will allow you to "create opportunities and the will to engage in social action" (Marshall and Rossman 2016:78). Research questions might ask, "How do participants problematize their circumstances and take positive social action?" If we know that some students have come together to fight against student debt, how are they doing this, and with what success? Your purpose would be to help evaluate possibilities for social change and to use your research to make recommendations for more successful emancipatory actions.

Recap: Be specific. Be clear. Be practical. And do what you love.

Choosing an Approach or Tradition

Qualitative researchers may be defined as those who are working with data that is not in numerical form, but there are actually multiple traditions or approaches that fall under this broad category. I find it useful to know a little bit about the history and development of qualitative research to better understand the differences in these approaches. The following chart provides an overview of the six phases of development identified by Denzin and Lincoln (2005):

Table 4.1. Six Phases of Development

Year/ Period	Phase	Focus
Pre-1945	Traditional	Influence of positivism; anthropologists and ethnographers strive for objectivity when reporting observations in the field
1945-1970	Modernist	Emphasis of methodological rigor and procedural formalism as a way of gaining acceptance
1970-1986	Blurred genres	Large number of alternative approaches emerge, all competing with and contesting positivist and formalist approaches; e.g., structuralism, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, constructionism
1980s-1990s	Crisis of representation	Attention turns to issues of power and privilege and the necessity of reflexivity around race, class, gender positions and identities; traditional notions of validity and neutrality were undermined
1990s-2000	Triple crisis	Moving beyond issues of representation, questions raised about evaluation of qualitative research and the writing/presentation of it as well; more political and participatory forms emerge; qualitative research to advance social justice advocated
2000s...	Postexperimental	Boundaries expanded to include creative nonfiction, autobiographical ethnography, poetic representation, and other creative approaches

There are other ways one could present the history as well. Feminist theory and methodologies came to the fore in the 1970s and 1980s and had a lot to do with the internal critique of more positivist approaches. Feminists were quite aware that standpoint matters—that the identity of the researcher plays a role in the research, and they were ardent supporters of dismantling unjust power systems and using qualitative methods to help advance this mission. You might note, too, that many of the internal disputes were basically epistemological disputes about how we know what we know and whether one's social location/ position delimits that knowledge. Today, we are in a bountiful world of qualitative research, one that embraces multiple forms of knowing and knowledge. This is good, but it means that you, the student, have more choice when it comes to situating your study and framing your research question, and some will expect you to signal the choices you have made in any research protocols you write or publications and presentations.

Creswell's (1998) definition of qualitative research includes the notion of distinct traditions of inquiry: "Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The research builds complex, holistic pictures, analyzes words, reports detailed views of **informants**, and conducted the study in a natural setting" (15; emphases added). I usually caution my students against taking shelter under one of these approaches, as, practically speaking, there is a lot of mixing of traditions among researchers. And yet it is useful to know something about the various histories and approaches, particularly as you are first starting out. Each tradition tends to

favor a particular epistemological perspective (see chapter 3), a way of reasoning (see "Advanced: Inductive versus Deductive Reasoning"), and a data-collection technique.

There are anywhere from ten to twenty "traditions of inquiry," depending on how one draws the boundaries. In my accounting, there are twelve, but three approaches tend to dominate the field.

Ethnography

Ethnography was developed from the discipline of anthropology, as the study of (other) culture(s). From a relatively positivist/objective approach to writing down the "truth" of what is observed during the colonial era (where this "truth" was then often used to help colonial administrators maintain order and exploit people and extract resources more effectively), ethnography was adopted by all kinds of social science researchers to get a better understanding of how groups of people (various subcultures and cultures) live their lives. Today, ethnographers are more likely to be seeking to dismantle power relations than to support them. They often study groups of people that are overlooked and marginalized, and sometimes they do the obverse by demonstrating how truly strange the familiar practices of the dominant group are. Ethnography is also central to organizational studies (e.g., How does this institution actually work?) and studies of education (e.g., What is it like to be a student during the COVID era?).

Ethnographers use methods of participant observation and intensive fieldwork in their studies, often living or working among the group under study for months at a time (and, in some cases, years). I've called this "deep ethnography," and it is the subject of chapter 14. The data ethnographers analyze are copious "field notes" written while in the field, often supplemented by in-depth interviews and many more casual conversations. The final product of ethnographers is a "thick" description of the culture. This makes reading ethnographies enjoyable, as the goal is to write in such a way that the reader feels immersed in the culture.

There are variations on the ethnography, such as the **autoethnography**, where the researcher uses a systematic and rigorous study of themselves to better understand the culture in which they find themselves. Autoethnography is a relatively new approach, even though it is derived from one of the oldest approaches. One can say that it takes to heart the feminist directive to "make the personal political," to underscore the connections between personal experiences and larger social and political structures. Introspection becomes the primary data source.

Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory holds a special place in qualitative research for a few reasons, not least of which is that nonqualitative researchers often mistakenly believe that Grounded Theory is the only qualitative research **methodology**. Sometimes, it is easier for students to explain what they are doing as "Grounded

Theory" because it sounds "more scientific" than the alternative descriptions of qualitative research. This is definitely part of its appeal. Grounded Theory is the name given to the systematic inductive approach first developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Too few people actually read Glaser and Strauss's book. It is both groundbreaking and fairly unremarkable at the same time. As a historical intervention into research methods generally, it is both a sharp critique of positivist methods in the social sciences (theory testing) and a rejection of purely descriptive accounts-building qualitative research. Glaser and Strauss argued for an approach whose goal was to construct (middle-level) theories from recursive data analysis of nonnumerical data (interviews and observations). They advocated a "constant comparative method" in which **coding** and analysis take place simultaneously and recursively. The demands are fairly strenuous. If done correctly, the result is the development of a new theory about the social world.

So why do I call this "fairly unremarkable"? To some extent, all qualitative research already does what Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommend, albeit without denoting the processes quite so specifically. As will be seen throughout the rest of this textbook, all qualitative research employs some "constant comparisons" through recursive data analyses. Where Grounded Theory sets itself apart from a significant number of qualitative research projects, however, is in its dedication to inductively building theory. Personally, I think it is important to understand that Glaser and Strauss were rejecting deductive theory testing in sociology when they first wrote their book. They were part of a rising cohort who rejected the positivist mathematical approaches that were taking over sociology journals in the 1950s and 1960s. Here are some of the comments and points they make against this kind of work:

> Accurate description and verification are not so crucial when one's purpose is to generate theory. (28; further arguing that sampling strategies are different when one is not trying to test a theory or generalize results)
>
> Illuminating perspectives are too often suppressed when the main emphasis is verifying theory. (40)
>
> Testing for statistical significance can obscure from theoretical relevance. (201)

Instead, they argued, sociologists should be building theories about the social world. They are not physicists who spend time testing and refining theories. And they are not journalists who report descriptions. What makes sociologists better than journalists and other professionals is that they develop theory from their work "In their driving efforts to get the facts [research sociologists] tend to forget that the distinctive offering of sociology to our society is sociological theory, not research description" (30–31).

Grounded Theory's inductive approach can be off-putting to students who have a general research question in mind and a working hypothesis. The true Grounded Theory approach is often used in exploratory studies where there are no extant theories. After all, the promise of this approach is theory generation, not theory testing. Flying totally free at the start can be terrifying. It can also be a little disingenuous, as there are very few things under the sun that have not been considered before. Barbour

(2008:197) laments that this approach is sometimes used because the researcher is too lazy to read the relevant literature.

To summarize, Glaser and Strauss justified the qualitative research project in a way that gave it standing among the social sciences, especially vis-à-vis quantitative researchers. By distinguishing the constant comparative method from journalism, Glaser and Strauss enabled qualitative research to gain legitimacy.

So what is it exactly, and how does one do it? The following stages provide a succinct and basic overview, differentiating the portions that are similar to/in accordance with qualitative research methods generally and those that are distinct from the Grounded Theory approach:

Step 1. Select a case, sample, and setting (similar—unless you begin with a theory to test!).

Step 2. Begin data collection (similar).

Step 3. Engage data analysis (similar in general but specificity of details somewhat unique to Grounded Theory): (1) emergent coding (initial followed by focused), (2) **axial (a priori) coding**, (3) **theoretical coding**, (4) creation of theoretical categories; analysis ends when "theoretical **saturation**" has been achieved.

Grounded Theory's prescriptive (i.e., it has a set of rules) framework can appeal to beginning students, but it is unnecessary to adopt the entire approach in order to make use of some of its suggestions. And if one does not exactly follow the Grounded Theory rulebook, it can mislead others if you tend to call what you are doing Grounded Theory when you are not:

Grounded theory continues to be a misunderstood method, although many researchers purport to use it. Qualitative researchers often claim to conduct grounded theory studies without fully understanding or adopting its distinctive guidelines. They may employ one or two of the strategies or mistake qualitative analysis for grounded theory. Conversely, other researchers employ grounded theory methods in reductionist, mechanistic ways. Neither approach embodies the flexible yet systematic mode of inquiry, directed but open-ended analysis, and imaginative theorizing from empirical data that grounded theory methods can foster. Subsequently, the potential of grounded theory methods for generating middle-range theory has not been fully realized (Charmaz 2014).

Phenomenology

Where Grounded Theory sets itself apart for its inductive systematic approach to data analysis, phenomenologies are distinct for their focus on what is studied—in this case, the meanings of "lived experiences" of a group of persons sharing a particular event or circumstance. There are phenomenologies of being working class (Charlesworth 2000), of the tourist experience (Cohen 1979), of Whiteness (Ahmed 2007). The phenomenon of interest may also be an emotion or circumstance. One can study the phenomenon of "White rage," for example, or the phenomenon of arranged marriage.

The roots of **phenomenology** lie in philosophy (Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre) but have been adapted by sociologists in particular. Phenomenologists explore "how human beings make sense of

experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning" (Patton 2002:104).

One of the most important aspects of conducting a good phenomenological study is getting the sample exactly right so that each person can speak to the phenomenon in question. Because the researcher is interested in the meanings of an experience, in-depth interviews are the preferred method of data collection. Observations are not nearly as helpful here because people may do a great number of things without meaning to or without being conscious of their implications. This is important to note because phenomenologists are studying not "the reality" of what happens at all but an articulated understanding of a lived experience. When reading a phenomenological study, it is important to keep this straight—too often I have heard students critique a study because the interviewer didn't actually see how people's behavior might conflict with what they say (which is, at heart, an epistemological issue!).

In addition to the "big three," there are many other approaches; some are variations, and some are distinct approaches in their own right. Case studies focus explicitly on context and dynamic interactions over time and can be accomplished with quantitative or qualitative methods or a mixture of both (for this reason, I am not considering it as one of the big three qualitative methods, even though it is a very common approach). Whatever methods are used, a contextualized deep understanding of the case (or cases) is central.

Critical inquiry is a loose collection of techniques held together by a core argument that understanding issues of power should be the focus of much social science research or, to put this another way, that it is impossible to understand society (its people and institutions) without paying attention to the ways that power relations and power dynamics inform and deform those people and institutions. This attention to power dynamics includes how research is conducted too. All research fundamentally involves issues of power. For this reason, many critical inquiry traditions include a place for collaboration between researcher and researched. Examples include (1) critical narrative analysis, which seeks to describe the meaning of experience for marginalized or oppressed persons or groups through storytelling; (2) participatory action research, which requires collaboration between the researcher and the research subjects or community of interest; and (3) critical race analysis, a methodological application of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which posits that racial oppression is endemic (if not always throughout time and place, at least now and here).

Researcher Note

Do you follow a particular tradition of inquiry? Why?

Shawn Wilson's book, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, is my holy grail. It really flipped my understanding of research and relationships. Rather than thinking linearly and approaching research in a more canonical sense, Wilson shook my world view by drawing me into a pattern of inquiry that emphasized transparency and relational accountability. The Indigenous research paradigm is applicable in all research settings, and I follow it because it pushes me to constantly evaluate my position as a knowledge seeker and knowledge sharer.

—Susanna Y. Park, PhD, mixed-methods researcher in public health and author of "How Native Women Seek Support as Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence: A Mixed-Methods Study"

Autoethnography takes the researcher as the subject. This is one approach that is difficult to explain to more quantitatively minded researchers, as it seems to violate many of the norms of "scientific research" as understood by them. First, the **sample size** is quite small—the n is 1, the researcher. Two, the researcher is not a neutral observer—indeed, the subjectivity of the researcher is the main strength of this approach. Autoethnographies can be extremely powerful for their depth of understanding and reflexivity, but they need to be conducted in their own version of rigor to stand up to scrutiny by skeptics. If you are skeptical, read one of the excellent published examples out there—I bet you will be impressed with what you take away. As they say, the proof is in the pudding on this approach.

Advanced: Inductive versus Deductive Reasoning

There has been a great deal of ink shed in the discussion of inductive versus deductive approaches, not all of it very instructive. Although there is a huge conceptual difference between them, in practical terms, most researchers cycle between the two, even within the same research project. The simplest way to explain the difference between the two is that we are using **deductive reasoning** when we test an existing theory (move from general to particular), and we are using **inductive reasoning** when we are generating theory (move from particular to general). Figure 4.2 provides a schematic of the deductive approach. From the literature, we select a theory about the impact of student loan debt: student loan debt will delay homeownership among young adults. We then formulate a hypothesis based on this theory: adults in their thirties with high debt loads will be less likely to own homes than their peers who do not have high debt loads. We then collect data to test the hypothesis and analyze the results. We find that homeownership is substantially lower among persons of color and those who were the first in their families to graduate from college. Notably, high debt loads did not affect homeownership among White adults whose parents held college degrees. We thus refine the theory to match the new findings: student debt loads delay homeownership among some

young adults, thereby increasing inequalities in this generation. We have now contributed new knowledge to our collective corpus.

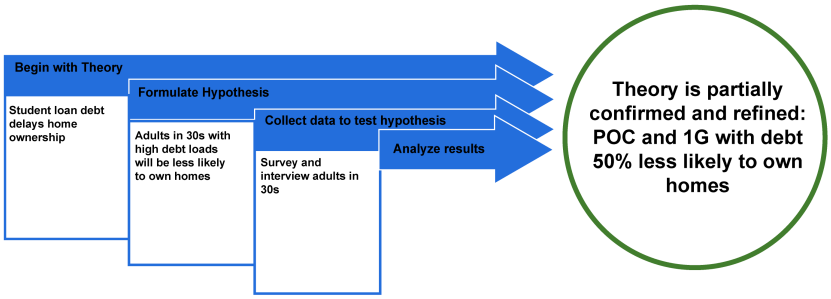

Figure 4.2. Example of Deductive Approach

The inductive approach is contrasted in figure 4.3. Here, we did not begin with a preexisting theory or previous literature but instead began with an observation. Perhaps we were conducting interviews with young adults who held high amounts of debt and stumbled across this observation, struck by how many were renting apartments or small houses. We then noted a pattern—not all the young adults we were talking to were renting; race and class seemed to play a role here. We would then probably expand our study in a way to be able to further test this developing theory, ensuring that we were not seeing anomalous patterns. Once we were confident about our observations and analyses, we would then develop a theory, coming to the same place as our deductive approach, but in reverse.

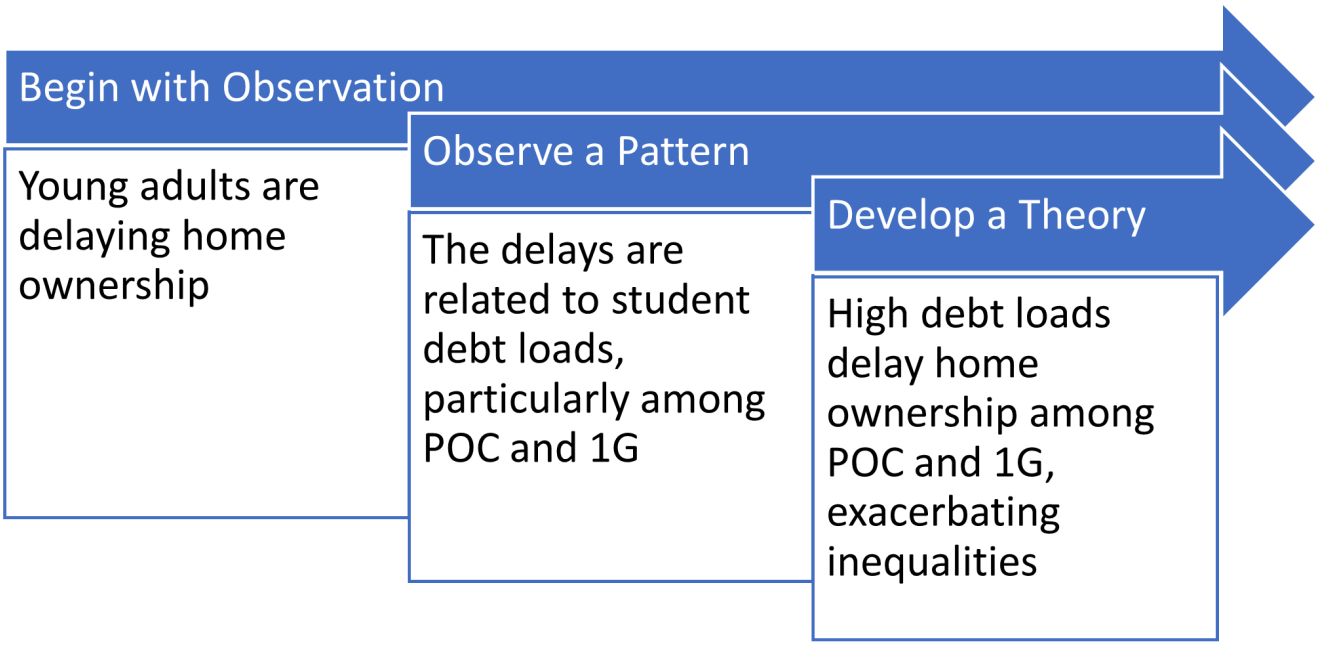

Figure 4.3. Example of Inductive Approach

A third form of reasoning, **abductive** (sometimes referred to as probabilistic reasoning) was developed in the late nineteenth century by American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. I have included some articles for further reading for those interested.

Among social scientists, the deductive approach is often relaxed so that a research question is set based on the existing literature rather than creating a hypothesis or set of hypotheses to test. Some journals still require researchers to articulate hypotheses, however. If you have in mind a publication, it is probably a good idea to take a look at how most articles are organized and whether specific hypotheses statements are included.

Table 4.2. Twelve Approaches. Adapted from Patton 2002:132-133.

Approach	**Home discipline**	***Central Question*/Data Collection Techniques**
Ethnography	Anthropology	*What is the culture of this group of people?* Fieldwork/Observations + supplemental interviews
Grounded theory	Sociology	*What theories emerge from systematic constant comparative analysis grounded in observations?* Fieldwork/Observations + Interviews
Phenomenology	Philosophy	*What is the lived experience of this group/phenomenon?* In-depth interviews
Constructivism	Sociology	*How have the people here constructed their reality?* Focus Groups; Interviews
Heuristic inquiry	Psychology	*What is my experience of this phenomenon and the essential experience of others?* Self-reflections and fieldnotes + interviews
Ethnomethodology	Sociology	*How do people make sense of their everyday activities so as to behave acceptably?* In-depth interviews + Fieldwork, including social experiments
Symbolic interaction	Social psychology	*What common understandings give meaning to people's interactions?* Focus Groups + Interviews
Semiotics	Linguistics	*How do words and symbols carry and convey meaning in particular contexts?* Textual analyses + interviews/focus groups
Hermeneutics	Theology	*What are the conditions under which a human act took place or a product was produced that makes it possible to interpret its meanings?* Textual analyses
Narrative analysis	Literary criticism	*What does this story reveal about the person and the world they inhabit?* Interviews, Oral Histories, Textual Analyses, Historical Artefacts, Content Analyses
Ecological psychology	Ecology	*How do people accomplish their goals through specific behaviors in specific environments?* Observation
Orientational/Standpoint approaches (critical theory, feminist theory)	Law; Sociology	*How is the perspective of [identity group] manifest in this phenomenon? How can society be made more just?* PAR, Interviews, Focus Groups

Further Readings

Approaches

The following readings have been examples of various approaches or traditions of inquiry:

Ahmed, Sara. 2007. "A Phenomenology of Whiteness." *Feminist Theory* 8(2):149–168.

Charlesworth, Simon. 2000. *A Phenomenology of Working-Class Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.*

Clandinin, D. Jean, and F. Michael Connelly. 2000. *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Cohen, E. 1979. "A Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences." *Sociology* 13(2):179–201.

Cooke, Bill, and Uma Kothari, eds. 2001. *Participation: The New Tyranny?* London: Zed Books. A critique of participatory action.

Corbin, Juliet, and Anselm Strauss. 2008. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Crabtree, B. F., and W. L. Miller, eds. 1999. *Doing Qualitative Research: Multiple Strategies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Creswell, John W. 1997. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm Strauss. 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine.

Gobo, Giampetro, and Andrea Molle. 2008. *Doing Ethnography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Hancock, Dawson B., and Bob Algozzine. 2016. *Doing Case Study Research: A Practical Guide for Beginning Research*. 3rd ed. New York: Teachers College Press.

Harding, Sandra. 1987. *Feminism and Methodology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Husserl, Edmund. (1913) 2017. *Ideas: Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books.

Rose, Gillian. 2012. *Visual Methodologies.* 3rd ed. London: SAGE.

Van der Riet, M. 2009. "Participatory Research and the Philosophy of Social Science: Beyond the Moral Imperative." *Qualitative Inquiry* 14(4):546–565.

Van Manen, Max. 1990. *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*. Albany: State University of New York.

Wortham, Stanton. 2001. *Narratives in Action: A Strategy for Research and Analysis*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Inductive, Deductive, and Abductive Reasoning and **Nomothetic** Science in General

Aliseda, Atocha. 2003. "Mathematical Reasoning vs. Abductive Reasoning: A Structural Approach." *Synthese* 134(1/2):25–44.

Bonk, Thomas. 1997. "Newtonian Gravity, Quantum Discontinuity and the Determination of Theory by Evidence." *Synthese* 112(1):53–73. A (natural) scientific discussion of inductive reasoning.

Bonnell, Victoria E. 1980. "The Uses of Theory, Concepts and Comparison in Historical Sociology." C*omparative Studies in Society and History* 22(2):156–173.

Crane, Mark, and Michael C. Newman. 1996. "Scientific Method in Environmental Toxicology." *Environmental Reviews* 4(2):112–122.

Huang, Philip C. C., and Yuan Gao. 2015. "Should Social Science and Jurisprudence Imitate Natural Science?" *Modern China* 41(2):131–167.

Mingers, J. 2012. "Abduction: The Missing Link between Deduction and Induction. A Comment on Ormerod's 'Rational Inference: Deductive, Inductive and Probabilistic Thinking.'" *Journal of the Operational Research Society* 63(6):860–861.

Ormerod, Richard J. 2010. "Rational Inference: Deductive, Inductive and Probabilistic Thinking." *Journal of the Operational Research Society* 61(8):1207–1223.

Perry, Charner P. 1927. "Inductive vs. Deductive Method in Social Science Research." *Southwestern Political and Social Science Quarterly* 8(1):66–74.

Plutynski, Anya. 2011. "Four Problems of Abduction: A Brief History." *HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science* 1(2):227–248.

Thompson, Bruce, and Gloria M. Borrello. 1992. "Different Views of Love: Deductive and Inductive Lines of Inquiry." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 1(5):154–156.

Tracy, Sarah J. 2012. "The Toxic and Mythical Combination of a Deductive Writing Logic for Inductive Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Communication Research* 1(1):109–141.

CHAPTER 5. SAMPLING

Introduction

Most Americans will experience unemployment at some point in their lives. Sarah Damaske (2021) was interested in learning about how men and women experience unemployment differently. To answer this question, she interviewed unemployed people. After conducting a "pilot study" with twenty interviewees, she realized she was also interested in finding out how working-class and middle-class persons experienced unemployment differently. She found one hundred persons through local unemployment offices. She purposefully selected a roughly equal number of men and women and working-class and middle-class persons for the study. This would allow her to make the kinds of comparisons she was interested in. She further refined her selection of persons to interview:

> I decided that I needed to be able to focus my attention on gender and class; therefore, I interviewed only people born between 1962 and 1987 (ages 28–52, the prime working and child-rearing years), those who worked full-time before their job loss, those who experienced an involuntary job loss during the past year, and those who did not lose a job for cause (e.g., were not fired because of their behavior at work). (244)

The people she ultimately interviewed compose her sample. They represent ("sample") the larger population of the involuntarily unemployed. This "theoretically informed stratified **sampling** design" allowed Damaske "to achieve relatively equal distribution of participation across gender and class," but it came with some limitations. For one, the unemployment centers were located in primarily White areas of the country, so there were very few persons of color interviewed. Qualitative researchers must make these kinds of decisions all the time—who to include and who not to include. There is never an absolutely correct decision, as the choice is linked to the particular research question posed by the particular researcher, although some sampling choices are more compelling than others. In this case, Damaske made the choice to foreground both gender and class rather than compare all middle-class men and women or women of color from different class positions or just talk to White men. She leaves the door open for other researchers to sample differently. Because science is a collective enterprise, it is most likely someone will be inspired to conduct a similar study as Damaske's but with an entirely different sample.

This chapter is all about sampling. After you have developed a research question and have a general idea of how you will collect data (observations or interviews), how do you go about actually finding people and sites to study? Although there is no "correct number" of people to interview, the sample should follow the research question and research design. You might remember studying sampling in a quantitative research course. Sampling is important here too, but it works a bit differently. Unlike quantitative research,

qualitative research involves nonprobability sampling. This chapter explains why this is so and what qualities instead make a good sample for qualitative research.

Quick Terms Refresher

- The *population* is the entire group that you want to draw conclusions about.
- The *sample* is the specific group of individuals that you will collect data from.
- ***Sampling frame*** is the actual list of individuals that the sample will be drawn from. Ideally, it should include the entire target population (and nobody who is not part of that population).
- *Sample size* is how many individuals (or units) are included in your sample.

The "Who" of Your Research Study

After you have turned your general research interest into an actual research question and identified an approach you want to take to answer that question, you will need to specify the people you will be interviewing or observing. In most qualitative research, the objects of your study will indeed be people. In some cases, however, your objects might be content left by people (e.g., diaries, yearbooks, photographs) or documents (official or unofficial) or even institutions (e.g., schools, medical centers) and locations (e.g., nation-states, cities). Chances are, whatever "people, places, or things" are the objects of your study, you will not really be able to talk to, observe, or follow *every single individual/object* of the entire population of interest. You will need to create a **sample** of the **population**. Sampling in qualitative research has different purposes and goals than sampling in quantitative research. Sampling in both allows you to say something of interest about a population without having to include the entire population in your sample.

We begin this chapter with the case of a population of interest composed of actual people. After we have a better understanding of populations and samples that involve real people, we'll discuss sampling in other types of qualitative research, such as archival research, content analysis, and case studies. We'll then move to a larger discussion about the difference between sampling in qualitative research generally versus quantitative research, then we'll move on to the idea of "theoretical" generalizability, and finally, we'll conclude with some practical tips on the correct "number" to include in one's sample.

Sampling People

To help think through samples, let's imagine we want to know more about "vaccine hesitancy." We've all lived through 2020 and 2021, and we know that a sizable number of people in the United States (and elsewhere) were slow to accept vaccines, even when these were freely available. By some accounts, about one-third of Americans initially refused vaccination. Why is this so? Well, as I write this in the summer of 2021, we know that some people actively refused the vaccination, thinking it was harmful or part of a government plot. Others were simply lazy or dismissed the necessity. And still others were worried about harmful side effects. The general *population of interest* here (all adult Americans who were not vaccinated by August 2021) may be as many as eighty million people. We clearly cannot talk to all of them. So we will have to narrow the number to something manageable. How can we do this?

[Untitled image] by CDC on Unsplash

First, we have to think about our actual research question and the form of research we are conducting. I am going to begin with a quantitative research question. Quantitative research questions tend to be simpler to visualize, at least when we are first starting out doing social science research. So let us say we want to know what percentage of each kind of resistance is out there and how race or class or gender affects vaccine hesitancy. Again, we don't have the ability to talk to everyone. But harnessing what we know about normal probability distributions (see quantitative methods for more on this), we can find this out through a sample that *represents* the general population. We can't really address these particular questions if we only talk to White women who go to college with us. And if you are really trying to *generalize* the specific findings of your sample to the larger population, you will have to employ **probability sampling**, a sampling technique where a researcher sets a selection of a few criteria and chooses members of a population randomly. Why randomly? If truly random, all the members have an equal opportunity to be a part of the sample, and thus we avoid the problem of having only our friends and neighbors (who may be very different from other people in the population) in the study. Mathematically, there is going to be a certain number that will be large enough to allow us to generalize our particular findings from our sample population to the population

at large. It might surprise you how small that number can be. Election polls of no more than one thousand people are routinely used to predict actual election outcomes of millions of people. Below that number, however, you will not be able to make generalizations. Talking to five people at random is simply not enough people to predict a presidential election.

In order to answer quantitative research questions of causality, one must employ probability sampling. Quantitative researchers try to generalize their findings to a larger population. Samples are designed with that in mind. Qualitative researchers ask very different questions, though. Qualitative research questions are not about "how many" of a certain group do X (in this case, what percentage of the unvaccinated hesitate for concern about safety rather than reject vaccination on political grounds). Qualitative research employs *nonprobability sampling*. By definition, not everyone has an equal opportunity to be included in the sample. The researcher might select White women they go to college with to provide insight into racial and gender dynamics at play. Whatever is found by doing so will not be generalizable to everyone who has not been vaccinated, or even all White women who have not been vaccinated, or even all White women who have not been vaccinated who are in this particular college. That is not the point of qualitative research at all. This is a really important distinction, so I will repeat in bold: **Qualitative researchers are not trying to statistically generalize specific findings to a larger population**. They have not failed when their sample cannot be generalized, as that is not the point at all.

In the previous paragraph, I said it would be perfectly acceptable for a qualitative researcher to interview five White women with whom she goes to college about their vaccine hesitancy "to provide insight into racial and gender dynamics at play." The key word here is "insight." Rather than use a sample as a stand-in for the general population, as quantitative researchers do, the qualitative researcher uses the sample to gain insight into a process or phenomenon. The qualitative researcher is not going to be content with simply asking each of the women to state her reason for not being vaccinated and then draw conclusions that, because one in five of these women were concerned about their health, one in five of all people were also concerned about their health. That would be, frankly, a very poor study indeed. Rather, the qualitative researcher might sit down with each of the women and conduct a lengthy interview about what the vaccine means to her, why she is hesitant, how she manages her hesitancy (how she explains it to her friends), what she thinks about others who are unvaccinated, what she thinks of those who have been vaccinated, and what she knows or thinks she knows about COVID-19. The researcher might include specific interview questions about the college context, about their status as White women, about the political beliefs they hold about racism in the US, and about how their own political affiliations may or may not provide narrative scripts about "protective whiteness." There are many interesting things to ask and learn about and many things to discover. Where a quantitative researcher begins with clear parameters to set their population and guide their sample selection process, the qualitative researcher is discovering new parameters, making it impossible to engage in probability sampling.

Looking at it this way, sampling for qualitative researchers needs to be more strategic. More theoretically informed. What persons can be interviewed or observed that would provide maximum insight into what is

still unknown? In other words, qualitative researchers think through what cases they could learn the most from, and those are the cases selected to study: "What would be 'bias' in statistical sampling, and therefore a weakness, becomes intended focus in qualitative sampling, and therefore a strength. The logic and power of purposeful sampling like in selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term *purposeful* sampling" (Patton 2002:230; emphases in the original).

Before selecting your sample, though, it is important to clearly identify the general population of interest. You need to know this before you can determine the sample. In our example case, it is "adult Americans who have not yet been vaccinated." Depending on the specific qualitative research question, however, it might be "adult Americans who have been vaccinated for political reasons" or even "college students who have not been vaccinated." What insights are you seeking? Do you want to know how politics is affecting vaccination? Or do you want to understand how people manage being an outlier in a particular setting (unvaccinated where vaccinations are heavily encouraged if not required)? More clearly stated, *your population should align with your research question*. Think back to the opening story about Damaske's work studying the unemployed. She drew her sample narrowly to address the particular questions she was interested in pursuing. Knowing your questions or, at a minimum, why you are interested in the topic will allow you to draw the best sample possible to achieve insight.

Once you have your population in mind, how do you go about getting people to agree to be in your sample? In qualitative research, it is permissible to find people by convenience. Just ask for people who fit your sample criteria and see who shows up. Or reach out to friends and colleagues and see if they know anyone that fits. Don't let the name convenience sampling mislead you; this is not exactly "easy," and it is certainly a valid form of sampling in qualitative research. The more unknowns you have about what you will find, the more **convenience sampling** makes sense. If you don't know how race or class or political affiliation might matter, and your population is unvaccinated college students, you can construct a sample of college students by placing an advertisement in the student paper or posting a flyer on a notice board. Whoever answers is your sample. That is what is meant by a convenience sample. A common variation of convenience sampling is **snowball sampling**. This is particularly useful if your target population is hard to find. Let's say you posted a flyer about your study and only two college students responded. You could then ask those two students for referrals. They tell their friends, and those friends tell other friends, and, like a snowball, your sample gets bigger and bigger.

Researcher Note

Gaining Access: When Your Friend Is Your Research Subject

My early experience with qualitative research was rather unique. At that time, I needed to do a project that required me to interview first-generation college students, and my friends, with whom I had been sharing a dorm for two years, just perfectly fell into the sample category. Thus, I just asked them and easily "gained my access" to the research subject; I know them, we are friends, and I am part of them. I am an insider. I also thought, "Well, since I am part of the group, I can easily understand their language and norms, I can capture their honesty, read their nonverbal cues well, will get more information, as they will be more opened to me because they trust me." All in all, easy access with rich information. But, gosh, I did not realize that my status as an insider came with a price! When structuring the interview questions, I began to realize that rather than focusing on the unique experiences of my friends, I mostly based the questions on my own experiences, assuming we have similar if not the same experiences. I began to struggle with my objectivity and even questioned my role; am I doing this as part of the group or as a researcher? I came to know later that my status as an insider or my "positionality" may impact my research. It not only shapes the process of data collection but might heavily influence my interpretation of the data. I came to realize that although my inside status came with a lot of benefits (especially for access), it could also bring some drawbacks.

—Dede Setiono, PhD student focusing on international development and environmental policy, Oregon State University

The more you know about what you might find, the more strategic you can be. If you wanted to compare how politically conservative and politically liberal college students explained their vaccine hesitancy, for example, you might construct a sample purposively, finding an equal number of both types of students so that you can make those comparisons in your analysis. This is what Damaske (2021) did. You could still use convenience or snowball sampling as a way of recruitment. Post a flyer at the conservative student club and then ask for referrals from the one student that agrees to be interviewed. As with convenience sampling, there are variations of purposive sampling as well as other names used (e.g., judgment, quota, stratified, criterion, theoretical). Try not to get bogged down in the nomenclature; instead, focus on identifying the general population that matches your research question and then using a sampling method that is most likely to provide insight, given the types of questions you have.

There are all kinds of ways of being strategic with sampling in qualitative research. Here are a few of my favorite techniques for maximizing insight:

- Consider using "extreme" or "deviant" cases. Maybe your college houses a prominent anti-vaxxer who has written about and demonstrated against the college's policy on vaccines. You could learn a lot from that single case (depending on your research question, of course).

- Consider "intensity": people and cases and circumstances where your questions are more likely to feature prominently (but not extremely or deviantly). For example, you could compare those who volunteer at local Republican and Democratic election headquarters during an election season in a study on why party matters. Those who volunteer are more likely to have something to say than those who are more apathetic.
- Maximize variation, as with the case of "politically liberal" versus "politically conservative," or include an array of social locations (young vs. old; Northwest vs. Southeast region). This kind of heterogeneity sampling can capture and describe the central **themes** that cut across the variations: any common patterns that emerge, even in this wildly mismatched sample, are probably important to note!
- Rather than maximize the variation, you could select a small homogenous sample to describe some particular subgroup in depth. Focus groups are often the best form of data collection for homogeneity sampling.
- Think about which cases are "critical" or politically important—ones that "if it happens here, it would happen anywhere" or a case that is politically sensitive, as with the single "blue" (Democratic) county in a "red" (Republican) state. In both, you are choosing a site that would yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge.
- On the other hand, sometimes you want to select the "typical"—the typical college student, for example. You are trying to not generalize from the typical but illustrate aspects that may be typical of this case or group. When selecting for typicality, be clear with yourself about why the typical matches your research questions (and who might be excluded or marginalized in doing so).
- Finally, it is often a good idea to look for **disconfirming cases**: if you are at the stage where you have a hypothesis (of sorts), you might select those who do not fit your hypothesis—you will surely learn something important there. They may be "exceptions that prove the rule" or exceptions that force you to alter your findings in order to make sense of these additional cases.

In addition to all these sampling variations, there is the theoretical approach taken by grounded theorists in which the researcher samples comparative people (or events) on the basis of their potential to represent important theoretical constructs. The sample, one can say, is by definition representative of the phenomenon of interest. It accompanies the constant comparative method of analysis. In the words of the funders of **Grounded Theory**, "Theoretical sampling is sampling on the basis of the emerging concepts, with the aim being to explore the dimensional range or varied conditions along which the properties of the concepts vary" (Strauss and Corbin 1998:73).

When Your Population is Not Composed of People

I think it is easiest for most people to think of populations and samples in terms of people, but sometimes our units of analysis are not actually people. They could be places or institutions. Even so, you might still want to talk to people or observe the actions of people to understand those places or institutions. Or not! In the case of content analyses (see chapter 17), you won't even have people involved at all but rather documents or films or photographs or news clippings. Everything we have covered about sampling applies to other units of analysis too. Let's work through some examples.

Case Studies

When constructing a case study, it is helpful to think of your cases as sample populations in the same way that we considered people above. If, for example, you are comparing campus climates for diversity, your overall population may be "four-year college campuses in the US," and from there you might decide to study three college campuses as your sample. Which three? Will you use purposeful sampling (perhaps [1] selecting three colleges in Oregon that are different sizes or [2] selecting three colleges across the US located in different political cultures or [3] varying the three colleges by racial makeup of the student body)? Or will you select three colleges at random, out of convenience? There are justifiable reasons for all approaches.

As with people, there are different ways of maximizing insight in your sample selection. Think about the following rationales: typical, diverse, extreme, deviant, influential, crucial, or even embodying a particular "pathway" (Gerring 2008). When choosing a case or particular research site, Rubin (2021) suggests you bear in mind, first, what you are leaving out by selecting this particular case/site; second, what you might be overemphasizing by studying this case/site and not another; and, finally, whether you truly need to worry about either of those things—"that is, what are the sources of *bias* and how bad are they for what you are trying to do?" (89).

Once you have selected your cases, you may still want to include interviews with specific people or observations at particular sites within those cases. Then you go through possible sampling approaches all over again to determine *which people* will be contacted.

Content: Documents, Narrative Accounts, And So On

Although not often discussed as sampling, your selection of documents and other units to use in various content/historical analyses is subject to similar considerations. When you are asking quantitative-type questions (percentages and proportionalities of a general population), you will want to follow probabilistic sampling. For example, I created a **random sample** of accounts posted on the website

studentloanjustice.org to delineate the types of problems people were having with student debt (Hurst 2007). Even though my data was qualitative (narratives of student debt), I was actually asking a quantitative-type research question, so it was important that my sample was representative of the larger population (debtors who posted on the website). On the other hand, when you are asking qualitative-type questions, the selection process should be very different. In that case, use nonprobabilistic techniques, either convenience (where you are really new to this data and do not have the ability to set comparative criteria or even know what a **deviant case** would be) or some variant of purposive sampling. Let's say you were interested in the visual representation of women in media published in the 1950s. You could select a national magazine like Time for a "typical" representation (and for its convenience, as all issues are freely available on the web and easy to search). Or you could compare one magazine known for its feminist content versus one antifeminist. The point is, sample selection is important even when you are not interviewing or observing people.

Goals of Qualitative Sampling versus Goals of Quantitative Sampling

We have already discussed some of the differences in the goals of quantitative and qualitative sampling above, but it is worth further discussion. The quantitative researcher seeks a sample that is *representative* of the population of interest so that they may properly *generalize* the results (e.g., if 80 percent of first-gen students in the sample were concerned with costs of college, then we can say there is a strong likelihood that 80 percent of first-gen students nationally are concerned with costs of college). The qualitative researcher *does not seek to generalize in this way*. They may want a representative sample because they are interested in typical responses or behaviors of the population of interest, but they may very well not want a representative sample at all. They might want an "extreme" or deviant case to highlight what could go wrong with a particular situation, or maybe they want to examine just one case as a way of understanding what elements might be of interest in further research. When thinking of your sample, you will have to know why you are selecting the units, and this relates back to your research question or sets of questions. It has nothing to do with having a representative sample to generalize results. You may be tempted—or it may be suggested to you by a quantitatively minded member of your committee—to create as large and representative a sample as you possibly can to earn credibility from quantitative researchers. Ignore this temptation or suggestion. The only thing you should be considering is what sample will best bring insight into the questions guiding your research. This has implications for the *number* of people (or units) in your study as well, which is the topic of the next section.

What is the Correct "Number" to Sample?

Because we are not trying to create a generalizable representative sample, the guidelines for the "number" of people to interview or news stories to code are also a bit more nebulous. There are some brilliant insightful studies out there with an *n* of 1 (meaning one person or one account used as the entire set of data). This is particularly so in the case of autoethnography, a variation of ethnographic research that uses the researcher's own subject position and experiences as the basis of data collection and analysis. But it is true for all forms of qualitative research. There are no hard-and-fast rules here. The number to include is what is relevant and insightful to your particular study.

That said, humans do not thrive well under such ambiguity, and there are a few helpful suggestions that can be made. First, many qualitative researchers talk about "saturation" as the end point for data collection. You stop adding participants when you are no longer getting any new information (or so very little that the cost of adding another interview subject or spending another day in the field exceeds any likely benefits to the research). The term **saturation** was first used here by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the founders of Grounded Theory. Here is their explanation: "The criterion for judging when to stop sampling the different groups pertinent to a category is the category's *theoretical saturation*. *Saturation* means that no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category. As he [or she] sees similar instances over and over again, the researcher becomes empirically confident that a category is saturated. [They go] out of [their] way to look for groups that stretch diversity of data as far as possible, just to make certain that saturation is based on the widest possible range of data on the category" (61).

It makes sense that the term was developed by grounded theorists, since this approach is rather more open-ended than other approaches used by qualitative researchers. With so much left open, having a guideline of "stop collecting data when you don't find anything new" is reasonable. However, saturation can't help much when first setting out your sample. How do you know how many people to contact to interview? What number will you put down in your institutional review board (IRB) protocol (see chapter 8)? You may guess how many people or units it will take to reach saturation, but there really is no way to know in advance. The best you can do is think about your population and your questions and look at what others have done with similar populations and questions.

Here are some suggestions to use as a starting point: For phenomenological studies, try to interview at least ten people *for each major category or group of people*. If you are comparing male-identified, female-identified, and gender-neutral college students in a study on gender regimes in social clubs, that means you might want to design a sample of thirty students, ten from each group. This is the minimum suggested number. Damaske's (2021) sample of one hundred allows room for up to twenty-five participants in each of four "buckets" (e.g., working-class*female, working-class*male, middle-class*female, middle-class*male). If there is more than one comparative group (e.g., you are comparing students attending three different colleges, and you are comparing White and Black students in each), you can sometimes reduce the number for each group in your sample to five for, in this case, thirty total students. But that is really

a bare minimum you will want to go. A lot of people will not trust you with only "five" cases in a bucket. Lareau (2021:24) advises a minimum of seven or nine for each bucket (or "cell," in her words). The point is to think about what your analyses might look like and how comfortable you will be with a certain number of persons fitting each category.

Because qualitative research takes so much time and effort, it is rare for a beginning researcher to include more than thirty to fifty people or units in the study. You may not be able to conduct all the comparisons you might want simply because you cannot manage a larger sample. In that case, the limits of who you can reach or what you can include may influence you to rethink an original overcomplicated research design. Rather than include students from every racial group on a campus, for example, you might want to sample strategically, thinking about the most contrast (insightful), possibly excluding majority-race (White) students entirely, and simply using previous literature to fill in gaps in our understanding. For example, one of my former students was interested in discovering how race and class worked at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Due to time constraints, she simplified her study from an original sample frame of middle-class and working-class domestic Black and international African students (four buckets) to a sample frame of domestic Black and international African students (two buckets), allowing the complexities of class to come through individual accounts rather than from part of the sample frame. She wisely decided not to include White students in the sample, as her focus was on how minoritized students navigated the PWI. She was able to successfully complete her project and develop insights from the data with fewer than twenty interviewees.[1]

But what if you had unlimited time and resources? Would it always be better to interview more people or include more accounts, documents, and units of analysis? No! Your sample size should reflect your research question and the goals you have set yourself. Larger numbers can sometimes work against your goals. If, for example, you want to help bring out individual stories of success against the odds, adding more people to the analysis can end up drowning out those individual stories. Sometimes, the perfect size really is one (or three, or five). It really depends on what you are trying to discover and achieve in your study. Furthermore, studies of one hundred or more (people, documents, accounts, etc.) can sometimes be mistaken for quantitative research. Inevitably, the large sample size will push the researcher into simplifying the data numerically. And readers will begin to expect **generalizability** from such a large sample.

To summarize, "There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources" (Patton 2002:244).

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1. Rubin (2021) suggests a minimum of twenty interviews (but safer with thirty) for an interview-based study and a minimum of three to six months in the field for ethnographic studies. For a content-based study, she suggests between five hundred and one thousand documents, although some will be "very small" (243–244).

Researcher Note

How did you find/construct a sample?

Since qualitative researchers work with comparatively small sample sizes, getting your sample right is rather important. Yet it is also difficult to accomplish. For instance, a key question you need to ask yourself is whether you want a homogeneous or heterogeneous sample. In other words, do you want to include people in your study who are by and large the same, or do you want to have diversity in your sample?

For many years, I have studied the experiences of students who were the first in their families to attend university. There is a rather large number of sampling decisions I need to consider before starting the study. (1) Should I only talk to first-in-family students, or should I have a comparison group of students who are not first-in-family? (2) Do I need to strive for a gender distribution that matches undergraduate enrollment patterns? (3) Should I include participants that reflect diversity in gender identity and sexuality? (4) How about racial diversity? First-in-family status is strongly related to some ethnic or racial identity. (5) And how about areas of study?

As you can see, if I wanted to accommodate all these differences and get enough study participants in each category, I would quickly end up with a sample size of hundreds, which is not feasible in most qualitative research. In the end, for me, the most important decision was to maximize the voices of first-in-family students, which meant that I only included them in my sample. As for the other categories, I figured it was going to be hard enough to find first-in-family students, so I started recruiting with an open mind and an understanding that I may have to accept a lack of gender, sexuality, or racial diversity and then not be able to say anything about these issues. But I would definitely be able to speak about the experiences of being first-in-family.

—Wolfgang Lehmann, author of "Habitus Transformation and Hidden Injuries"

Examples of "Sample" Sections in Journal Articles

Think about some of the studies you have read in college, especially those with rich stories and accounts about people's lives. Do you know how the people were selected to be the focus of those stories? If the account was published by an academic press (e.g., University of California Press or Princeton University Press) or in an academic journal, chances are that the author included a description of their sample

selection. You can usually find these in a methodological appendix (book) or a section on "research methods" (article).

Here are two examples from recent books and one example from a recent article:

Example 1. In *It's Not like I'm Poor: How Working Families Make Ends Meet in a Post-welfare World*, the research team employed a mixed methods approach to understand how parents use the earned income tax credit, a refundable tax credit designed to provide relief for low- to moderate-income working people (Halpern-Meekin et al. 2015). At the end of their book, their first appendix is "Introduction to Boston and the Research Project." After describing the context of the study, they include the following description of their sample selection:

> In June 2007, we drew 120 names at random from the roughly 332 surveys we gathered between February and April. Within each racial and ethnic group, we aimed for one-third married couples with children and two-thirds unmarried parents. We sent each of these families a letter informing them of the opportunity to participate in the in-depth portion of our study and then began calling the home and cell phone numbers they provided us on the surveys and knocking on the doors of the addresses they provided.…In the end, we interviewed 115 of the 120 families originally selected for the in-depth interview sample (the remaining five families declined to participate). (22)

Was their sample selection based on convenience or purpose? Why do you think it was important for them to tell you that five families declined to be interviewed? There is actually a trick here, as the names were pulled randomly from a survey whose sample design was probabilistic. Why is this important to know? What can we say about the representativeness or the uniqueness of whatever findings are reported here?

Example 2. In *When Diversity Drops*, Park (2013) examines the impact of decreasing campus diversity on the lives of college students. She does this through a case study of one student club, the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF), at one university ("California University," a pseudonym). Here is her description:

> I supplemented participant observation with individual in-depth interviews with sixty IVCF associates, including thirty-four current students, eight former and current staff members, eleven alumni, and seven regional or national staff members. The racial/ethnic breakdown was twenty-five Asian Americans (41.6 percent), one Armenian (1.6 percent), twelve people who were black (20.0 percent), eight Latino/as (13.3 percent), three South Asian Americans (5.0 percent), and eleven people who were white (18.3 percent). Twenty-nine were men, and thirty-one were women. Looking back, I note that the higher number of Asian Americans reflected both the group's racial/ethnic composition and my relative ease about approaching them for interviews. (156)

How can you tell this is a convenience sample? What else do you note about the sample selection from this description?

Example 3. The last example is taken from an article published in the journal *Research in Higher Education*. Published articles tend to be more formal than books, at least when it comes to the presentation of qualitative research. In this article, Lawson (2021) is seeking to understand why female-identified

college students drop out of majors that are dominated by male-identified students (e.g., engineering, computer science, music theory). Here is the entire relevant section of the article:

> *Method*
>
> Participants Data were collected as part of a larger study designed to better understand the daily experiences of women in MDMs [male-dominated majors].…Participants included 120 students from a midsize, Midwestern University. This sample included 40 women and 40 men from MDMs—defined as any major where at least 2/3 of students are men at both the university and nationally—and 40 women from GNMs—defined as any may where 40–60% of students are women at both the university and nationally.…
>
> *Procedure*
>
> A multi-faceted approach was used to recruit participants; participants were sent targeted emails (obtained based on participants' reported gender and major listings), campus-wide emails sent through the University's Communication Center, flyers, and in-class presentations. **Recruitment materials** stated that the research focused on the daily experiences of college students, including classroom experiences, stressors, positive experiences, departmental contexts, and career aspirations. Interested participants were directed to email the study coordinator to verify eligibility (at least 18 years old, man/woman in MDM or woman in GNM, access to a smartphone). Sixteen interested individuals were not eligible for the study due to the gender/major combination. (482ff.)

What method of sample selection was used by Lawson? Why is it important to define "MDM" at the outset? How does this definition relate to sampling? Why were interested participants directed to the study coordinator to verify eligibility?

Final Words

I have found that students often find it difficult to be specific enough when defining and choosing their sample. It might help to think about your sample design and sample recruitment like a cookbook. You want all the details there so that someone else can pick up your study and conduct it as you intended. That person could be yourself, but this analogy might work better if you have someone else in mind. When I am writing down recipes, I often think of my sister and try to convey the details she would need to duplicate the dish. We share a grandmother whose recipes are full of handwritten notes in the margins, in spidery ink, that tell us what bowl to use when or where things could go wrong. Describe your sample clearly, convey the steps required accurately, and then add any other details that will help keep you on track and remind you why you have chosen to limit possible interviewees to those of a certain age or class or location. Imagine actually going out and getting your sample (making your dish). Do you have all the necessary details to get started?

Table 5.1. Sampling Type and Strategies

Type	Used primarily in...	Strategies	
Probabilistic	Quantitative research		
		Simple random	Each member of the population has an equal chance at being selected
		Stratified	The sample is split into strata; members of each strata are selected in proportion to the population at large *(e.g, half of sample identifies as male, half identifies as female)*
Non-probabilistic	Qualitative research		
		Convenience	Simply includes the individuals who happen to be most accessible to the researcher
		Snowball	Used to recruit participants via other participants. The number of people you have access to "snowballs" as you get in contact with more people
		Purposive	Involves the researcher using their expertise to select a sample that is most useful to the purposes of the research; An effective purposive sample must have clear criteria and rationale for inclusion (e.g., *political liberal and political conservative college students in a study of politics on campus*)
		Quota	Set quotas to ensure that the sample you get represents certain characteristics in proportion to their prevalence in the population

Further Readings

Fusch, Patricia I., and Lawrence R. Ness. 2015. "Are We There Yet? Data Saturation in Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Report* 20(9):1408–1416.

Saunders, Benjamin, Julius Sim, Tom Kinstone, Shula Baker, Jackie Waterfield, Bernadette Bartlam, Heather Burroughs, and Clare Jinks. 2018. "Saturation in Qualitative Research: Exploring Its Conceptualization and Operationalization." *Quality & Quantity* 52(4):1893–1907.

CHAPTER 6. REFLEXIVITY

Introduction

Related to epistemological issues of how we know anything about the social world, qualitative researchers understand that *we the researchers* can never be truly neutral or outside the study we are conducting. As observers, we see things that make sense to us and may entirely miss what is either too obvious to note or too different to comprehend. As interviewers, as much as we would like to ask questions neutrally and remain in the background, interviews are a form of conversation, and the persons we interview are responding *to us*. Therefore, it is important to reflect upon our social positions and the knowledges and expectations we bring to our work and to work through any blind spots that we may have. This chapter discusses the concept of **reflexivity** and its importance for conducting reliable qualitative research.

Reflexivity: What It Is and Why It Is Important

Remember our discussion in **epistemology**? Qualitative researchers tend to question assertions of absolute fact or reality, unmediated through subject positions and subject knowledge. There are limits to what we know because we are part of the social worlds we inhabit. To use the terminology of standpoint theorists, we have a standpoint from which we observe the world just as much as anyone else. In this, we too are the blind men, and the world is our elephant. None of us are omniscient or neutral observers. Because of this epistemological standpoint, qualitative researchers value the ability to reflect upon and think hard about our own effects on our research. We call this reflexivity. Reflexivity "generally involves the self-examination of how research findings were produced, and, particularly, the role of the researcher in their construction" (Heaton 2004:104).

There are many aspects of being reflexive. First, there is the simple fact that we are human beings with the limitations that come with that condition. We have likes and dislikes, biases, blind spots, preferences, and so on. If we do not take these into account, they can prevent us from being the best researcher we can be. Being reflective means, first and foremost, trying as best as possible to bracket out elements of our own character and understanding that get in the way. It is important to note that bias (in this context, at least) is not inherently wrong. It just is. Unavoidable. But by noting it, we can minimize its impact or, in some cases, help explain more clearly what it is we see or why it is that we are asking the questions we are asking. For example, I might want to communicate to my audience that I grew up poor and that I have a lot of sympathy and concern for first-generation college students as a result. This "bias" of mine motivates me to

do the work I do, even as I try to ensure that it does not blind me to things I find out in the course of my research. [1]

[Untitled image] by Osarugue Igbinoba on Unsplash

A second aspect of being reflexive is being aware that you yourself are part of the research when you are conducting qualitative research. This is particularly true when conducting interviews, observing interactions, or participating in activities. You have a body, and it will be "read" by those in the field. You will be perceived as an insider or an outsider, as a friend or foe, as empathetic or hostile. Some of this will be wrong. People will prejudge you based on the color of your skin, your presented gender, the accent of your language. People will classify you based on the clothes you wear, and they will be more open to you if you remind them of a friendly aunt or uncle and more reserved if you remind them of someone they don't like. This is all natural and inevitable. Your research will suffer if you do not take this into account, if you do not *reflect upon* how you are being read and how this might be influencing what people tell you or what they are willing to do in front of you. The flip side of this problem is that your particular body and presence will open some doors barred to other researchers. Finding sites and contexts where your presented self is a benefit rather than a burden is an important part of your individual research career. Be honest with yourself

1. Someone might ask me if I have truly been able to "stand" in the shoes of more privileged students and if I might be overlooking similarities among college students because of my "biased" standpoint. These are questions I ask myself all the time. They have even motivated me to conduct my latest research on college students in general so that I might check my observations that working-class college students are uniquely burdened (Hurst 2019). One of the things I did find was that middle-class students, relative to upper-class students, are also relatively disadvantaged and sometimes experience (feel) that disadvantage.

about this, and you will be more successful as a qualitative researcher. Learn to leverage yourself in your research.

The third aspect of being reflexive is related to how we communicate our work to others. Being honest with our position, as I am about my own social background and its potential impact on what I study or about how I leveraged my own position to get people to open up to me, helps our audiences evaluate what we have found. Maybe I haven't entirely eliminated my biases or weaknesses, but by telling my audience who I am and where I potentially stand, they can take account of those biases and weaknesses in their reading of my findings. Letting them know that I wore pink when talking with older men because that made them more likely to be kind to me (a strategy acknowledged by Posselt [2016]) helps them understand the interview context. In other words, my research becomes more reliable when my own social position and the strategies I used are communicated.

Some people think being reflective is just another form of narcissistic navel-gazing. "The study is not about you!" they might cry. True, to some degree—but that also misses the point. All studies on the social world are inevitably about us as well because we are part of that social world. It is actually more dangerous to pretend that we are neutral observers, outside what we are observing. Pierre Bourdieu makes this point several times, and I think it is worth quoting him here: "The idea of a neutral science is fiction, an interested fiction which enables its authors to present a version of the dominant representation of the social world, naturalized and euphemized into a particularly misrecognizable and symbolically, therefore, particularly effective form, and to call it scientific" (quoted in Lemert 1981:278).

Bourdieu (1984) argues that reflective analysis is "not an epistemological scruple" but rather "an indispensable pre-condition of scientific knowledge of the object" (92). It would be narcissistic to present findings without reflection, as that would give much more weight to any findings or insights that emerge than is due.

The critics are right about one thing, however. Putting oneself at the *center* of the research is also inappropriate.[2] The focus *should be* on what is being researched, and the reflexivity is there to advance the study, not to push it aside. This issue has emerged at times when researchers from dominant social positions reflect upon their social locations vis-à-vis study participants from marginalized locations. A researcher who studies how low-income women of color experience unemployment might need to address her White, upper-class, fully employed social location, but not at the cost of crowding out the stories, lived experiences, and understandings of the women she has interviewed. This can sometimes be a delicate balance, and not everyone will agree that a person has walked it correctly.

2. Unless, of course, one is engaged in autoethnography! Even in that case, however, the point of the study should probably be about a larger phenomenon or experience that can be understood more deeply through insights that emerge in the study of the particular self, not really a study about that self.

Examples of Reflexivity in Practice

Most qualitative researchers include a **positionality statement** in any "methods section" of their publications. This allows readers to understand the location of the researcher, which is often helpful for gauging **reliability**. Many journals now require brief positionality statements as well. Here are a few examples of such statements.

The first is from an ethnographic study of elite golfers. Ceron-Anaya (2017) writes about his class, race, and gender and how these aspects of his identity and social location affected his interactions with research participants:

> My own class origins, situated near the intersection between the middle and the lower-middle class, hindered cooperation in some cases. For example, the amiable interaction with one club member changed toward the end of the interview when he realized that I commonly moved about in the city by public transportation (which is a strong class indicator). He was not rude but stopped elaborating on the answers as he had been doing up to that point.…Bodily confidence is a privilege of the privileged. My subordinate position, vis-à-vis golfers, was ameliorated by my possession of cultural capital, objectified in my status of researcher/student in a western university. However, my cultural capital dwindled in its value at the invisible but firm boundary between the upper-middle and the upper class. The few contacts I made with members of the upper class produced no connections with other members of the same group, illustrating how the research process is also inserted in the symbolic and material dynamics that shape the field. (288)

What did you learn from Ceron-Anaya's reflection? If he hadn't told you about his background, would this have made a difference in reading about elite golfers? Would the findings be different had Ceron-Anaya driven up to the club in a limousine? Is it helpful to know he came by bus?

The second example is from a study on first-generation college students. Hinz (2016) discusses both differences and similarities between herself and those she interviewed and how both could have affected the study:

> I endeavored to avoid researcher bias by allowing the data to speak for itself, but my own habitus as a White, female, middle-class second-generation college student with a few years of association with Selective State [elite university] may have influenced my interpretation. Being a Selective State student at the time of the interviews provided a familiarity with the environment in which the participants were living, and an ease of communication facilitated by a shared institutional culture. And yet, not being a first-gen myself, it seemed as if I were standing on the periphery of their experience, looking in. (289–290)

Note that Hinz cannot change who she is, nor should she. Being aware (reflective) that she may "stand on the periphery" of the experience of those she interviews has probably helped her listen more closely rather than assume she understands what is really going on. Do you find her more reliable given this?

These statements can be quite long, especially when found in methodological appendixes in books rather

than short statements in articles. This last lengthy example comes from my own work. I try to place myself, explaining the motivations for the research I conducted at small liberal arts colleges:

> I began this project out of a deep curiosity about how college graduates today were faring in an increasingly debt-ridden and unequal labor market. I was working at a small liberal arts college when I began thinking about this project and was poised to take a job at another one. During my interview for the new job, I was told that I was a good fit, because I had attended Barnard College, so I knew what the point of a liberal arts college was. I did. A small liberal arts college was a magical place. You could study *anything* you wanted, for no reason at all, simply for the love of it. And people would like you for it. You were surrounded by readers, by people who liked to dress up in costume and recite Shakespeare, by people who would talk deep into the night about the meaning of life or whether "beauty" existed out there, in nature, or was simply a projection of our own circumstances.
>
> My own experience at Barnard had been somewhat like that. I studied Ancient Greek and Latin, wrote an undergraduate thesis on the legal standing of Vestal Virgins in Ancient Rome, and took frequent subway rides to the Cloisters, the medieval annex of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where I sketched the courtyard and stared at unicorn tapestries. But I also worked full-time, as a waitress at a series of hectic and demanding restaurants around the city, as a security guard for the dorm, as a babysitter for some pretty privileged professors who lived in doorman buildings along Riverside Park, and at the library (the best job by far). I also constantly worried I would not be able to finish my degree, as every year I was unsure how I would come up with the money to pay for costs of college above and beyond the tuition (which, happily, was covered by the college given my family's low income). Indeed, the primary reason I studied the Classics was because all the books were freely available in the library. There are no modern textbooks—you just find a copy of the Iliad. There are a lot of those in a city like New York. Due to my fears, I pushed to graduate one year early, taking a degree in "Ancient Studies" instead of "Classics," which could have led on to graduate training. From there, I went to law school, which seemed like a safe choice. I do not remember ever having a conversation with anyone about how to find a job or what kinds of job one could do with a degree in Ancient Studies. I had little to no social networks, as I had spent my time studying and working. And I was very lucky, because I graduated with almost zero debt.
>
> For years, until that job interview, I hadn't really thought my Barnard experience had been that great or unusual. But now it was directly helping me get a job, about fifteen years after graduation. And it probably had made me a better person, whatever that means. Had I graduated with debt, however, I am not so sure that it would have been worth it. Was it, on balance, a real opportunity and benefit for poor students like me? Even now? I had a hunch of what I might find if I looked: small liberal arts colleges were unique places of opportunity for low-income first-generation working-class students who somehow managed to find and get in to one of them (no easy task). I thought that, because of their ethos, their smallness, the fact that one could not hide from professors, these colleges would do a fair job equalizing opportunities and experiences for all their students. I wanted to tell this story. But that is not the story that I found, or not entirely. While everyone benefits from the kind of education a small liberal arts college can offer, because students begin and continue so differently burdened and privileged, the advantages of the already-advantaged are amplified, potentially increasing rather than decreasing initial inequalities. That is not really a surprising story, but it is an important one to tell and to remember. Education doesn't reduce inequality. Going to a good college doesn't level the playing field for low-income, first-generation, working-class students. But perhaps it can help them write a book about that. (Hurst 2019:259–261)

What do you think? Did you learn something about the author that would help you, as a reader, understand the reasons and context for the study? Would you trust the researcher? If you said yes, why?

How to Do It

How does one become a reflective researcher? Practice! Nearly every great qualitative researcher maintains a reflexive journal (there are exceptions that prove the rule), a type of diary where they record their thinking on the research process itself. This might include writing about the research design (chapter 2), plotting out strategies for sample selection (chapter 6), or talking through what one believes can be known (chapter 3). During analysis, this journal is a place to record ideas and insights and pose questions for further reflection or follow-up studies. This journal should be highly personal. It is a place to record fears, concerns, and hopes as well. Why are you studying what you are studying? What is really motivating you? Being clear with yourself and being able to put it down in words are invaluable to the research process.

Today, there are many blogs out there on writing reflective journals, with helpful suggestions and examples. Although you may want to take a look at some of these, the form of your own journal will probably be unique. This is you, the researcher, on the page. Each of us looks different. Use the journal to interrogate your decisions and clarify your intent. If you find something during the study of note, you might want to ask yourself what led you to note that. Why do you think this "thing" is a "thing"? What about your own position, background, or researcher status that makes you take note? And asking yourself this question might lead you to think about what you *did not* notice. Other questions to ask yourself include the following: How do I know "that thing" I noted? So what? What does it mean? What are the implications? Who cares about this and why? Remember that doing qualitative research well is *recursive*, meaning that we may begin with a research design, but the steps of doing the research often loop back to the beginning. By keeping a reflective journal, you allow yourself to circle back to the beginning, to make changes to the study to keep it in line with what you are really interested in knowing.

One might also consider designing research that includes multiple investigators, particularly those who may not share your preconceptions about the study. For example, if you are studying conservative students on campus, and you yourself thoroughly identify as liberal, you might want to pair up with a researcher interested in the topic who grew up in a conservative household. If you are studying racial regimes, consider creating a racially diverse team of researchers. Or you might include in your research design a component of participatory research wherein members of the community of interest become coresearchers. Even if you can't form a research team, you can reach out to others for feedback as you move along. Doing research can be a lonely enterprise, so finding people who will listen to you and nudge you to clarify your thinking where necessary or move you to consider an aspect you have missed is invaluable.

Finally, make it a regular part of your practice to write a paragraph reporting your perspectives,

positions, values, and beliefs and how these may have influenced the research. This paragraph may be included in publications upon request.

Internal Validity

Being reflexive can help ensure that our studies are internally valid. All research must be valid to be helpful. We say a study's findings are externally valid when they are equally true of other times, places, people. Quantitative researchers often spend a lot of time grappling with external **validity**, as they are often trying to demonstrate that their sample is representative of a larger population. Although we do not do that in qualitative research, we do sometimes make claims that the processes and mechanisms we uncover here, in this particular setting, are likely to be equally active in that setting over there, although there may be (will be!) contextual differences as well. Internal validity is more peculiar to qualitative research. Is your finding an accurate representation of what you are studying? Are you describing the people you are observing or interviewing as they really are? This is *internal validity*, and you should be able to see how this connects with the requirement of reflexivity. To the extent that you leave unexamined your own biases or preconceptions, you will fail at accurately representing those people and processes you study. Remember that "bias" here is not a moral failing in the way we commonly use bias in the nonresearch world but an inevitable product of our being social beings who inhabit social worlds, with all the various complexities surrounding that. Because of things that have happened to you, certain things (concepts, quotes, activities) might jump out at you as being particularly important. Being reflexive allows you to take a step back and grapple with the larger picture, reflecting on why you might be seeing X (which is present) but also missing Y (which is also present). It also allows you to consider what effect/impact your presence has on what you are observing or being told and to make any adjustments necessary to minimize your impact or, at the very least, to be aware of these effects and talk about them in any descriptions or presentations you make. There are other ways of ensuring internal validity (e.g., **member checking**, **triangulation**), but being reflective is an essential component.

Advanced: Bourdieu on Reflexivity

One researcher who really tackled the issue of reflexivity was Pierre Bourdieu.[3] Known in the US primarily as a theorist, Bourdieu was a very capable and thorough researcher, who employed a variety of methods in his wide-ranging studies. Originally trained as an anthropologist, he became uncomfortable with the

3. I mentioned Pierre Bourdieu earlier in the chapter. For those who want to know more about his work, I've included this advanced section. Undergraduates should feel free to skip over.

unreflective "outsider perspective" he was taught to follow. How was he supposed to observe and write about the various customs and rules of the people he was studying if he did not take into account his own supposedly neutral position in the observations? And even more interestingly, how could he write about customs and rules as if they were lifted from but outside of the understandings and practice of the people following them? When you say "God bless you" to someone who sneezes, are you really following a social custom that requires the prevention of illness through some performative verbal ritual of protection, or are you saying words out of reflex and habit? Bourdieu wondered what it meant that anthropologists were so ready to attribute meaning to actions that, to those performing them, were probably unconsidered. This caused him to ponder those deep epistemological questions about the possibilities of knowledge, particularly what we can know and truly understand about others. Throughout the following decades, as he developed his theories about the social world out of the deep and various studies he engaged in, he thought about the relationship between the researcher and the researched. He came to several conclusions about this relationship.

First, he argued that researchers needed to be *reflective* about their position vis-à-vis the object of study. The very fact that there is a subject and an object needs to be accounted for. Too often, he argued, the researcher forgets that part of the relationship, bracketing out the researcher entirely, as if what is being observed or studied exists entirely independently of the study. This can lead to false reports, as in the case where a blind man grasps the trunk of the elephant and claims the elephant is cylindrical, not having recognized how his own limitations of sight reduced the elephant to only one of its parts.

As mentioned previously, Bourdieu (1984) argued that "reflective analysis of the tools of analysis is not an epistemological scruple but an indispensable precondition of scientific knowledge of the object" (92). It is not that researchers are inherently biased—they are—but rather that the relationship between researcher and researched is an unnatural one that needs to be accounted for in the analysis. True and total objectivity is impossible, as researchers are human subjects themselves, called to research what interests them (or what interests their supervisors) and also inhabiting the social world. The solution to this problem is to be reflective and to account for these aspects in the analysis itself. Here is how Bourdieu explains this charge:

> To adopt the viewpoint of REFLEXIVITY is not to renounce objectivity but to question the privilege of the knowing subject, which the antigenetic vision arbitrarily frees, as purely noetic, from the labor of objectification. **To adopt this viewpoint is to strive to account for the empirical "subject" in the very terms of the objectivity** constructed by the scientific subject (notably by situating it in a determined place in social space-time) **and thereby to give oneself awareness and (possible) mastery of the constraints which may be exercised on the scientific subject** via all the ties which attach it to the empirical "subject," to its interests, motives, assumptions, beliefs, its doxa, **and which it must break in order to constitute itself**. (1996:207; emphases added)

Reflexivity, for Bourdieu, was a trained state of mind for the researcher, essential for proper knowledge production. Let's use a story from Hans Christian Andersen to illustrate this point. If you remember this story from your childhood, it goes something like this: Two con artists show up in a town in which its chief

monarch spends a lot of money on expensive clothes and splashy displays. They sense an opportunity to make some money out of this situation and pretend they are talented weavers from afar. They tell the vain emperor that they can make the most magnificent clothes anyone has ever seen (or not seen, as the case may be!). Because what they really do is "pretend" to weave and sew and hand the emperor thin air, which they then help him to put on in an elaborate joke. They tell him that only the very stupid and lowborn will be unable to see the magnificent clothes. Embarrassed that he can't see them either, he pretends he can. Everyone pretends they can see clothes, when really the emperor walks around in his bare nakedness. As he parades through town, people redden and bow their heads, but no one says a thing. That is, until one child looks at the naked emperor and starts to laugh. His laughter breaks the spell, and everyone realizes the "naked truth."

Now let us add a new thread to this story. The boy did not laugh. Years go by, and the emperor continues to wear his new clothes. At the start of every day, his aides carefully drape the "new clothes" around his naked body. Decades go by, and this is all "normal." People don't even see a naked emperor but a fully robed leader of the free world. A researcher, raised in this milieu, visits the palace to observe court habits. She observes the aides draping the emperor. She describes the care they take in doing so. She nowhere reports that the clothes are nonexistent *because she herself has been trained to see them*. She thus misses a very important fact—that there are no clothes at all! Note that it is not her individual "biases" that are getting in the way but her *unreflective* acceptance of the reality she inhabits that binds her to report things less accurately than she might.

In his later years, Bourdieu turned his attention to science itself and argued that the promise of modern science required **reflectivity** among scientists. We need to develop our reflexivity as we develop other muscles, through constant practice. Bourdieu (2004) urged researchers "to convert reflexivity into a disposition, constitutive of their scientific habitus, *a reflexivity reflex*, capable of acting not *ex poste*, on the *opus operatum*, but *a priori*, on the *modus operandi*" (89). In other words, we need to build into our research design an appreciation of the relationship between researcher and researched.

To do science properly is to be reflective, to be aware of the social waters in which one swims and to turn one's researching gaze on oneself and one's researcher position as well as on the object of the research. Above all, doing science properly requires one to acknowledge science as a social process. We are not omniscient gods, lurking above the humans we observe and talk to. We are human too.

Further Readings

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Wacquant, Loïc J. D. 1989. "Towards a Reflexive Sociology: A Workshop with Pierre Bourdieu." *Sociological Theory* 7(1):26–63. A careful examination of Bourdieu's notion of reflexivity by one of his most earnest disciples.

CHAPTER 7. ETHICS

> The "fly on the wall" approach in anthropology, still taught as an antidote to the influences of one's subjectivity on the research process, only obscures the fact that even those who try to be insects are, at the very least, already influencing the social environment in which they conduct their fieldwork and, more important, are already committing themselves to a very clear moral and political position—that of letting things remain as they are, or leaving the status quo untouched. Neutrality is impossible—or better still, neutrality may work for the maintenance of privileges, but it does not work for all. Many forms of oppression, exclusion, and death continue to be perpetrated in the name of objectivity and detachment.
>
> —Joâo Helios Costa Vargas, *Catching Hell in the City of Angels*

Introduction

Joâo Helios Costa Vargas spent two years living in South Central Los Angeles, a region of predominantly Black neighborhoods known for high rates of poverty, crime, and violence. When recounting the findings of his ethnographic research, he refused to write "neutrally." As a human being, he viewed the prospect of writing as if he were merely "a fly on the wall" distasteful if not unethical. He wanted to name oppression outright. To testify to the outrages and injustices he saw perpetrated against those living in these communities by those with power—the police, school authorities, the public at large. And so he did, and his book is both more powerful and more honest for that. His choice is both an example of reflexivity (see chapter 6) and an example of **ethics** in practice. In this chapter, we explore a great many ethical considerations made by qualitative researchers and argue that being ethical is a *constant and ongoing responsibility* for any researcher and particularly for those involved in social science. Unlike other fields of science, the lines between doing right and doing wrong are sometimes hard to distinguish, a situation that puts tremendous pressure on every qualitative researcher to consider ethics *all the time*.

This is a very important chapter and should not be overlooked. As a practical matter, it should also be read closely with chapters 6 and 8. Because qualitative researchers deal with people and the social world, it is imperative they develop and adhere to a strong ethical code for conducting research in a way that does not harm. There are legal requirements and guidelines for doing so (see chapter 8), but these requirements should not be considered synonymous with the ethical code required of us. Each researcher must constantly interrogate every aspect of their research—from research question to design to sample through analysis and presentation—to ensure that a minimum of harm (ideally, zero harm) is caused. Because each research project is unique, the standards of care for each study are unique. Part of being a professional researcher is carrying this code in one's heart, being constantly attentive to what is required under particular circumstances. Chapter 7 provides various research scenarios and asks readers to weigh

in on the suitability and appropriateness of the research. If done in a class setting, it will become obvious fairly quickly that there are often no absolutely correct answers, as different people find different aspects of the scenarios of greatest importance. Minimizing the harm in one area may require possible harm in another. Being attentive to all the ethical aspects of one's research and making the best judgments one can clearly and consciously are integral parts of being a good researcher.

[Untitled image] by Nathan Dumlao on Unsplash

Being an Ethical Researcher

Being a competent qualitative researcher means being reflective (chapter 6) and being ethical. In the next chapter, we will explore the regulatory requirements of ethical practice, but it is important to recognize that being ethical goes well beyond following the rules and regulations. Born from an epistemological perspective (chapter 3) that places value on the diversity of meanings and unique perspectives of the humans we study, qualitative researchers' ethics encompass truthfully and generously reporting those meanings and perspectives, being attentive to what people tell and show us, and honestly appraising the harm and efficacy of what we report. The rules and regulations guiding qualitative research tend to focus on the importance of informed consent and the general balancing of potential benefits against likely harms. However, our duties to those with whom we interact go well beyond these aspects of our research. Further, because each study is unique and involves relationships between a researcher and research "subjects," proceeding ethically requires constant attention and deliberation. One might make dozens of decisions during the research process that have ethical implications. It is not permissible to stop thinking about ethics after you have submitted your application for institutional review board (IRB) review (more on this process in chapter 8) or once you have received permission to proceed with your study: "Ethics are more than a set of principles or abstract rules that sit as an overarching entity guiding our research.… Ethics exist in our actions and in our way of doing and practicing our research; we perceive ethics to be always in progress, never to be taken for granted, flexible, and responsive to change" (Davies and Dodd 2002:281).

Reviewing agencies such as IRBs will not scrutinize all the ethical decisions you need to make throughout your research process. Only you can do this. It is thus vitally important that you develop your sense of ethics as part of your identity as a researcher. Being reflective can help, as you are more likely to identify and acknowledge and confront ethical issues if you are paying attention to the process.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part walks you through the research process, highlighting a variety of places where ethical issues may emerge. The second part presents several ethical scenarios. I encourage you to talk through these with a friend or colleagues from class. You may find as you do so that you disagree on what the "correct" ethical decision is. This is absolutely normal and an important lesson. There are many "gray" areas in ethical consideration where there is no clear right or wrong answer. Sometimes there are "least bad" courses of action. Being ethical does not always means doing the right thing—it simply means trying to find the right thing to do and being able to justify the decisions you make.

Part 1: Ethical Issues throughout the Course of the Study

Research Design

Many of the rules and regulations around conducting qualitative research focus on the research design. For example, institutional review boards routinely ask you to justify your sample, while including members of **vulnerable populations** (e.g., children) in the study will trigger a heightened review. In chapter 8, we will look more closely at the formal requirements, but before getting there, we need to take a step back and think about the study design more generally. Why is this study being conducted in the first place? If human subjects are involved (this is the aspect that triggers formal review), any study is going to affect them to some extent. The impact on the humans we study could be quite minimal, as in the case of unobtrusive observations in which no personal information is recorded. Or it could be substantial, as in the case where people are asked very personal and potentially "triggering" questions about a harmful phenomenon. Or it could be simply the inconvenience of being bothered by a nosy researcher. Is your study worth the bother? Recognize that the advantages of a successful study accrue to *you* in the first place (completing your degree requirements, publishing an article, etc.) and secondarily contribute to collective knowledge. Make sure that that secondary contribution is really worth it. This may require you to do enough foundational research to ensure that what you are doing is truly novel and worth the expense.

Once you have determined that, yes, it is worth doing this study because we don't yet know the answer to the research questions you've posed *and* those questions are good questions to ask, you need to consider whether this is the best and least harmful way to answer those questions. Balance the contributions to knowledge and the potential harm to humans posed by the research. Sometimes, the knowledge is so important that we are willing to lean a little harder on our research subjects, causing them a bit more discomfort or potential harm than we would be willing to do for a study of less importance. To make

this kind of calculation, you have to be very honest about the importance of your work, another aspect of reflexivity (chapter 6). You also have to think about your research subjects honestly and the power they have to protect themselves from your intrusion. Poor people often get studied more often than rich people because they have less power to protect themselves from unwanted intrusions on their privacy. Designing a study around easy-to-access people is an ethical decision. Sometimes it is the right decision, sometimes not.

Just as you have to consider your sample in terms of power and the ability of some groups to hide from your scrutiny, you also have to consider your sample in terms of who *gets to be* included and what the implications of exclusion are on our knowledge. Medical studies that exclude certain hard-to-reach populations out of convenience are poorer for that exclusion. You want to be very clear about stating and justifying both your inclusion criteria and your exclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria are those characteristics your research subjects must have in order to participate in the study. Being of adult age is a common inclusion criterion. Exclusion criteria are those characteristics that would disqualify people from being part of your study. These are established to protect potential participants, as in the case where those not born in the United States are excluded from a study that observes potential criminal behavior so as to protect them from deportation orders and reporting mandates. On the other hand, by excluding this group of people, you have limited their insights and perspectives from being heard.

Data Collection

Once you have designed your study in an ethical manner, you will have to find the people to match your inclusion criteria and invite them to participate. In most cases, you cannot ethically collect data without permission. This permission must often be in writing, and there are formal rules about what this writing looks like, which will be fully described in chapter 8. What about situations where you are simply observing behavior? If this is in a private setting, you will still need to get permission as well as access to the site. Who is giving you access to the site? This, too, raises ethical considerations. Is this a person with power (e.g., an employer) such that their permission may influence employees' consent to be included in the study? If a principal of a high school allows you to observe teachers teach, does it matter that there is a lawsuit pending against the principal for unlawful terminations of various teachers? Yes, it does! You must consider how you and your research may be implicated in ongoing workplace issues. Ethics come into play even in public settings, especially in cases where the people being observed have little choice but to act in public (e.g., a community pool during a heatwave).

One of the obvious harms that can be created by a nosy researcher other than inconvenience and bother is the breaching of confidential statements or publications of private reflections and actions. You may think you are doing enough to protect your research subjects from harm by keeping what you learn anonymous (e.g., using pseudonyms or reporting only aggregate group data—e.g., "community pool members were rowdy"), but **anonymity** is easily breached. Even when no "identifiable information" is collected, the risk

of being able to attribute data to particular individuals is never nonexistent. Formal rules and regulations specify in great detail various levels of anonymity and **confidentiality** permitted (see table 7.1). The bottom line is that we have to act as if what we write of people we observe and talk to may be individually identified (however unlikely) and consider what harm would occur to those people when we publish our research. This might necessitate multiple case sites to protect our subjects from identification (e.g., three community pools rather than just one) or even rethinking the kinds of questions we ask, refraining from pushing our interview subjects to address supplemental questions (those that are not directly tied to our research questions) that might cause them harm or embarrassment to them if they were identified.

Table 7.1. Anonymous and Confidential Data, A Vocabulary

Anonymous research	At no time will the researcher or anyone associated with the project know the identity of the participants; the information collected does not contain any identifiable information, and the risk of being able to attribute data to particular individuals is low
Confidential research	Proper safeguards are in place to protect the privacy of participants and their information from unauthorized access, use, disclosure, modification, loss, and theft
Anonymized data	Data that is irrevocably stripped of all direct identifiers (e.g., name) and where the risk of reidentification from remaining indirect identifiers is low, and where no codes exist that could allow for future re-linkage when the data is anonymized, *even the researcher will not be able to link data to participants*
De-identified data	Data in de-identified form and where the existing key code is held by a custodian or third party (e.g., Qualtrics) or where the linking code has been destroyed
Coded data	A link exists between a unique code (often a number) and individual identifying information (e.g., name)

Another aspect of gaining permission is deciding how much information about the study to provide in advance. Again, there are formal rules that require honesty, simplicity, and clarity when explaining the research study. The language must be understood by the particular research subjects. If one is doing research with children, the language describing the study is going to necessarily be different than if one is explaining the research study to adults. If one is doing research with nonnative English speakers, the language should be in the native language as well. There are many times, however, when these simple rules fail to take into account the research design's requirements. Some researchers, especially psychologists, employ a certain level of deception in their research design, as stating honestly what the study is about would undercut the value of the findings. Accurate information is sometimes not possible without deception. When this is the case, reviewing agencies can make exceptions to the rule of fully informed consent so long as the deception is minimal and poses no harm and there is some debriefing after the fact (as in an experiment in which the full study is explained as soon as the experiment ends). There are other times, however, when researchers accurately describe the general purpose and goal of the study but fail to mention details that, had the subjects known in advance, they might have withheld their consent. This might be the case, for example, where a powerful CEO is told that he is taking part in a study of power dynamics

at large corporations when in fact the study is also focused on gender imbalances and male CEOs' biases toward women in leadership. The simple explanation was not deceptive, but the CEO may have decided to opt out had he received all the information. In such a case, the researcher needs to balance the potential benefits of the study with the likely harm to the subject and may very well come to the conclusion that this is an ethical practice. Others might disagree, of course.

There are a host of other questions to consider. How long will you stay in the field? What kinds of relationships will you form with the people you are observing, and how will you gracefully "exit" the field with the least amount of pain to those who have come to rely on your presence? What level of collaboration do you have with your participants? How deep are your interview questions? Are your probes too invasive? All of these are ethical questions that arise during the data collection phase.

More questions arise during data analysis and the presentation of your findings. Because we have not yet gotten to those subjects in this book, I am going to reserve much of the discussion on these and point them out in relevant chapters. There are two later-stage ethical challenges, however, that you need to plan for in advance: Who will own the data you collect? What kind of impact might the presentation or reporting of your findings have?

You will often need to think about who owns the data that has been collected and analyzed and who has rights of control over it. For example, some researchers negotiate access with employers or supervisors at particular worksites. Those employers or supervisors may then expect some control over the data collected. Maybe they want to see the results first, before anyone else, or perhaps they even want a say in which results are made public. It is important to work out any agreements on the use of the data in advance so you are not put in a position of having someone else dictate what you can do with your data.

You should also consider the *impact* your study may have on those who granted you access to the site and to all of those who were willing to be interviewed or observed. If your findings could result in a negative outcome (anything from bad press to loss of business or community support to public shaming of an individual or group), you should anticipate this and consider your ethical obligations, obligations that may exist to multiple persons and groups and may be in conflict with one another. How will you handle this?

Many of these questions (and more) will arise during the course of your research. Keeping a journal will help you reflect on the challenges. Every decision you make will probably carry an ethical consideration. To give you a sense of how ambiguous these ethical decision points can be, let's walk through a few ethical scenarios.

Part 2: Ethical Scenarios

Below are several short scenarios that will help you think through how to spot ethical issues and how you might resolve them. Pay attention to all stages of the research process, from design to publication.

It's possible that one or more of the scenarios are fatally flawed from the very start. Think about what each researcher owes to (1) the scientific community of which they are a part and (2) the human beings with whom they are building relationships. How to properly balance the two? A few questions follow each scenario, but you need not confine your consideration to these questions. Note that each scenario might bring up more than one ethical issue!

Scenario 1: The Glass Ceiling

[Untitled image} by Alena Darmel on Pexels

> Jacinda would like to understand how women deal with sexual discrimination and harassment in engineering firms. She is able to secure a temporary job as a receptionist at Engineer-O, a Fortune 500 firm. To everyone in the company, she is simply a "temp." While working there, she approaches several women about their experiences. A few are willing to sit down and be recorded by her as she asks them questions about working at the company. In addition to the interviews, she keeps notes of her own daily experiences at the company (during her breaks and at night). She witnesses many examples of sexual harassment—managers who make sexual comments to their employees. She also takes pictures of the office and cubicle walls of some of the male employees, where sexually explicit images of women and/or misogynistic sayings are posted.

Questions to consider: From whom must Jacinda get consent for her study? The women she interviews, the men whose walls she takes pictures of, those whose activities she observes? Does she need to tell her boss that she is an undercover researcher? Should she?

Scenario 2: #BlackLivesMatter

[Untitled image} by Nicole Baster on Unsplash

> Anne is a White twenty-five-year-old graduate student who is interested in police-community relations, especially in urban neighborhoods that have experienced conflicts (e.g., police shootings of unarmed Black men and children). She has a very close friend, Jamal, who lives in one such neighborhood. He allows her to hang out with him for a summer. She carries around a notebook and writes down observations frequently. She also records a few interviews with Jamal, his best friends, his parents, and his beloved grandmother, whose house he lives in. One Sunday, while she is at his grandmother's house, the police knock down the front door and force everyone to lie down on the ground as they search the premises. She begins to cry and writes movingly afterward of the pain and terror written on Joyce's (Jamal's grandmother) face as they lie next to each other with a gun at their necks. On another occasion, she is present when Jamal finds out his best friend has been fatally shot by a local gang. She gets in the car with Jamal as he looks for the killer. He asks her to hold his gun. She writes all of this down and plans on publishing everything.

Questions to consider: What are Anne's duties and responsibilities in terms of publishing these events? From whom must she get consent? What if Joyce and Jamal's friends did not know she was a graduate student conducting a study? Did she commit a crime when she carried Jamal's gun for him? Should she have received permission from the police department before conducting this study?

Scenario 3: The Unhoused

[Untitled image] by Jon Tyson on Unsplash

> Julie is doing a study of the unhoused in San Francisco. She approaches several men on the street and explains her study and asks if she can follow them around. Twelve agree. She spends several weeks in their company—getting to know them, following them as they panhandle and recycle old bottles and cans, and asking them questions about their lives. She records many of their conversations on her phone. When it is too cold outdoors, she sometimes allows one or two men to crash at her apartment. She knows they really dislike the shelters and how they are run. She also encourages them all to use her shower during the course of the study. Other times, she buys them food. Once or twice, she has paid for beers and has sat with them as they drink and reminisce about their childhoods. And still other times she has given "Julius" cash, even though there is a chance he will use it to buy heroin. After six months, she realizes she has enough material to write a book about the men. She leaves San Francisco and moves back to her home in Berkeley. Although she tells the men the study is over, she does not follow up with them or provide any of them with contact information for her.

Questions to consider: What does Julie owe the unhoused participants of her study after six months? Should she have provided them with a way to contact her in the future? Should she have made an attempt to reconnect with them? Was it appropriate to allow the men to use her apartment? Would it have been wrong not to do so? Should Julie have helped the men more? Did she help them too much? Was it wrong to drink beer with them? To give Julius cash he might have used to buy heroin? If her book is published to great success, does she owe any of the proceeds to the men?

Scenario 4: Studying Upside Down

[Untitled image] by Gene Gallin on Unsplash

> Franco is a graduate student interested in understanding the practice of racial discrimination and how this might be related to individual beliefs about insider/outsider status within a community. During the Trump administration, he heard a lot about "White working-class racists," but he suspects that wealthy White persons are just as discriminatory as poor White persons. He designs a research plan that allows him to hear what people have to say about "who belongs" in the US and a part that allows him to actually observe interactions they have with others. As his father belongs to a very fancy golf club, he plans to (1) interview the members of the club and (2) golf at the club and otherwise hang out and watch interactions between (primarily White) members and (primarily Latinx) staff. He did not ask the club's permission. The club leadership heard about the study, however, when one of its members mentioned they saw a young man writing things down in a notebook when they were in an argument with a caddy. The club pressured the IRB of Franco's university to revoke his application. Franco doesn't fight the decision (how can he?). Still interested in understanding racial discrimination, he uses the same research design, but now at a poor neighborhood's community pool. He finds some examples of racism in his interviews with the White working-class pool-goers and observes one example of what could be racial discrimination.

Questions to consider: Should Franco have approached the golf club directly to secure permission for this study? Why do you think he did not? Does it matter that his father was a member? Was his original design a good one? Why or why not? How would you have handled the IRB revocation? Is Franco's new site a good one? Why or why not? Is his decision to observe at a community pool ethical?

Scenario 5: Political Deception

[Untitled image} by Element5Digital on Unsplash

> Mumbi, a graduate student from Kenya, is fascinated by American politics. In particular, she wants to understand the increasingly visible role of race among politically active conservatives in the US. She plans to do research at a local Republican Party headquarters during campaign season. She will work there herself and interview other volunteers. Mumbi's informed consent form explains that she is doing research on "how people engage politically." Informally, she tells her covolunteers that she is a Republican and that she voted for Trump. However, as a Kenyan citizen, she is not able to vote in the elections, and had she done so, she would never have voted for Trump. She thinks Trump is truly the devil.

Questions to consider: Is Mumbi's failure to identify herself unethical? What does she owe the people she is interviewing? Is it ethical to omit the motivations for the study? Had she included all the facts about herself and her motivation for the study, would she have received different information from the people she interviewed? Is deception justified in this case or not? Should Mumbi worry about her personal safety?

Scenario 6: What Do Your Friends Say About You?

[Untitled image} by Priscilla Du Preez on Unsplash

Serena is a psychology graduate student trying to understand how people make friends. She runs an experiment using primarily college students at a large research university in the Pacific Northwest. In the experiment, she provides students notecards with interesting facts about some strangers and records which strangers get selected as potential new friends. Some of the facts include (1) shops at Walmart, (2) has traveled outside the US, and (3) owns a MAGA hat or T-shirt. She finds that those who espoused fact (2) were overwhelmingly chosen as friends and that only one in five chose a friend that selected (3) and zero chose friends who chose (1). Based on these findings, she develops a theory that people value cross-cultural experiences. She debriefs the students in the experiment and tells them that (1) was the big loser!

Questions to consider: Are there any problems with this study design? Who is likely to be included and who is not likely to be included in the sample? What might be wrong with the theory Serena developed? Were any college students harmed by the questions asked? What would you have advised Serena before she began running the experiment?

Quick Recap of Common Ethical Challenges to Consider

- Who was included in the sample design? Who was not included?
- How did the researcher get entry into the field?
- What did the researcher tell people about their research?
- Was there "informed consent"?
- When reporting findings, was care taken to protect the **anonymity**, **confidentiality**, and *dignity* of the research subjects?
- Does this study contribute to our knowledge about a subject in a way that *does not foster harm*?

Further Readings

Cwikel, Julie, and Elizabeth Hoban. 2005. "Contentious Issues in Research on Trafficked Women Working in the Sex Industry: Study Design, Ethics, and Methodology." *The Journal of Sex Research* 42(4):306–316.

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CHAPTER 8. WORKING WITH INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARDS

Introduction

The thought of having to submit a proposal to **IRB** for approval has been enough to turn away many students (and some practitioners) from engaging in qualitative research. IRB approval is generally required for any studies involving "human subjects." It may seem easier to work with numbers rather than people. Although I share common frustrations with delays and bureaucratic hassles associated with IRBs, on the whole, seeking IRB approval for your study should not keep you from doing the kind of research you want to do or answering the questions that truly matter to you. This chapter will walk you through what you need to know to have a successful relationship with your institutional review board.

What are IRBs?

Any researcher whose research includes "human subjects" is required by federal guidelines to have their research protocol reviewed in advance by their institution's ethical review panel.[1] In the US, these panels are known as institutional review boards, or IRBs. The federal policy on **human subjects research** is often referred to simply as the **Common Rule**. First codified as such in 1974, the Common Rule was substantially revised in 2017, with those revisions being implemented in 2019. In the grand scheme of things, these rule changes are *very new*, so the first thing you must realize is that much of what has been written about IRBs and the Common Rule has since changed. As a new student to qualitative research, you will be operating under the new updated Common Rule, and this may differ from what your teacher or past researchers understood. That said, the changes were not quite as substantial as some had hoped (more on this below). More commonly, the shifting guidelines put a lot of burden on local IRBs to modify their reviewing practices. As this often included structural changes in personnel and software, resulting delays occurred in 2019–2021, just as the global pandemic hit. Your institution may still be working to adapt. These adaptations are really the first major change since the inception of the IRB system in the 1970s.

The Common Rule and the establishment of IRBs occurred on the heels of several well-publicized

1. The remainder of this chapter will focus on the set of guidelines in place in the United States. Other nations have their own sets of guidelines for ethical review. For example, Canada employs REBs (research ethics boards) instead of IRBs (institutional review boards).

ethical breaches in research design and study of the mid-twentieth century. In the 1930s, there was the infamous Tuskegee experiment, in which African American men, roughly half of whom had syphilis, had treatment withheld. Horrendous and inhumane medical "experiments" by Nazi doctors during the 1940s came to light during the 1947 Nuremberg trials, leading to calls for the regulation and oversight of medical experiments and the eventual "Nuremberg Code."

The Nuremberg Code (1947)

Permissible Medical Experiments

The great weight of the evidence before us to effect that certain types of medical experiments on human beings, when kept within reasonably well-defined bounds, conform to the ethics of the medical profession generally. The protagonists of the practice of human experimentation justify their views on the basis that such experiments yield results for the good of society that are unprocurable by other methods or means of study. All agree, however, that certain basic principles must be observed in order to satisfy moral, ethical and legal concepts:

1. The voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential. This means that the person involved should have legal capacity to give consent; should be so situated as to be able to exercise free power of choice, without the intervention of any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress, overreaching, or other ulterior form of constraint or coercion; and should have sufficient knowledge and comprehension of the elements of the subject matter involved as to enable him to make an understanding and enlightened decision. This latter element requires that before the acceptance of an affirmative decision by the experimental subject there should be made known to him the nature, duration, and purpose of the experiment; the method and means by which it is to be conducted; all inconveniences and hazards reasonably to be expected; and the effects upon his health or person which may possibly come from his participation in the experiment.The duty and responsibility for ascertaining the quality of the consent rests upon each individual who initiates, directs, or engages in the experiment. It is a personal duty and responsibility which may not be delegated to another with impunity.
2. The experiment should be such as to yield fruitful results for the good of society, unprocurable by other methods or means of study, and not random and unnecessary in nature.
3. The experiment should be so designed and based on the results of animal experimentation and a knowledge of the natural history of the disease or other problem under study that the anticipated results justify the performance of the experiment.

4. The experiment should be so conducted as to avoid all unnecessary physical and mental suffering and injury.
5. No experiment should be conducted where there is an a priori reason to believe that death or disabling injury will occur; except, perhaps, in those experiments where the experimental physicians also serve as subjects.
6. The degree of risk to be taken should never exceed that determined by the humanitarian importance of the problem to be solved by the experiment.
7. Proper preparations should be made and adequate facilities provided to protect the experimental subject against even remote possibilities of injury, disability or death.
8. The experiment should be conducted only by scientifically qualified persons. The highest degree of skill and care should be required through all stages of the experiment of those who conduct or engage in the experiment.
9. During the course of the experiment the human subject should be at liberty to bring the experiment to an end if he has reached the physical or mental state where continuation of the experiment seems to him to be impossible.
10. During the course of the experiment the scientist in charge must be prepared to terminate the experiment at any stage, if he has probable cause to believe, in the exercise of the good faith, superior skill and careful judgment required of him, that a continuation of the experiment is likely to result in injury, disability, or death to the experimental subject.

Despite this code, the Tuskegee experiment continued in the US (until 1972), as did several other unethical studies: the Willowbrook study of hepatitis transmission in a hospital for mentally impaired children, the Fernald School trials using radioactive minerals in impaired children, and the Jewish Chronic Disease Hospital case in which chronically ill patients were injected with cancer cells.

The National Research Act was passed in 1974, creating the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. This commission authored the ***Belmont Report***, enunciating three ethical principles that form the basis of acceptable human subjects research. These principles are the following:

> *Respect for persons.* Treat individuals as autonomous human beings, capable of making their own decisions and choices; do not use people as a means to an end. Respect for person requires (1) obtaining and documenting **informed consent**; (2) respect the privacy interests of research subjects; and (3) considering additional protection when conducting research on individuals with limited autonomy (e.g., children, prisoners and others under custodial supervision).
>
> ***Beneficence***. Minimize the risks of harm and maximize the potential benefits. Beneficence requires: (1) using procedures that present the least risk to subjects consistent with answering the research question(s);

(2) gathering data from procedures or activities that are already being performed for non-research reasons; (3) ensuring that risks to subjects should be reasonable in relation to both the potential benefits to the subjects and the importance of the knowledge expected to result from the study; (4) maintaining promises of confidentiality; and (5) monitoring the data to ensure the safety of subjects.

Justice. Treat people fairly and design research so that its burden and benefits are shared equitably. Justice requires: (1) selecting subjects equitably (not excluding a group out of bias or mere convenience) and (2) avoiding exploitation of vulnerable populations or populations of convenience.

These principles should look familiar to you if you read chapter 7, as they are similar to the general ethical principles of qualitative research. You might notice, however, that the context of the *Belmont Report* and some of its language on principles are geared toward the kinds of biomedical research that had raised concerns (e.g., What does "monitoring the data to ensure the safety of subjects" mean in the context of interview-based research?). Indeed, the Common Rule that followed from the *Belmont Report* was really created with the image of human subjects in medical experiments in mind and so imperfectly aligned itself with codes of ethics that made sense for those who talked to people (rather than injecting them with a potential vaccine). This would become a big issue in the following decades and was the primary reason the Common Rule was revised in 2017.

The IRB review system was designed following the *Belmont Report* to provide an independent, objective review of research involving human subjects. Any institution that received federal funding was subject to the Common Rule. Rather than create a corps of federal agents reviewing research protocols, the Common Rule required each and every research institution (all colleges, hospitals, research foundations) to create its own review panel, known as its IRB. In accordance with federal regulations, an IRB has the authority to approve, require modifications in, or disapprove research. According to the regulations, the IRB must be composed of diverse members,[2] including at least one person from the local community outside of the institution itself. In practice, most IRBs also include at least one attorney. For university IRBs, the majority of its members are drawn from different disciplines (e.g., there might be one biology faculty member and one sociologist). These are not full-time positions, which explains some of the delays and long processing times students confront (and complain about). Some applications will require "full-board review," while others can be addressed by IRB representatives.

The Common Rule Since 2019

IRB jurisdiction is triggered whenever there is research involving human subjects. Part of the changes implemented in the Common Rule had to do with defining both "human subjects" and "research." You

2. The actual regulations require that, as part of being qualified as an IRB, the IRB must have a "diversity of members, including consideration of race, gender, cultural backgrounds and sensitivity to such issues as community attitudes" (21 CFR 56.107(a)).

may wonder why this was necessary, but consider the following: Is asking your grandmother questions about her childhood for a classroom project "research"? Does an IRB have to review your research design before you talk to her? What about the journalist who observes the Taliban taking over Kabul and then writes about this for the *New York Times*? What if she includes quotes from Afghanis? Or this: You collect information from blogs about cooking for a thesis on cultural transmission. Do you need IRB approval here? Or this: You code and analyze diaries of people who lived through the US Civil War for a dissertation in US history. Before the Common Rule clarifications, some IRBs were in fact claiming that all were human subjects research (see "Advanced: IRB Imperialism?" for more). This caused a great deal of frustration and confusion among researchers, journalists, librarians, historians, and students.

According to recent clarifications, a human subject is "a living individual about whom an investigator conducting research obtains (1) *information* or biospecimens *through* intervention or i*nteraction with the individual, and uses, studies, or analyzes the information* or biospecimens; or (2) uses, studies, analyzes, or generates identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens" (45 CFR 46). I have added the italics to emphasize the aspect of this definition most applicable to qualitative research (we do not take biospecimens). Note that the individual must be living, so historical analyses of diaries or oral histories fall outside IRB jurisdiction. There are still ethics involved in doing this kind of research, but your IRB will not be weighing in on those. Note, too, that the information must be gained through some form of interaction. This would seem to suggest that preexisting data sets such as already collected oral histories or blogs, even of living persons, are also outside the IRB's jurisdiction (although there are privacy concerns; see [2] of the definition).

Not everything involving human subjects is covered by IRBs. The interaction must be part of "research." (This requirement excludes most journalism and classroom projects.) Research is designed as "*a systematic investigation*, including research development, testing, and evaluation, *designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge*" (emphases added). If you are writing a research paper for a class and you are not expecting to publish that paper beyond the classroom, it does not count as "research" under this definition. Further, if you are collecting data from human subjects for the sake of the data itself and not to make any analyses based on that data, it is not research (think of the US Census or data gathered by public health officials). My own institution's IRB (the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board) clarifies that "the intent or purpose of the systematic investigation is dissemination of findings (publication or presentation) outside of OSU" and is "intended to have an impact (theoretical or practical) on others within one's discipline."[3] Activities that are specifically not deemed to be research include "scholarly and journalistic activities" such as oral histories, journalism, biographies, literary criticism, legal research, and most historical scholarship. Government functions with separately mandated protections (e.g., US Census) are not research.

3. See the website: https://research.oregonstate.edu/irb/does-your-study-require-irb-review.

Figure 8.1 displays the decision tree used at Oregon State University for determining IRB jurisdiction.

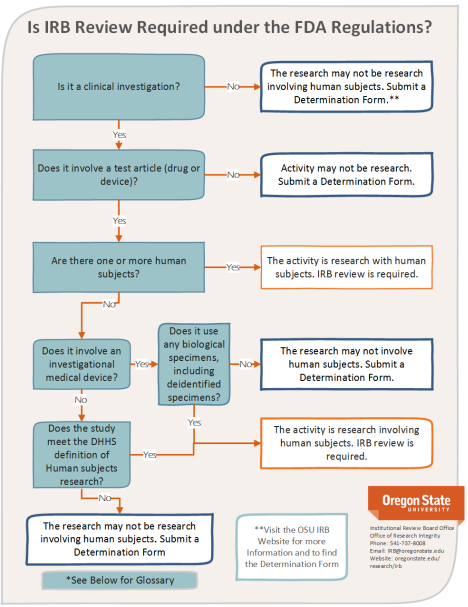


Fig. 8.1 Process for determining IRB review (source: Oregon State University). Used with permission.

Applying the Belmont Principles to Human Subject Research

Now that we know what "human subjects research" is in IRB-land, we need to understand how the three Belmont principles are applied to research that is subject to review.

As part of the **Respect for Persons principle**, IRBs are looking to ensure that human subjects have consented to be part of the study. People cannot consent to something they do not understand, so IRBs look to ensure that potential participants have been duly informed about both the study itself and their rights regarding the study (e.g., the right to opt out at any time, something denied the men in the Tuskegee experiment). IRBs will carefully scrutinize consent forms and recruitment material. Most IRBs recognize informed consent as a process, not a single document. Information must be presented that will enable potential participants to voluntarily decide whether to enroll in the study and then also to stay in the study during its duration. Anything that could pressure participation (such as including one's employee or student) will raise red flags. The procedures used in obtaining informed consent, including recruitment flyers, should be designed to educate potential study participants in terms that they can understand. IRBs will probably stop you from recruiting participants with a promise of money in bold letters. Your IRB may also ask you to include a translation of the document if you are recruiting persons whose primary language is not English.

There are some standard attributes to include on any consent form (figure 8.2). Your IRB office probably has a template it makes available to researchers. Download this, and adapt it to your study.

Figure 8.2. Attributes of Consent Forms

In general, deception is frowned upon, as it undercuts informed consent. As mentioned in the previous chapter, however, there are a few recognized exceptions. Deception may be permitted when all of the following obtains:

- The study must not involve more than minimal risk to the subjects.
- The use of deceptive methods must be justified by the study's significant prospective scientific, educational, or applied value.
- The protocol must clearly address why deception or incomplete disclosure is necessary to ensure that the research is scientifically valid and feasible and that an alternative, nondeceptive methodology could not be used.
- Subjects should not be deceived about any aspect of the study that would affect their willingness to participate.

In addition, an immediate debriefing, when possible, is often required.

IRBs will also look to see that you have presented the study so that the risks of harm are minimized and the potential benefits (e.g., knowledge production, increased understanding) are maximized (**Beneficence principle**). They will want to know that you are conducting the study with as minimal intrusion as possible and that you have thought about the importance of the research and balanced this against the inconvenience or harm that could accrue to the people you are studying. Further, IRBs spend a lot of care ensuring that you are taking all available precautions against breaches of confidentiality and anonymity. At a minimum, they will want you to include descriptions of how you are safeguarding the data you collect, where you are warehousing it (e.g., a password-protected computer file), and how long you will store it after the completion of the study.

Finally, IRBs will review your application for adherence to the **Justice principle**. They will scrutinize your protocol to ensure that you have selected your subjects equitably (not excluding a group out of bias or mere convenience) and that you have avoided exploiting vulnerable populations or populations of convenience.

There are three levels of IRB review: **full**, **expedited**, and **exempt**. Full-board reviews are invoked when a preliminary review (sometimes by a single IRB representative) indicates that the research involves greater than minimal risk or is of minimal risk research but does not meet one or more of the expedited review categories. Full review is used whenever vulnerable populations are included in the protocol. Vulnerable populations have historically encompassed children, prisoners, and pregnant persons. There are separate

guidelines listing when expedited review is possible (see your own IRB website for its list). Exempt review is a specific subset of research involving human subjects that does not require continuing IRB oversight. Studies that are deemed full or expedited require continuing review. Changes in the protocol can move a study from one category of review to another. If all of this sounds confusing, welcome to bureaucracy! There are good reasons for IRB to set its own guidelines for how the categorizations work, as each institution is a bit different in the kinds of research that are likely to be reviewed. You will have to work with your IRB for more clarity in this area.

Working with your IRB

Every institution has a unique IRB. It is helpful to find your IRB's website and review the process described there. Although all adhere to the Common Rule, the actual process of review may differ. Some IRBs use software programs to help route applications between expedited, exempt, and full-board reviews. Smaller institutions are likely to have more personal review processes where you may end up talking to an actual person who manages the entire process. Given the substantial changes enacted in the Common Rule in 2017, it is likely that your IRB's website has been recently updated and includes a wealth of helpful material.

Know that the process takes a lot of time and that the actual amount may depend on staffing at your institution. A fully functioning IRB may take two to three weeks to review your **protocol**. Another may take six to nine months. It is helpful to know in advance the time frame for your application process. Ask your IRB or colleagues at your institution who have recently submitted a study for review. Know what triggers "full-board review" (e.g., inclusion of "vulnerable" populations). Note, too, that many IRBs require some determination of whether a study is "exempt" from IRB review. In other words, even if you are pretty sure that what you are doing is not "human subjects research" (see above), you may still have to go through some form of review process.

Have all of your documents in shape for submitting your application, as any errors or missing documents will delay the review process. Although each IRB's process is different, you can generally expect to include at least the following documents for a qualitative project:

1. *Protocol (research design).* This should include a full description of your sample and site selection, how participants will be recruited, how consent will be obtained, and how documents (e.g., transcripts, consent forms) will be safeguarded. The reviewers will also need to know about your research question and the importance of the study so they can balance the benefits and costs of the study.
2. *Consent form*. Your IRB will probably have its own template for this (see the website). If not, there are numerous models available online, and I have included a basic one here as well. You will want to

make sure you include a decent description of the study targeted to your audience, that you include contact information for you (the principal investigator, or PI) and the IRB, and that you include the signature and date lines as well as separate initial lines if you are asking for consent to be recorded (audio and/or video).

3. *Recruitment material*. If you are using a poster/flyer or email to distribute, you will need to attach this to your protocol. The IRB will be looking for clarity and honesty in your recruitment materials.

Once you have submitted your materials, keep in touch with your IRB. If your IRB uses a software system, you may be able to monitor the process online and will be able to know if it gets held up somewhere. Otherwise, contact the IRB if things seem to be taking longer than one would expect (knowing what you know about how your IRB works)—it may be that there is a problem with your materials that you need to correct.

I cannot stress strongly enough that it pays to establish a good working relationship with your IRB office. Be polite in all correspondence with IRB officers, and when you have been assigned an IRB tracking number, use this number in the subject line of any correspondence. Reach out if you have questions. They really are there to help you.

Advanced Reading: IRB Imperialism?

Throughout its history, two major critiques have been leveled at IRBs by qualitative researchers. The first is that, designed to prevent unethical biomedical experiments and often composed of members who do those kinds of research, IRBs are ill-equipped to review most qualitative research. Second, and relatedly, "mission creep" of IRBs and federal regulations more broadly has occurred. Thus, IRBs were never very well suited to reviewing the kinds of work qualitative researchers do (interviewing and observing humans), and they have been increasingly intrusive over the decades. At the very least, "there is a culture clash in the bureaucratic gatekeeping demands of the IRB and the emergent 'figure it out as you go along' character" of qualitative research (Lareau 2021:39). But some critics have gone so far as to charge IRBs with silencing important research, or at least putting so many hurdles in the way that researchers opt out of more challenging (and potentially insightful) research designs. Recall that most IRBs have a lawyer or two on board. Lawyers are famously wary of litigation and tend to encourage boards to withhold permission to study those with power or who might otherwise cause conflict. Graduate students in particular are advised or compelled to seek less controversial subjects or to avoid human subjects entirely as being too much of a hassle. After all, there is no IRB that will stand in the way of quantitative analyses of already collected data sets. Pressure to change the Common Rule was relentless throughout the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, eventually resulting in the 2017 revision, which, to many, was "too little too late." Although the jurisdiction

of IRBs has been somewhat scaled back (see above), the larger critiques remain, and there is some reason to fear mission creep will reassert itself in the future.

Two books published during the fight to change the Common Rule speak eloquently to these issues. Schrag's (2010) historical analysis of how qualitative research became included in the jurisdiction of the Common Rule in the first place and with what consequences is a fascinating read. Each field of research, Schrag argues, has, by necessity, its own ethical rules and guidelines. What works to protect human subjects against biomedical experimentation is not the same at all as what will protect a human subject against being exploited and used by an unethical ethnographer who leaves the field precipitously. How did the biomedical researchers manage to impose their own field's rules so completely on another field? This "ethical imperialism" resulted in an ethics regime that is "contrary to the norms of freedom and scholarship that lie at the heart of American universities" (8). For the sake of simplicity, regulators "forced social science research into an ill-fitting biomedical model" (9). The regime was created largely in response to biomedical ethical violations (e.g., Tuskegee), with very little attention paid to social sciences and humanities. Questions over the meaning of "human subjects" and "research" were never properly answered. In speaking of the National Commission, "it was as if a national commission on the lime industry had completed its work without deciding whether it was regulating citrus fruit or calcium oxide" (76). Further, "IRB review of the social sciences and the humanities was founded on ignorance, haste, and disrespect. The more people understand the current system as a product of this history, the more they will see it as capable of change" (192).

Van den Hoonaard (2011), writing contemporaneously of research ethics boards (**REB**s) in Canada, whose establishment paralleled IRBs in the US, demonstrates how their reach has impaired and deformed qualitative research during this period. Researchers have tailored their approaches in response to technical demands imposed by REBs, leading social science disciplines to resemble one another more closely and to lose the richness of their research: "Many social scientists get lost in the moral tundra because the signage speaks to biomedical research, as opposed to social research" (4). By observing the work of REBs (a qualitative research in and of itself!), Van den Hoonaard uncovers the social relations and power tied up in this ethics regime. Rather than seeing research as a right, review boards act as if research is a privilege, retaining the power to themselves to grant or deny permission. Researchers then employ particular strategies of avoidance or partial or full compliance as they seek approval from ethics committees. Both researchers and individual members of the ethics review system recognize that something is not working here, but no one is able to change course. The current ethics regime offers an inappropriate model for social science research. It can sometimes appear to strangle legitimate research, curtail academic freedom, and throw up so much red tape that the actual pursuit of doing qualitative research ethically gets lost in the bureaucratic "normalization" of ethics (55).

The changes to the Common Rule have addressed some of the concerns of Schrag and Van den Hoonaard. Furthermore, the issues they speak of (mission creep, silencing and diverting studies away from the powerful) occurred variously depending on location. Some IRBs have been better managers of the

delicate balance between protecting human subjects and advancing important research than others. I hope that however your IRB operates, you do understand that the ethics of your research should not be confined to or equated with IRB review. There are many other ethical issues raised by qualitative research that by and large go unexamined by IRBs and REBs (see chapter 7). It is helpful to understand the role and place of IRBs and how they particularly protect you and your university from incurring legal liability. Try not to get too frustrated with the bureaucracy. And most of all, remember that your role as an ethical researcher is ongoing, and securing IRB approval for a study is just one of many duties and responsibilities you bear.

Research Consent Form

Study Title:
Principle Investigator:
Study team:
Version*Date:

We are inviting you to take part in a research study.

Purpose: This study is about…..

We are asking you if you want to be part of this study because……
You should not be in this if……

Voluntary: You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You can also decide to be in the study now and change your mind later.

Activities: The study activities…

Time: Your participation in this study will take approximately…

Risk: The possible risks or discomforts associated with being in this study include…

Benefit: This study is not designed to benefit you directly. Your participation will advance knowledge in this area. [*discuss any other possible benefits*]

Confidentiality: We cannot assure that the information you provide will be entirely safe from breaches of confidentiality, but we will take the following steps to ensure this…

Payment: You [*will OR will not*] be paid for being in this research study. [*describe*]

Study contacts: We would like you to ask us questions if there is anything about the study that you do not understand. You can call us at …. or email us at ….

You can also contact the [IRB office] with any concerns you have about your rights or welfare as a study participant. The office can be reached at … or by email at….

Signatures:

Your signature indicates that this study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in the study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Participant Name:_____
Participant Signature:_____
Date Signed:_____
Do you agree to be recorded (video/audio): YES/NO Initial:

Name of Person Obtaining Consent:_____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:_____
Date Signed:_____

For Further Readings on IRB

Boser. Susan 2007. "Power, Ethics and the IRB: Dissonance over Human Participant Review of Participatory Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 13(8): 1060-1074. Addresses various challenges IRBs pose for participatory research.

Cheek, Julianne 2007. "Qualitative Inquiry, Ethics, and the Politics of Evidence: Working within these Spaces rather than Being Worked over by Them." *Qualitative Inquiry* 13(8): 1051-1069. Argues for the necessity of creativity when dealing with the audit culture and other aspects of knowledge regimes associated with IRBs.

Howe, Kenneth R., and Katharine Cutts Dougherty. 1993. "Ethics, Institutional Review Boards, and the

Changing Face of Educational Research." *Educational Researcher* 22(9): 16-21. Gives an historical overview of special exemptions of IRB review for educational research and discusses which kinds of educational research should properly be exempt.

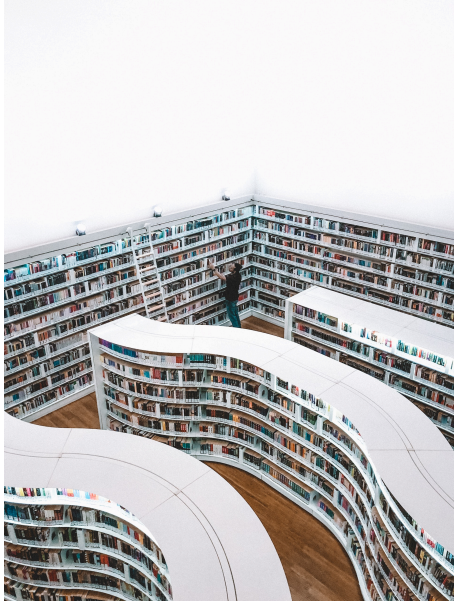
Lincoln, Y.S. and Tierney, W.G., 2004. "Qualitative Research and Institutional Review Boards." *Qualitative Inquiry* 10(2): 219-234. Reports several actual case studies where IRBs impeded qualitative research and provides strategies for addressing IRB concerns in the proposal to avoid these kinds of problems.

Nelson, Carey. 2004. "The Brave New World of Research Surveillance." *Qualitative Inquiry* 10(2):207-218. Examines the problem of IRB jurisdiction over humanities and social science research. Argues this poses a potential threat to academic freedom.

CHAPTER 9. REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

What is a "Literature Review"?

No researcher ever comes up with a research question that is wholly novel. Someone, somewhere, has asked the same thing. Academic research is part of a larger community of researchers, and it is your responsibility, as a member of this community, to acknowledge others who have asked similar questions and to put your particular research into this greater context. It is not simply a convention or custom to begin your study with a review of previous literature (the "**lit review**") but an important responsibility you owe the scholarly community.



[Untitled image] by Fahrul Azmi on Unsplash

Too often, new researchers pursue a topic to study and then write something like, "No one has ever studied this before" or "This area is underresearched." It may be that no one has studied this *particular* group or setting, but it is highly unlikely no one has studied the foundational phenomenon of interest. And that comment about an area being underresearched? Be careful. The statement may simply signal to others that you haven't done your homework. Rubin (2021) refers to this as "free soloing," and it is not appreciated in academic work:

> The truth of the matter is, academics don't really like when people free solo. It's really bad form to omit

> talking about the other people who are doing or have done research in your area. Partly, I mean we need to cite their work, but I also mean we need to *respond* to it—agree or disagree, clarify for extend. It's also really bad form to talk about your research in a way that does not make it understandable to other academics.…You have to explain to your readers what your story is really about *in terms they care about*. This means using certain terminology, referencing debates in the literature, and citing relevant works—that is, in connecting your work to something else. (51–52)

A literature review is a comprehensive summary of previous research on a topic. It includes both articles and books—and in some cases reports—relevant to a particular area of research. Ideally, one's research question follows from the reading of what has already been produced. For example, you are interested in studying sports injuries related to female gymnasts. You read everything you can find on sports injuries related to female gymnasts, and you begin to get a sense of what questions remain open. You find that there is a lot of research on how coaches manage sports injuries and much about cultures of silence around treating injuries, but you don't know what the gymnasts themselves are thinking about these issues. You look specifically for studies about this and find several, which then pushes you to narrow the question further. Your literature review then provides the road map of how you came to your very specific question, and it puts your study in the context of studies of sports injuries. What you eventually find can "speak to" all the related questions as well as your particular one.

In practice, the process is often a bit messier. Many researchers, and not simply those starting out, begin with a particular question and have a clear idea of who they want to study and where they want to conduct their study but don't really know much about other studies at all. Although backward, we need to recognize this is pretty common. Telling students to "find literature" after the fact can seem like a purposeless task or just another hurdle for completing a thesis or dissertation. It is not! Even if you were not motivated by the literature in the first place, acknowledging similar studies and connecting your own research to those studies are important parts of building knowledge. Acknowledgment of past research is a responsibility you owe the discipline to which you belong.

Literature reviews can also signal *theoretical approaches* and particular *concepts* that you will incorporate into your own study. For example, let us say you are doing a study of how people find their first jobs after college, and you want to use the concept of *social capital*. There are competing definitions of social capital out there (e.g., Bourdieu vs. Burt vs. Putnam). Bourdieu's notion is of one form of capital, or durable asset, of a "network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (1984:248). Burt emphasizes the "brokerage opportunities" in a social network as social capital (1997:355). Putnam's social capital is all about "facilitating coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (2001:67). Your literature review can adjudicate among these three approaches, or it can simply refer to the one that is animating your own research. If you include Bourdieu in your literature review, readers will know "what kind" of social capital you are talking about as well as what kind of social scientist you yourself are. They will likely understand that you are interested more in how some people are

advantaged by their social capital relative to others rather than being interested in the mechanics of how social networks operate.

The literature review thus does two important things for you: firstly, it allows you to acknowledge previous research in your area of interest, thereby situating you within a discipline or body of scholars, and, secondly, it demonstrates that you know what you are talking about. If you present the findings of your research study without including a literature review, it can be like singing into the wind. It sounds nice, but no one really hears it, or if they do catch snippets, they don't know where it is coming from.

Examples of Literature Reviews

To help you get a grasp of what a good literature review looks like and how it can advance your study, let's take a look at a few examples.

Reader-Friendly Example: *The Power of Peers*

The first is by Janice McCabe (2016) and is from an article on peer networks in the journal *Contexts*. *Contexts* presents articles in a relatively reader-friendly format, with the goal of reaching a large audience for interesting sociological research. Read this example carefully and note how easily McCabe is able to convey the relevance of her own work by situating it in the context of previous studies:

> Scholars who study education have long acknowledged the importance of peers for students' well-being and academic achievement. For example, in 1961, James Coleman argued that peer culture within high schools shapes students' social and academic aspirations and successes. More recently, Judith Rich Harris has drawn on research in a range of areas—from sociological studies of preschool children to primatologists' studies of chimpanzees and criminologists' studies of neighborhoods—to argue that peers matter much more than parents in how children "turn out." Researchers have explored students' social lives in rich detail, as in Murray Milner's book about high school students, *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids*, and Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton's look at college students, *Paying for the Party*. These works consistently show that peers play a very important role in most students' lives. They tend, however, to prioritize social over academic influence and to use a fuzzy conception of peers rather than focusing directly on friends—the relationships that should matter most for student success.
>
> Social scientists have also studied the power of peers through network analysis, which is based on uncovering the web of connections between people. Network analysis involves visually mapping networks and mathematically comparing their structures (such as the density of ties) and the positions of individuals within them (such as how central a given person is within the network). As Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler point out in their book *Connected*, network structure influences a range of outcomes, including health, happiness, wealth, weight, and emotions. Given that sociologists have long considered network explanations for social phenomena, it's surprising that we know little about how college students' friends impact their experiences. In line with this network tradition, I focus on the structure of friendship networks, constructing

> network maps so that the differences we see across participants are due to the underlying structure, including each participant's centrality in their friendship group and the density of ties among their friends. (23)

What did you notice? In her very second sentence, McCabe uses "for example" to introduce a study by Coleman, thereby indicating that she is not going to tell you *every single study* in this area but is going to tell you that (1) there is a lot of research in this area, (2) it has been going on since at least 1961, and (3) it is still relevant (i.e., recent studies are still being done now). She ends her first paragraph by summarizing *the body of literature* in this area (after giving you a few examples) and then telling you what may have been (so far) left out of this research. In the second paragraph, she shifts to a separate interesting focus that is related to the first but is also quite distinct. Lit reviews very often include two (or three) distinct strands of literature, the combination of which nicely backgrounds *this particular study*. In the case of our female gymnast study (above), those two strands might be (1) cultures of silence around sports injuries and (2) the importance of coaches. McCabe concludes her short and sweet literature review with one sentence explaining how she is drawing from both strands of the literature she has succinctly presented for her particular study. This example should show you that literature reviews can be readable, helpful, and powerful additions to your final presentation.

Authoritative Academic Journal Example: Working Class Students' College Expectations

The second example is more typical of academic journal writing. It is an article published in the British Journal of Sociology of Education by Wolfgang Lehmann (2009):

> Although this increase in post-secondary enrolment and the push for university is evident across gender, race, ethnicity, and social class categories, access to university in Canada continues to be significantly constrained for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Finnie, Lascelles, and Sweetman 2005). Rising tuition fees coupled with an overestimation of the cost and an underestimation of the benefits of higher education has put university out of reach for many young people from low-income families (Usher 2005). Financial constraints aside, empirical studies in Canada have shown that the most important predictor of university access is parental educational attainment. Having at least one parent with a university degree significantly increases the likelihood of a young person to attend academic-track courses in high school, have high educational and career aspirations, and ultimately attend university (Andres et al. 1999, 2000; Lehmann 2007a).
>
> Drawing on Bourdieu's various writing on habitus and class-based dispositions (see, for example, Bourdieu 1977, 1990), Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) explain career decisions as neither determined nor completely rational. Instead, they are based on personal experiences (e.g., through employment or other exposure to occupations) and advice from others. Furthermore, they argue that we have to understand these decisions as pragmatic, rather than rational. They are pragmatic in that they are based on incomplete and filtered information, because of the social context in which the information is obtained and processed. New experiences and information can, however, also be allowed into one's world, where they gradually or radically

> transform habitus, which in turn creates the possibility for the formation of new and different dispositions. Encountering a supportive teacher in elementary or secondary school, having ambitious friends, or chance encounters can spark such transformations. Transformations can be confirming or contradictory, they can be evolutionary or dislocating. Working-class students who enter university most certainly encounter such potentially transformative situations. Granfield (1991) has shown how initially dislocating feelings of inadequacy and inferiority of working-class students at an elite US law school were eventually replaced by an evolutionary transformation, in which the students came to dress, speak and act more like their middle-class and upper-class peers. In contrast, Lehmann (2007b) showed how persistent habitus dislocation led working-class university students to drop out of university. Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (1999) argue that young people's perceptions of careers are a complex mix of their own experiences, images conveyed through adults, and derived images conveyed by the media. Media images of careers, perhaps, are even more important for working-class youth with high ambitions as they offer (generally distorted) windows into a world of professional employment to which they have few other sources of access. It has also been argued that working-class youth who do continue to university still face unique, class-specific challenges, evident in higher levels of uncertainty (Baxter and Britton 2001; Lehmann 2004, 2007a; Quinn 2004), their higher education choices (Ball et al. 2002; Brooks 2003; Reay et al. 2001) and fears of inadequacy because of their cultural outsider status (Aries and Seider 2005; Granfield 1991). Although the number of working-class university students in Canada has slowly increased, that of middle-class students at university has risen far more steeply (Knighton and Mizra 2002). These different enrolment trajectories have actually widened the participation gap, which in tum explains our continued concerns with the potential outsider status Indeed, in a study comparing first-generation working-class and traditional students who left university without graduating, Lehmann (2007b) found that first-generation working-class students were more likely to leave university very early in some cases within the first two months of enrollment. They were also more likely to leave university despite solid academic performance. Not "fitting in," not "feeling university," and not being able to "relate to these people" were key reasons for eventually withdrawing from university.
>
> From the preceding review of the literature, a number of key research questions arise: How do working-class university students frame their decision to attend university? How do they defy the considerable odds documented in the literature to attend university? What are the sources of information and various images that create dispositions to study at university? What role does their social-class background- or habitus play in their transition dispositions and how does this translate into expectations for university? (139)

What did you notice here? How is this different from (and similar to) the first example? Note that rather than provide you with one or two illustrative examples of similar types of research, Lehmann provides abundant source citations throughout. He includes theory and concepts too. Like McCabe, Lehmann is weaving through multiple literature strands: the class gap in higher education participation in Canada, class-based dispositions, and obstacles facing working-class college students. Note how he concludes the literature review by placing his research questions in context.

Find other articles of interest and read their literature reviews carefully. I've included two more for you at the end of this chapter. As you learned how to diagram a sentence in elementary school (hopefully!), try diagramming the literature reviews. What are the "different strands" of research being discussed? How does the author connect these strands to their own research questions? Where is theory in the lit review,

and how is it incorporated (e.g., Is it a separate strand of its own or is it inextricably linked with previous research in this area)?

One model of how to structure your literature review can be found in table 9.1. More tips, hints, and practices will be discussed later in the chapter.

Table 9.1. Model of Literature Review, Adopted from Calarco (2020:166)

What we know about some issue	Lays the foundation for your *argument*
What we don't know about that issue	Lays foundation for your *research question*
Why that unanswered question is important to ask	Hints at *potential implications* of your study
What existing research tells us about the best way to answer that unanswered question	Lays foundation for justifying your
What existing research might predict as the answer to the question	Justifies your "hypothesis" or *general expectation about what you will find*

Embracing Theory

A good research study will, in some form or another, use theory. Depending on your particular study (and possibly the preferences of the members of your committee), theory may be built into your literature review. Or it may form its own section in your research proposal/design (e.g., “literature review” followed by “theoretical framework”). In my own experience, I see a lot of graduate students grappling with the requirement to “include theory” in their research proposals. Things get a little squiggly here because there are different ways of incorporating theory into a study (Are you *testing* a theory? Are you *generating* a theory?), and based on these differences, your literature review proper may include works that describe, explain, and otherwise set forth theories, concepts, or frameworks you are interested in, or it may not do this at all. Sometimes a literature review sets forth what we know about a particular group or culture totally independent of what kinds of theoretical framework or particular concepts you want to explore. Indeed, the big point of your study might be to bring together a body of work with a theory that has never been applied to it previously. All this is to say that there is no one correct way to approach the use of theory and the writing about theory in your research proposal.

Students are often scared of embracing theory because they do not exactly understand what it is. Sometimes, it seems like an arbitrary requirement. You’re interested in a topic; maybe you’ve even done some research in the area and you have findings you want to report. And then a committee member reads over what you have and asks, “So what?” This question is a good clue that you are missing theory, the part that connects what you have done to what other researchers have done and are doing. You might stumble upon this rather accidentally and not know you are embracing theory, as in a case where you seek to replicate a prior study under new circumstances and end up finding that a particular correlation between

behaviors only happens when mediated by something else. There's theory in there, if you can pull it out and articulate it. Or it might be that you are motivated to do more research on racial microaggressions because you want to document their frequency in a particular setting, taking for granted the kind of critical race theoretical framework that has done the hard work of defining and conceptualizing "microaggressions" in the first place. In that case, your literature review could be a review of Critical Race Theory, specifically related to this one important concept. That's the way to bring your study into a broader conversation while also acknowledging (and honoring) the hard work that has preceded you.

Rubin (2021) classifies ways of incorporating theory into case study research into four categories, each of which might be discussed somewhat differently in a literature review or theoretical framework section. The first, the least theoretical, is where you set out to study a "configurative idiographic case" (70) This is where you set out to describe a particular case, leaving yourself pretty much open to whatever you find. You are not *expecting anything* based on previous literature. This is actually pretty weak as far as research design goes, but it is probably the default for novice researchers. Your committee members should probably help you situate this in previous literature in some way or another. If they cannot, and it really does appear you are looking at something fairly new that no one else has bothered to research before, and you really are completely open to discovery, you might try using a Grounded Theory approach, which is a methodological approach that foregrounds the generation of theory. In that case, your "theory" section can be a discussion of "Grounded Theory" methodology (confusing, yes, but if you take some time to ponder, you will see how this works). You will still need a literature review, though. Ideally one that describes other studies that have ever looked at anything remotely like what you are looking at—parallel cases that have been researched.

The second approach is the "disciplined configurative case," in which theory is applied to explain a particular case or topic. You are not trying to test the theory but rather assuming the theory is correct, as in the case of exploring microaggressions in a particular setting. In this case, you really do need to have a separate theory section in addition to the literature review, one in which you clearly define the theoretical framework, including any of its important concepts. You can use this section to discuss how other researchers have used the concepts and note any discrepancies in definitions or operationalization of those concepts. This way you will be sure to design your study so that it speaks to and with other researchers. If everyone who is writing about microaggressions has a different definition of them, it is hard for others to compare findings or make any judgments about their prevalence (or any number of other important characteristics). Your literature review section may then stand alone and describe previous research in the particular area or setting, irrespective of the kinds of theory underlying those studies.

The third approach is "heuristic," one in which you seek to identify new variables, hypotheses, mechanisms, or paths not yet explained by a theory or theoretical framework. In a way, you are generating new theory, but it is probably more accurate to say that you are extending or deepening preexisting theory. In this case, having a single literature review that is focused on the theory and the ways the theory has been applied and understood (with all its various mechanisms and pathways) is probably your best option. The focus of the literature reviewed is less on the case and more on the theory you are seeking to extend.

The final approach is "theory testing," which is much rarer in qualitative studies than in quantitative, where this is the default approach. Theory-testing cases are those where a particular case is used to see if an existing theory is accurate or accurate under particular circumstances. As with the heuristic approach, your literature review will probably draw heavily on previous uses of the theory, but you may end up having a special section specifically about cases *very close to your own*. In other words, the more your study approaches theory testing, the more likely there is to be a set of similar studies to draw on or even *one important key study* that you are setting your own study up in parallel to in order to find out if the theory generated there operates here.

If we wanted to get very technical, it might be useful to distinguish theoretical frameworks properly from conceptual frameworks. The latter are a bit looser and, given the nature of qualitative research, often fit exploratory studies. Theoretical frameworks rely on specific theories and are essential for theory-testing studies. Conceptual frameworks can pull in specific concepts or ideas that may or may not be linked to particular theories. Think about it this way: A theory is a story of how the world works. Concepts don't presume to explain the whole world but instead are ways to approach phenomena to help make sense of them. Microaggressions are concepts that are linked to Critical Race Theory. One could contextualize one's study within Critical Race Theory and then draw various concepts, such as that of microaggressions from the overall theoretical framework. Or one could bracket out the master theory or framework and employ the concept of microaggression more opportunistically as a phenomenon of interest. If you are unsure of what theory you are using, you might want to frame a more practical conceptual framework in your review of the literature.

Helpful Tips

How to Maintain Good Notes for What Your Read

Over the years, I have developed various ways of organizing notes on what I read. At first, I used a single sheet of full-size paper with a preprinted list of questions and points clearly addressed on the front side, leaving the second side for more reflective comments and free-form musings about what I read, why it mattered, and how it might be useful for my research. Later, I developed a system in which I use a single 4″ × 6″ note card for each book I read. I try only to use the front side (and write very small), leaving the back for comments that are about not just this reading but things to do or examine or consider based on the reading. These notes often mean nothing to anyone else picking up the card, but they make sense to me. I encourage you to find an organizing system that works for you. Then when you set out to compose a literature review, instead of staring at five to ten books or a dozen articles, you will have ten neatly printed pages or notecards or files that have distilled what is important to know about your reading.

It is also a good idea to store this data digitally, perhaps through a reference manager. I use RefWorks,

but I also recommend EndNote or any other system that allows you to search institutional databases. Your campus library will probably provide access to one of these or another system. Most systems will allow you to export references from another manager if and when you decide to move to another system. Reference managers allow you to sort through all your literature by descriptor, author, year, and so on. Even so, I personally like to have the ability to manually sort through my index cards, recategorizing things I have read as I go. I use RefWorks to keep a record of what I have read, with proper citations, so I can create bibliographies more easily, and I do add in a few "notes" there, but the bulk of my notes are kept in longhand.

What kinds of information should you include from your reading? Here are some bulleted suggestions from Calarco (2020:113–114), with my own emendations:

- *Citation*. If you are using a reference manager, you can import the citation and then, when you are ready to create a bibliography, you can use a provided menu of citation styles, which saves a lot of time. If you've originally formatted in Chicago Style but the journal you are writing for wants APA style, you can change your entire bibliography in less than a minute. When using a notecard for a book, I include author, title, date *as well as* the library call number (since most of what I read I pull from the library). This is something RefWorks is not able to do, and it helps when I categorize.

I begin each notecard with an "intro" section, where I record the aims, goals, and general point of the book/article as explained in the introductory sections (which might be the preface, the acknowledgments, or the first two chapters). I then draw a bold line underneath this part of the notecard. Everything after that should be chapter specific. Included in this intro section are things such as the following, recommended by Calarco (2020):

- *Key background*. "Two to three short bullet points identifying the theory/prior research on which the authors are building and defining key terms."
- *Data/methods*. "One or two short bullet points with information about the source of the data and the method of analysis, with a note if this is a novel or particularly effective example of that method." I use [M] to signal methodology on my notecard, which might read, "[M] Int[erview]s (n-35), B[lack]/W[hite] voters" (I need shorthand to fit on my notecard!).
- *Research question*. "Stated as briefly as possible." I always provide page numbers so I can go back and see exactly how this was stated (sometimes, in qualitative research, there are multiple research questions, and they cannot be stated simply).
- *Argument/contributions*. "Two to three short bullet points briefly describing the authors' answer to the central research question and its implication for research, theory, and practice." I use [ARG] for argument to signify the argument, and I make sure this is prominently visible on my notecard. I also provide page numbers here.

For me, all of this fits in the "intro" section, which, if this is a theoretically rich, methodologically sound book, might take up a third or even half of the front page of my notecard. Beneath the bold underline, I report specific findings or particulars of the book as they emerge chapter by chapter. Calarco's (2020) next step is the following:

- *Key findings*. "Three to four short bullet points identifying key patterns in the data that support the authors' argument."

All that remains is writing down thoughts that occur upon finishing the article/book. I use the back of the notecard for these kinds of notes. Often, they reach out to other things I have read (e.g., "Robinson reminds me of Crusoe here in that both are looking at the effects of social isolation, but I think Robinson makes a stronger argument"). Calarco (2020) concludes similarly with the following:

- *Unanswered questions*. "Two to three short bullet points that identify key limitations of the research and/or questions the research did not answer that could be answered in future research."

As I mentioned, when I first began taking notes like this, I preprinted pages with **prompts** for "research question," "argument," and so on. This was a great way to remind myself to look for these things in particular. You can do the same, adding whatever preprinted sections make sense to you, given what you are studying and the important aspects of your discipline. The other nice thing about the preprinted forms is that it keeps your writing to a minimum—you cannot write more than the allotted space, even if you might want to, preventing your notes from spiraling out of control. This can be helpful when we are new to a subject and everything seems worth recording!

After years of discipline, I have finally settled on my notecard approach. I have thousands of notecards, organized in several index card filing boxes stacked in my office. On the top right of each card is a note of the month/day I finished reading the item. I can remind myself what I read in the summer of 2010 if the need or desire ever arose to do so…those invaluable notecards are like a memento of what my brain has been up to!

Where to Start Looking for Literature

Your university library should provide access to one of several searchable databases for academic books and articles. My own preference is JSTOR, a service of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that works to advance and preserve knowledge and to improve teaching and learning through the use of digital technologies. JSTOR allows you to search by several keywords and to narrow your search by type of material (articles or books). For many disciplines, the "literature" of the literature review is expected to be peer-reviewed "articles," but some disciplines will also value books and book chapters. JSTOR is

particularly useful for article searching. You can submit several keywords and see what is returned, and you can also narrow your search by a particular journal or discipline. If your discipline has one or two key journals (e.g., the *American Journal of Sociology* and the *American Sociological Review* are key for sociology), you might want to go directly to those journals' websites and search for your topic area. There is an art to when to cast your net widely and when to refine your search, and you may have to tack back and forth to ensure that you are getting all that is relevant but not getting bogged down in all studies that might have some marginal relevance.

Some articles will carry more weight than others, and you can use applications like Google Scholar to see which articles have made and are continuing to make larger impacts on your discipline. Find these articles and read them carefully; use *their* literature review and the sources cited in those articles to make sure you are capturing what is relevant. This is actually a really good way of finding relevant books—only the most impactful will make it into the citations of journals. Over time, you will notice that a handful of articles (or books) are cited so often that when you see, say, Armstrong and Hamilton (2015), you know exactly what book this is without looking at the full cite. This is when you know you are in the conversation.

You might also approach a professor whose work is broadly in the area of your interest and ask them to recommend one or two "important" foundational articles or books. You can then use the references cited in those recommendations to build up your literature. Just be careful: some older professors' knowledge of the literature (and I reluctantly add myself here) may be a bit outdated! It is best that the article or book whose references and sources you use to build your body of literature be relatively current.

Keep a List of Your Keywords

When using searchable databases, it is a good idea to keep a list of all the keywords you use as you go along so that (1) you do not needlessly duplicate your efforts and (2) you can more easily adjust your search as you get a better sense of what you are looking for. I suggest you keep a separate file or even a small notebook for this and you date your search efforts.

Here's an example:

Table 9.2. Keep a List of Your Keywords

Date	***Database/Search***	***Comments***
August 23, 2021	JSTOR search: "literature review" + "qualitative research" limited to "after 1/1/2000" and "articles" in abstracts only	5 results: go back and search titles? Change up keywords? Take out qualitative research term?
August 24, 2021	JSTOR search: "literature review" + and "articles" in abstracts only	37,113 results – way too many!!!!

Think Laterally

How to find the various strands of literature to combine? Don't get stuck on finding the exact same research topic you think you are interested in. In the female gymnast example, I recommended that my student consider looking for studies of ballerinas, who also suffer sports injuries and around whom there is a similar culture of silence. It turned out that there was in fact research about my student's particular questions, just not about the subjects she was interested in. You might do something similar. Don't get stuck looking for too direct literature but think about the broader phenomenon of interest or analogous cases.

Read Outside the Canon

Some scholars' work gets cited by everyone all the time. To some extent, this is a very good thing, as it helps establish the discipline. For example, there are a lot of "Bourdieu scholars" out there (myself included) who draw ideas, concepts, and quoted passages from Bourdieu. This makes us recognizable to one another and is a way of sharing a common language (e.g., where "cultural capital" has a particular meaning to those versed in Bourdieusian theory). There are empirical studies that get cited over and over again because they are excellent studies but also because there is an "echo chamber effect" going on, where knowing to cite this study marks you as part of the club, in the know, and so on. But here's the problem with this: there are hundreds if not thousands of excellent studies out there that fail to get appreciated because they are crowded out by the canon. Sometimes this happens because they are published in "lower-ranked" journals and are never read by a lot of scholars who don't have time to read anything other than the "big three" in their field. Other times this happens because the author falls outside of the dominant social networks in the field and thus is unmentored and fails to get noticed by those who publish a lot in those highly ranked and visible spaces. Scholars who fall outside the dominant social networks and who publish outside of the top-ranked journals are in no way less insightful than their peers, and their studies may be just as rigorous and relevant to your work, so it is important for you to take some time to read outside the canon. Due to how a person's race, gender, and class operate in the academy, there is also a matter of social justice and ethical responsibility involved here: "When you focus on the most-cited research, you're more likely to miss relevant research by women and especially women of color, whose research tends to be under-cited in most fields. You're also more likely to miss new research, research by junior scholars, and research in other disciplines that could inform your work. Essentially, it is important to read and cite responsibly, which means checking that you're not just reading and citing the same white men and the same old studies that everyone has cited before you" (Calarco 2020:112).

Consider Multiple Uses for Literature

Throughout this chapter, I've referred to the literature of interest in a rather abstract way, as what is relevant to your study. But there are many different ways previous research can be relevant to your study. The most basic use of the literature is the "findings"—for example, "So-and-so found that Canadian working-class students were concerned about 'fitting in' to the culture of college, and I am going to look at a similar question here in the US." But the literature may be of interest not for its findings but theoretically—for example, employing concepts that you want to employ in your own study. Bourdieu's definition of social capital may have emerged in a study of French professors, but it can still be relevant in a study of, say, how parents make choices about what preschools to send their kids to (also a good example of lateral thinking!).

If you are engaged in some novel methodological form of data collection or analysis, you might look for previous literature that has attempted that. I would not recommend this for undergraduate research projects, but for graduate students who are considering "breaking the mold," find out if anyone has been there before you. Even if their study has absolutely nothing else in common with yours, it is important to acknowledge that previous work.

Describing Gaps in the Literature

First, be careful! Although it is common to explain how your research adds to, builds upon, and fills in gaps in the previous research (see all four literature review examples in this chapter for this), there is a fine line between describing the gaps and misrepresenting previous literature by failing to conduct a thorough review of the literature. A little humility can make a big difference in your presentation. Instead of "This is the first study that has looked at how firefighters juggle childcare during forest fire season," say, "I use the previous literature on how working parents juggling childcare and the previous ethnographic studies of firefighters to explore how firefighters juggle childcare during forest fire season." You can even add, "To my knowledge, no one has conducted an ethnographic study in this specific area, although what we have learned from X about childcare and from Y about firefighters would lead us to expect Z here." Read more literature review sections to see how others have described the "gaps" they are filling.

Use Concept Mapping

Concept mapping is a helpful tool for getting your thoughts in order and is particularly helpful when thinking about the "literature" foundational to your particular study. Concept maps are also known as mind maps, which is a delightful way to think about them. Your brain is probably abuzz with competing ideas in the early stages of your research design. Write/draw them on paper, and then try to categorize and move the pieces around into "clusters" that make sense to you. Going back to the gymnasts example,

my student might have begun by jotting down random words of interest: gymnasts * sports * coaches * female gymnasts * stress * injury * don't complain * women in sports * bad coaching * anxiety/stress * careers in sports * pain. She could then have begun clustering these into relational categories (bad coaching, don't complain culture) and simple "event" categories (injury, stress). This might have led her to think about reviewing literature in these two separate aspects and then literature that put them together. There is no correct way to draw a concept map, as they are wonderfully specific to your mind. There are many examples you can find online.

Ask Yourself, "How Is This Sociology (or Political Science or Public Policy, Etc.)?"

Rubin (2021:82) offers this suggestion instead of asking yourself the "So what?" question to get you thinking about what bridges there are between your study and the body of research in your particular discipline. This is particularly helpful for thinking about theory. Rubin further suggests that if you are really stumped, ask yourself, "What is the really big question that all [fill in your discipline here] care about?" For sociology, it might be "inequality," which would then help you think about theories of inequality that might be helpful in framing your study on whatever it is you are studying—OnlyFans? Childcare during COVID? Aging in America? I can think of some interesting ways to frame questions about inequality for any of those topics. You can further narrow it by focusing on particular aspects of inequality (Gender oppression? Racial exclusion? Heteronormativity?). If your discipline is public policy, the big questions there might be, How does policy get enacted, and what makes a policy effective? You can then take whatever your particular policy interest is—tax reform, student debt relief, cap-and-trade regulations—and apply those big questions. Doing so would give you a handle on what is otherwise an intolerably vague subject (e.g., *What about* student debt relief?).

> Sometimes finding you are in new territory means you've hit the jackpot, and sometimes it means you've traveled out of bounds for your discipline. The jackpot scenario is wonderful. You are doing truly innovative research that is combining multiple literatures or is addressing a new or under-examined phenomenon of interest, and your research has the potential to be groundbreaking. Congrats! But that's really hard to do, *and it might be more likely that you've traveled out of bounds, by which I mean, you are no longer in your discipline*. It might be that no one has written about this thing—at least within your field—*because no one in your field actually cares about this topic*. (Rubin 2021:83; emphases added)

Don't Treat This as a Chore

Don't treat the literature review as a chore that has to be completed, but see it for what it really is—you are building connections to other researchers out there. You want to represent your discipline or area of

study fairly and adequately. Demonstrate humility *and* your knowledge of previous research. Be part of the conversation.

Supplement: Two More Literature Review Examples

Elites by Harvey (2011)

In the last two decades, there has been a small but growing literature on elites. In part, this has been a result of the resurgence of ethnographic research such as interviews, focus groups, case studies, and participant observation but also because scholars have become increasingly interested in understanding the perspectives and behaviors of leaders in business, politics, and society as a whole. Yet until recently, our understanding of some of the methodological challenges of researching elites has lagged behind our rush to interview them.

There is no clear-cut definition of the term elite, and given its broad understanding across the social sciences, scholars have tended to adopt different approaches. Zuckerman (1972) uses the term ultraelites to describe individuals who hold a significant amount of power within a group that is already considered elite. She argues, for example, that US senators constitute part of the country's political elite but that among them are the ultraelites: a "subset of particularly powerful or prestigious influentials" (160). She suggests that there is a hierarchy of status within elite groups. McDowell (1998) analyses a broader group of "professional elites" who are employees working at different levels for merchant and investment banks in London. She classifies this group as elite because they are "highly skilled, professionally competent, and class-specific" (2135). Parry (1998:2148) uses the term hybrid elites in the context of the international trade of genetic material because she argues that critical knowledge exists not in traditional institutions "but rather as increasingly informal, hybridised, spatially fragmented, and hence largely 'invisible,' networks of elite actors." Given the undertheorization of the term elite, Smith (2006) recognizes why scholars have shaped their definitions to match their **respondents**. However, she is rightly critical of the underlying assumption that those who hold professional positions necessarily exert as much influence as initially perceived. Indeed, job titles can entirely misrepresent the role of workers and therefore are by no means an indicator of elite status (Harvey 2010).

Many scholars have used the term elite in a relational sense, defining them either in terms of their social position compared to the researcher or compared to the average person in society (Stephens 2007). The problem with this definition is there is no guarantee that an elite subject will necessarily translate this power and authority in an interview setting. Indeed, Smith (2006) found that on the few occasions she experienced respondents wanting to exert their authority over her, it was not from elites but from

relatively less senior workers. Furthermore, although business and political elites often receive extensive media training, they are often scrutinized by television and radio journalists and therefore can also feel threatened in an interview, particularly in contexts that are less straightforward to prepare for such as academic interviews. On several occasions, for instance, I have been asked by elite respondents or their personal assistants what they need to prepare for before the interview, which suggests that they consider the interview as some form of challenge or justification for what they do.

In many cases, it is not necessarily the figureheads or leaders of organizations and institutions who have the greatest claim to elite status but those who hold important social networks, social capital, and strategic positions within social structures because they are better able to exert influence (Burt 1992; Parry 1998; Smith 2005; Woods 1998). An elite status can also change, with people both gaining and losing theirs over time. In addition, it is geographically specific, with people holding elite status in some but not all locations. In short, it is clear that the term elite can mean many things in different contexts, which explains the range of definitions. The purpose here is not to critique these other definitions but rather to highlight the variety of perspectives.

When referring to my research, I define elites as those who occupy senior-management- and board-level positions within organizations. This is a similar scope of definition to Zuckerman's (1972) but focuses on a level immediately below her ultraelite subjects. My definition is narrower than McDowell's (1998) because it is clear in the context of my research that these people have significant decision-making influence within and outside of the firm and therefore present a unique challenge to interview. I deliberately use the term elite more broadly when drawing on examples from the theoretical literature in order to compare my experiences with those who have researched similar groups.

"Changing Dispositions among the Upwardly Mobile" by Curl, Lareau, and Wu (2018)

There is growing interest in the role of cultural practices in undergirding the social stratification system. For example, Lamont et al. (2014) critically assess the preoccupation with economic dimensions of social stratification and call for more developed cultural models of the transmission of inequality. The importance of cultural factors in the maintenance of social inequality has also received empirical attention from some younger scholars, including Calarco (2011, 2014) and Streib (2015). Yet questions remain regarding the degree to which economic position is tied to cultural sensibilities and the ways in which these cultural sensibilities are imprinted on the self or are subject to change. Although habitus is a core concept in Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, there is limited empirical attention to the precise areas of the habitus that can be subject to change during upward mobility as well as the ramifications of these changes for family life.

In Bourdieu's (1984) highly influential work on the importance of class-based cultural dispositions, habitus is defined as a "durable system of dispositions" created in childhood. The habitus provides a "matrix of perceptions" that seems natural while also structuring future actions and pathways. In many of his writings, Bourdieu emphasized the durability of cultural tastes and dispositions and did not consider empirically whether these dispositions might be changed or altered throughout one's life (Swartz 1997). His theoretical work does permit the possibility of upward mobility and transformation, however, through the ability of the habitus to "improvise" or "change" due to "new experiences" (Friedman 2016:131). Researchers have differed in opinion on the durability of the habitus and its ability to change (King 2000). Based on marital conflict in cross-class marriages, for instance, Streib (2015) argues that cultural dispositions of individuals raised in working-class families are deeply embedded and largely unchanging. In a somewhat different vein, Horvat and Davis (2011:152) argue that young adults enrolled in an alternative educational program undergo important shifts in their self-perception, such as "self-esteem" and their "ability to accomplish something of value." Others argue there is variability in the degree to which habitus changes dependent on life experience and personality (Christodoulou and Spyridakis 2016). Recently, additional studies have investigated the habitus as it intersects with lifestyle through the lens of meaning making (Ambrasat et al. 2016). There is, therefore, ample discussion of class-based cultural practices in self-perception (Horvat and Davis 2011), lifestyle (Ambrasat et al. 2016), and other forms of taste (Andrews 2012; Bourdieu 1984), yet researchers have not sufficiently delineated which aspects of the habitus might change through upward mobility or which specific dimensions of life prompt moments of class-based conflict.

Bourdieu (1999:511; 2004) acknowledged simmering tensions between the durable aspects of habitus and those aspects that have been transformed—that is, a "fractured" or "cleft" habitus. Others have explored these tensions as a "divided" or "fragmented" habitus (Baxter and Britton 2001; Lee and Kramer 2013). Each of these conceptions of the habitus implies that changes in cultural dispositions are possible but come with costs. Exploration of the specific aspects of one's habitus that can change and generate conflict contributes to this literature.

Scholars have also studied the costs associated with academic success for working-class undergraduates (Hurst 2010; Lee and Kramer 2013; London 1989; Reay 2017; Rondini 2016; Stuber 2011), but we know little about the lasting effects on adults. For instance, Lee and Kramer (2013) point to cross-class tensions as family and friends criticize upwardly mobile individuals for their newly acquired cultural dispositions. Documenting the tension many working-class students experience with their friends and families of origin, they find that the source of their pain or struggle is "shaped not only by their interactions with non-mobile family and friends but also within their own minds, by their own assessments of their social positions, and by how those positions are interpreted by others" (Lee and Kramer 2013:29). Hurst (2010) also explores the experiences of undergraduates who have been

academically successful and the costs associated with that success. She finds that decisions about "class allegiance and identity" are required aspects of what it means to "becom[e] educated" (4) and that working-class students deal with these cultural changes differently. Jack (2014, 2016) also argues that there is diversity among lower-income students, which yields varied college experiences. Naming two groups, the "doubly disadvantaged" and the "privileged poor," he argues that previous experience with "elite environments" (2014:456) prior to college informs students' ability to take on dominant cultural practices, particularly around engagement, such as help seeking or meeting with professors (2016). These studies shed light on the role college might play as a "lever for mobility" (2016:15) and discuss the pain and difficulty associated with upward mobility among undergraduates, but the studies do not illuminate how these tensions unfold in adulthood. Neither have they sufficiently addressed potential enduring tensions with extended family members as well as the specific nature of the difficulties.

Some scholars point to the positive outcomes upwardly mobile youth (Lehmann 2009) and adults (Stuber 2005) experience when they maintain a different habitus than their newly acquired class position, although, as Jack (2014, 2016) shows, those experiences may vary depending on one's experience with elite environments in their youth. Researchers have not sufficiently explored the specific aspects of the habitus that upwardly mobile adults change or the conflicts that emerge with family and childhood friends as they reach adulthood and experience colliding social worlds. We contribute to this scholarship with clear examples of self-reported changes to one's cultural dispositions in three specific areas: "horizons," food and health, and communication. We link these changes to enduring tension with family members, friends, and colleagues and explore varied responses to this tension based on race.

Further Readings

Bloomberg, Linda Dale, and Marie F. Volpe. 2012. *Completing Your Qualitative Dissertation: A Road Map from Beginning to End*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. In keeping with its general approach to qualitative research, includes a "road map" for conducting a literature review.

Hart, Chris. 1998. *Doing a Literature Review: Releasing the Social Science Research Imagination*. London: SAGE. A how-to book dedicated entirely to conducting a literature review from a British perspective. Useful for both undergraduate and graduate students.

Machi, Lawrence A., and Brenda T. McEvoy. 2022. *The Literature Review: Six Steps to Success*. 4th ed.

Newbury Park, CA: Corwin. A well-organized guidebook complete with reflection sections to prompt successful thinking about your literature review.

Ridley, Diana. 2008. *The Literature Review: A Step-by-Step Guide for Students*. London: SAGE. A highly recommended companion to conducting a literature review for doctoral-level students.

CHAPTER 10. INTRODUCTION TO DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

Introduction

Now that we have discussed various aspects of qualitative research, we can begin to collect data. This chapter serves as a bridge between the first half and second half of this textbook (and perhaps your course) by introducing techniques of data collection. You've already been introduced to some of this because qualitative research is often characterized by the form of data collection; for example, an ethnographic study is one that employs primarily observational data collection for the purpose of documenting and presenting a particular culture or ethnos. Thus, some of this chapter will operate as a review of material already covered, but we will be approaching it from the data-collection side rather than the tradition-of-inquiry side we explored in chapters 2 and 4.

Revisiting Approaches

There are four primary techniques of data collection used in qualitative research: interviews, focus groups, observations, and document review.[1] There are other available techniques, such as visual analysis (e.g., photo elicitation) and biography (e.g., autoethnography) that are sometimes used independently or supplementarily to one of the main forms. Not to confuse you unduly, but these various data collection techniques are employed differently by different qualitative research traditions so that sometimes the technique and the tradition become inextricably entwined. This is largely the case with observations and ethnography. The ethnographic tradition is fundamentally based on observational techniques. At the same time, traditions other than ethnography also employ observational techniques, so it is worthwhile thinking of "tradition" and "technique" separately (see figure 10.1).

1. Marshall and Rossman (2016) state this slightly differently. They list four primary methods for gathering information: (1) participating in the setting, (2) observing directly, (3) interviewing in depth, and (4) analyzing documents and material culture (141). An astute reader will note that I have collapsed participation into observation and that I have distinguished focus groups from interviews. I suspect that this distinction marks me as more of an interview-based researcher, while Marshall and Rossman prioritize ethnographic approaches. The main point of this footnote is to show you, the reader, that there is no single agreed-upon number of approaches to collecting qualitative data.

TYPE	As in...	Approaches where you commonly see this technique...	Guidelines
Interviews	Interview-based studies	**Phenomenology**; Ethnography (along with Observations); Mixed Methods; Grounded Theory; Narrative Inquiry; Feminist Approaches	Semi-structured or unstructured interviews with one to 100 participants, depending on tradition
Focus Groups Evaluation studies; market research; participatory action research	Case Study; Feminist Approaches; Mixed Methods; often used as a supplementary technique	SIngle or comparative focused discussions with 5-12 persons	
Observations	Participant-observation studies; ethnographic studies	**Ethnography**; Grounded Theory; Symbolic Interactionism; Case Study	Multiple observations in "field," with written fieldnotes serving as the data
Document review	Historical or archival research or content analysis	**Case Study**; Content Analysis; Narrative Inquiry; Mixed Methods	Systematic and rigorous analyses of documents employing coding techniques
Visual analysis	Photo/drawing elicitations; photovoice	Phenomenology; Grounded Theory; Ethnography	Supplemental technique asking participants to draw/explain or view/ explain visual material
Biographies	Autoethnography; Oral Histories	Narrative Inquiry; Case Study; Oral History	Largely chronologically-structured collection of a person's life history; can be a single illustrative case

Figure 10.1. Data Collection Techniques

Each of these data collection techniques will be the subject of its own chapter in the second half of this textbook. This chapter serves as an orienting overview and as the bridge between the conceptual/design portion of qualitative research and the actual practice of conducting qualitative research.

Overview of the Four Primary Approaches

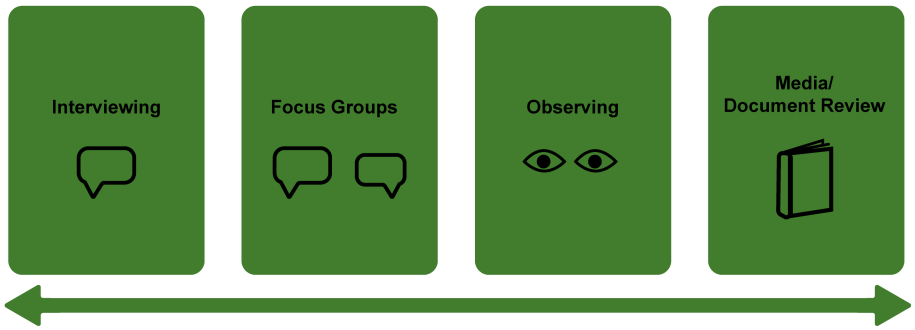
Interviews are at the heart of qualitative research. Returning to epistemological foundations, it is during the interview that the researcher truly opens herself to hearing what others have to say, encouraging her interview subjects to reflect deeply on the meanings and values they hold. Interviews are used in almost every qualitative tradition but are particularly salient in phenomenological studies, studies seeking to understand the meaning of people’s lived experiences.

Focus groups can be seen as a type of interview, one in which a group of persons (ideally between five and twelve) is asked a series of questions focused on a particular topic or subject. They are sometimes used as the primary form of data collection, especially outside academic research. For example, businesses often employ focus groups to determine if a particular product is likely to sell. Among qualitative researchers, it is often used in conjunction with any other primary data collection technique as a form of "triangulation," or a way of increasing the reliability of the study by getting at the object of study from multiple directions.[2] Some traditions, such as feminist approaches, also see the focus group as an important "consciousness-raising" tool.

If interviews are at the heart of qualitative research, observations are its lifeblood. Researchers who are more interested in the practices and behaviors of people than what they think or who are trying to understand the parameters of an organizational culture rely on observations as their primary form of data collection. The notes they make "in the field" (either during observations or afterward) form the "data" that will be analyzed. Ethnographers, those seeking to describe a particular ethnos, or culture, believe that observations are more reliable guides to that culture than what people have to say about it. Observations are thus the primary form of data collection for ethnographers, albeit often supplemented with in-depth interviews.

Some would say that these three—interviews, focus groups, and observations—are really the foundational techniques of data collection. They are far and away the three techniques most frequently used separately, in conjunction with one another, and even sometimes in mixed methods qualitative/quantitative studies. Document review, either as a form of content analysis or separately, however, is an important addition to the qualitative researcher's toolkit and should not be overlooked (figure 10.1). Although it is rare for a qualitative researcher to make document review their primary or sole form of data collection, including documents in the research design can help expand the reach and the reliability of a study. Document review can take many forms, from historical and archival research, in which the researcher pieces together a narrative of the past by finding and analyzing a variety of "documents" and records (including photographs and physical artifacts), to analyses of contemporary media content, as in the case of compiling and coding blog posts or other online commentaries, and content analysis that identifies and describes communicative aspects of media or documents.

2. See "Advanced Reading: Triangulation" at end of this chapter.



The Four Primary Techniques of Qualitative Data Analysis

In addition to these four major techniques, there are a host of emerging and incidental data collection techniques, from photo elicitation or photo voice, in which respondents are asked to comment upon a photograph or image (particularly useful as a supplement to interviews when the respondents are hesitant or unable to answer direct questions), to autoethnographies, in which the researcher uses his own position and life to increase our understanding about a phenomenon and its historical and social context.

Taken together, these techniques provide a wide range of practices and tools with which to discover the world. They are particularly suited to addressing the questions that qualitative researchers ask—questions about *how* things happen and *why* people act the way they do, given particular social contexts and shared meanings about the world (chapter 4).

Triangulation and Mixed Methods

Because the researcher plays such a large and nonneutral role in qualitative research, one that requires constant reflectivity and awareness (chapter 6), there is a constant need to reassure her audience that the results she finds are reliable. Quantitative researchers can point to any number of measures of statistical significance to reassure their audiences, but qualitative researchers do not have math to hide behind. And she will also want to reassure herself that what she is hearing in her interviews or observing in the field is a true reflection of what is going on (or as "true" as possible, given the problem that the world is as large and varied as the elephant; see chapter 3). For those reasons, it is common for researchers to employ more than one data collection technique or to include multiple and comparative populations, settings, and samples in the research design (chapter 2). A single set of interviews or initial comparison of focus groups might be conceived as a "pilot study" from which to launch the actual study. Undergraduate students working on a research project might be advised to think about their projects in this way as well. You are simply not going to have enough time or resources as an undergraduate to construct and complete a successful qualitative research project, but you may be able to tackle a pilot study. Graduate students also need to think about the amount of time and resources they have for completing a full study. Masters-level students, or students who have one year or less in which to complete a program, should probably consider their study as an initial

exploratory pilot. PhD candidates might have the time and resources to devote to the type of triangulated, multifaceted research design called for by the research question.

We call the use of multiple qualitative methods of data collection and the inclusion of multiple and comparative populations and settings "triangulation." Using different data collection methods allows us to check the consistency of our findings. For example, a study of the vaccine hesitant might include a set of interviews with vaccine-hesitant people and a focus group of the same and a content analysis of online comments about a vaccine mandate. By employing all three methods, we can be more confident of our interpretations from the interviews alone (especially if we are hearing the same thing throughout; if we are not, then this is a good sign that we need to push a little further to find out what is really going on).[3] Methodological triangulation is an important tool for increasing the reliability of our findings and the overall success of our research.

Methodological triangulation should not be confused with mixed methods techniques, which refer instead to the combining of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Mixed methods studies can increase reliability, but that is not their primary purpose. Mixed methods address multiple research questions, both the "how many" and "why" kind, or the causal and explanatory kind. Mixed methods will be discussed in more detail in chapter 15.

Examples

Let us return to the three examples of qualitative research described in chapter 1: Cory Abramson's study of aging (*The End Game)*, Jennifer Pierce's study of lawyers and discrimination (*Racing for Innocence*), and my own study of liberal arts college students (*Amplified Advantage*). Each of these studies uses triangulation.

Abramson's book is primarily based on three years of observations in four distinct neighborhoods. He chose the neighborhoods in such a way to maximize his ability to make comparisons: two were primarily middle class and two were primarily poor; further, within each set, one was predominantly White, while the other was either racially diverse or primarily African American. In each neighborhood, he was present in senior centers, doctors' offices, public transportation, and other public spots where the elderly congregated.[4] The observations are the core of the book, and they are richly written and described in very

3. We can also think about triangulating the sources, as when we include comparison groups in our sample (e.g., if we include those receiving vaccines, we might find out a bit more about where the real differences lie between them and the vaccine hesitant); triangulating the analysts (building a research team so that your interpretations can be checked against those of others on the team); and even triangulating the theoretical perspective (as when we "try on," say, different conceptualizations of social capital in our analyses).
4. We can also think about triangulating the sources, as when we include comparison groups in our sample (e.g., if we include those receiving vaccines, we might find out a bit more about where the real differences lie between them and the vaccine hesitant); triangulating the analysts

moving passages. But it wasn't enough for him to watch the seniors. He also engaged with them in casual conversation. That, too, is part of fieldwork. He sometimes even helped them make it to the doctor's office or get around town. Going beyond these interactions, he also interviewed sixty seniors, an equal amount from each of the four neighborhoods. It was in the interviews that he could ask more detailed questions about their lives, what they thought about aging, what it meant to them to be considered old, and what their hopes and frustrations were. He could see that those living in the poor neighborhoods had a more difficult time accessing care and resources than those living in the more affluent neighborhoods, but he couldn't know how the seniors understood these difficulties without interviewing them. Both forms of data collection supported each other and helped make the study richer and more insightful. Interviews alone would have failed to demonstrate the very real differences he observed (and that some seniors would not even have known about). This is the value of methodological triangulation.

Pierce's book relies on two separate forms of data collection—interviews with lawyers at a firm that has experienced a history of racial discrimination and content analyses of news stories and popular films that screened during the same years of the alleged racial discrimination. I've used this book when teaching methods and have often found students struggle with understanding why these two forms of data collection were used. I think this is because we don't teach students to appreciate or recognize "popular films" as a legitimate form of data. But what Pierce does is interesting and insightful in the best tradition of qualitative research. Here is a description of the content analyses from a review of her book:

> In the chapter on the news media, Professor Pierce uses content analysis to argue that the media not only helped shape the meaning of affirmative action, but also helped create white males as a class of victims. The overall narrative that emerged from these media accounts was one of white male innocence and victimization. She also maintains that this narrative was used to support "neoconservative and neoliberal political agendas" (p. 21). The focus of these articles tended to be that affirmative action hurt white working-class and middle-class men particularly during the recession in the 1980s (despite statistical evidence that people of color were hurt far more than white males by the recession). In these stories fairness and innocence were seen in purely individual terms. Although there were stories that supported affirmative action and developed a broader understanding of fairness, the total number of stories slanted against affirmative action from 1990 to 1999. During that time period negative stories always outnumbered those supporting the policy, usually by a ratio of 3:1 or 3:2. Headlines, the presentation of polling data, and an emphasis in stories on racial division, Pierce argues, reinforced the story of white male victimization. Interestingly, the news media did very few stories on gender and affirmative action.
>
> The chapter on the film industry from 1989 to 1999 reinforces Pierce's argument and adds another layer to her interpretation of affirmative action during this time period. She sampled almost 60 Hollywood films with receipts ranging from four million to 184 million dollars. In this chapter she argues that the dominant theme of these films was racial progress and the redemption of white Americans from past racism. These movies usually portrayed white, elite, and male experiences. People of color were background figures who

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(building a research team so that your interpretations can be checked against those of others on the team); and even triangulating the theoretical perspective (as when we "try on," say, different conceptualizations of social capital in our analyses).

> supported the protagonist and "anointed" him as a savior (p. 45). Over the course of the film the protagonists move from "innocence to consciousness" concerning racism. The antagonists in these films most often were racist working-class white men. *A Time to Kill*, *Mississippi Burning*, *Amistad*, *Ghosts of Mississippi*, *The Long Walk Home*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Dances with Wolves* receive particular analysis in this chapter, and her examination of them leads Pierce to conclude that they infused a myth of racial progress into America's cultural memory. White experiences of race are the focus and contemporary forms of racism are underplayed or omitted. Further, these films stereotype both working-class and elite white males, and underscore the neoliberal emphasis on individualism. (Hrezo 2012)

With that context in place, Pierce then turned to interviews with attorneys. She finds that White male attorneys often misremembered facts about the period in which the law firm was accused of racial discrimination and that they often portrayed their firms as having made substantial racial progress. This was in contrast to many of the lawyers of color and female lawyers who remembered the history differently and who saw continuing examples of racial (and gender) discrimination at the law firm. In most of the interviews, people talked about individuals, not structure (and these are attorneys, who really should know better!). By including both content analyses and interviews in her study, Pierce is better able to situate the attorney narratives and explain the larger context for the shared meanings of individual innocence and racial progress. Had this been a study only of films during this period, we would not know how actual people who lived during this period understood the decisions they made; had we had only the interviews, we would have missed the historical context and seen a lot of these interviewees as, well, not very nice people at all. Together, we have a study that is original, inventive, and insightful.

My own study of how class background affects the experiences and outcomes of students at small liberal arts colleges relies on mixed methods and triangulation. At the core of the book is an original survey of college students across the US. From analyses of this survey, I can present findings on "how many" questions and descriptive statistics comparing students of different social class backgrounds. For example, I know and can demonstrate that working-class college students are less likely to go to graduate school after college than upper-class college students are. I can even give you some estimates of the class gap. But what I can't tell you from the survey is exactly *why* this is so or *how it came to be so*. For that, I employ interviews, focus groups, document reviews, and observations. Basically, I threw the kitchen sink at the "problem" of class reproduction and higher education (i.e., Does college reduce class inequalities or make them worse?). A review of historical documents provides a picture of the place of the small liberal arts college in the broader social and historical context. Who had access to these colleges and for what purpose have always been in contest, with some groups attempting to exclude others from opportunities for advancement. What it means to choose a small liberal arts college in the early twenty-first century is thus different for those whose parents are college professors, for those whose parents have a great deal of money, and for those who are the first in their family to attend college. I was able to get at these different understandings through interviews and focus groups and to further delineate the culture of these colleges by careful observation (and my own participation in them, as both former student and current professor). Putting together individual meanings, student dispositions, organizational culture, and historical context

allowed me to present a story of how exactly colleges can both help advance first-generation, low-income, working-class college students and simultaneously amplify the preexisting advantages of their peers. Mixed methods addressed multiple research questions, while triangulation allowed for this deeper, more complex story to emerge.

Conclusion

In the next few chapters, we will explore each of the primary data collection techniques in much more detail. As we do so, think about how these techniques may be productively joined for more reliable and deeper studies of the social world.

Advanced Reading: Triangulation

Denzin (1978) identified four basic types of triangulation: data, investigator, theory, and methodological. Properly speaking, if we use the Denzin typology, the use of multiple methods of data collection and analysis to strengthen one's study is really a form of methodological triangulation. It may be helpful to understand how this differs from the other types.

Data triangulation occurs when the researcher uses a variety of sources in a single study. Perhaps they are interviewing multiple samples of college students. Obviously, this overlaps with sample selection (see chapter 5). It is helpful for the researcher to understand that these multiple data sources add strength and reliability to the study. After all, it is not just "these students here" but also "those students over there" that are experiencing this phenomenon in a particular way.

Investigator triangulation occurs when different researchers or evaluators are part of the research team. Intercoding reliability is a form of investigator triangulation (or at least a way of leveraging the power of multiple researchers to raise the reliability of the study).

Theory triangulation is the use of multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of data, as in the case of competing theoretical paradigms (e.g., a human capital approach vs. a Bourdieusian multiple capital approach).

Methodological triangulation, as explained in this chapter, is the use of multiple methods to study a single phenomenon, issue, or problem.

Further Readings

Carter, Nancy, Denise Bryant-Lukosius, Alba DiCenso, Jennifer Blythe, Alan J. Neville. 2014. "The Use of Triangulation in Qualitative Research." *Oncology Nursing Forum* 41(5):545–547. Discusses the four types of triangulation identified by Denzin with an example of the use of focus groups and in-depth individuals.

Mathison, Sandra. 1988. "Why Triangulate?" *Educational Researcher* 17(2):13–17. Presents three particular ways of assessing validity through the use of triangulated data collection: convergence, inconsistency, and contradiction.

Tracy, Sarah J. 2010. "Qualitative Quality: Eight 'Big-Tent' Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 16(10):837–851. Focuses on triangulation as a criterion for conducting valid qualitative research.

CHAPTER 11. INTERVIEWING

Introduction

Interviewing people is at the heart of qualitative research. It is not merely a way to collect data but an intrinsically rewarding activity—an interaction between two people that holds the potential for greater understanding and interpersonal development. Unlike many of our daily interactions with others that are fairly shallow and mundane, sitting down with a person for an hour or two and really listening to what they have to say is a profound and deep enterprise, one that can provide not only "data" for you, the interviewer, but also self-understanding and a feeling of being heard for the interviewee. I always approach interviewing with a deep appreciation for the opportunity it gives me to understand how other people experience the world. That said, there is not one kind of **interview** but many, and some of these are shallower than others. This chapter will provide you with an overview of interview techniques but with a special focus on the in-depth semistructured **interview guide** approach, which is the approach most widely used in social science research.

An interview can be variously defined as "a conversation with a purpose" (Lune and Berg 2018) and an attempt to understand the world from the point of view of the person being interviewed: "to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations" (Kvale 2007). It is a form of active listening in which the interviewer steers the conversation to subjects and topics of interest to their research but also manages to leave enough space for those interviewed to say surprising things. Achieving that balance is a tricky thing, which is why most practitioners believe interviewing is both an art and a science. In my experience as a teacher, there are some students who are "natural" interviewers (often they are introverts), but anyone can learn to conduct interviews, and everyone, even those of us who have been doing this for years, can improve their interviewing skills. This might be a good time to highlight the fact that the interview is a product between interviewer and interviewee and that this product is only as good as the rapport established between the two participants. Active listening is the key to establishing this necessary rapport.

Patton (2002) makes the argument that we use interviews because there are certain things that are not observable. In particular, "we cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things" (341).

Types of Interviews

There are several distinct types of interviews. Imagine a continuum (figure 11.1). On one side are unstructured conversations—the kind you have with your friends. No one is in control of those conversations, and what you talk about is often random—whatever pops into your head. There is no secret, underlying purpose to your talking—if anything, the purpose is *to talk to* and engage with each other, and the words you use and the things you talk about are a little beside the point. An **unstructured interview** is a little like this informal conversation, except that one of the parties to the conversation (you, the researcher) *does* have an underlying purpose, and that is to understand the other person. You are *not* friends speaking for no purpose, but it might feel just as unstructured to the "interviewee" in this scenario. That is one side of the continuum. On the other side are fully structured and standardized survey-type questions asked face-to-face. Here it is very clear who is asking the questions and who is answering them. This doesn't feel like a conversation at all! A lot of people new to interviewing have this (*erroneously*!) in mind when they think about interviews as data collection. Somewhere in the middle of these two extreme cases is the "**semistructured" interview**, in which the researcher uses an "interview guide" to gently move the conversation to certain topics and issues. This is the primary form of interviewing for qualitative social scientists and will be what I refer to as interviewing for the rest of this chapter, unless otherwise specified.

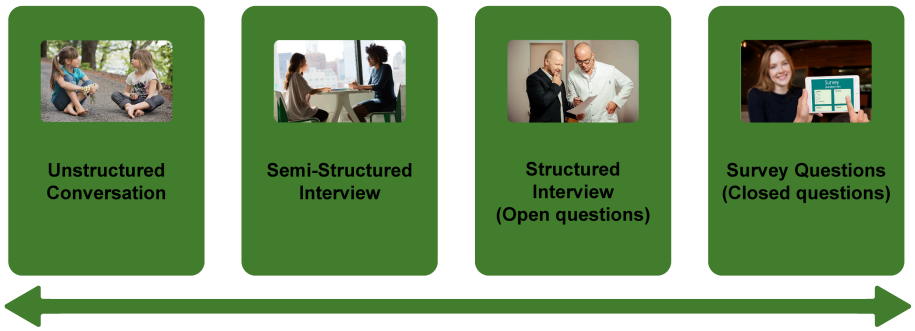

Figure 11.1. Types of Interviewing Questions

Informal (unstructured conversations). This is the most "open-ended" approach to interviewing. It is particularly useful in conjunction with **observational methods** (see chapters 13 and 14). There are no predetermined questions. Each interview will be different. Imagine you are researching the Oregon Country Fair, an annual event in Veneta, Oregon, that includes live music, artisan craft booths, face painting, and a lot of people walking through forest paths. It's unlikely that you will be able to get a person to sit down with you and talk intensely about a set of questions for an hour and a half. But you might be able to sidle up to several people and engage with them about their experiences at the fair. You might have a general interest in what attracts people to these events, so you could start a conversation by asking strangers why they are here or why they come back every year. That's it. Then you have a conversation that may lead you anywhere. Maybe one person tells a long story about how their parents brought them here

when they were a kid. A second person talks about how this is better than Burning Man. A third person shares their favorite traveling band. And yet another enthuses about the public library in the woods. During your conversations, you also talk about a lot of other things—the weather, the utilikilts for sale, the fact that a favorite food booth has disappeared. It's all good. You may not be able to record these conversations. Instead, you might jot down notes on the spot and then, when you have the time, write down as much as you can remember about the conversations in long fieldnotes. Later, you will have to sit down with these fieldnotes and try to make sense of all the information (see chapters 18 and 19).

Interview guide (**semistructured interview**). This is the primary type employed by social science qualitative researchers. The researcher creates an "interview guide" in advance, which she uses in every interview. In theory, every person interviewed is asked the same questions. In practice, every person interviewed is asked mostly the same topics but not always the same questions, as the whole point of a "guide" is that it guides the direction of the conversation but does not command it. The guide is typically between five and ten questions or question areas, sometimes with suggested follow-ups or **prompts**. For example, one question might be "What was it like growing up in Eastern Oregon?" with prompts such as "Did you live in a rural area? What kind of high school did you attend?" to help the conversation develop. These interviews generally take place in a quiet place (not a busy walkway during a festival) and are recorded. The recordings are transcribed, and those transcriptions then become the "data" that is analyzed (see chapters 18 and 19). The conventional length of one of these types of interviews is between one hour and two hours, optimally ninety minutes. Less than one hour doesn't allow for much development of questions and thoughts, and two hours (or more) is a lot of time to ask someone to sit still and answer questions. If you have a lot of ground to cover, and the person is willing, I highly recommend two separate interview sessions, with the second session being slightly shorter than the first (e.g., ninety minutes the first day, sixty minutes the second). There are lots of good reasons for this, but the most compelling one is that this allows you to listen to the first day's recording and catch anything interesting you might have missed in the moment and so develop follow-up questions that can probe further. This also allows the person being interviewed to have some time to think about the issues raised in the interview and go a little deeper with their answers.

Standardized questionnaire with open responses (**structured interview**). This is the type of interview a lot of people have in mind when they hear "interview": a researcher comes to your door with a clipboard and proceeds to ask you a series of questions. These questions are all the same whoever answers the door; they are "standardized." Both the wording and the exact order are important, as people's responses may vary depending on how and when a question is asked. These are qualitative only in that the questions allow for "open-ended responses": people can say whatever they want rather than select from a predetermined menu of responses. For example, a survey I collaborated on included this open-ended response question: "How does class affect one's career success in sociology?" Some of the answers were simply one word long (e.g., "debt"), and others were long statements with stories and personal anecdotes. It is possible to

be surprised by the responses. Although it's a stretch to call this kind of questioning a conversation, it does allow the person answering the question some degree of freedom in how they answer.

Survey questionnaire with closed responses (not an interview!). Standardized survey questions with specific answer options (e.g., closed responses) are not really interviews at all, and they do not generate qualitative data. For example, if we included five options for the question "How does class affect one's career success in sociology?"—(1) debt, (2) social networks, (3) alienation, (4) family doesn't understand, (5) type of grad program—we leave no room for surprises at all. Instead, we would most likely look at patterns around these responses, thinking *quantitatively* rather than *qualitatively* (e.g., using regression analysis techniques, we might find that working-class sociologists were twice as likely to bring up alienation). It can sometimes be confusing for new students because the very same survey can include both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The key is to think about *how these will be analyzed* and *to what level surprises* are possible. If your plan is to turn all responses into a number and make predictions about correlations and relationships, you are no longer conducting qualitative research. This is true even if you are conducting this survey face-to-face with a real live human. Closed-response questions are not conversations of any kind, purposeful or not.

In summary, the semistructured interview guide approach is the predominant form of interviewing for social science qualitative researchers because it allows a high degree of freedom of responses from those interviewed (thus allowing for novel discoveries) while still maintaining some connection to a research question area or topic of interest. The rest of the chapter assumes the employment of this form.

Creating an Interview Guide

Your interview guide is the instrument used to bridge your research question(s) and what the people you are interviewing want to tell you. Unlike a standardized questionnaire, the questions actually asked do not need to be exactly what you have written down in your guide. The guide is meant to create space for those you are interviewing to talk about the phenomenon of interest, but sometimes you are not even sure what that phenomenon is until you start asking questions. A priority in creating an interview guide is to ensure it offers space. One of the worst mistakes is to create questions that are so specific that the person answering them will not stray. Relatedly, questions that sound "academic" will shut down a lot of respondents. A good interview guide invites respondents to talk about what is important to them, not feel like they are performing or being evaluated by you.

Good interview questions should not sound like your "research question" at all. For example, let's say your research question is "How do patriarchal assumptions influence men's understanding of climate change and responses to climate change?" It would be worse than unhelpful to ask a respondent, "How do your assumptions about the role of men affect your understanding of climate change?" You need to unpack this into manageable nuggets that pull your respondent into the area of interest without leading

him anywhere. You could start by asking him what he thinks about climate change in general. Or, even better, whether he has any concerns about heatwaves or increased tornadoes or polar icecaps melting. Once he starts talking about that, you can ask follow-up questions that bring in issues around gendered roles, perhaps asking if he is married (to a woman) and whether his wife shares his thoughts and, if not, how they negotiate that difference. The fact is, you won't really know the right questions to ask until he starts talking.

There are several distinct types of questions that can be used in your interview guide, either as main questions or as follow-up probes. If you remember that the point is to leave space for the respondent, you will craft a much more effective interview guide! You will also want to think about the place of time in both the questions themselves (past, present, future orientations) and the sequencing of the questions.

Researcher Note

Suggestion: As you read the next three sections (types of questions, temporality, question sequence), have in mind a particular research question, and try to draft questions and sequence them in a way that opens space for a discussion that helps you answer your research question.

Type of Questions

Experience and behavior questions ask about what a respondent does regularly (their behavior) or has done (their experience). These are relatively easy questions for people to answer because they appear more "factual" and less subjective. This makes them good opening questions. For the study on climate change above, you might ask, "Have you ever experienced an unusual weather event? What happened?" Or "You said you work outside? What is a typical summer workday like for you? How do you protect yourself from the heat?"

Opinion and values questions, in contrast, ask questions that get inside the minds of those you are interviewing. "Do you think climate change is real? Who or what is responsible for it?" are two such questions. Note that you don't have to literally ask, "What is your opinion of X?" but you can find a way to ask the specific question relevant to the conversation you are having. These questions are a bit trickier to ask because the answers you get may depend in part on how your respondent perceives *you* and whether they want to please you or not. We've talked a fair amount about being reflective. Here is another place where this comes into play. You need to be aware of the effect your presence might have on the answers you are receiving and adjust accordingly. If you are a woman who is perceived as liberal asking a man

who identifies as conservative about climate change, there is a lot of subtext that can be going on in the interview. There is no one right way to resolve this, but you must at least be aware of it.

Feeling questions are questions that ask respondents to draw on their emotional responses. It's pretty common for academic researchers to forget that we have bodies and emotions, but people's understandings of the world often operate at this affective level, sometimes unconsciously or barely consciously. It is a good idea to include questions that leave space for respondents to remember, imagine, or relive emotional responses to particular phenomena. "What was it like when you heard your cousin's house burned down in that wildfire?" doesn't explicitly use any emotion words, but it allows your respondent to remember what was probably a pretty emotional day. And if they respond emotionally neutral, that is pretty interesting data too. Note that asking someone "How do you feel about X" is not always going to evoke an emotional response, as they might simply turn around and respond with "I think that…" It is better to craft a question that actually pushes the respondent into the affective category. This might be a specific follow-up to an *experience and behavior question*—for example, "You just told me about your daily routine during the summer heat. Do you worry it is going to get worse?" or "Have you ever been afraid it will be too hot to get your work accomplished?"

Knowledge questions ask respondents what they actually know about something factual. We have to be careful when we ask these types of questions so that respondents do not feel like we are evaluating them (which would shut them down), but, for example, it is helpful to know when you are having a conversation about climate change that your respondent does in fact know that unusual weather events have increased and that these have been attributed to climate change! Asking these questions can set the stage for deeper questions and can ensure that the conversation makes the same kind of sense to both participants. For example, a conversation about political polarization can be put back on track once you realize that the respondent doesn't really have a clear understanding that there are two parties in the US. Instead of asking a series of questions about Republicans and Democrats, you might shift your questions to talk more generally about political disagreements (e.g., "people against abortion"). And sometimes what you do want to know is the level of knowledge about a particular program or event (e.g., "Are you aware you can discharge your student loans through the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program?").

Sensory questions call on all senses of the respondent to capture deeper responses. These are particularly helpful in sparking memory. "Think back to your childhood in Eastern Oregon. Describe the smells, the sounds…" Or you could use these questions to help a person access the full experience of a setting they customarily inhabit: "When you walk through the doors to your office building, what do you see? Hear? Smell?" As with *feeling questions*, these questions often supplement *experience and behavior questions*. They are another way of allowing your respondent to report fully and deeply rather than remain on the surface.

Creative questions employ illustrative examples, suggested scenarios, or simulations to get respondents to think more deeply about an issue, topic, or experience. There are many options here. In *The Trouble with Passion*, Erin Cech (2021) provides a scenario in which "Joe" is trying to decide whether to stay at his

decent but boring computer job or follow his passion by opening a restaurant. She asks respondents, "What should Joe do?" Their answers illuminate the attraction of "passion" in job selection. In my own work, I have used a news story about an upwardly mobile young man who no longer has time to see his mother and sisters to probe respondents' feelings about the costs of social mobility. Jessi Streib and Betsy Leondar-Wright have used single-page cartoon "scenes" to elicit evaluations of potential racial discrimination, sexual harassment, and classism. Barbara Sutton (2010) has employed lists of words ("strong," "mother," "victim") on notecards she fans out and asks her female respondents to select and discuss.

Background/Demographic Questions

You most definitely will want to know more about the person you are interviewing in terms of conventional demographic information, such as age, race, gender identity, occupation, and educational attainment. These are not questions that normally open up inquiry.[1] For this reason, my practice has been to include a separate "demographic questionnaire" sheet that I ask each respondent to fill out at the conclusion of the interview. Only include those aspects that are relevant to your study. For example, if you are not exploring religion or religious affiliation, do not include questions about a person's religion on the demographic sheet. See the example provided at the end of this chapter.

Temporality

Any type of question can have a past, present, or future orientation. For example, if you are asking a behavior question about workplace routine, you might ask the respondent to talk about past work, present work, and ideal (future) work. Similarly, if you want to understand how people cope with natural disasters, you might ask your respondent how they felt *then* during the wildfire and *now* in retrospect and *whether and to what extent* they have concerns for *future* wildfire disasters. It's a relatively simple suggestion—don't forget to ask about past, present, and future—but it can have a big impact on the quality of the responses you receive.

Question Sequence

Having a list of good questions or good question areas is not enough to make a good interview guide. You will want to pay attention to the order in which you ask your questions. Even though any one respondent

1. I say "normally" because how people understand their various identities can itself be an expansive topic of inquiry. Here, I am merely talking about collecting otherwise unexamined demographic data, similar to how we ask people to check boxes on surveys.

can derail this order (perhaps by jumping to answer a question you haven't yet asked), a good advance plan is always helpful. When thinking about sequence, remember that your goal is to get your respondent to open up to you and to say things that might surprise you. To establish rapport, it is best to start with nonthreatening questions. Asking about the present is often the safest place to begin, followed by the past (they have to know you a little bit to get there), and lastly, the future (talking about hopes and fears requires the most rapport). To allow for surprises, it is best to move from very general questions to more particular questions only later in the interview. This ensures that respondents have the freedom to bring up the topics that are relevant to them rather than feel like they are constrained to answer you narrowly. For example, refrain from asking about particular emotions until these have come up previously—don't lead with them. Often, your more particular questions will emerge only during the course of the interview, tailored to what is emerging in conversation.

Once you have a set of questions, read through them aloud and imagine you are being asked the same questions. Does the set of questions have a natural flow? Would you be willing to answer the very first question to a total stranger? Does your sequence establish facts and experiences before moving on to opinions and values? Did you include prefatory statements, where necessary; transitions; and other announcements? These can be as simple as "Hey, we talked a lot about your experiences as a barista while in college.… Now I am turning to something completely different: how you managed friendships in college." That is an abrupt transition, but it has been softened by your acknowledgment of that.

Probes and Flexibility

Once you have the interview guide, you will also want to leave room for probes and follow-up questions. As in the sample probe included here, you can write out the obvious probes and follow-up questions in advance. You might not need them, as your respondent might anticipate them and include full responses to the original question. Or you might need to tailor them to how your respondent answered the question. Some common probes and follow-up questions include asking for more details (When did that happen? Who else was there?), asking for elaboration (Could you say more about that?), asking for clarification (Does that mean what I think it means or something else? I understand what you mean, but someone else reading the transcript might not), and asking for contrast or comparison (How did this experience compare with last year's event?). "Probing is a skill that comes from knowing what to look for in the interview, listening carefully to what is being said and what is not said, and being sensitive to the feedback needs of the person being interviewed" (Patton 2002:374). It takes work! And energy. I and many other interviewers I know report feeling emotionally and even physically drained after conducting an interview. You are tasked

with *active listening* and rearranging your interview guide as needed on the fly. If you only ask the questions written down in your interview guide with no deviations, you are doing it wrong.[2]

The Final Question

Every interview guide should include a very open-ended final question that allows for the respondent to say whatever it is they have been dying to tell you but you've forgotten to ask. About half the time they are tired too and will tell you they have nothing else to say. But incredibly, some of the most honest and complete responses take place here, at the end of a long interview. You have to realize that the person being interviewed is often discovering things about themselves as they talk to you and that this process of discovery can lead to new insights for them. Making space at the end is therefore crucial. Be sure you convey that you actually do want them to tell you more, that the offer of "anything else?" is not read as an empty convention where the polite response is no. Here is where you can pull from that active listening and tailor the final question to the particular person. For example, "I've asked you a lot of questions about what it was like to live through that wildfire. I'm wondering if there is anything I've forgotten to ask, especially because I haven't had that experience myself" is a much more inviting final question than "Great. Anything you want to add?" It's also helpful to convey to the person that you have the time to listen to their full answer, even if the allotted time is at the end. After all, there are no more questions to ask, so the respondent knows exactly how much time is left. Do them the courtesy of listening to them!

Conducting the Interview

Once you have your interview guide, you are on your way to conducting your first interview. I always practice my interview guide with a friend or family member. I do this even when the questions don't make perfect sense for them, as it still helps me realize which questions make no sense, are poorly worded (too academic), or don't follow sequentially. I also practice the routine I will use for interviewing, which goes something like this:

1. Introduce myself and reintroduce the study
2. Provide consent form and ask them to sign and retain/return copy
3. Ask if they have any questions about the study before we begin
4. Ask if I can begin recording

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2. Again, this applies to "semistructured in-depth interviewing." When conducting standardized questionnaires, you *will* want to ask each question exactly as written, without deviations!

5. Ask questions (from interview guide)
6. Turn off the recording device
7. Ask if they are willing to fill out my demographic questionnaire
8. Collect questionnaire and, without looking at the answers, place in same folder as signed consent form
9. Thank them and depart

Researcher Note

A note on remote interviewing: Interviews have traditionally been conducted face-to-face in a private or quiet public setting. You don't want a lot of background noise, as this will make transcriptions difficult. During the recent global pandemic, many interviewers, myself included, learned the benefits of interviewing remotely. Although face-to-face is still preferable for many reasons, Zoom interviewing is not a bad alternative, and it does allow more interviews across great distances. Zoom also includes automatic transcription, which significantly cuts down on the time it normally takes to convert our conversations into "data" to be analyzed. These automatic transcriptions are not perfect, however, and you will still need to listen to the recording and clarify and clean up the transcription. Nor do automatic transcriptions include notations of body language or change of tone, which you may want to include. When interviewing remotely, you will want to collect the consent form before you meet: ask them to read, sign, and return it as an email attachment. I think it is better to ask for the demographic questionnaire after the interview, but because some respondents may never return it then, it is probably best to ask for this at the same time as the consent form, in advance of the interview.

What should you bring to the interview? I would recommend bringing two copies of the consent form (one for you and one for the respondent), a demographic questionnaire, a manila folder in which to place the signed consent form and filled-out demographic questionnaire, a printed copy of your interview guide (I print with three-inch right margins so I can jot down notes on the page next to relevant questions), a pen, a recording device, and water.

After the interview, you will want to secure the signed consent form in a locked filing cabinet (if in print) or a password-protected folder on your computer. Using Excel or a similar program that allows tables/spreadsheets, create an identifying number for your interview that links to the consent form without using the name of your respondent. For example, let's say that I conduct interviews with US politicians, and the first person I meet with is George W. Bush. I will assign the transcription the number "INT#001"

and add it to the signed consent form.[3] The signed consent form goes into a locked filing cabinet, and I never use the name "George W. Bush" again. I take the information from the demographic sheet, open my Excel spreadsheet, and add the relevant information in separate columns for the row INT#001: White, male, Republican. When I interview Bill Clinton as my second interview, I include a second row: INT#002: White, male, Democrat. And so on. The only link to the actual name of the respondent and this information is the fact that the consent form (unavailable to anyone but me) has stamped on it the interview number.

Many students get very nervous before their first interview. Actually, many of us are always nervous before the interview! But do not worry—this is normal, and it does pass. Chances are, you will be pleasantly surprised at how comfortable it begins to feel. These "purposeful conversations" are often a delight for both participants. This is not to say that sometimes things go wrong. I often have my students practice several "bad scenarios" (e.g., a respondent that you cannot get to open up; a respondent who is too talkative and dominates the conversation, steering it away from the topics you are interested in; emotions that completely take over; or shocking disclosures you are ill-prepared to handle), but most of the time, things go quite well. Be prepared for the unexpected, but know that the reason interviews are so popular as a technique of data collection is that they are usually richly rewarding for both participants.

Researcher Note

One thing that I stress to my methods students and remind myself about is that interviews are still conversations between people. If there's something you might feel uncomfortable asking someone about in a "normal" conversation, you will likely also feel a bit of discomfort asking it in an interview. Maybe more importantly, your respondent may feel uncomfortable. Social research—especially about inequality—can be uncomfortable. And it's easy to slip into an abstract, intellectualized, or removed perspective as an interviewer. This is one reason trying out interview questions is important. Another is that sometimes the question sounds good in your head but doesn't work as well out loud in practice. I learned this the hard way when a respondent asked me how I would answer the question I had just posed, and I realized that not only did I not really know how I would answer it, but I also wasn't quite as sure I knew what I was asking as I had thought.

3. I always include "INT" in the number because I sometimes have other kinds of data with their own numbering: FG#001 would mean the first focus group, for example. I also always include three-digit spaces, as this allows for up to 999 interviews (or, more realistically, allows for me to interview up to one hundred persons without having to reset my numbering system).

—Elizabeth M. Lee, Associate Professor of Sociology at Saint Joseph's University, author of *Class and Campus Life*, and co-author of *Geographies of Campus Inequality*

How Many Interviews?

Your research design has included a targeted number of interviews and a recruitment plan (see chapter 5). Follow your plan, but remember that "**saturation**" is your goal. You interview as many people as you can until you reach a point at which you are no longer surprised by what they tell you. This means not that no one after your first twenty interviews will have surprising, interesting stories to tell you but rather that the picture you are forming about the phenomenon of interest to you from a research perspective has come into focus, and none of the interviews are substantially refocusing that picture. That is when you should stop collecting interviews. Note that to know when you have reached this, you will need to read your transcripts as you go. More about this in chapters 18 and 19.

Your Final Product: The Ideal Interview Transcript

A good interview transcript will demonstrate a subtly controlled conversation by the skillful interviewer. In general, you want to see replies that are about one paragraph long, not short sentences and not running on for several pages. Although it is sometimes necessary to follow respondents down tangents, it is also often necessary to pull them back to the questions that form the basis of your research study. This is not really a free conversation, although it may feel like that to the person you are interviewing.

Final Tips from an Interview Master

Annette Lareau is arguably one of the masters of the trade. In *Listening to People*, she provides several guidelines for good interviews and then offers a detailed example of an interview gone wrong and how it could be addressed (please see the "Further Readings" at the end of this chapter). Here is an abbreviated version of her set of guidelines: (1) interview respondents who are experts on the subjects of most interest to you (as a corollary, don't ask people about things they don't know); (2) listen carefully and talk as little as possible; (3) keep in mind what you want to know and why you want to know it; (4) be a proactive interviewer (subtly guide the conversation); (5) assure respondents that there aren't any right or wrong answers; (6) use the respondent's own words to probe further (this both allows you to accurately identify

what you heard and pushes the respondent to explain further); (7) reuse effective probes (don't reinvent the wheel as you go—if repeating the words back works, do it again and again); (8) focus on learning the subjective meanings that events or experiences have for a respondent; (9) don't be afraid to ask a question that draws on your own knowledge (unlike trial lawyers who are trained never to ask a question for which they don't already know the answer, sometimes it's worth it to ask risky questions based on your hypotheses or just plain hunches); (10) keep thinking while you are listening (so difficult…and important); (11) return to a theme raised by a respondent if you want further information; (12) be mindful of power inequalities (and never ever coerce a respondent to continue the interview if they want out); (13) take control with overly talkative respondents; (14) expect overly succinct responses, and develop strategies for probing further; (15) balance digging deep and moving on; (16) develop a plan to deflect questions (e.g., let them know you are happy to answer any questions at the end of the interview, but you don't want to take time away from them now); and at the end, (17) check to see whether you have asked all your questions. You don't always have to ask everyone the same set of questions, but if there is a big area you have forgotten to cover, now is the time to recover (Lareau 2021:93–103).

Sample: Demographic Questionnaire

ASA Taskforce on First-Generation and Working-Class Persons in Sociology – Class Effects on Career Success

Supplementary Demographic Questionnaire

Thank you for your participation in this interview project. We would like to collect a few pieces of key demographic information from you to supplement our analyses. Your answers to these questions will be kept confidential and stored by ID number. All of your responses here are entirely voluntary!

What best captures your race/ethnicity? (please check any/all that apply)

- ☐ White (Non Hispanic/Latina/o/x)
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Hispanic, Latino/a/x of Spanish
- ☐ Asian or Asian American
- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native

- ☐ Middle Eastern or North African
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ Other : (Please write in: _____)

What is your current position?

- ☐ Grad Student
- ☐ Full Professor
- ☐ Other:

Please check any and all of the following that apply to you:

- ☐ I identify as a working-class academic
- ☐ I was the first in my family to graduate from college
- ☐ I grew up poor

What best reflects your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Transgender female/Transgender woman
- ☐ Transgender male/Transgender man
- ☐ Gender queer/ Gender nonconforming

Anything else you would like us to know about you?

Example: Interview Guide

In this example, follow-up prompts are italicized. Note the sequence of questions. That second question often elicits an entire ***life history****, answering several later questions in advance.*

Introduction Script/Question

Thank you for participating in our survey of ASA members who identify as first-generation or working-class. As you may have heard, ASA has sponsored a taskforce on first-generation and working-class persons in sociology and we are interested in hearing from those who so identify. Your participation in this interview will help advance our knowledge in this area.

1. The first thing we would like to as you is why you have volunteered to be part of this study? What does it mean to you be first-gen or working class? Why were you willing to be interviewed?
2. How did you decide to become a sociologist?
3. Can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up? (*prompts: what did your parent(s) do for a living? What kind of high school did you attend?)*
4. At what point did you realize that being first-gen/ working class set you apart from your peers?

    1. *Has this identity been salient to your experience? (how? How much?)*
    2. *How welcoming was your grad program? Your first academic employer?*
    3. Why did you decide to pursue sociology at the graduate level?
    4. Did you experience culture shock in college? In graduate school?
    5. Has your FGWC status shaped how you've thought about where you went to school? debt? etc?

5. What advice would you give to first-gen/working class graduate students (or undergraduate sociology majors) who are interested in pursuing a career as a sociologist?

    1. *Were you mentored? How did this work (not work)? How might it?*
    2. *What did you consider when deciding where to go to grad school? Where to apply for your first position?*

6. What, to you, is a mark of career success? Have you achieved that success? What has helped or hindered your pursuit of success?
7. Do you think sociology, as a field, cares about prestige?

8. Let's talk a little bit about intersectionality. How does being first-gen/working class work alongside other identities that are important to you?
9. What do your friends and family think about your career? Have you had any difficulty relating to family members or past friends since becoming highly educated?
10. Do you have any debt from college/grad school? Are you concerned about this? Could you explain more about how you paid for college/grad school? (here, include assistance from family, fellowships, scholarships, etc.)
11. (You've mentioned issues or obstacles you had because of your background.) What could have helped? Or, who or what did? Can you think of fortuitous moments in your career?
12. Do you have any regrets about the path you took?
13. Is there anything else you would like to add? Anything that the Taskforce should take note of, that we did not ask you about here?

Further Readings

Britten, Nicky. 1995. "Qualitative Interviews in Medical Research." *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 31(6999):251–253. A good basic overview of interviewing particularly useful for students of public health and medical research generally.

Corbin, Juliet, and Janice M. Morse. 2003. "The Unstructured Interactive Interview: Issues of Reciprocity and Risks When Dealing with Sensitive Topics." *Qualitative Inquiry* 9(3):335–354. Weighs the potential benefits and harms of conducting interviews on topics that may cause emotional distress. Argues that the researcher's skills and code of ethics should ensure that the interviewing process provides more of a benefit to both participant and researcher than a harm to the former.

Gerson, Kathleen, and Sarah Damaske. 2020. *The Science and Art of Interviewing*. New York: Oxford University Press. A useful guidebook/textbook for both undergraduates and graduate students, written by sociologists.

Kvale, Steiner. 2007. *Doing Interviews*. London: SAGE. An easy-to-follow guide to conducting and analyzing interviews by psychologists.

Lamont, Michèle, and Ann Swidler. 2014. "Methodological Pluralism and the Possibilities and Limits of

Interviewing." *Qualitative Sociology* 37(2):153–171. Written as a response to various debates surrounding the relative value of interview-based studies and ethnographic studies defending the particular strengths of interviewing. This is a must-read article for anyone seriously engaging in qualitative research!

Pugh, Allison J. 2013. "What Good Are Interviews for Thinking about Culture? Demystifying Interpretive Analysis." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 1(1):42–68. Another defense of interviewing written against those who champion ethnographic methods as superior, particularly in the area of studying culture. A classic.

Rapley, Timothy John. 2001. "The 'Artfulness' of Open-Ended Interviewing: Some considerations in analyzing interviews." *Qualitative Research* 1(3):303–323. Argues for the importance of "local context" of data production (the relationship built between interviewer and interviewee, for example) in properly analyzing interview data.

Weiss, Robert S. 1995. *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: Simon and Schuster. A classic and well-regarded textbook on interviewing. Because Weiss has extensive experience conducting surveys, he contrasts the qualitative interview with the survey questionnaire well; particularly useful for those trained in the latter.

CHAPTER 12. FOCUS GROUPS

Introduction

Focus groups are a particular and special form of interviewing in which the interview asks focused questions of a group of persons, optimally between five and eight. This group can be close friends, family members, or complete strangers. They can have a lot in common or nothing in common. Unlike one-on-one interviews, which can probe deeply, focus group questions are narrowly tailored ("focused") to a particular topic and issue and, with notable exceptions, operate at the shallow end of inquiry. For example, market researchers use focus groups to find out why groups of people choose one brand of product over another. Because focus groups are often used for commercial purposes, they sometimes have a bit of a stigma among researchers. This is unfortunate, as the focus group is a helpful addition to the qualitative researcher's toolkit. Focus groups explicitly use group interaction to assist in the data collection. They are particularly useful as supplements to one-on-one interviews or in data triangulation. They are sometimes used to initiate areas of inquiry for later data collection methods. This chapter describes the main forms of focus groups, lays out some key differences among those forms, and provides guidance on how to manage focus group interviews.

[Untitled image] by Jason Goodman on Unsplash

Focus Groups: What Are They and When to Use Them

As interviews, focus groups can be helpfully distinguished from one-on-one interviews. The purpose of conducting a focus group is not to expand the number of people one interviews: the focus group is a

different entity entirely. The focus is on the *group* and its interactions and evaluations rather than on the *individuals* in that group. If you want to know how individuals understand their lives and their individual experiences, it is best to ask them individually. If you want to find out how a group forms a collective opinion about something (whether a product or an event or an experience), then conducting a focus group is preferable. The power of focus groups resides in their being both *focused* and oriented to the *group*. They are best used when you are interested in the *shared meanings* of a group or how people discuss a topic publicly or when you want to observe the social formation of evaluations. The interaction of the group members is an asset in this method of data collection. If your questions would not benefit from group interaction, this is a good indicator that you should probably use individual interviews (chapter 11). Avoid using focus groups when you are interested in personal information or strive to uncover deeply buried beliefs or personal narratives. In general, you want to avoid using focus groups when the subject matter is polarizing, as people are less likely to be honest in a group setting. There are a few exceptions, such as when you are conducting focus groups with people who are not strangers and/or you are attempting to probe deeply into group beliefs and evaluations. But caution is warranted in these cases.[1]

As with interviewing in general, there are many forms of focus groups. Focus groups are widely used by nonresearchers, so it is important to distinguish these uses from the research focus group. Businesses routinely employ marketing focus groups to test out products or campaigns. Jury consultants employ "mock" jury focus groups, testing out legal case strategies in advance of actual trials. Organizations of various kinds use focus group interviews for program evaluation (e.g., to gauge the effectiveness of a diversity training workshop). The research focus group has many similarities with all these uses but is specifically tailored to a research (rather than applied) interest. The line between application and research use can be blurry, however. To take the case of evaluating the effectiveness of a diversity training workshop, the same interviewer may be conducting focus group interviews both to provide specific actionable feedback for the workshop leaders (this is the application aspect) and to learn more about how people respond to diversity training (an interesting research question with theoretically generalizable results).

When forming a focus group, there are two different strategies for inclusion. **Diversity focus groups** include people with diverse perspectives and experiences. This helps the researcher identify commonalities across this diversity and/or note interactions across differences. What kind of diversity to capture depends on the research question, but care should be taken to ensure that those participating are not set up for attack from other participants. This is why many warn against diversity focus groups, especially around politically sensitive topics. The other strategy is to build a **convergence focus group**, which includes people with similar perspectives and experiences. These are particularly helpful for identifying shared patterns and

1. Note that I have included a few examples of conducting focus groups with sensitive issues in the "Further Readings" section and have included an "Advanced: Focus Groups on Sensitive Topics" section on this area.

group consensus. The important thing is to closely consider who will be invited to participate and what the composition of the group will be in advance. Some review of sampling techniques (see chapter 5) may be helpful here.

Moderating a focus group can be a challenge (more on this below). For this reason, confining your group to no more than eight participants is recommended. You probably want at least four persons to capture group interaction. Fewer than four participants can also make it more difficult for participants to remain (relatively) anonymous—there is less of a group in which to hide. There are exceptions to these recommendations. You might want to conduct a focus group with a naturally occurring group, as in the case of a family of three, a social club of ten, or a program of fifteen. When the persons know one another, the problems of too few for anonymity don't apply, and although ten to fifteen can be unwieldy to manage, there are strategies to make this possible. If you really are interested in this group's dynamic (not just a set of random strangers' dynamic), then you will want to include all its members or as many as are willing and able to participate.

There are many benefits to conducting focus groups, the first of which is their interactivity. Participants can make comparisons, can elaborate on what has been voiced by another, and can even check one another, leading to real-time reevaluations. This last benefit is one reason they are sometimes employed specifically for consciousness raising or building group cohesion. This form of data collection has an activist application when done carefully and appropriately. It can be fun, especially for the participants. Additionally, what does not come up in a focus group, especially when expected by the researcher, can be very illuminating.

Many of these benefits do incur costs, however. The multiplicity of voices in a good focus group interview can be overwhelming both to moderate and later to transcribe. Because of the focused nature, deep probing is not possible (or desirable). You might only get superficial thinking or what people are willing to put out there publicly. If that is what you are interested in, good. If you want deeper insight, you probably will not get that here. Relatedly, extreme views are often suppressed, and marginal viewpoints are unspoken or, if spoken, derided. You will get the majority group consensus and very little of minority viewpoints. Because people will be engaged with one another, there is the possibility of cut-off sentences, making it even more likely to hear broad brush themes and not detailed specifics. There really is very little opportunity for specific follow-up questions to individuals. Reading over a transcript, you may be frustrated by avenues of inquiry that were foreclosed early.

Some people expect that conducting focus groups is an efficient form of data collection. After all, you get to hear from eight people instead of just one in the same amount of time! But this is a serious misunderstanding. What you hear in a focus group is one single group interview or discussion. It is not the same thing at all as conducting eight single one-hour interviews. Each focus group counts as "one." Most likely, you will need to conduct several focus groups, and you can design these as comparisons to one another. For example, the American Sociological Association (ASA) Task Force on First-Generation and Working-Class Persons in Sociology began its study of the impact of class in sociology by conducting five separate focus groups with different groups of sociologists: graduate students, faculty (in general),

community college faculty, faculty of color, and a racially diverse group of students and faculty. Even though the total number of participants was close to forty, the "number" of cases was five. It is highly recommended that when employing focus groups, you plan on composing more than one and at least three. This allows you to take note of and potentially discount findings from a group with idiosyncratic dynamics, such as where a particularly dominant personality silences all other voices. In other words, putting all your eggs into a single focus group basket is not a good idea.

How to Conduct a Focus Group Interview/Discussion

Advance Preparations

Once you have selected your focus groups and set a date and time, there are a few things you will want to plan out before meeting.

As with interviews, you begin by creating an interview (or discussion) guide. Where a good one-on-one interview guide should include ten to twelve main topics with possible prompts and follow-ups (see the example provided in chapter 11), the focus group guide should be more narrowly tailored to a single focus or topic area. For example, a focus might be "How students coped with online learning during the pandemic," and a series of possible questions would be drafted that would help prod participants to think about and discuss this topic. These questions or discussion prompts can be creative and may include stimulus materials (watching a video or hearing a story) or posing hypotheticals. For example, Cech (2021) has a great hypothetical, asking what a fictional character should do: keep his boring job in computers or follow his passion and open a restaurant. You can ask a focus group this question and see what results—how the group comes to define a "good job," what questions they ask about the hypothetical (How boring is his job really? Does he hate getting up in the morning, or is it more of an everyday tedium? What kind of financial support will he have if he quits? Does he even know how to run a restaurant?), and how they reach a consensus or create clear patterns of disagreement are all interesting findings that can be generated through this technique.

As with the above example ("What should Joe do?"), it is best to keep the questions you ask simple and easily understood by everyone. Thinking about the sequence of the questions/prompts is important, just as it is in conducting any interviews.

Avoid embarrassing questions. Always leave an out for the "I have a friend who X" response rather than pushing people to divulge personal information. Asking "How do you think students coped?" is better than "How did you cope?" Chances are, some participants will begin talking about themselves without you directly asking them to do so, but allowing impersonal responses here is good. The group itself will determine how deep and how personal it wants to go. This is not the time or place to push anyone out of their comfort zone!

Of course, people have different levels of comfort talking publicly about certain topics. You will have provided detailed information to your focus group participants beforehand and secured consent. But even so, the conversation may take a turn that makes someone uncomfortable. Be on the lookout for this, and remind everyone of their ability to opt out—to stay silent or to leave if necessary. Rather than call attention to anyone in this way, you also want to let everyone know they are free to walk around—to get up and get coffee (more on this below) or use the restroom or just step out of the room to take a call. Of course, you don't really want anyone to do any of these things, and chances are everyone will stay seated during the hour, but you should leave this "out" for those who need it.

Have copies of consent forms and any supplemental questionnaire (e.g., demographic information) you are using prepared in advance. Ask a friend or colleague to assist you on the day of the focus group. They can be responsible for making sure the recording equipment is functioning and may even take some notes on body language while you are moderating the discussion. Order food (coffee or snacks) for the group. This is important! Having refreshments will be appreciated by your participants and really damps down the anxiety level. Bring name tags and pens. Find a quiet welcoming space to convene. Often this is a classroom where you move chairs into a circle, but public libraries often have meeting rooms that are ideal places for community members to meet. Be sure that the space allows for food.

Researcher Note

When I was designing my research plan for studying activist groups, I consulted one of the best qualitative researchers I knew, my late friend Raphael Ezekiel, author of *The Racist Mind*. He looked at my plan to hand people demographic surveys at the end of the meetings I planned to observe and said, "This methodology is missing one crucial thing." "What?" I asked breathlessly, anticipating some technical insider tip. "Chocolate!" he answered. "They'll be tired, ready to leave when you ask them to fill something out. Offer an incentive, and they will stick around." It worked! As the meetings began to wind down, I would whip some bags of chocolate candies out of my bag. Everyone would stare, and I'd say they were my thank-you gift to anyone who filled out my survey. Once I learned to include some sugar-free candies for diabetics, my typical response rate was 100 percent. (And it gave me an additional class-culture data point by noticing who chose which brand; sure enough, Lindt balls went faster at majority professional-middle-class groups, and Hershey's minibars went faster at majority working-class groups.)

—Betsy Leondar-Wright, author of *Missing Class*, coauthor of *The Color of Wealth*, associate professor of sociology at Lasell University, and coordinator of staffing at the Mission Project for Class Action

During the Focus Group

As people arrive, greet them warmly, and make sure you get a signed consent form (if not in advance). If you are using name tags, ask them to fill one out and wear it. Let them get food and find a seat and do a little chatting, as they might wish. Once seated, many focus group moderators begin with a relevant icebreaker. This could be simple introductions that have some meaning or connection to the focus. In the case of the ASA task force focus groups discussed above, we asked people to introduce themselves and where they were working/studying ("Hi, I'm Allison, and I am a professor at Oregon State University"). You will also want to introduce yourself and the study in simple terms. They've already read the consent form, but you would be surprised at how many people ignore the details there or don't remember them. Briefly talking about the study and then letting people ask any follow-up questions lays a good foundation for a successful discussion, as it reminds everyone what the point of the event is.

Focus groups should convene for between forty-five and ninety minutes. Of course, you must tell the participants the time you have chosen in advance, and you must promptly end at the time allotted. Do not make anyone nervous by extending the time. Let them know at the outset that you will adhere to this timeline. This should reduce the nervous checking of phones and watches and wall clocks as the end time draws near.

Set ground rules and expectations for the group discussion. My preference is to begin with a general question and let whoever wants to answer it do so, but other moderators expect each person to answer most questions. Explain how much cross-talk you will permit (or encourage). Again, my preference is to allow the group to pick up the ball and run with it, so I will sometimes keep my head purposefully down so that they engage with one another rather than me, but I have seen other moderators take a much more engaged position. Just be clear at the outset about what your expectations are. You may or may not want to explain how the group should deal with those who would dominate the conversation. Sometimes, simply stating at the outset that all voices should be heard is enough to create a more egalitarian discourse. Other times, you will have to actively step in to manage (moderate) the exchange to allow more voices to be heard. Finally, let people know they are free to get up to get more coffee or leave the room as they need (if you are OK with this). You may ask people to refrain from using their phones during the duration of the discussion. That is up to you too.

Either before or after the introductions (your call), begin recording the discussion *with their collective permission and knowledge*. If you have brought a friend or colleague to assist you (as you should), have them attend to the recording. Explain the role of your colleague to the group (e.g., they will monitor the recording and will take short notes throughout to help you when you read the transcript later; they will be a silent observer).

Once the focus group gets going, it may be difficult to keep up. You will need to make a lot of quick decisions during the discussion about whether to intervene or let it go unguided. Only you really care about the research question or topic, so only you will really know when the discussion is truly off topic. However

you handle this, keep your "participation" to a minimum. According to Lune and Berg (2018:95), the moderator's voice should show up in the transcript no more than 10 percent of the time. By the way, you should also ask your research assistant to take special note of the "intensity" of the conversation, as this may be lost in a transcript. If there are people looking overly excited or tapping their feet with impatience or nodding their heads in unison, you want some record of this for future analysis.

Researcher Note

I'm not sure why this stuck with me, but I thought it would be interesting to share. When I was reviewing my plan for conducting focus groups with one of my committee members, he suggested that I give the participants their gift cards first. The incentive for participating in the study was a gift card of their choice, and typical processes dictate that participants must complete the study in order to receive their gift card. However, my committee member (who is Native himself) suggested I give it at the beginning. As a qualitative researcher, you build trust with the people you engage with. You are asking them to share their stories with you, their intimate moments, their vulnerabilities, their time. Not to mention that Native people are familiar with being academia's subjects of interest with little to no benefit to be returned to them. To show my appreciation, one of the things I could do was to give their gifts at the beginning, regardless of whether or not they completed participating.

—Susanna Y. Park, PhD, mixed-methods researcher in public health and author of "How Native Women Seek Support as Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence: A Mixed-Methods Study"

After the Focus Group

Your "data" will be either fieldnotes taken during the focus group or, more desirably, transcripts of the recorded exchange. If you do not have permission to record the focus group discussion, make sure you take very clear notes during the exchange and then spend a few hours afterward filling them in as much as possible, creating a rich memo to yourself about what you saw and heard and experienced, including any notes about body language and interactions. Ideally, however, you will have recorded the discussion. It is still a good idea to spend some time immediately after the conclusion of the discussion to write a memo to yourself with all the things that may not make it into the written record (e.g., body language and interactions). This is also a good time to journal about or create a memo with your initial researcher reactions to what you saw, noting anything of particular interest that you want to come back to later on

(e.g., "It was interesting that no one thought Joe should quit his job, but in the other focus group, half of the group did. I wonder if this has something to do with the fact that all the participants were first-generation college students. I should pay attention to class background here.").

Please thank each of your participants in a follow-up email or text. Let them know you appreciated their time and invite follow-up questions or comments.

One of the difficult things about focus group transcripts is keeping speakers distinct. Eventually, you are going to be using pseudonyms for any publication, but for now, you probably want to know who said what. You can assign speaker numbers ("Speaker 1," "Speaker 2") and connect those identifications with particular demographic information in a separate document. Remember to clearly separate actual identifications (as with consent forms) to prevent breaches of anonymity. If you cannot identify a speaker when transcribing, you can write, "Unidentified Speaker." Once you have your transcript(s) and memos and fieldnotes, you can begin analyzing the data (chapters 18 and 19).

Advanced: Focus Groups on Sensitive Topics

Throughout this chapter, I have recommended against raising sensitive topics in focus group discussions. As an introvert myself, I find the idea of discussing personal topics in a group disturbing, and I tend to avoid conducting these kinds of focus groups. And yet I have actually participated in focus groups that do discuss personal information and consequently have been of great value to me as a participant (and researcher) because of this. There are even some researchers who believe this is the best use of focus groups (de Oliveira 2011). For example, Jordan et al. (2007) argue that focus groups should be considered most useful for illuminating locally sanctioned ways of talking about sensitive issues. So although I do not recommend the beginning qualitative researcher dive into deep waters before they can swim, this section will provide some guidelines for conducting focus groups on sensitive topics. To my mind, these are a *minimum* set of guidelines to follow when dealing with sensitive topics.

First, *be transparent* about the place of sensitive topics in your focus group. If the whole point of your focus group is to discuss something sensitive, such as how women gain support after traumatic sexual assault events, make this abundantly clear in your consent form and recruiting materials. *It is never appropriate to blindside participants with sensitive or threatening topics.*

Second, create a confidentiality form (figure 12.2) for each participant to sign. These forms carry no legal weight, but they do create an expectation of confidentiality for group members.

In order to respect the privacy of all participants in [insert name of study here], all parties are asked to

read and sign the statement below. If you have any reason not to sign, please discuss this with [insert your name], the researcher of this study,

I, _____, agree to maintain the confidentiality of the information discussed by all participants and researchers during the focus group discussion.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Signature:_____ Date:_____

Figure 12.2 Confidentiality Agreement of Focus Group Participants

Third, provide abundant space for opting out of the discussion. Participants are, of course, always permitted to refrain from answering a question or to ask for the recording to be stopped. It is important that focus group members know they have these rights during the group discussion as well. And if you see a person who is looking uncomfortable or like they want to hide, you need to step in affirmatively and remind everyone of these rights.

Finally, if things go "off the rails," permit yourself the ability to end the focus group. Debrief with each member as necessary.

Further Readings

Barbour, Rosaline. 2018. *Doing Focus Groups*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. Written by a medical sociologist based in the UK, this is a good how-to guide for conducting focus groups.

Gibson, Faith. 2007. "Conducting Focus Groups with Children and Young People: Strategies for Success." *Journal of Research in Nursing* 12(5):473–483. As the title suggests, this article discusses both methodological and practical concerns when conducting focus groups with children and young people and offers some tips and strategies for doing so effectively.

Hopkins, Peter E. 2007. "Thinking Critically and Creatively about Focus Groups." *Area* 39(4):528–535. Written from the perspective of critical/human geography, Hopkins draws on examples from his own work conducting focus groups with Muslim men. Useful for thinking about positionality.

Jordan, Joanne, Una Lynch, Marianne Moutray, Marie-Therese O'Hagan, Jean Orr, Sandra Peake, and

John Power. 2007. "Using Focus Groups to Research Sensitive Issues: Insights from Group Interviews on Nursing in the Northern Ireland 'Troubles.'" *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 6(4), 1–19. A great example of using focus groups productively around emotional or sensitive topics. The authors suggest that focus groups should be considered most useful for illuminating locally sanctioned ways of talking about sensitive issues.

Merton, Robert K., Marjorie Fiske, and Patricia L. Kendall. 1956. *The Focused Interview: A Manual of Problems and Procedures.* New York: Free Press. This is one of the first classic texts on conducting interviews, including an entire chapter devoted to the "group interview" (chapter 6).

Morgan, David L. 1986. "Focus Groups." *Annual Review of Sociology* 22:129–152. An excellent sociological review of the use of focus groups, comparing and contrasting to both surveys and interviews, with some suggestions for improving their use and developing greater rigor when utilizing them.

de Oliveira, Dorca Lucia. 2011. "The Use of Focus Groups to Investigate Sensitive Topics: An Example Taken from Research on Adolescent Girls' Perceptions about Sexual Risks." *Cien Saude Colet* 16(7):3093–3102. Another example of discussing sensitive topics in focus groups. Here, the author explores using focus groups with teenage girls to discuss AIDS, risk, and sexuality as a matter of public health interest.

Peek, Lori, and Alice Fothergill. 2009. "Using Focus Groups: Lessons from Studying Daycare Centers, 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina." *Qualitative Research* 9(1):31–59. An examination of the efficacy and value of focus groups by comparing three separate projects: a study of teachers, parents, and children at two urban daycare centers; a study of the responses of second-generation Muslim Americans to the events of September 11; and a collaborative project on the experiences of children and youth following Hurricane Katrina. Throughout, the authors stress the strength of focus groups with marginalized, stigmatized, or vulnerable individuals.

Wilson, Valerie. 1997. "Focus Groups: A Useful Qualitative Method for Educational Research?" *British Educational Research Journal* 23(2):209–224. A basic description of how focus groups work using an example from a study intended to inform initiatives in health education and promotion in Scotland.

CHAPTER 13. PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Introduction

Although there are many possible forms of data collection in the qualitative researcher's toolkit, the two predominant forms are interviewing and observing. This chapter and the following chapter explore observational data collection. While most observers also include interviewing, many interviewers do not also include observation. It takes some special skills and a certain confidence to be a successful observer. There is also a rich tradition of what I am going to call "deep ethnography" that will be covered in chapter 14. In this chapter, we tackle the basics of observational data collection.

[Untitled image] by Atharva Tulsi on Unsplash

What is Participant Observation?

While interviewing helps us understand how people make sense of their worlds, observing them helps us understand how they act and behave. Sometimes, these actions and behaviors belie what people think or say about their beliefs and values and practices. For example, a person can tell you they would never racially discriminate, but observing how they actually interact with racialized others might undercut those statements. This is not always about dishonesty. Most of us tend to act differently than we think we do or think we should. That is part of being human. If you are interested in *what people say and believe*, interviewing is a useful technique for data collection. If you are interested in *how people act and behave*, observing them is essential. And if you want to know both, particularly how thinking/believing and acting/behaving complement or contradict each other, then a combination of interviewing and observing is ideal.

There are a variety of terms we use for observational data collection, from *ethnography* to *fieldwork* to *participant observation*. Many researchers use these terms fairly interchangeably, but here I will separately define them. The subject of this chapter is observation in general, or participant observation, to highlight the fact that observers can also be participants. The subject of chapter 14 will be *deep ethnography*, a particularly immersive form of study that is attractive for a certain subset of qualitative researchers. Both participant observation and deep ethnography are forms of fieldwork in which the researcher leaves their office and goes into a natural setting to record observations that take place in that setting.[1]

Participant observation (PO) is a *field* approach to gathering data in which the researcher enters a specific site for purposes of engagement or observation. Participation and observation can be conceptualized as a continuum, and any given study can fall somewhere on that line between full participation (researcher is a member of the community or organization being studied) and observation (researcher pretends to be a fly on the wall surreptitiously but mostly by permission, recording what happens). Participant observation forms the heart of ethnographic research, an approach, if you remember, that seeks to understand and write about a particular culture or subculture. We'll discuss what I am calling deep ethnography in the next chapter, where researchers often embed themselves for months if not years or even decades with a particular group to be able to fully capture "what it's like." But there are lighter versions of PO that can form the basis of a research study or that can supplement or work with other forms of data collection, such as interviews or archival research. This chapter will focus on these lighter versions, although note that much of what is said here can also apply to deep ethnography (chapter 14).

PO methods of gathering data present some special considerations—How involved is the researcher? How close is she to the subjects or site being studied? And how might her own social location—identity, position—affect the study? These are actually great questions for any kind of qualitative data collection but particularly apt when the researcher "enters the field," so to speak. It is helpful to visualize where one falls on a continuum or series of continua (figure 13.1).

1. Note that leaving one's office to interview someone in a coffee shop would not be considered fieldwork because the coffee shop is not an element of the study. If one sat down in a coffee shop and recorded observations, then this would be fieldwork.

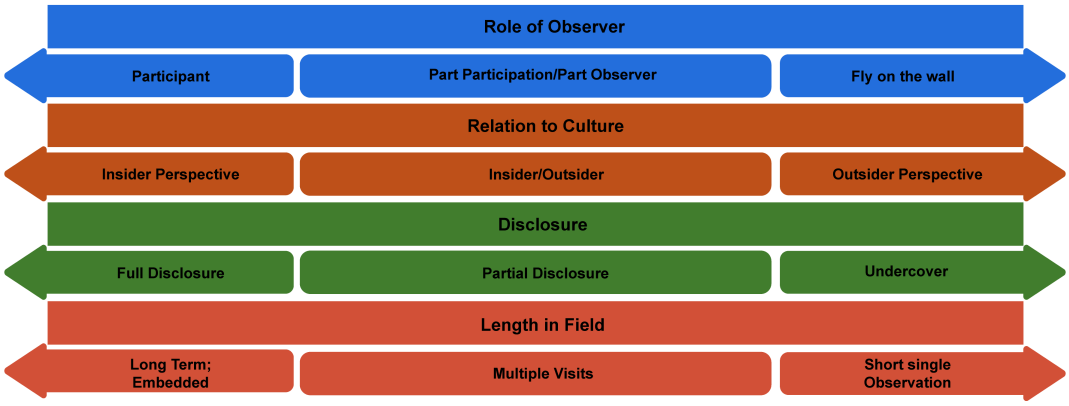

Figure 31.1 Fieldwork Possibilities

Let's take a few examples and see how these continua work. Think about each of the following scenarios, and map them onto the possibilities of figure 13.1:

- a nursing student during COVID doing research on patient/doctor interactions in the ICU
- a graduate student accompanying a police officer during her rounds one day in a part of the city the graduate student has never visited
- a professor raised Amish who goes back to her hometown to conduct research on Amish marriage practices for one month
- a sociologist who visits the Oregon Country Fair (OCF) every year and decides to write down his observations one year
    - (What if the sociologist was also a member of the OCF board and camping crew?)

Depending on how the researcher answers those questions and where they stand on the P.O. continuum, various techniques will be more or less effective. For example, in cases where the researcher is a participant, writing reflective fieldnotes at the end of the day may be the primary form of data collected. After all, if the researcher is fully participating, they probably don't have the time or ability to pull out a notepad and ask people questions. On the other side, when a researcher is more of an observer, this is exactly what they might do, so long as the people they are interrogating are able to answer while they are going about their business. The more an observer, the more likely the researcher will engage in relatively structured interviews (using techniques discussed in chapters 11 and 12); the more a participant, the more likely casual conversations or "unstructured interviews" will form the core of the data collected.[2]

2. This is one reason why I have chosen to discuss deep ethnography in a separate chapter (chapter 14).

Observation and Qualitative Traditions

Observational techniques are used whenever the researcher wants to document actual behaviors and practices as they happen (not as they are explained or recorded historically). Many traditions of inquiry employ observational data collection, but not all traditions employ them in the same way. Chapter 14 will cover one very specific tradition: ethnography. Because the word ethnography is sometimes used for all fieldwork, I am calling the subject of chapter 14 deep ethnography, those studies that take as their focus the documentation through the description of a culture or subculture. Deeply immersive, this tradition of ethnography typically entails several months or even years in the field. But there are plenty of other uses of observation that are less burdensome to the researcher.

Grounded Theory, in which theories emerge from a rigorous and systematic process of induction, is amenable to both interviewing and observing forms of data collection, and some of the best Grounded Theory works employ a deft combination of both. Often closely aligned with Grounded Theory in sociology is the tradition of **symbolic interactionism** (SI). Interviews and observations in combination are necessary to properly address the SI question, *What common understandings give meaning to people's interactions*? Gary Alan Fine's body of work fruitfully combines interviews and observations to build theory in response to this SI question. His *Authors of the Storm: Meteorologists and the Culture of Prediction* is based on field observation and interviews at the Storm Prediction Center in Oklahoma; the National Weather Service in Washington, DC; and a few regional weather forecasting outlets in the Midwest. Using what he heard and what he observed, he builds a theory of weather forecasting based on social and cultural factors that take place inside local offices. In *Morel Tales: The Culture of Mushrooming*, Fine investigates the world of mushroom hunters through participant observation and interviews, eventually building a theory of "naturework" to describe how the meanings people hold about the world are constructed and are socially organized—our understanding of "nature" is based on human nature, if you will.

Phenomenology typically foregrounds interviewing, as the purpose of this tradition is to gather people's understandings and meanings about a phenomenon. However, it is quite common for phenomenological interviewing to be supplemented with some observational data, especially as a check on the "reality" of the situations being described by those interviewed. In my own work, for example, I supplemented primary interviews with working-class college students with some participant observational work on the campus in which they were studying. This helped me gather information on the general silence about class on campus, which made the salience of class in the interviews even more striking (Hurst 2010a).

Critical theories such as standpoint approaches, feminist theory, and Critical Race Theory are often multimethod in design. Interviews, observations (possibly participation), and archival/historical data are all employed to gather an understanding of how a group of persons experiences a particular setting or institution or phenomenon and *how things can be made more just*. In *Making Elite Lawyers*, Robert Granfield (1992) drew on both classroom observations and in-depth interviews with students to document the conservatizing effects of the Harvard legal education on working-class students, female students, and

students of color. In this case, stories recounted by students were amplified by searing examples of discrimination and bias observed by Granfield and reported in full detail through his fieldnotes.

Entry Access and Issues

Managing your entry into a field site is one of the most important and nerve-wracking aspects of doing ethnographic research. Unlike interviews, which can be conducted in neutral settings, the field is an actual place with its own rules and customs that you are seeking to explore. How you "gain access" will depend on what kind of field you are entering. If your field site is a physical location with walls and a front desk (such as an office building or an elementary school), you will need permission from someone in the organization to enter and to conduct your study. Negotiating this might take weeks or even months. If your field site is a public site (such as a public dog park or city sidewalks), there is no "official" gatekeeper, but you will still probably need to find a person present at the site who can vouch for you (e.g., other dog owners or people hanging out on their stoops).[3] And if your field site is semipublic, as in a shopping mall, you might have to weigh the pros and cons of gaining "official" permission, as this might impede your progress or be difficult to ascertain whose permission to request. If you recall, many of the ethical dilemmas discussed in chapter 7 were about just such issues.

Even with official (or unofficial) permission to enter the site, however, your quest to gain access is not done. You will still need to gain the trust and permission of the people you encounter at that site. If you are a mere observer in a public setting, you probably do not need each person you observe to sign a consent form, but if you are a participant in an event or enterprise who is also taking notes and asking people questions, you probably do. Each study is unique here, so I recommend talking through the ethics of permission and consent seeking with a faculty mentor.

A separate but related issue from permission is how you will introduce yourself and your presence. How you introduce yourself to people in the field will depend very much on what level of participation you have chosen as well as whether you are an insider or outsider. Sometimes your presence will go unremarked, whereas other times you may stick out like a very sore thumb. Lareau (2021) advises that you be "vague but accurate" when explaining your presence. You don't want to use academic jargon (unless your field is the academy!) that would be off-putting to the people you meet. Nor do you want to deceive anyone. "Hi, I'm Allison, and I am here to observe how students use career services" is accurate and simple and more effective than "I am here to study how race, class, and gender affect college students' interactions with career services personnel."

3. This person is sometimes referred to as the [pb_glossary id="389"]informant [/pb_glossary](and more on these characters in chapter 14).

Researcher Note

Something that surprised me and that I still think about a lot is how to explain to respondents what I'm doing and why and how to help them feel comfortable with field work. When I was planning fieldwork for my dissertation, I was thinking of it from a researcher's perspective and not from a respondent's perspective. It wasn't until I got into the field that I started to realize what a strange thing I was planning to spend my time on and asking others to allow me to do. Like, can I follow you around and write notes? This varied a bit by site—it was easier to ask to sit in on meetings, for example—but asking people to let me spend a lot of time with them was awkward for me and for them. I ended up asking if I could shadow them, a verb that seemed to make clear what I hoped to be able to do. But even this didn't get around issues like respondents' self-consciousness or my own. For example, respondents sometimes told me that their lives were "boring" and that they felt embarrassed to have someone else shadow them when they weren't "doing anything." Similarly, I would feel uncomfortable in social settings where I knew only one person. Taking field notes is not something to do at a party, and when introduced as a researcher, people would sometimes ask, "So are you researching me right now?" The answer to that is always yes. I figured out ways of taking notes that worked (I often sent myself text messages with jotted notes) and how to get more comfortable explaining what I wanted to be able to do (wanting to see the campus from the respondent's perspective, for example), but it is still something I work to improve.

—Elizabeth M. Lee, Associate Professor of Sociology at Saint Joseph's University, author of *Class and Campus Life* and coauthor of *Geographies of Campus Inequality*

Reflexivity in Fieldwork

As always, being aware of who you are, how you are likely to be read by others in the field, and how your own experiences and understandings of the world are likely to affect your reading of others in the field are all very important to conducting successful research. When Annette Lareau (2021) was managing a team of graduate student researchers in her study of parents and children, she noticed that her middle-class graduate students took in stride the fact that children called adults by their first names, while her working-class-origin graduate students "were shocked by what they considered the rudeness and disrespect middle-class children showed toward their parents and other adults" (151). This "finding" emerged from particular fieldnotes taken by particular research assistants. Having graduate students with different class backgrounds turned out to be useful. Being reflexive in this case meant interrogating one's own expectations

about how children should act toward adults. Creating **thick descriptions** in the fieldnotes (e.g., describing how children name adults) is important, but thinking about one's response to those descriptions is equally so. Without reflection, it is possible that important aspects never even make it into the fieldnotes because they seem "unremarkable."

The Data of Observational Work: Fieldnotes

In interview data collection, recordings of interviews are transcribed into the data of the study. This is not possible for much PO work because (1) aural recordings of observations aren't possible and (2) conversations that take place on-site are not easily recorded. Instead, the participant observer takes notes, either during the fieldwork or at the day's end. These notes, called "fieldnotes," are then the primary form of data for PO work.

Writing fieldnotes takes a lot of time. Because fieldnotes are your primary form of data, you cannot be stingy with the time it takes. Most practitioners suggest it takes at least the same amount of time to write up notes as it takes to be in the field, and many suggest it takes double the time. If you spend three hours at a meeting of the organization you are observing, it is a good idea to set aside five to six hours to write out your fieldnotes. Different researchers use different strategies about how and when to do this. Somewhat obviously, the earlier you can write down your notes, the more likely they are to be accurate. Writing them down at the end of the day is thus the default practice. However, if you are plainly exhausted, spending several hours trying to recall important details may be counterproductive. Writing fieldnotes the next morning, when you are refreshed and alert, may work better.

Reseaarcher Note

How do you take *fieldnotes*? Any advice for those wanting to conduct an ethnographic study?

Fieldnotes are so important, especially for qualitative researchers. A little advice when considering how you approach fieldnotes: Record as much as possible! Sometimes I write down fieldnotes, and I often audio-record them as well to transcribe later. Sometimes the space to speak what I observed is helpful and allows me to be able to go a little more in-depth or to talk out something that I might not quite have the words for just yet. Within my fieldnote, I include feelings and think about the following questions: How do I feel before data collection? How did I feel when I was engaging/watching? How do I feel after data collection? What was going on for me before this particular data collection? What did I notice about how folks were

engaging? How were participants feeling, and how do I know this? Is there anything that seems different than other data collections? What might be going on in the world that might be impacting the participants? As a qualitative researcher, it's also important to remember our own influences on the research—our feelings or current world news may impact how we observe or what we might capture in fieldnotes.

—Kim McAloney, PhD, College Student Services Administration Ecampus coordinator and instructor

What should be included in those fieldnotes? The obvious answer is "everything you observed and heard relevant to your research question." The difficulty is that you often don't know what is relevant to your research question when you begin, as your research question itself can develop and transform during the course of your observations. For example, let us say you begin a study of second-grade classrooms with the idea that you will observe gender dynamics between both teacher and students and students and students. But after five weeks of observation, you realize you are taking a lot of notes about how teachers validate certain attention-seeking behaviors among some students while ignoring those of others. For example, when Daisy (White female) interrupts a discussion on frogs to tell everyone she has a frog named Ribbit, the teacher smiles and asks her to tell the students what Ribbit is like. In contrast, when Solomon (Black male) interrupts a discussion on the planets to tell everyone his big brother is called Jupiter by their stepfather, the teacher frowns and shushes him. These notes spark interest in how teachers favor and develop some students over others and the role of gender, race, and class in these teacher practices. You then begin to be much more careful in recording these observations, and you are a little less attentive to the gender dynamics among students. But note that had you not been fairly thorough in the first place, these crucial insights about teacher favoritism might never have been made.

Here are some suggestions for things to include in your fieldnotes as you begin: (1) descriptions of the physical setting; (2) people in the site: who they are and how they interact with one another (what roles they are taking on); and (3) things overheard: conversations, exchanges, questions. While you should develop your own personal system for organizing these fieldnotes (computer vs. printed journal, for example), at a minimum, each set of fieldnotes should include the date, time in the field, persons observed, and location specifics. You might also add keywords to each set so that you can search by names of participants, dates, and locations. Lareau (2021:167) recommends covering the following key issues, which mnemonically spell out WRITE—*W*: who, what, when, where, how; R: reaction (responses to the action in question and the response to the response); I: inaction (silence or nonverbal response to an action); T: timing (how slowly or quickly someone is speaking); and E: emotions (nonverbal signs of emotion and/or stoicism).

In addition to the observational fieldnotes, if you have time, it is a good practice to write *reflective memos* in which you ask yourself what you have learned (either about the study or about your abilities in the field). If you don't have time to do this for every set of fieldnotes, at least get in the practice of memoing at certain key junctures, perhaps after reading through a certain number of fieldnotes (e.g., every third day

of fieldnotes, you set aside two hours to read through the notes and memo). These memos can then be appended to relevant fieldnotes. You will be grateful for them when it comes time to analyze your data, as they are a preliminary by-the-seat-of-your-pants analysis. They also help steer you toward the study you want to pursue rather than allow you to wallow in unfocused data.

Ethics of Fieldwork

Because most fieldwork requires multiple and intense interactions (even if merely observational) with real living people as they go about their business, there are potentially more ethical choices to be made. In addition to the ethics of gaining entry and permission discussed above, there are issues of accurate representation, of respecting privacy, of adequate financial compensation, and sometimes of financial and other forms of assistance (when observing/interacting with low-income persons or other marginalized populations). In other words, the ethical decision of fieldwork is never concluded by obtaining a signature on a consent form. Read this brief selection from Pascale's (2021) methods description (observation plus interviews) to see how many ethical decisions she made:

> Throughout I kept detailed ethnographic field and interview records, which included written notes, recorded notes, and photographs. I asked everyone who was willing to sit for a formal interview to speak only for themselves and offered each of them a prepaid Visa Card worth $25–40. I also offered everyone the opportunity to keep the card and erase the tape completely at any time they were dissatisfied with the interview in any way. No one asked for the tape to be erased; rather, people remarked on the interview being a really good experience because they felt heard. Each interview was professionally transcribed and for the most part the excerpts in this book are literal transcriptions. In a few places, the excerpta have been edited to reduce colloquial features of speech (e.g., you know, like, um) and some recursive elements common to spoken language. A few excerpts were placed into standard English for clarity. I made this choice for the benefit of readers who might otherwise find the insights and ideas harder to parse in the original. However, I have to acknowledge this as an act of class-based violence. I tried to keep the original phrasing whenever possible. (235)

Summary Checklist for Successful Participant Observation

The following are ten suggestions for being successful in the field, slightly paraphrased from Patton

(2002:331). Here, I take those ten suggestions and turn them into an extended "checklist" to use when designing and conducting fieldwork.

1. Consider all possible approaches to your field and your position relative to that field (see figure 13.2). Choose wisely and purposely. If you have access to a particular site or are part of a particular culture, consider the advantages (and disadvantages) of pursuing research in that area. Clarify the amount of disclosure you are willing to share with those you are observing, and justify that decision.
2. Take thorough and descriptive field notes. Consider how you will record them. Where your research is located will affect what kinds of field notes you can take and when, but do not fail to write them! Commit to a regular recording time. Your field notes will probably be the primary data source you collect, so your study's success will depend on thick descriptions and **analytical memos** you write to yourself about what you are observing.
3. Permit yourself to be flexible. Consider alternative lines of inquiry as you proceed. You might enter the field expecting to find something only to have your attention grabbed by something else entirely. This is perfectly fine (and, in some traditions, absolutely crucial for excellent results). When you do see your attention shift to an emerging new focus, take a step back, look at your original research design, and make careful decisions about what might need revising to adapt to these new circumstances.
4. Include triangulated data as a means of checking your observations. If you are that ICU nurse watching patient/doctor interactions, you might want to add a few interviews with patients to verify your interpretation of the interaction. Or perhaps pull some public data on the number of arrests for jaywalking if you are the student accompanying police on their rounds to find out if the large number of arrests you witnessed was typical.
5. Respect the people you are witnessing and recording, and allow them to speak for themselves whenever possible. Using direct quotes (recorded in your field notes or as supplementary recorded interviews) is another way to check the validity of the analyses of your observations. When designing your research, think about how you can ensure the voices of those you are interested in get included.
6. Choose your informants wisely. Who are they relative to the field you are exploring? What are the limitations (ethical and strategic) in using those particular informants, guides, and gatekeepers? Limit your reliance on them to the extent possible.
7. Consider all the stages of fieldwork, and have appropriate plans for each. Recognize that different talents are required at different stages of the data-collection process. In the beginning, you will probably spend a great deal of time building trust and rapport and will have less time to focus on

what is actually occurring. That's normal. Later, however, you will want to be more focused on and disciplined in collecting data while also still attending to maintaining relationships necessary for your study's success. Sometimes, especially when you have been invited to the site, those granting access to you will ask for feedback. Be strategic about when giving that feedback is appropriate. Consider how to extricate yourself from the site and the participants when your study is coming to an end. Have an ethical exit plan.

8. Allow yourself to be immersed in the scene you are observing. This is true even if you are observing a site as an outsider just one time. Make an effort to see things through the eyes of the participants while at the same time maintaining an analytical stance. This is a tricky balance to do, of course, and is more of an art than a science. Practice it. Read about how others have achieved it.
9. Create a practice of separating your descriptive notes from your analytical observations. This may be as clear as dividing a sheet of paper into two columns, one for description only and the other for questions or interpretation (as we saw in chapter 11 on interviewing), or it may mean separating out the time you dedicate to descriptions from the time you reread and think deeply about those detailed descriptions. However you decide to do it, recognize that these are two separate activities, both of which are essential to your study's success.
10. As always with qualitative research, be reflective and reflexive. Do not forget how your own experience and social location may affect both your interpretation of what you observe and the very things you observe themselves (e.g., where a patient says more forgiving things about an observably rude doctor because they read you, a nursing student, as likely to report any negative comments back to the doctor). Keep a research journal!

Further Readings

Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 2011. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. 2nd ed. University of Chicago Press. Excellent guide that uses actual unfinished fieldnote to illustrate various options for composing, reviewing, and incorporating fieldnote into publications.

Lareau, Annette. 2021. *Listening to People: A Practical Guide to Interviewing, Participant Observation,*

Data Analysis, and Writing It All Up. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Includes actual fieldnote from various studies with a really helpful accompanying discussion about how to improve them!

Wolfinger, Nicholas H. 2002. "On Writing Fieldnotes: Collection Strategies and Background Expectancies." *Qualitative Research* 2(1):85–95. Uses fieldnote from various sources to show how the researcher's expectations and preexisting knowledge affect what gets written about; offers strategies for taking useful fieldnote.

CHAPTER 14. DEEP ETHNOGRAPHY

Ethnography is the eye of the needle through which the threads of the imagination must pass.

-Paul Willis, *The Ethnographic Imagination*

Introduction

Philippe Bourgois was a young scholar when he set out to uncover the cultural dynamics of a poor neighborhood in New York City at the height of the crack epidemic of the early 1990s. To get near his subjects, he chose to live in the neighborhood (along with his wife and young child). His plan was to study poverty and ethnic segregation, which is why he chose East Harlem, a well-known barrio populated by Dominican and Puerto Rican immigrants. But living in the neighborhood allowed him to "hang out" daily with men on his block who were engaged in the drug trade, and his observations of the trade and his conversations with the men pushed his research toward an understanding of the complicated and structured reasons for selling crack. His book, five years in the making, is called *In Search of Respect*, and it is a masterpiece of what I am here calling deep ethnography, a particular immersive approach to observational research that comes out of a long tradition in the discipline of anthropology. Bourgois was himself trained as an anthropologist and had conducted studies in Latin America as a student. He adopted the anthropological approach of studying "other" cultures to a culture in, literally, his own backyard.

[Untitled image] by Cam on Unsplash

This chapter takes a closer look at deep ethnography—immersion in the field of a particularly long duration for the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding and appreciation of a particular culture or social world.

Clifford Geertz called this "deep hanging out." Whereas participant observation is often combined with semistructured interview techniques, deep ethnography's commitment to "living the life" or experiencing the situation as it really is demands more conversational and natural interactions with people. These interactions and conversations may take place over months or even years. As can be expected, there are some costs to this technique as well as some very large rewards when done competently. It is a huge commitment on the part of the researcher and is not to be undertaken lightly. It almost always upends the researcher's life and possibly that of their family as well.

Rubin (2021) describes three aspects of ethnographic fieldwork as (1) travel to an unfamiliar place, (2) the negotiation of access (i.e., permission to work/observe in the field), and (3) a fair amount of discomfort, either because of the unfamiliar setting (which might be dangerous) or simply because you are away from home and loved ones for extended periods of time (167–168). While all fieldwork (see chapter 13) includes negotiations of access, it is really only this deep form of ethnography that foregrounds the unfamiliarity of the place/culture and the discomfort involved in immersion into the unfamiliarity. This is why I have divided fieldwork into two separate chapters: to mark the qualitative break between the deeply immersive kind and its less exhaustive cousins previously discussed.

Anthropological Roots: "He Observes, He Records, He Analyzes"

There are some pieces of research that are so important to the ways that others conduct research that they are considered foundational to the field. One such piece is an essay by Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist who had spent many years of his (and his wife's) life deeply immersed in Java, Bali, Indonesia, and Sumatra. The essay "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" was published in 1972, although the cockfighting culture described was observed several years prior: "Early in April of 1958, my wife and I arrived, malarial and diffident, in a Balinese village we intended, as anthropologists, to study. A small place, about five hundred people, and relatively remote, it was its own world. We were intruders, professional ones, and the villagers dealt with us as Balinese seem always to deal with people not part of their life who yet press themselves upon them: as though we were not there. For them, and to a degree for ourselves, we were nonpersons, specters, invisible men."[1] After living in the village for an extended period of time, Geertz was struck by the seeming importance of the mostly illegal activity of forcing roosters to fight one another to the death. There seemed an obscenity to it linked to masculine status: "To anyone who has been in Bali any length of time, the deep psychological identification of Balinese men with their cocks is unmistakable. The double entendre here is deliberate. It works in exactly the same way in Balinese as it

1. All quotes here come from the full text, which is accessible at http://hypergeertz.jku.at/GeertzTexts/Deep_Play.htm.

does in English, even to producing the same tired jokes, strained puns, and uninventive obscenities." An example of "thick description," Geertz uses his detailed fieldnotes to evoke the atmosphere of the cockfight in such a way that the reader can share the experience. In the following passage, note the many specific details, including even the absence of expected events as well as the emotional valence reported:

> Cockfights (tetadjen; sabungan) are held in a ring about fifty feet square. Usually they begin toward late afternoon and run three or four hours until sunset. About nine or ten separate matches (sehet) comprise a program. Each match is precisely like the others in general pattern: there is no main match, no connection between individual matches, no variation in their format, and each is arranged on a completely ad hoc basis. After a fight has ended and the emotional debris is cleaned away—the bets paid, the curses cursed, the carcasses possessed—seven, eight, perhaps even a dozen men slip negligently into the ring with a cock and seek to find there a logical opponent for it. This process, which rarely takes less than ten minutes, and often a good deal longer, is conducted in a very subdued, oblique, even dissembling manner. Those not immediately involved give it at best but disguised, sidelong attention; those who, embarrassedly, are, attempt to pretend somehow that the whole thing is not really happening (Geertz 1972).

Geertz's analysis of the cockfight flows from this thick description of atmosphere, events, relationships, and meanings held by the participants. In other words, the meaning of the event (the subject of the research here) is found in this description itself. Geertz was able to make a theoretical argument about the importance of the cockfight by attending to the details of what it was like and what it was doing for the participants:

What sets the cockfight apart from the ordinary course of life, lifts it from the realm of everyday practical affairs, and surrounds it with an aura of enlarged importance is…that it provides a metasocial commentary upon the whole matter of assorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment. Its function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience; a story they tell themselves about themselves.…Every people, the proverb has it, loves its own form of violence. The cockfight is the Balinese reflection on theirs: on its look, its uses, its force, its fascination. Drawing on almost every level of Balinese experience, it brings together themes—animal savagery, male narcissism, opponent gambling, status rivalry, mass excitement, blood sacrifice—whose main connection is their involvement with rage and the fear of rage, and, binding them into a set of rules which at once contains them and allows them play, builds a symbolic structure in which, over and over again, the reality of their inner affiliation can be intelligibly felt.

Geertz did not travel to Bali to watch cockfights. He traveled to Bali to understand Balinese society. And he did so by being open to whatever was of seeming importance to the Balinese. This is the essence of how deep ethnography gets done. By definition, there can be no preconceived research question, as the very unfamiliarity of the culture precludes the researcher from knowing what is important in advance of immersing themselves in the culture.

In the 1970s and 1980s, qualitative researchers began adopting Geertz's anthropological technique of

observation/description/analysis of cultures and subcultures closer to home. Sociologists in particular were eager adopters.[2] If handled in this way, even what at first seems familiar can be experienced as strange. Think about organizations you belong to, for example. How might adopting a Geertzian eye deepen your understanding of, say, your soccer team's practice of high-fiving or your classroom's expectation that people face the front of the classroom? What if you observed the dynamics within the cultural center to which you belong? Might you be surprised at who speaks the most or how certain people are deferred to over others? Sarah Thornton (1996) spent four years immersed in 1990s rave culture, observing how new forms of hierarchy were being built in this youthful subculture, even as other traditional forms were subverted. Loïc Wacquant (2004) spent months in training as an apprentice boxer so he could understand boxing's appeal in poor neighborhoods (he found that it operated as a "skilled trade," attracting particularly ambitious working-class persons). Kris Paap (2006) worked in construction as one of the only female workers on site, developing the concept of "performing pigness" to help explain how masculinity was socially constructed and employed against outsiders.

At the core of all of these studies is the production of detailed fieldnotes, thick descriptions of both what is observed and the interpretive analyses of what is being observed as in Geertz's notes above.

Fieldnotes as Data Source

Although many (most?) ethnographic research involves talking to people both informally and formally through interviews that can be recorded and transcribed, the bulk of the "data" in ethnographic research comes from what you observe when in the field. Writing down those observations in the form of fieldnotes becomes the primary data source for this kind of research (see chapter 13). There are some well-established rules for writing ethnographic fieldnotes as well as a plethora of helpful idiosyncratic advice. In other words, there are great guidelines, but writing fieldnotes is also deeply personal, and every person is going to do it a little bit differently. Further, most ethnographers develop their ability to take great fieldnotes over time. Practice definitely helps.

The suggestions made here fall into the mostly agreed-upon conventions for writing fieldnotes. First, what should you write down? Obviously, you should be writing down what you observe. But…everything? Is that even possible? The more "open" and unfocused your study is (which is most qualitative research in the beginning), the more difficult it will be to determine what is interesting and relevant, so you will probably be writing a lot of fieldnotes. These fieldnotes should strive to capture not only what you are observing but what is missing that you might otherwise expect. For that, you will need to be constantly reflective and attentive.

2. Although to be fair, there was always a strong observational tradition associated with the University of Chicago.

As you go deeper into the study, you might begin to focus on a particular aspect, as discussed in chapter 13 (such as gender interactions), and so begin to write fuller notes when making those observations. But even so, you will want to record everything you can about those "gender interactions"—who, what, when, how, what tone of voice, what consequences, and so on. To ensure these are thick descriptions, you will also want to be very clear in recording the social context—the meanings and interpretations that appear to be occurring alongside whatever actions you are recording. For example, if you record third-grade teacher Mrs. Hamish calling on Johnny more often than Lula, you will also want to record any emotional reactions of other students to this phenomenon (maybe all the students look to Johnny too, which will tell you something interesting about the overall societal expectations around gender, even in this elementary school classroom).

In addition to writing down what you observe, you will also want to make notes on your data collection techniques. This will help you be reflective, but it is also an important aspect of accurate recording. Remember that you yourself are an instrument of data collection, so your presence has an effect, whether you like it or not. If you are particularly grumpy this day because you read a report on gender pay inequality, perhaps that is coloring your observations. Other times, you yourself may be signaling particular gender expectations in terms of how you are dressed and how you are presenting yourself. What were you wearing when you observed this interaction? (How might that affect the gender interactions you observed?)[3]

Always include reflective memoing. Record your own reactions to what you heard and observed. What was striking about this event or exchange, and why is this striking to you? Not only can these fieldnotes be very helpful when it comes time to make sense of what you are observing and to write down some possible "findings" or generate concepts (such as Paap's [2006] "performing pigness"), but they are also psychologically helpful reminders. It may be months or years between the time you make your observations and the time you write about them. Having notes of your own reactions can put you back into yourself as the observer. Otherwise, your notes will read as if they were written by a foreign correspondent, and you will have forgotten the key that pulls them together.

Geertz instructed ethnographers to "observe; describe; analyze." All three of these components need to make it into your fieldnotes. Most ethnographers draw a distinction between observational fieldnotes, reflective memos, and analytical memos. Conceptually, these are distinct, but in practice, you may find yourself muddling them. Using different fonts (if using the computer) or highlighting colors (if writing manually) can help you sort them out. Analytical memos are places where you attempt to capture the meaning of what you are observing. They are often rough and frequently wrong in the beginning: you simply have not made enough observations to understand what is going on. But forcing yourself to think

3. This may seem like no one's business what you were wearing, but people do make judgments all the time based on initial physical markers, including dress. Posselt (2016) shared a story in which "wearing pink" seemed to make older male professors more friendly and forthcoming to her. Who knows what effect this had on professors espousing feminist ideals?

about what you are observing will help you be a more attentive observer. For example, if you think you are noticing gender dynamics in which male students appear to be favored by teachers in the classroom, noting this should push you to look for cases where this is not true, the absence of the observation. The more complete your analytical memos, the stronger and more attentive your following observations will be.

Whatever form you use, I recommend adding a single-page cover sheet that includes basic information, which may look something like this:

Fieldnotes #132

Date: July 16, 2022 (Saturday)

Location: Farmer's Market. Downtown Corvallis

Time: 10:02 am-1:35 pm (total time in field: 93m)

Weather: Sunny, warm (high 70s)

Time spent writing fieldnotes: 2 hours (12 pages)

General Comments: bustling activity; very little mask wearing; lots of people were is small groups and there was a lot of hugging in greetings

Number of persons observed: 47 adult visitors; 19 booth tenders; numerous pets and children

Analytic Themes: Resumption of "Normal"? Small Group Clustering ("dates")?

Personal Reflections: I was very happy to get to the Farmer's Market today, and everyone seemed in such a good mood (don't know if I was reflecting myself or actually saw it; I know I smiled a lot)

Always keep in mind that you will be going back to these fieldnotes *as your primary data*, so you want to ensure that you have a system in place that allows you to easily sort, sift, compare, and recall as necessary.

Forming Relationships with Informants and Guides

Because of the immersive quality of deep ethnography, finding a person already embedded in the site or culture who can inform and guide you can be crucial to your success. The more "exotic" or unfamiliar the site, the more you will probably depend on this person (or persons). There are two big consequences of this reliance. First, if you choose an unreliable informant, your observations and interpretations may be skewed. For example, say that you are trying to understand how the graffiti subculture operates. Because tagging is still mostly illegal, graffiti artists are not likely to open up to just anyone. So you find a tagger who claims to

know everyone and the general "code" of graffiti in your particular research location (let's say, Cleveland, Ohio). Let's call him Paintball. But six months in, after you have gained some credibility among the ten or twelve taggers your informant has introduced you to, you learn that no one really trusts Paintball, that he kind of desperately has tried to join the main crews, and that no one thinks he is a very good artist. Even more than that, they don't think he understands what it is they are doing, and he even gets the lingo wrong. Because you have spent enough time with these other artists, you can take all of this into consideration in your analyses, but imagine if your only access to the codes and culture was Paintball himself. The less time you have in the field, the more likely you are to rely on one or two informants (because you haven't had the time to develop further relationships). This is one big reason deep ethnography takes so long to complete.

The second big issue actually follows from the long completion time. The more time you spend with informants and guides and all the people whom you are observing and with whom you are interacting, the harder it will be to "extricate" yourself at the conclusion of the study. Many ethnographers find it difficult or even unethical to sever ties with people they have been studying for years. Take the example of Jay MacLeod, who first formed relationships in a particular low-income neighborhood (Clarendon Heights) when he was a college student in 1981. He worked with young people for several summers, writing an undergraduate thesis on the occupational aspirations of two separate groups of older teenagers, the "Hallway Hangers" (mostly White) and the "Brothers" (mostly Black). He completed his research in 1984, and it was published as *Ain't No Makin' It* in 1987 to critical acclaim. It's a great book, lovingly recording the hopes and dreams and obstacles to the success of these young men. Concerned and invested, Jay MacLeod could not fully extricate himself from the lives of his informants. Even as he moved to England to continue his studies and then to rural Mississippi to work as a community organizer, he kept in touch. Eight years after his original observations, he returned to Clarendon Heights for some intensive fieldwork. What had happened to the young men? Had any of them made it to college? Did any of them have gainful employment? Had they stayed out of trouble? Eight hundred pages of interviews later, he reported answers to those questions in an expanded publication in 1995 of *Ain't No Makin' It*, pretty much confirming the original title. Still invested, Jay MacLeod continued to monitor the lives of his informants. Now a parish priest, he went back a third time in 2006 and 2007 and reinterviewed most of the original Hallway Hangers and Brothers (some had passed away by then). In middle age, the men of Clarendon Heights speak directly to the reader in the pages of the third publication of *Ain't No Makin' It*. Twenty-five years after he first made contact, MacLeod still had one foot in the "field."

Conclusion: Immersive Storytelling

I have told more stories in this chapter than I have in previous ones on purpose. One of the criteria for doing ethnography well is the aesthetic merit of the story told. There is something about humans that respond to stories. Our theories are nothing more than stories we tell ourselves about the world that are testable

and reliable (for the moment). The best ethnographies let readers experience the culture under observation, and they do this through the stories they report and create. Poetry, metaphor, emotional impact—all help advance the story's ability to be told. All qualitative researchers know this to some extent, but those working in the ethnographic tradition are particularly attuned to the necessity of thick descriptive meaning making.

And good ethnographers also know that they are part of the story as well. There is no neutral standpoint when we inhabit the same world as those we observe. We are deep in it, whether we like it or not. In *Catching Hell in the City of Angels*, Joâo Helios Costa Vargas (2006) presents a portrait of racism and economic dislocation in South Central Los Angeles. Including his own experience as an immigrant of color in the story he tells contributes to a greater understanding of the forces at work. It is also impossible to do otherwise:

> The "fly on the wall" approach in anthropology, still taught as an antidote to the influences of one's subjectivity on the research process, only obscures the fact that even those who try to be insects are, at the very least, already influencing the social environment in which they conduct their fieldwork and, more important, are already committing themselves to a very clear moral and political position—that of letting things remain as they are, or leaving the status quo untouched. Neutrality is impossible—or better still, neutrality may work for the maintenance of privileges, but it does not work for all. Many forms of oppression, exclusion, and death continue to be perpetrated in the name of objectivity and detachment. (18–19)

Supplement: Variations

There are two important variations of ethnography that are worth mentioning here

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is the general term for observational research that uses the researcher's own identity or personal location in the world to launch a broader investigation of that world. It is an approach that leverages the full and total access a person has to a culture through themselves as a key informant. A partial listing of the many other versions of autoethnography or names for this kind of research would include autobiographical ethnography, critical autobiography, ethnobiography, Indigenous ethnography, narrative biography/ethnography, personal narrative, and socioautobiography. Written in the first person, the product of this approach can take many forms, from research article to poem to short-story fiction. Rather than use the reflecting memoing as a guide and supplement to descriptive and analytical

memoing, those reflections become the core of what is reported, albeit *thickly*, drawing connections between the personal and the cultural context and/or social structure. Patton (2002:87) summarizes five criteria of quality for this kind of research: (1) making a substantive contribution to our understanding of social life, (2) having aesthetic merit (being well written and not boring!), (3) being honestly reflexive with enough self-awareness and self-exposure for readers to evaluate the researcher's point of view, (4) generating new questions or having an emotional impact that connects the reader to the issues raised, and finally, (5) expressing reality truthfully, being a credible account of the researcher's lived experience.

Institutional Ethnography

Derived from the work of feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith, **Institutional Ethnography** (IE) is a critical qualitative methodology that examines how people's everyday lives are organized by institutional forces. According to Pascale (2021), this means that "IE researchers treat local experience as a window into how broader power relations operate" (236). The approach leverages the local to understand the larger institutional/social structure, or what Smith often referred to as "translocal relations of ruling." One might even see this as a parallel to autoethnography: whereas autoethnography uses the self to understand the larger culture in which the self finds itself, IE uses the local to understand the larger structure in which local relations are embedded. Primarily, IE researchers examine work processes and how they are coordinated, focusing on forms of social control operating in that coordination. In Living on the Edge, Pascale traveled to four specific regions of the US to find out how people were dealing with economic hardship. Using the IE approach, the book is less about the particular people whose stories anchor the book and more about the larger contexts in which they find themselves—specifically, how "business practices and government policies create, normalize, and entrench economic struggles for many in order to produce extreme wealth for a few" (xi). Local experiences provide "a window into how broader power relations work" (236). Pascale takes the stories about unemployment, bad jobs, payday loans, and slum landlords and traces these back to structures of power and policy. For example, she explains payday lending and food deserts as background to a story about being in debt and hungry. Embedded throughout the text are "budgets" that highlight the disjuncture between what people are paid and what is required for a decent living in a particular place with particular needs. These budgets are an eye-opener for those accustomed to being able to pay their bills. Ultimately, Pascale explains, this is a book "about power that has been leveraged by government and corporations at the expense of ordinary people" (xi). This is the power of the IE approach—to make legible the power structures in which we are embedded by attending to the particular stories and circumstances of a locality.

Further Readings

Bourgois, Phillipe, and Jeffrey Schonberg. 2009. *Righteous Dopefiend*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.* An example of a multiyear, multisited deep ethnography that makes some interesting and controversial ethical choices about data collection and presentation, including the identification of participants and the inclusion of full-page photographs in heartrending black and white.

Devault, Marjorie L. 2006. "Introduction: What Is Institutional Ethnography?" *Social Problems* 53(3):294–298. A relatively easy overview of institutional ethnography.

Duneier, Mitchell. 2000. *Sidewalk*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. A great example of an urban ethnography, replete with careful discussions about the ethics of this kind of research. Also recommended is the accompanying documentary that can be found free on YouTube (https://youtu.be/Bv4civR8mSI), which includes panel discussions with several of the participants of the study.

Duneier, Mitchell. 2011. "How Not to Lie with Ethnography." *Sociological Methodology* 41:1–11. Provides two examples of thought experiments that increase the reliability of ethnographic research.

Ferrell, Jeff. 1996. *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.* A good example of an immersive ethnography where the author "hangs out" with a team of graffiti artists for several months.

Fetterman, David M. 2019. *Ethnography: Step-by-Step*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. A good textbook on ethnography that is appropriate for undergraduate and graduate students.

Janesik, Valerie J. 2015. *"Stretching" Exercises for Qualitative Researchers*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. This is an unusual treasure that should accompany qualitative researchers at all stages of data collection and analysis but is particularly helpful, in my opinion, for ethnographers.

Jerolmack, Colin, and Shamus Khan. 2014. "Talk Is Cheap: Ethnography and the Attitudinal Fallacy." *Sociological Methods & Research* 43(2):178–209. A little article that started something of a good-natured war between interviewers and observers; the authors point out that what people say is often a poor predictor of what they do and argue strongly for the use of ethnography instead of interviewing.

Pascale, Celine-Marie. 2021. *Living on the Edge: When Hard Times Become a Way of Life*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.* A recent application of institutional ethnography; readable and inspiring.

Pearson, Charles, and Philippe Bourgois. 1995. "Hope to Die a Dope Fiend." *Cultural Anthropology*

10(4):587–593. A vivid example of ethnographic narration or how to turn excellent field notes into a compelling presentation. The emotionality of this text can also serve as a caution or point of discussion.*

Sanjek, Roger. 1990. *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. If you are an anthropologist, this is a must-read. A collection of anthropologists writing about field notes and the place of fieldnote in the development of the discipline.

Smith, Dorothy E. 2005. *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press. The classic statement of institutional ethnography written by its founder. Not an easy read, but one that is likely to provoke and inspire.

Taber, Nancy. 2010. "Institutional Ethnography, Autoethnography, and Narrative: An Argument for Incorporating Multiple Methodologies." *Qualitative Research* 10:5–25. Explains institutional ethnography through an application to a particular study of the military.

Von Maanen, John. 2011. *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. A somewhat personal and fascinating look at how to write fieldnote, illustrating three different forms: realist tales, confessional tales, and impressionist tales. Recommended for graduate students and seasoned practitioners alike.

Willis, Paul. 2000. *The Ethnographic Imagination*. London: Polity Press. Drawing on a lifetime of research into various facets of social life (unemployment, dance clubs, television viewing), Willis makes a strong argument for creativity both in the conducting of ethnographic research and in the interpretation of social behavior.

CHAPTER 15. MIXED METHODS

Introduction

Where deep ethnography (chapter 14) is a tradition that relies on naturalistic techniques of data collection, foregrounding the specificity of a particular culture and site, there are other times when researchers are looking for approaches that allow them to make use of some of the analytical techniques developed by statisticians and quantitative researchers to generalize the data they are collecting. Rather than push into a deeper understanding of a culture through thick interpretive descriptions, these researchers would rather *abstract* from a sufficiently large body of cases (or persons) to hazard predictions about a connection, relationship, or phenomenon. You may already have some experience learning basic statistical techniques for analyzing large data sets. In this chapter, we describe how some research harnesses those techniques to supplement or augment qualitative research, *mixing methods* for the purpose of building stronger claims and arguments. There are many ways this can be done, but perhaps the most common **mixed methods** research design involves the use of survey data (analyzed statistically via descriptive cross-tabs or fairly simple regression analyses of large number probability samples) plus semistructured interviews. This chapter will take a closer look at mixed methods approaches, explain why you might want to consider them (or not), and provide some guidance for successful mixed methods research designs.

What Is It? Triangulation, Multiple Methods, and Mixed Methods

First, a bit of nomenclature. Mixed methods can be understood as a path toward **triangulation**. Triangulation is a way of strengthening the validity of a study by employing multiple forms of data, multiple investigators, multiple theoretical perspectives, or multiple research methods. Let's say that Anikit wants to know more about how first-year college students acclimate to college. He could talk to some college students (conduct interviews) and also observe their behavior (fieldwork). He is strengthening the validity of his study by including multiple forms of data. If both the interview and the observations indicate heavy reliance on peer networks, a reported finding about the importance of peers would be more credible than had he only interviewed students or only observed them. If he discovers that students say one thing but do another (which is pretty common, after all), then this, too, becomes an interesting finding (e.g., Why do they forget to talk about their peers when peers have so much observable influence?). In this case, we say that Anikit is employing multiple forms of data, or even that he relies on multiple methods. But

he is not, strictly speaking, mixing data. Mixed methods refer specifically to the use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. If Anikit were to supplement his interviews and/or observations with a random sample of one thousand college students, he would then be employing a mixed methods approach. Although he might not get the rich details of how friends matter in the survey, the large sample size allows statistical analyses of relationships among variables, perhaps showing which groups of students are more likely to benefit from strong peer networks. So to summarize, both multiple methods and mixed methods are forms of research triangulation,[1] but mixed methods include mixing both qualitative and quantitative research elements.

Mixed methods techniques, then, are pretty unique. Where many qualitative researchers have little interest in statistical generalizability, and many quantitative researchers undervalue the importance of rich descriptions of singular cases, the mixed methods researcher has an open mind about both approaches simultaneously. And they use the power of both approaches to build stronger results:[2]

> Quantitative (mainly deductive) methods are ideal for measuring pervasiveness of "known" phenomena and central patterns of association, including inferences of causality. Qualitative (mainly inductive) methods allow for identification of *previously unknown* processes, explanations of why and how phenomena occur, and the range of their effects (Pasick et al. 2009). Mixed methods research, then, is *more than simply collecting* qualitative data from interviews, or collecting multiple forms of qualitative evidence (e.g., observations and interviews) or multiple types of quantitative evidence (e.g., surveys and diagnostic tests). *It involves the intentional collection of both quantitative and qualitative data and the combination of the strengths of each to answer research questions*. (Creswell et al. 2011:5; emphases added)

Why Use Mixed Methods?

As with all methodological choices, the answer depends on your underlying research questions and goals. Some research questions are better answered by the strengths of the mixed methods approach. Small (2011) discusses the use of mixed methods as a *confirmation* or *complement* of one set of findings from one method by another. Creswell and Clark (2017:8ff.) note the following situations as being particularly aided by combining qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis: (1) when you need to obtain both more complete (need for qualitative) and more corroborated (need for quantitative) information; (2) when you need to explain (need for qualitative) initial results (quantitative); (3) when you need to do

1. To extend this notion of triangulation a little further: if Anikit enlisted the help of Kanchan to interpret the observations and interview transcripts, he would be strengthening the validity of the study through multiple investigators, another form of triangulation having nothing at all to do with what methods are employed. He could also bring in multiple theoretical frameworks—say, Critical Race Theory and Bourdieusian field analysis—as a form of theoretical triangulation.
2. If stronger is your aim, that is. For many qualitative researchers, verisimilitude, or the truthfulness of a presentation, is a more desirable aim than strength in the sense of validity.

an exploratory study (need for qualitative) before you can really create and administer a survey or other instrument (quantitative); (4) when you need to describe and compare different types of cases to get a more holistic understanding of what is going on; (5) when you need (or very much want!) to include participants in the study, adding in qualitative elements as you build a quantitative design; (6) when you need all the tools at your disposal to develop, implement, and evaluate a program.

Please note what is not included in this list: *because you can*. Mixed methods research is not always preferable, even if in general it makes your study "stronger." Strength is not the only criterion for quality or value. I have met many students in my career who assume that the mixed methods approach is optimal because it includes both qualitative and quantitative research. That is the wrong way of looking at things. Mixed methods are optimal when and only when they fit the necessities of your research question (e.g., How can I corroborate this interesting finding from my interviews so that proper solutions can be fashioned?) or underlying goal (e.g., How can I make sure to include the people in this program as participants of the study?).

If you are just starting out and learning your way through designing your first study, mixed methods are not default requirements. As you will see in the next section on design, mixed methods studies often happen sequentially rather than consecutively, so I recommend you start with the study that has the most meaning to you, the one that is the most compelling. Later on, if you want to add (mix) another approach for the sake of strength or validity or "corroboration" (if you are adding quantitative) or "explanation" (if you are adding qualitative), you can always do that then, after the completion of your first study.

Segue: Historical Interlude

For those interested in a little history, one could make the case that mixed methods research in the social sciences actually predates the development of either quantitative or qualitative research methods. The very first social scientists (what we call "social science" in the West, which is itself a historical construct, as many other peoples have been exploring meaning and interpretation of the social world for centuries if not millennia) often employed a mélange of methods to address their research questions. For example, the first sociologists in the US operating out of the "Chicago School" of the early twentieth century surveyed neighborhoods, interviewing people, observing demographic subcultures, and making tallies of everything from the numbers of persons in households to what languages were being spoken. They learned many of these techniques from early statisticians and demographers in Europe—people like Charles Booth (1902), who surveyed neighborhoods in London, and Frédéric Le Play, who spent decades examining the material conditions of the working classes across Europe, famously including family "budgets" along with interviews and observations (see C. B. Silver 1982). The renowned American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois, who was the first Black man to earn a PhD from Harvard University, also conducted one of the very first mixed methods studies in the US, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899). This work mapped every Black residence,

church, and business in Philadelphia's Seventh Ward and included observations and details on family structure and occupation (similar to Booth's earlier work on London). Continuing through the 1930s and 1940s, "community studies" were conducted by teams of researchers who basically tallied everything they could find about the particular town or city they chose to work in and performed countless interviews, months and years of fieldwork, and detailed mappings of community relationships and power relations. One of the most famous of these studies includes the "Middletown" studies conducted by Robert and Helen Lynd (1929, 1937).

As statistical analysis progressed after World War II alongside the development of the technology that allowed for ever faster computations, quantitative research emerged as a separate field. There was a lot to learn about how to conduct statistical analyses, and there were more refinements in the creation of large survey instruments. Qualitative research—the observations and interviews at the heart of naturalistic inquiry—became a separate field for different kinds of researchers. One might even say qualitative research languished at the expense of new developments of quantitative analytical techniques until the 1970s, when feminist critiques of positivist social science emerged, casting doubt on the superiority of quantitative research methods. The rise of interdisciplinarity in recent decades combined with a lessening of the former harsh critique of quantitative research methods and the "paradigm wars" (Small 2011) has allowed for an efflorescence of mixed methods research, which is where we are today.

Mixed-Methods Research Designs

Returning from our historical interlude to the list of possible uses of mixed methods, we now confront the question of research design. If we are using more than one method, how exactly do we do this, and *when*? The how and the when will depend largely on why we are using mixed methods. For example, if we want to *corroborate* findings emerging from interviews, then we obviously begin with interviews and follow with, perhaps, a large survey. On the other hand, if we are seeking to *explain* findings generated from a survey, we begin with that survey and add interviews or observations or focus groups after its completion. And if we are seeking to include participants in the research design itself, we may want to work concurrently, interviewing and holding focus groups as surveys are administered. So it all depends on why we have chosen to use mixed methods.

We can think of our choices here in terms of three possibilities. The first, called *sequential explanatory*, begins with quantitative data (collection) and then follows with qualitative data (collection). After both are collected, interpretations are made. The second, called *sequential exploratory*, begins the other way around, with qualitative followed by quantitative. After both are collected, interpretations are made. The third, called ***concurrent triangulation***, conceives of both quantitative and qualitative elements happening concurrently. In practice, one may still happen before the other, but one does not follow the other. The data then converge, and from that convergence, interpretations are made.

In **sequential explanatory design** (figure 15.1), we are asking ourselves, "In what ways do the qualitative findings explain the quantitative results?" (Creswell et al. 2017). This design thus gives some priority to the quantitative data. The qualitative data, collected after the quantitative data, is used to provide a better understanding of the research problem and then the quantitative data alone.

Figure 15.1 Sequential Explanatory Design

Often, this means providing some context or explaining meanings and motivations behind the correlations found in the quantitative data. For example, in my research on college students (Hurst 2019), I found a statistical correlation between upper-middle-class female students and study abroad. In other words, and stating this rather baldly, class*gender could be used to predict who studied abroad. But I couldn't fully explain why, given the survey data I had collected.[3] To answer these (and other) questions that the survey results raised, I began interviewing students and holding focus groups. And it was through these qualitative forms of data collection that I found a partial answer: upper-middle-class female students had been taught to see study abroad as a final "finishing" component of their education in a way that other students simply had not. They often had mothers who had done the same. And they clearly saw connections here to the kinds of well-traveled cosmopolitan adults they wanted to become.

In ***sequential exploratory design*** (figure 15.2), we are asking ourselves, "In what ways do the quantitative findings *generalize (or confirm)* the qualitative results?" (Creswell et al. 2018). This design thus gives some priority to the qualitative data. The quantitative data, collected after the qualitative data, is used to confirm the findings.

3. Actually, I could do a fair amount of testing on other variables' relationships to this finding: students who had gone far away to college (more than five hundred miles) were significantly more likely to study abroad, for example, as were students who majored in arts and humanities courses. But I still missed any way of getting at personal motivations or how individuals explained these motivations. That is the part a survey is just never going to fully get at, no matter how well or numerous the questions asked.

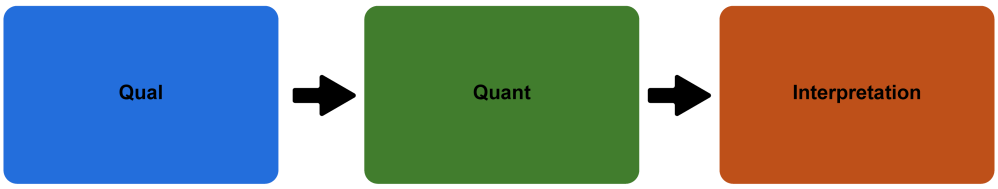

Figure 15.2. Sequential Exploratory Design

This approach is ideal for developing new instruments or when a researcher intends to generalize findings from a qualitative study to different groups or populations. The American Sociological Association (ASA) Task Force on First-Generation and Working-Class Persons wanted to understand how class background may have played a role in the success of sociology graduate students and faculty. Because this was a relatively new research question, the task force began by conducting several focus groups, asking general questions about how class might have affected careers in sociology. Based on several recurring findings (e.g., high debt burdens, mentorship, feelings of fit), the task force developed a survey instrument that it then administered to more than one thousand sociologists, thus generalizing the preliminary findings and providing corroboration of some of the key variables at play.

In *concurrent triangulation design* (figure 15.3), neither the quantitative nor the qualitative component takes precedence. Although in practice one might precede the other in time, neither is the tail that wags the dog, so to speak. They are both the dog. The general of this design is to better understand or deepen one's understanding of the phenomenon under study. The goal is to obtain *different but complementary* data that strengthen (validate) the overall results.

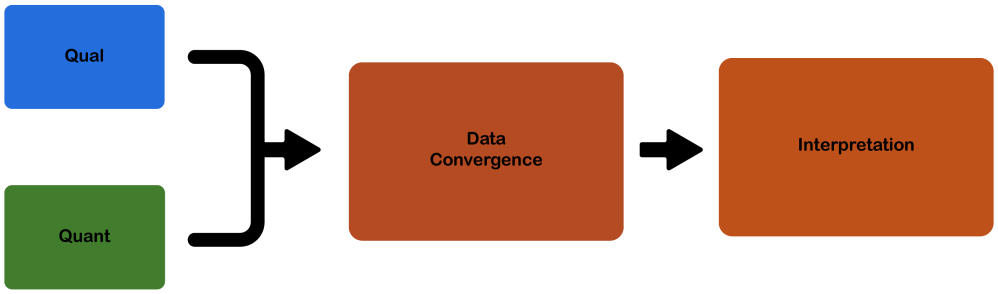

Figure 15.3. Concurrent Triangulation Method

These designs might be either *nested* or *nonnested*. In a **nested design**, a subsample of an original randomized sample is used for further interviews or observation. A common nested design form is where in-depth interviews are conducted with a subsample of those who filled out a survey. Nonnested designs occur when it is impractical or impossible to recruit the same individuals that took place in the survey. The research I conducted for my book Amplified Advantage (Hurst 2019) is an example of this. I supplemented

a large national survey of college students and recent college graduates with interviews and focus groups of similar college students and graduates who were not participants in the study (or who may have been randomly selected as participants but without my knowledge or linking their data). Nonnested designs are much more flexible than nested designs, but they eliminate the possibility of linking data across methods.

As with all research design, it is important to think about how best to address your particular research question. There are strengths and weaknesses of each design. Sequential design allows for the collection and analysis of different methods separately, which can make the process more manageable. Sequential designs are relatively easy to implement, design, and report. Sequential exploratory designs allow you to contextualize and generalize qualitative findings to larger samples, while sequential explanatory designs enable you to gain a deeper understanding of findings revealed by quantitative data analysis. All sequential design takes a lot of time, however. You are essentially doubling your research. This is why I do not recommend these approaches to undergraduate students or graduate students in master's programs. In contrast, concurrent designs, whose dual methods may be conducted simultaneously, may be conducted more quickly. However, as a practical matter, you will probably end up focusing first on one data collection method and then the other, so the time saved might be minimal.[4] Concurrent design can also preclude following up on interesting findings that emerge from one side of the study, and the abbreviated form may prevent clarification of confusing issues that arise during analysis. If the results are contradictory or diverge, it may also be difficult to integrate the data. You might end up with more questions to pursue for further study and not much conclusive to say at the end of all your work.

Finally, there is what I will call here the *recursive design model* (figure 15.4), in which you combine both explanatory and exploratory sequential design.

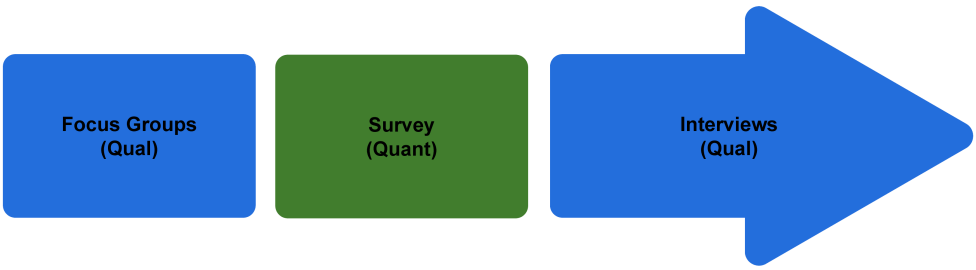

Figure 15.4. Recursive Design Model Example.

This design is currently being used by the ASA task force mentioned above. The first stage of data collection involved several focus groups. From these focus groups, we constructed a survey that we

4. The big exception here is when you are relying on data that has already been collected and is ready for analysis, as in the case of large survey data sets like the General Social Survey. In that case, it is not too time consuming to design a mixed methods study that uses (nonnested) interviews to supplement your analyses of survey data.

administered to ASA members. The focus group survey could be viewed as an example of exploratory sequential design. As the surveys were being analyzed, we added a nested set of interviews with persons who had taken the survey and who indicated a willingness to participate in this later stage of data collection. These interviews then help explain some of the findings from the survey. The entire process takes several years, however, and involves multiple researchers!

Advanced: Crossover Design

Small's (2011) review of the state of mixed methods research argues that mixed methods are being increasingly adopted in social science research. In addition to sequential and concurrent research designs, where quantitative and qualitative data work to either confirm or complement each other, he sets forth examples of innovative designs that go further toward truly blending the special techniques and strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods.[5] Written in 2011, I have seen scant evidence so far that these blended techniques are becoming well established, but they are promising. As new software programs for data analysis emerge, along with increased computing power, there will be greater opportunities for crossover work. Perhaps you can take up the charge and attempt one of these more innovative approaches yourself.

Here is Small's (2011:73ff.) list of innovative crossover research design:

1. *Network analyses of narrative textual data*. Here, researchers use techniques of network analysis (typically quantitative) and apply them to narratives (qualitative), coding stories as separate "nodes" and then looking for connections between those nodes, as is done in network analysis.
2. *Sequence analyses of narrative textual data*. Here, techniques of event structure analysis and optimal matching (designed for analysis of quantitative data) are applied to narratives (qualitative data). The narratives are reconceived as a series of events, and then causal pathways between these events are mapped. This allows for identification of crucial turning points as well as "nonsignificant" events that just happened.
3. *Quantitative analyses of semantic (meaning) elements of narrative textual data*. The basic distinction between quantitative (data in the form of numbers) and qualitative (date in the form of words) gets blurred here, as words themselves and their meanings and contexts are coded numerically. I usually strongly advise beginning students to do this, as what often happens is that they begin to think quantitatively about the data, flattening it considerably. However, if done with full attention to meaning and context, the power of computing/analytical software may strengthen the coding

5. I refer to these as blended methods rather than mixed methods because the epistemological positions and science claims, usually rather distinct from quantitative (more positivistic) and qualitative (more naturalistic), blur considerably.

process.

4. *Narrative analyses of large-n survey data.* In contrast to the first three designs listed above, where quantitative techniques were applied to qualitative data, we now come to a situation where the reverse takes place. Here we have a large data set, either coded numerically or "raw" with various choice options for each question posed. Rather than read the data set as a series of factors (variables) whose relationship one explores through statistical analyses, the researcher creates a narrative from the survey responses, contextualizing the answers rather than abstracting them.[6]
5. *Regression-based analyses of small-n or narrative textual data.* This is by far the most common crossover method and the reverse of the fourth example. Many qualitative software analysis programs now include basic quantitative analytical functions. The researcher can code interview transcripts and fieldnotes in such a way that allows for basic cross-tabulations, simple frequency statistics, or even basic regression analyses. Transcripts and fieldnotes can generate "variables" for such analyses.

Despite the promise of blending methods in this way, the possibility of doing damage to one's study by discounting the particular values of either quantitative or qualitative approaches is a real one. Unlike mixed methods, where the two approaches work separately (even when designed to concur in time), crossover research blends or muddies the two. Small (2011) warns, "At a minimum, the application of techniques should not be fundamentally contrary to the epistemological principles from which they are derived or to the technical problems for which they were intended" (76). When employing any of these designs or blending approaches, it is very important to explain clearly and fully what one's aims are and how the analysis has proceeded, as this allows others to evaluate the appropriateness of the design for the questions posed.

Further Readings

Cech, Erin. 2021. *The Trouble with Passion: How Searching for Fulfillment at Work Fosters Inequality*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.* Cech combines surveys with interviews to explore how people think about and talk about job searches and careers.

Cooper, Kristy S. 2014. "Eliciting Engagement in the High School Classroom: A Mixed-Methods

6. I admit that trained first as a qualitative researcher, this has always been my impulse when confronting a large survey data set.

Examination of Teaching Practices." *American Educational Research Journal* 51(2):363–402. An example of using multilevel regression analyses with both interviews and observations to ascertain how best to engage students.

Creswell, John W., and J. David Creswell. 2018. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. Essential textbook for mixed-methods research.

Edin, Kathryn, and Maureen A. Pirog. 2014. "Special Symposium on Qualitative and Mixed-Methods for Policy Analysis." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 33(2):345–349. A good overview of the strengths of mixed-methods research, which, the authors argue, make it particularly well suited for public policy analysis.

Hurst, Allison L. 2019. *Amplified Advantage: Going to a "Good" College in an Era of Inequality*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield: Lexington Books..* Employs a national survey of recent graduates of small liberal arts colleges combined with interviews, focus groups, and archival data to explore how class background affects college outcomes.

Johnson, R. Burke, and Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie. 2004. "Mixed Methods Research: A Research Paradigm Whose Time Has Come." *Educational Researcher* 33(7):14–26. Takes a pragmatic approach and provides a framework for designing and conducting mixed-methods research.

Klinenberg, Eric. 2015. *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.* A great read and could not be more timely. Klinenberg uses a combination of fieldwork, interviews, and archival research to investigate why some neighborhoods experience greater mortality than others.

Lynd, Robert, and Helen Lynd. 1929. *Middletown: A Study in American Culture*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.* This early mixed-methods study of a "typical" American city was a pioneering work in sociology. The husband-and-wife team seemingly explores every aspect of life in the city, mapping social networks, surveying attitudes and beliefs, talking to people about their expectations and lives, and observing people going about their everyday business. Although none of the techniques are very sophisticated, this remains a classic example of pragmatic research.

Lynd, Robert, and Helen Lynd. 1937. *Middletown in Transition*. New York: Harcourt, Brace. The follow-up to the Lynds' original study of a small American city. More theoretical and critical than the first volume.

Markle, Gail. 2017. "Factors Influencing Achievement in Undergraduate Social Science Research Methods Courses: A Mixed Methods Analysis." *Teaching Sociology* 45(2):105–115.* Examines the factors that influence student achievement using an initial survey with follow-up interviews.

Matthews, Wendy K. 2017. "'Stand by Me': A Mixed Methods Study of a Collegiate Marching Band Members' Intragroup Beliefs throughout a Performance Season." *Journal of Research in Music Education* 65(2):179–202.* The primary method here is focus groups, but the author also employed multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to shore up the qualitative findings.

Monrad, Merete. 2013. "On a Scale of One to Five, Who Are You? Mixed Methods in Identity Research." *Acta Sociologica* 56(4):347–360. A call to employ mixed methods in identity research.

Silver, Catherine Bodard. 1982. *Frédéric Le Play on Family, Work and Social Change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. For anyone interested in the historic roots of mixed-methods research, the work of Frédéric Le Play is essential. This biography is a good place to start.

Small, Mario Luis. 2011. "How to Conduct a Mixed Methods Study: Recent Trends in a Rapidly Growing Literature." *Annual Review of Sociology* 37:57–86. A massive review of recent mixed-methods research, distinguishing between mixed-data-collection studies, which combine two or more kinds of data, and mixed-data-analysis studies, which combine two or more analytical strategies. Essential reading for graduate students wanting to use mixed methods.

CHAPTER 16. ARCHIVAL AND HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Introduction

The British sociologist John Goldthorpe (2000) once remarked, "Any sociologist who is concerned with a theory that can be tested in the present should so test it, in the first place; for it is, in all probability, in this way that it can be tested most rigorously" (33). Testing can be done through either qualitative or quantitative methods or some mixture of the two. But sometimes a theory cannot be tested in the present at all. What happens when the persons or phenomena we are interested in happened in the past? It's hardly possible to interview the people involved in abolishing the slave trade, for example. Does this mean social scientists have no role to play in understanding past phenomena? Not at all. People leave traces behind, and although these traces may not be exactly as we would like them to be had we ordered them (as, in a way, we do when we construct an interview guide or a survey with the questions we want answered), they are nevertheless full of potential for exploration and analysis. For examining traces left by persons, we turn to archival methods, the subject of this chapter.

[Untitled image] by Catarina Carvalho on Unsplash

Things happening in the past are not the only reason we turn to archival methods. Sometimes, the people we are interested in are inaccessible to us for other reasons. For example, we are probably not going to be able to sit down and ask Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, and Jeff Bezos a long list of questions about what it is like to be wealthy. And it is even more unlikely that we can get into the boardrooms of Facebook (Meta), Microsoft, or Amazon to watch how corporate decisions are made. But these men and these companies still

leave traces, through public records, media reportage, and public meeting minutes. We can use archival methods here too. They might not be quite as good as face-to-face interviews with billionaires or deep ethnographies of corporate culture, but they are nevertheless valid forms of research with much to tell us.

This chapter introduces archival methods of data collection. We begin by exploring in more detail why and when archival methods should be employed and with what limitations. We then discuss the importance of special collections and archives as potential gold mines for social science research. We will explain how to access these places, for what purposes, and how to begin to make sense of what you find.

Disciplinary Segue: Why Social Scientists Don't Leave Archives to the Historians

One might suppose that only historians look at the past and that historical archives are no place for social scientists. Goldthorpe (2000) even suggested this. But it would be a mistake to leave historical analyses entirely to historians because historians "typically do not understand our [social science] intellectual and organizational projects.…Social scientists must learn to use the materials that historians have staked out traditionally as their own" (Hill 1993:4). The key difference for our purposes between history and social science is how each discipline understands the goals of its work and how to understand social life. Historians are (mostly) committed to an idiographic approach, where each case is explored to understand itself (this is the "idios" part, where ιδιος is Ancient Greek for single self).[1] As an example of an idiographic approach, a historian might study the events of January 6, 2021, to understand how a violent mob attempted to stop the electoral count. This might mean tracing motivations back to beliefs in fanciful conspiracies, measuring the impact of Donald Trump's rhetoric on the violence, or any number of interesting facts and circumstances about that day and what led up to it. But the focus would remain on understanding this case itself. In contrast, social scientists are (mostly) committed to **nomothetic** research, in which generalizations about the social world are made to understand large-scale social patterns.[2] Whether this generalization is statistical, as quantitative research produces (e.g., we can predict this outcome in other cases and places based on measurable relationships among variables), or theoretical, as qualitative research produces (e.g., we can expect to find similar patterns between conspiratorial belief and action), the point of (most) social science *research* is to explain the world in such a way that we can possibly expect (if not outright predict) what will happen or be believed *in a different place and time*. Social

1. This is where the word idiot comes from as well; in Ancient Greece, failing to participate in collective democracy making was seen as "idiotic"—or, put another way, selfish.
2. This word also comes from Greek roots, although it was created recently (we often rummage around in Ancient Greek and Latin when we come up with new concepts!). In Greek, nomos (νομος) means "law." The use here makes much of the generation of laws or regularities about the social world in the sense of Newton's "law" of gravity.

scientists are engaged in this "scientific" project of prediction (loosely understood), while historians are (usually) not. It is for this reason that social scientists should not leave archival research to the historians!

When to Use Archival Materials

As mentioned above, sometimes the people we want to hear from or observe are simply not available to us. This may be because they are no longer living or because they are unwilling or unable to be part of a research study, as in the case of elites (e.g., CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, political leaders and other public figures, the very wealthy). In both cases, you might wonder about the ethics of studying people who have not given written consent to be studied. But using archival and historical sources as your research data is not the same thing as studying persons ("human subjects"). When we use archival and historical sources, we are examining the *traces* that people and institutions have left. **Institutional review boards** (IRBs) do not have jurisdiction in this area, although we still want to consider the ethics of our research and try to respect privacy and confidentiality when warranted.

In addition to using archival and historical sources when people are inaccessible, there are other reasons we might want to collect this data. First, we may want to explore the *generalized discourse* about a phenomenon.[3] For example, perhaps we want to understand the historical context of the 2016 US presidential election, so we think it is important to go back in time and collect data that will more vividly paint a picture of how people *at the time* were evaluating and experiencing the election. We might use archives to collect data about what people were saying about the third presidential debate in 2016 between candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. There are many ways we could go about doing that. We could sample local and national newspapers and collect op-eds and letters to the editor about the debate. Perhaps we can get Twitter feeds *#thirddebate*, or perhaps some librarian in 2016 collected *oral histories* of people's reactions the day after. Unlike previous person-focused qualitative research strategies, where we carefully create a research design that allows us to construct data through questioning and observing, we will spend our time *tracking down data* and finding out what possibly exists.

A second (or third) reason to employ these archival and historical sources is that we are interested in the historical "record" as the phenomenon itself. We want to know what was written down by Acme Company in letters to its shareholders from 1945 to 1960 about its Acme Pocket Sled (which had the unfortunate habit of accelerating and hurling its bearers off cliffs).[4] Our interest here is not in any particular human subject but in the record left by the company. If we were forced to employ interviews or observational methods to get this record, we could interview current and former employees of Acme or shareholders who received letters from the company, but all of this would actually be second best because what the employees

3. If this is your interest, see also chapter 17, "Content Analysis"!

4. For those of you too young to remember, this was a standard plot of *Looney Tunes* cartoons featuring Wile E. Coyote (Frazier 1990).

and shareholders remember would probably be nowhere near as accurate as what the records reflect. I once did a study of the development of US political party platforms over the course of the nineteenth century, using a huge volume I randomly found in the library (Hurst 2010b). The volume recorded each party's platform by election year, so I could trace how parties talked about and included "class" and "class inequality" in their platforms. This allowed me to show how third parties pushed the two major parties toward some recognition of labor rights over time. There was obviously no way to get at this information through interviews or observations.

Finally, archival and historical sources are often used to supplement other qualitative data collection as a form of verification through triangulation. Perhaps you interviewed several Starbucks employees in 2021 about their experiences working for the company, particularly how the company responded to labor organizing attempts. You might also search official Starbucks company records to compare and contrast the official line with the experience of workers. Alternatively, you could collect media coverage of local organizing campaigns that might include quotes or statements from Starbucks representatives. The best and most convincing qualitative researchers often employ archival and historical material in this way. In addition to providing verification through triangulation, supplementing your data with these sources can deepen contextualization. I encourage you to think about what possible archival and historical sources could strengthen any interview or observational-based study you are designing.[5]

How to Find Archival and Historical Sources

People and institutions leave traces in a variety of ways. This section documents some of those ways with the hope that the possibilities listed here will inspire you to explore further.

It might help to distinguish between public and private sources. Many public archives have dedicated web addresses so you can search them from anywhere. More on those below. Private individuals are more likely to have donated personal information to particular archives, perhaps the archival center associated with the college they attended. Famous and not-so-famous people's diaries and letters are often searchable in particular university archives. Each former US president has his (!) own dedicated national archive. Towns and cities often house interesting historical records in their public libraries. Archivists and librarians at special archives have often done monumental work creating and curating collections of various kinds. Oregon State University's Special Collections and Archives Research Center (SCARC) is no exception. In addition to a ton of material related to the history of the university, including private diaries of students, financial aid records, and photographs of carpentry classes from the nineteenth century, the librarians have documented the experiences of LGBTQ people within OSU and Corvallis, the history of hops and

5. Note that this would be an example of strength through multiple methods rather than strength through mixed methods (chapter 15). The former deepens the contextualization, while the latter increases the overall validity of the findings.

brewing in the Northwest, and the history of natural resources in the Pacific Northwest, especially around agriculture and forestry.

Oregon State University's Special Collections and Archives, The Douglas Strain Reading Room (c) 2012 by Christy Turner. Used with permission.

It can be overwhelming to think about where to start. Being strategic about your use of archival and historical material is often a large part of an effective research plan. Here are some options for kinds of materials to explore:

Public archives include the following:

1. *Commercial media accounts*. These are anything written, drawn, or recorded that is produced for a general audience, including newspapers, books, magazines, television program transcripts, drawn comics, and so on.

- Where to find these: special collections, online newspaper/magazine databases, collected publications[6]
- Examples: Time Magazine Vault is completely free and covers everything the magazine published from 1923 to today; Harper's Magazine archives go back to 1859; Internet Archive's Ebony collection is a wealth of historically important images and stories about African American life in the twentieth century and covers the magazine from 1945 to 2015.

2. *Actuarial and military records*. These include birth and death records, records of marriages and divorces, applications for insurance and credit, military service records, and cemeteries

6. Such as that volume of party platforms I stumbled across in the library!

(gravestones).

- Where to find these: state archives/state vital records offices, US Census / government agencies, US National Archives
- Examples: USAgov/genealogy will help you walk through the ordering of various vital records related to ancestry; US Census 1950 includes information on household size and occupation for all persons living in the US in 1950;[7] your local historical cemetery will have lots of information recorded on gravestones of possible historical use, as the case where deaths are clustered around a particular point in time or where military service is involved.

3. *Official and quasi-official documentary records*. These include organization meeting minutes, reports to shareholders, interoffice memos, company emails, company newsletters, and so on.

- Where to find these: Historical records are often donated to a special collection or are even included in an official online database. More recent records may have been "leaked" to the public, as in the case of the Democratic National Committee's emails in 2016 or the Panama (2016) and Pandora (2021) Papers leaks. The National Archives are also a great source for official documentary records of the US and its various organizations and branches (e.g., Supreme Court, US Patent Office).
- Examples: The Forest History Society's Weyerhauser Collection holds correspondences, director and executive files, branch and region files, advertising materials, oral histories, scrapbooks, publications, photographs, and audio/visual items documenting the activities of the Pacific Northwest timber company from its inception in 1864 through to 2010; the National Archive's Lewis and Clark documents include presidential correspondences and a list of "presents" received from Native Americans.

4. *Governmental and legislative documentary records*

- Where to find these: National Archives, state archives, Library of Congress, governmental agency records (often available in public libraries)
- Example: Records of the Supreme Court of the United States are housed in the National Archives and include scrapbooks from 1880 to 1935 on microfilm, sound recordings, and case files going back to 1792.

Private archives include the following:

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7. US Census material becomes available to the public seventy years after collection; Census data from the 1950s recently became available for the very first time.

1. *Autobiographies and memoirs*. These might have been published, but they are just as likely to have been written for oneself or one's family, with no intention of publication. Some of these have been digitized, but others will require an actual visit to the site to see the physical object itself.

- Where to find these: if not published, special collections and archives
- Example: John Adger McCrary graduated from Clemson University in 1898, where he received a degree in mechanical and electrical engineering. After graduation, he was stationed at the Washington Navy Yard as senior mechanical engineer. He donated a 1939 unpublished memoir regarding the early days of Clemson College, which includes a description of the first dormitory being built by convict labor.

2. *Diaries and letters*. These are probably not intended for publication; rather, they are contemporaneous private accounts and correspondences. Some of these have been digitized, but others will require an actual visit to the site to see the physical object itself.

- Where to find these: special collections and archives, Library of Congress for notable persons' diaries and letters
- Examples: Abraham Lincoln's Papers housed in the Library of Congress; Diary of Ella Mae Cloake, an OSU student, from 1941 to 1944, documenting her daily activities as a high school and college student in Oregon during World War II, located in OSU Special Collections and Archives

3. *Home movies, videos, photographs of various kinds*. These include drawings and sketches, recordings of places seen and visited, scrapbooks, and other ephemera. People leave traces in various forms, so it is best not to confine yourself solely to what has been written.

- Where to find these: special collections and archives, Library of Congress, Smithsonian
- Example: The McMenamins Brewery Collection at OSU SCARC includes digitized brew sheets, digital images, brochures, coasters, decals, event programs, flyers, newspaper clippings, tap handles, posters, labels, a wooden cask, and a six-pack of Hammerhead beer.

4. *Oral histories*. Oral histories are recorded and often transcribed interviews of various persons for purposes of historic documentation. To the untrained eye, they appear to be qualitative "interviews," but they are in fact specifically excluded from IRB jurisdiction because their purpose is documentation, not research.

- Where to find these: special collections and archives; Smithsonian
- Examples: Many archivists and librarians are involved in the collecting of such oral histories, often with a particular theme in mind or to strengthen a particular collection. For example, OSU's SCARC

has an Oregon Multicultural Archive, which includes oral histories that document the experiences and perspectives of people of color in Oregon. The Smithsonian is another great resource on a wide variety of historical events and persons.

How to Find Special Collections and Archives

Although much material has been "digitized" and is thus searchable online, the vast majority of private archival material, including ephemera like scrapbooks and beer coasters, is only available "on site." Qualitative researchers who employ archival and historical sources must often travel to special collections to find the material they are interested in. Often, the material they want has never really been looked at by another researcher. It may belong to a general catalog entry (such as "Student Scrapbooks, 1930–1950"). For official records at the city or county level, travel to the records office or local public library is often required to access the desired material. You will want to consider what kinds of material are available and what kinds of access are required for that material in your research plan.

The good news is that, even if much material has not been digitized, there are general searchable databases for most archives. If you have a particular topic of interest, you can run a general web search and include the topic and "archives" or "special collection." The more public and well known the entity, the more likely you will find digitally available material or special collections dedicated to the person or phenomenon. Or you might find an archive housed one thousand miles away that is happy to work with you on a visit. Some researchers become very familiar with a particular collection or database and tend to rely on that in their research. As you gain experience with historical documents, you will find it easier to narrow down your searches. One great place to start, though, is your college or university archives. And the librarians who work there will be more than happy to help answer your questions about both the particular collections housed there and how to do archival research in general.

What to Do with All That Content

Once you have found a collection or body of material, what do you do with that? Analyzing content will be discussed in some detail in chapter 17, but for now, let's think about what can be made of this kind of material and what cannot. As Goldthorpe (2000) suggested, using historical material or *traces* left by people is sometimes second best to actually talking to people or observing them in action. We have to be very clear about recognizing the limitations of what we find in the archives.

First, not everything produced manages to survive the ravages of time. Without digitization, historical records are vulnerable to a host of destroyers. Some vital records get destroyed when the local registry burns down, for example. Some memoirs or diaries are destroyed from mildew while sitting in a box in the basement. Photographs get torn up. Boxes of records get accidentally thrown in the garbage. We call this

the historical-trace problem. What we have in front of us is thus probably not *the entire record* of whatever it is we are looking for.

Second, what gets collected is itself often related to who has power and who is perceived as being worthy of recording and collection. This is why projects like OSU's multicultural archives are so important, as librarians intervene to ensure that it is not only the stories (diaries, papers) of the powerful that are found in the archives. If one were to read all the newspaper editorials from the nineteenth century, one would learn a lot about particular White men's thoughts on current events but very little from women or people of color or working-class people. This is the power problem of archives, and we need to be aware of it, especially when we are using historical material to build a context of what a time or place was like. What it was like for whom always needs to be properly addressed.

Third, there are issues related to truth telling and audience. There are no at-the-moment credibility checks on the materials you find in archives. Although we think people tend to write honestly in their personal journals, we don't actually know if this is the case—what about the person who expected to be famous and writes for an imagined posterity? There could be significant gaps and even falsehoods in such an account. People can lie to themselves too, which is something qualitative researchers know well (and partly the reason ethnographers favor observation over interviews). Despite the absence of credibility checks, historical documents sometimes appear *more honest* simply by having survived for so long. It is important to remember that they are prone to all the same problems as contemporaneously collected data. A diary by a planter in South Carolina in the 1840s is no more and often less truthful to the facts than an interview would have been had it been possible. Newspapers and magazines have always targeted particular audiences—a fact we understand about our own media (e.g., Fox News is hardly "fair and balanced" toward Democrats) but something we are prone to overlook when reading historic media stories.

Whenever using archival or historical sources, then, it is important to clearly identify and state the limitations of their use and any intended audience. In the case of diaries of Southern planters from the 1840s, "This is the story we get told from the point of view of relatively elite White men whose work was collected and safeguarded (and not destroyed) for posterity." Or in the case of a *Harper's Magazine* story from the 1950s, "This is an understanding of Eisenhower politics by a liberal magazine read by a relatively well-educated and affluent audience."

Conclusion

Collecting the data for an archival-based study is just the beginning. Once you have downloaded all the advertisements from *Men's Health* or compiled all the tweets put out on January 6 or scanned all the photographs of the childcare center in the 1950s, you will need to start "analyzing" it. What does that analysis entail? That is the subject of our next several chapters.

Further Readings

Baker, Alan R. H. 1997. "'The Dead Don't Answer Questionnaires': Researching and Writing Historical Geography." *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 21(2):231–243. Among other things, this article discusses the problems associated with making geographical interpretations from historical sources.

Benzecry, Claudio, Andrew Deener, and Armando Lara-Millán. 2020. "Archival Work as Qualitative Sociology." *Qualitative Sociology* 43:297–303. An editorial foreword to an issue of Qualitative Sociology dedicated to archival research briefly describing included articles (many of which you may want to read). Distinguishes the "heroic moment of data accumulation" from the "ascetic and sober exercise of distancing oneself from the data, analyzing it, and communicating the meaning to others." For advanced students only.

Bloch, Marc. 1954. *The Historian's Craft*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. A classic midcentury statement of what history is and does from a research perspective. Bloch's particular understanding and approach to history has resonance for social science too.

Fones-Wolf, Elizabeth A. 1994. *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–60*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.* Using corporate records, published advertisements, and congressional testimony (among other sources), Fones-Wolf builds an impressive account of a coordinated corporate campaign against labor unions and working people in the postwar years.

Hill, Michael R. 1993. *Archival Strategies and Techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. Guidebook to archival research. For advanced students.

Moore, Niamh, Andrea Salter, Liz Stanley, and Maria Tamboukou. 2017. *The Archive Project: Archival Research in the Social Sciences*. London: Routledge. An advanced collection of essays on various methodological ideas and debates in archival research.

Stoler, Ann Laura. 2009. *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.* A difficult but rewarding read for advanced students. Using archives in Indonesia, Stoler explores the history of colonialism and the making of racialized classes while also proposing and demonstrating innovative archival methodologies.

Wilder, Craig Stevens. 2014. *Ebony and Ivory: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*. London: Bloomsbury.* Although perhaps more history than social science, this is a great

example of using university archival data to tell a story about national development, racism, and the role of universities.

CHAPTER 17. CONTENT ANALYSIS

Introduction

Content analysis is a term that is used to mean both a method of data collection and a method of data analysis. Archival and historical works can be the source of content analysis, but so too can the contemporary media coverage of a story, blogs, comment posts, films, cartoons, advertisements, brand packaging, and photographs posted on Instagram or Facebook. Really, almost anything can be the "content" to be analyzed. This is a qualitative research method because the focus is on the *meanings* and *interpretations* of that content rather than strictly numerical counts or variables-based causal modeling.[1] Qualitative content analysis (sometimes referred to as QCA) is particularly useful when attempting to define and understand prevalent stories or communication about a topic of interest—in other words, when we are less interested in what particular people (our defined sample) are doing or believing and more interested in what general narratives exist about a particular topic or issue. This chapter will explore different approaches to content analysis and provide helpful tips on how to collect data, how to turn that data into codes for analysis, and how to go about presenting what is found through analysis. It is also a nice segue between our data collection methods (e.g., interviewing, observation) chapters and chapters 18 and 19, whose focus is on coding, the primary means of data analysis for most qualitative data. In many ways, the methods of content analysis are quite similar to the method of coding.

[Untitled image] by Jason Goodman on Unsplash

1. There are ways of handling content analysis quantitatively, however. Some practitioners therefore specify qualitative content analysis (QCA). In this chapter, all content analysis is QCA unless otherwise noted.

Although the body of material ("content") to be collected and analyzed can be nearly anything, most qualitative content analysis is applied to forms of human communication (e.g., media posts, news stories, campaign speeches, advertising jingles). The point of the analysis is to understand this communication, to systematically and rigorously explore its meanings, assumptions, themes, and patterns. Historical and archival sources may be the subject of content analysis, but there are other ways to analyze ("code") this data when not overly concerned with the communicative aspect (see chapters 18 and 19). This is why we tend to consider content analysis its own method of data collection as well as a method of data analysis. Still, many of the techniques you learn in this chapter will be helpful to any "coding" scheme you develop for other kinds of qualitative data. Just remember that content analysis is a particular form with distinct aims and goals and traditions.

An Overview of the Content Analysis Process

The First Step: Selecting Content

Figure 17.2 is a display of possible content for content analysis. The first step in content analysis is making smart decisions about what content you will want to analyze and to clearly connect this content to your research question or general focus of research. Why are you interested in the messages conveyed in this particular content? What will the identification of patterns here help you understand? Content analysis can be fun to do, but in order to make it research, you need to fit it into a research plan.

New stories	Blogs	Comment posts	Lyrics
Letters to editor	Films	Cartoons	Advertisements
Brand packaging	Logos	Instagram photos	Tweets
Photographs	Graffiti	Street signs	Personalized license plates
Avatars (names, shapes, presentations)	Nicknames	Band posters	Building names

Figure 17.1. A Non-exhaustive List of "Content" for Content Analysis

To take one example, let us imagine you are interested in gender presentations in society and how presentations of gender have changed over time. There are various forms of content out there that might help you document changes. You could, for example, begin by creating a list of magazines that are coded as being for "women" (e.g., *Women's Daily Journal*) and magazines that are coded as being for "men" (e.g., *Men's Health*). You could then select a date range that is relevant to your research question (e.g., 1950s–1970s) and collect magazines from that era. You might create a "sample" by deciding to look at three issues for each year in the date range and a systematic plan for what to look at in those issues (e.g.,

advertisements? Cartoons? Titles of articles? Whole articles?). You are not just going to look at some magazines willy-nilly. That would not be systematic enough to allow anyone to replicate or check your findings later on. Once you have a clear plan of what content is of interest to you and what you will be looking at, you can begin, creating a record of everything you are including as your content. This might mean a list of each advertisement you look at or each title of stories in those magazines along with its publication date. You may decide to have multiple "content" in your research plan. For each content, you want a clear plan for collecting, sampling, and documenting.

The Second Step: Collecting and Storing

Once you have a plan, you are ready to collect your data. This may entail downloading from the internet, creating a Word document or PDF of each article or picture, and storing these in a folder designated by the source and date (e.g., "*Men's Health* advertisements, 1950s"). Sølvberg (2021), for example, collected posted job advertisements for three kinds of elite jobs (economic, cultural, professional) in Sweden. But collecting might also mean going out and taking photographs yourself, as in the case of graffiti, street signs, or even what people are wearing. Chaise LaDousa, an anthropologist and linguist, took photos of "house signs," which are signs, often creative and sometimes offensive, hung by college students living in communal off-campus houses. These signs were a focal point of college culture, sending messages about the values of the students living in them. Some of the names will give you an idea: "Boot 'n Rally," "The Plantation," "Crib of the Rib." The students might find these signs funny and benign, but LaDousa (2011) argued convincingly that they also reproduced racial and gender inequalities. The data here already existed—they were big signs on houses—but the researcher had to collect the data by taking photographs.

In some cases, your content will be in physical form but not amenable to photographing, as in the case of films or unwieldy physical artifacts you find in the archives (e.g., undigitized meeting minutes or scrapbooks). In this case, you need to create some kind of detailed log (fieldnotes even) of the content that you can reference. In the case of films, this might mean watching the film and writing down details for key scenes that become your data.[2] For scrapbooks, it might mean taking notes on what you are seeing, quoting key passages, describing colors or presentation style. As you might imagine, this can take a lot of time. Be sure you budget this time into your research plan.

2. Note that some qualitative software allows you to upload whole films or film clips for coding. You will still have to get access to the film, of course.

Researcher Note

A note on data scraping: Data scraping, sometimes known as screen scraping or frame grabbing, is a way of extracting data generated by another program, as when a scraping tool grabs information from a website. This may help you collect data that is on the internet, but you need to be ethical in how to employ the scraper. A student once helped me scrape thousands of stories from the Time magazine archives at once (although it took several hours for the scraping process to complete). These stories were freely available, so the scraping process simply sped up the laborious process of copying each article of interest and saving it to my research folder. Scraping tools can sometimes be used to circumvent paywalls. Be careful here!

The Third Step: Analysis

There is often an assumption among novice researchers that once you have collected your data, you are ready to write about what you have found. Actually, you haven't yet found anything, and if you try to write up your results, you will probably be staring sadly at a blank page. Between the collection and the writing comes the difficult task of systematically and repeatedly reviewing the data in search of patterns and themes that will help you interpret the data, particularly its communicative aspect (e.g., What is it that is being communicated here, with these "house signs" or in the pages of *Men's Health*?).

The first time you go through the data, keep an open mind on what you are seeing (or hearing), and take notes about your observations that link up to your research question. In the beginning, it can be difficult to know what is relevant and what is extraneous. Sometimes, your research question changes based on what emerges from the data. Use the first round of review to consider this possibility, but then commit yourself to following a particular focus or path. If you are looking at how gender gets made or re-created, don't follow the white rabbit down a hole about environmental injustice *unless* you decide that this really should be the focus of your study or that issues of environmental injustice are linked to gender presentation. In the second round of review, be very clear about emerging themes and patterns. Create codes (more on these in chapters 18 and 19) that will help you simplify what you are noticing. For example, "men as outdoorsy" might be a common trope you see in advertisements. Whenever you see this, mark the passage or picture. In your third (or fourth or fifth) round of review, begin to link up the tropes you've identified, looking for particular patterns and assumptions. You've drilled down to the details, and now you are building back up to figure out what they all mean. Start thinking about theory—either theories you have read about and are using as a frame of your study (e.g., gender as performance theory) or theories you are building yourself,

as in the Grounded Theory tradition. Once you have a good idea of what is being communicated and how, go back to the data at least one more time to look for disconfirming evidence. Maybe you thought "men as outdoorsy" was of importance, but when you look hard, you note that women are presented as outdoorsy just as often. You just hadn't paid attention. It is very important, as any kind of researcher but particularly as a qualitative researcher, to test yourself and your emerging interpretations in this way.

The Fourth and Final Step: The Write-Up

Only after you have fully completed analysis, with its many rounds of review and analysis, will you be able to write about what you found. The interpretation exists not in the data but in your analysis of the data. Before writing your results, you will want to very clearly describe how you chose the data here and all the possible limitations of this data (e.g., historical-trace problem or power problem; see chapter 16). Acknowledge any limitations of your sample. Describe the audience for the content, and discuss the implications of this. Once you have done all of this, you can put forth your interpretation of the communication of the content, linking to theory where doing so would help your readers understand your findings and what they mean more generally for our understanding of how the social world works.[3]

Analyzing Content: Helpful Hints and Pointers

Although every data set is unique and each researcher will have a different and unique research question to address with that data set, there are some common practices and conventions. When reviewing your data, what do you look at exactly? How will you know if you have seen a pattern? How do you note or mark your data?

Let's start with the last question first. If your data is stored digitally, there are various ways you can highlight or mark up passages. You can, of course, do this with literal highlighters, pens, and pencils if you have print copies. But there are also qualitative software programs to help you store the data, retrieve the data, and mark the data. This can simplify the process, although it cannot do the work of analysis for you.

Qualitative software can be very expensive, so the first thing to do is to find out if your institution (or program) has a universal license its students can use. If they do not, most programs have special student licenses that are less expensive. The two most used programs at this moment are probably ATLAS.ti and NVivo. Both can cost more than $500[4] but provide everything you could possibly need for storing data,

3. See chapter 20 for more on the final presentation of research.
4. . Actually, ATLAS.ti is an annual license, while NVivo is a perpetual license, but both are going to cost you at least $500 to use. Student rates may be lower. And don't forget to ask your institution or program if they already have a software license you can use.

content analysis, and coding. They also have a lot of customer support, and you can find many official and unofficial tutorials on how to use the programs' features on the web. Dedoose, created by academic researchers at UCLA, is a decent program that lacks many of the bells and whistles of the two big programs. Instead of paying all at once, you pay monthly, as you use the program. The monthly fee is relatively affordable (less than $15), so this might be a good option for a small project. HyperRESEARCH is another basic program created by academic researchers, and it is free for small projects (those that have limited cases and material to import). You can pay a monthly fee if your project expands past the free limits. I have personally used all four of these programs, and they each have their pluses and minuses.

Regardless of which program you choose, you should know that none of them will actually do the hard work of analysis for you. They are incredibly useful for helping you store and organize your data, and they provide abundant tools for marking, comparing, and coding your data so you can make sense of it. But making sense of it will always be your job alone.

So let's say you have some software, and you have uploaded all of your content into the program: video clips, photographs, transcripts of news stories, articles from magazines, even digital copies of college scrapbooks. Now what do you do? What are you looking for? How do you see a pattern? The answers to these questions will depend partially on the particular research question you have, or at least the motivation behind your research. Let's go back to the idea of looking at gender presentations in magazines from the 1950s to the 1970s. Here are some things you can look at and code in the content: (1) actions and behaviors, (2) events or conditions, (3) activities, (4) strategies and tactics, (5) states or general conditions, (6) meanings or symbols, (7) relationships/interactions, (8) consequences, and (9) settings. Table 17.1 lists these with examples from our gender presentation study.

Table 17.1. Examples of What to Note During Content Analysis

What can be noted/ coded	Example from Gender Presentation Study
Actions and behaviors	*Men are depicted standing while women are sitting*
Events or conditions	*Many more depictions of women "in crisis" over appearance*
Activities	*Men fixing things vs Women cooking and baking*
Strategies and tactics	*How to sections of magazines: how to ask for a raise (men's magazine)*
States/conditions	*Women often presented as in a state of worry or being harried*
Meanings/symbols	*A "pipe" is used as shorthand for "man" while an outline of a "skirt" is used as shorthand for "woman" in a comic*
Relationships/ interactions	*Men often shown "helping" women (out of cars, through doors, fixing things)*
Consequences	*A fictional story shows an independent woman getting injured and regretting turning down a marriage proposal*
Settings	*Men often portrayed in office setting or outdoors; women in kitchens and living rooms*

One thing to note about the examples in table 17.1: sometimes we note (mark, record, code) a single example, while other times, as in "settings," we are recording a recurrent pattern. To help you spot patterns, it is useful to mark every setting, including a notation on gender. Using software can help you do this efficiently. You can then call up "setting by gender" and note this emerging pattern. There's an element of counting here, which we normally think of as quantitative data analysis, but we are using the count to identify a pattern that will be used to help us interpret the communication. Content analyses often include counting as part of the interpretive (qualitative) process.

In your own study, you may not need or want to look at *all* of the elements listed in table 17.1. Even in our imagined example, some are more useful than others. For example, "strategies and tactics" is a bit of a stretch here. In studies that are looking specifically at, say, policy implementation or social movements, this category will prove much more salient.

Another way to think about "what to look at" is to consider aspects of your content in terms of units of analysis. You can drill down to the specific words used (e.g., the adjectives commonly used to describe "men" and "women" in your magazine sample) or move up to the more abstract level of concepts used (e.g., the idea that men are more rational than women). Counting for the purpose of identifying patterns is particularly useful here. How many times is that idea of women's irrationality communicated? How is it is communicated (in comic strips, fictional stories, editorials, etc.)? Does the incidence of the concept change over time? Perhaps the "irrational woman" was everywhere in the 1950s, but by the 1970s, it is no longer showing up in stories and comics. By tracing its usage and prevalence over time, you might come up with a theory or story about gender presentation during the period. Table 17.2 provides more examples of using different units of analysis for this work along with suggestions for effective use.

Table 17.2. Examples of Unit of Analysis in Content Analysis

Unit of Analysis	**How Used...**
Words	*Identify and count the usage of particular salient words; compare and contrast over content data and time*
Themes	*Identify and count themes; look for patterns in how themes get funneled into a "main" theme and when*
Characters	*Who are the main characters (real or stock, as in the "irrational woman" or "outdoorsy man")? How much space is taken up with these characters? Do they change over time?*
Paragraphs	*How much space is devoted to whatever it is you are looking at? In an article, how many paragraphs are dedicated to talking about X?*
Items	*How many items in your collected data are about X? (similar to paragraphs but useful for non-written data)*
Concepts	*Identify and count the usage of important concepts; compare and contrast over content data and time; link to words used and devoted space*
Semantics	*Note how strong or weak words and images are that are used around your key issue or focus. Note that "crazy women" has a different intensity than "irrational women"*

Every qualitative content analysis is unique in its particular focus and particular data used, so there is no single correct way to approach analysis. You should have a better idea, however, of what kinds of things to look for and what to look for. The next two chapters will take you further into the coding process, the primary analytical tool for qualitative research in general.

Further Readings

Cidell, Julie. 2010. “Content Clouds as Exploratory Qualitative Data Analysis.” *Area* 42(4):514–523. A demonstration of using visual “content clouds” as a form of exploratory qualitative data analysis using transcripts of public meetings and content of newspaper articles.

Hsieh, Hsiu-Fang, and Sarah E. Shannon. 2005. “Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis.” *Qualitative Health Research* 15(9):1277–1288. Distinguishes three distinct approaches to QCA: conventional, directed, and summative. Uses hypothetical examples from end-of-life care research.

Jackson, Romeo, Alex C. Lange, and Antonio Duran. 2021. “A Whitened Rainbow: The In/Visibility of

Race and Racism in LGBTQ Higher Education Scholarship." *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity (JCSCORE)* 7(2):174–206.* Using a "critical summative content analysis" approach, examines research published on LGBTQ people between 2009 and 2019.

Krippendorff, Klaus. 2018. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. A very comprehensive textbook on both quantitative and qualitative forms of content analysis.

Mayring, Philipp. 2022. *Qualitative Content Analysis: A Step-by-Step Guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. Formulates an eight-step approach to QCA.

Messinger, Adam M. 2012. "Teaching Content Analysis through 'Harry Potter.'" *Teaching Sociology* 40(4):360–367. This is a fun example of a relatively brief foray into content analysis using the music found in Harry Potter films.

Neuendorft, Kimberly A. 2002. *The Content Analysis Guidebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. Although a helpful guide to content analysis in general, be warned that this textbook definitely favors quantitative over qualitative approaches to content analysis.

Schrier, Margrit. 2012. *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*. Thousand Okas, CA: SAGE. Arguably the most accessible guidebook for QCA, written by a professor based in Germany.

Weber, Matthew A., Shannon Caplan, Paul Ringold, and Karen Blocksom. 2017. "Rivers and Streams in the Media: A Content Analysis of Ecosystem Services." *Ecology and Society* 22(3).* Examines the content of a blog hosted by *National Geographic* and articles published in *The New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* for stories on rivers and streams (e.g., water-quality flooding).

CHAPTER 18. DATA ANALYSIS AND CODING

Introduction

Piled before you lie hundreds of pages of fieldnotes you have taken, observations you've made while volunteering at city hall. You also have transcripts of interviews you have conducted with the mayor and city council members. What do you do with all this data? How can you use it to answer your original research question (e.g., "How do political polarization and party membership affect local politics?")? Before you can make sense of your data, you will have to organize and simplify it in a way that allows you to access it more deeply and thoroughly. We call this **process coding**.[1] Coding is the iterative process of assigning meaning to the data you have collected in order to both simplify and identify patterns. This chapter introduces you to the process of qualitative data analysis and the basic concept of coding, while the following chapter (chapter 19) will take you further into the various kinds of codes and how to use them effectively.

To those who have not yet conducted a qualitative study, the sheer amount of collected data will be a surprise. Qualitative data can be absolutely overwhelming—it may mean hundreds if not thousands of pages of interview transcripts, or fieldnotes, or retrieved documents. How do you make sense of it? Students often want very clear guidelines here, and although I try to accommodate them as much as possible, in the end, analyzing qualitative data is a bit more of an art than a science: "The process of bringing order, structure, and interpretation to a mass of collected data is messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating. It does not proceed in a linear fashion: it is not neat. At times, the researcher may feel like an eccentric and tormented artist; not to worry, this is normal" (Marshall and Rossman 2016:214).

To complicate matters further, each approach (e.g., Grounded Theory, deep ethnography, phenomenology) has its own language and bag of tricks (techniques) when it comes to analysis. Grounded Theory, for example, uses **in vivo coding** to generate new theoretical insights that emerge from a rigorous but open approach to data analysis. Ethnographers, in contrast, are more focused on creating a *rich description* of the practices, behaviors, and beliefs that operate in a particular field. They are less interested in generating

1. When you have collected content (historical, media, archival) that interests you because of its communicative aspect, content analysis (chapter 17) is appropriate. Whereas content analysis is both a research method and a tool of analysis, coding is a tool of analysis that can be used for all kinds of data to address any number of questions. Content analysis itself includes coding.

theory and more interested in getting the picture right, valuing *verisimilitude* in the presentation. And then there are some researchers who seek to account for the qualitative data using almost quantitative methods of analysis, perhaps counting and comparing the uses of certain narrative frames in media accounts of a phenomenon. Qualitative content analysis (QCA) often includes elements of counting (see chapter 17). For these researchers, having very clear hypotheses and clearly defined "variables" before beginning analysis is standard practice, whereas the same would be expressly forbidden by those researchers, like grounded theorists, taking a more emergent approach.

All that said, there are some helpful techniques to get you started, and these will be presented in this and the following chapter. As you become more of an expert yourself, you may want to read more deeply about the tradition that speaks to your research. But know that there are many excellent qualitative researchers that use what works for any given study, who take what they can from each tradition. Most of us find this permissible (but watch out for the methodological purists that exist among us).

[Untitled image] by Mary Cullen on Unsplash

Qualitative Data Analysis as a *Long* Process!

Although most of this and the following chapter will focus on coding, it is important to understand that coding is just one (very important) aspect of the long data-analysis process. We can consider seven phases of data analysis, each of which is important for moving your voluminous data into "findings" that can be reported to others. The *first phase* involves data organization. This might mean creating a special password-protected Dropbox folder for storing your digital files. It might mean acquiring computer-assisted qualitative data-analysis software (**CAQDAS**) and uploading all transcripts, fieldnotes, and digital files to its storage repository for eventual coding and analysis. Finding a helpful way to store your material can take a lot of time, and you need to be smart about this from the very beginning. Losing data because of poor filing systems or mislabeling is something you want to avoid. You will also want to ensure that you have procedures in place to protect the confidentiality of your interviewees and informants. Filing signed

consent forms (with names) separately from transcripts and linking them through an ID number or other code that only you have access to (and store safely) are important.

Once you have all of your material safely and conveniently stored, you will need to immerse yourself in the data. The *second phase* consists of reading and rereading or viewing and reviewing all of your data. As you do this, you can begin to identify themes or patterns in the data, perhaps writing short memos to yourself about what you are seeing. You are not committing to anything in this *third phase* but rather keeping your eyes and mind open to what you see. In an actual study, you may very well still be "in the field" or collecting interviews as you do this, and what you see might push you toward either concluding your data collection or expanding so that you can follow a particular group or factor that is emerging as important. For example, you may have interviewed twelve international college students about how they are adjusting to life in the US but realized as you read your transcripts that important gender differences may exist and you have only interviewed two women (and ten men). So you go back out and make sure you have enough female respondents to check your impression that gender matters here. The seven phases do not proceed entirely linearly! It is best to think of them as recursive; conceptually, there is a path to follow, but it meanders and flows.

Coding is the activity of the *fourth phase*. The second part of this chapter and all of chapter 19 will focus on coding in greater detail. For now, know that coding is the *primary tool for analyzing qualitative data* and that its purpose is to both simplify and highlight the important elements buried in mounds of data. Coding is a rigorous and systematic process of identifying meaning, patterns, and relationships. It is a more formal extension of what you, as a conscious human being, are trained to do every day when confronting new material and experiences. The "trick" or skill is to learn how to take what you do naturally and semiconsciously in your mind and put it down on paper so it can be documented and verified and tested and refined.

At the conclusion of the coding phase, your material will be searchable, intelligible, and ready for deeper analysis. You can begin to offer *interpretations* based on all the work you have done so far. This *fifth phase* might require you to write analytic memos, beginning with short (perhaps a paragraph or two) interpretations of various aspects of the data. You might then attempt stitching together both reflective and analytical memos into longer (up to five pages) general interpretations or theories about the relationships, activities, patterns you have noted as salient.

As you do this, you may be rereading the data, or parts of the data, and reviewing your codes. It's possible you get to this phase and decide you need to go back to the beginning. Maybe your entire research question or focus has shifted based on what you are now thinking is important. Again, the process is *recursive*, not linear. The *sixth phase* requires you to check the interpretations you have generated. Are you really seeing this relationship, or are you ignoring something important you forgot to code? As we don't have statistical tests to check the validity of our findings as quantitative researchers do, we need to incorporate self-checks on our interpretations. Ask yourself what evidence would exist to counter your interpretation and then actively look for that evidence. Later on, if someone asks you how you know you

are correct in believing your interpretation, you will be able to explain what you did to verify this. Guard yourself against accusations of "**cherry-picking**," selecting only the data that supports your preexisting notion or expectation about what you will find.[2]

The *seventh and final phase* involves writing up the results of the study. Qualitative results can be written in a variety of ways for various audiences (see chapter 20). Due to the particularities of qualitative research, findings do not exist independently of their being written down. This is different for quantitative research or experimental research, where completed analyses can somewhat speak for themselves. A box of collected qualitative data remains a box of collected qualitative data without its written interpretation. Qualitative research is often evaluated on the strength of its presentation. Some traditions of qualitative inquiry, such as deep ethnography, depend on written thick descriptions, without which the research is wholly incomplete, even nonexistent. All of that practice journaling and writing memos (reflective and analytical) help develop writing skills integral to the presentation of the findings.

Remember that these are seven conceptual phases that operate in roughly this order but with *a lot of meandering and recursivity* throughout the process. This is very different from quantitative data analysis, which is conducted fairly linearly and processually (first you state a falsifiable research question with hypotheses, then you collect your data or acquire your data set, then you analyze the data, etc.). Things are a bit messier when conducting qualitative research. Embrace the chaos and confusion, and sort your way through the maze. Budget a lot of time for this process. Your research question might change in the middle of data collection. Don't worry about that. The key to being nimble and flexible in qualitative research is to start thinking and continue thinking about your data, even as it is being collected. All seven phases can be started before all the data has been gathered. Data collection does not always precede data analysis. In some ways, "qualitative data collection *is* qualitative data analysis.… By integrating data collection and data analysis, instead of breaking them up into two distinct steps, we both enrich our insights and stave off anxiety. We all know the anxiety that builds when we put something off—the longer we put it off, the more anxious we get. If we treat data collection as this mass of work we must do before we can get started on the even bigger mass of work that is analysis, we set ourselves up for massive anxiety" (Rubin 2021:182–183; emphasis added).

2. Scientific research, whether quantitative or qualitative, demands we keep an open mind as we conduct our research, that we are "neutral" regarding what is actually there to find. Students who are trained in non-research-based disciplines such as the arts or philosophy or who are (admirably) focused on pursuing social justice can too easily fall into the trap of thinking their job is to "demonstrate" something through the data. That is not the job of a researcher. The job of a researcher is to present (and interpret) findings—things "out there" (even if inside other people's hearts and minds). One helpful suggestion: when formulating your research question, if you already know the answer (or think you do), scrap that research. Ask a question to which you do not yet know the answer.

The Coding Stage

A code is "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña 2014:5). Codes can be applied to particular sections of or entire transcripts, documents, or even videos. For example, one might code a video taken of a preschooler trying to solve a puzzle as "puzzle," or one could take the transcript of that video and highlight particular sections or portions as "arranging puzzle pieces" (a descriptive code) or "frustration" (a summative emotion-based code). If the preschooler happily shouts out, "I see it!" you can denote the code "I see it!" (this is an example of an in vivo, participant-created code). As one can see from even this short example, there are many different kinds of codes and many different strategies and techniques for coding, more of which will be discussed in detail in chapter 19. The point to remember is that coding is a rigorous systematic process—to some extent, you are always coding whenever you look at a person or try to make sense of a situation or event, but you rarely do this consciously. Coding is the process of naming what you are seeing and how you are simplifying the data so that you can make sense of it in a way that is consistent with your study and in a way that others can understand and follow and replicate. Another way of saying this is that a code is "a researcher-generated interpretation that symbolizes or translates data" (Vogt et al. 2014:13).

As with qualitative data analysis generally, coding is often done recursively, meaning that you do not merely take one pass through the data to create your codes. Saldaña (2014) differentiates first-cycle coding from second-cycle coding. The goal of first-cycle coding is to "tag" or identify what emerges as important codes. Note that I said emerges—you don't always know from the beginning what will be an important aspect of the study or not, so the coding process is really the place for you to begin making the kinds of notes necessary for future analyses. In second-cycle coding, you will want to be much more focused—no longer gathering wholly new codes but synthesizing what you have into metacodes.

You might also conceive of the coding process in four parts (figure 18.1). First, identify a representative or diverse sample set of interview transcripts (or fieldnotes or other documents). This is the group you are going to use to get a sense of what might be emerging. In my own study of career obstacles to success among first-generation and working-class persons in sociology, I might select one interview from each career stage: a graduate student, a junior faculty member, a senior faculty member.

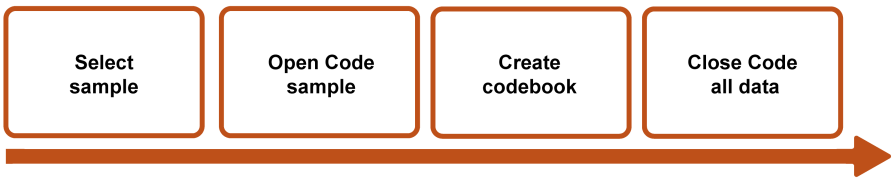

Figure 18.1. Coding Process in Four Stages

Second, code everything ("**open coding**"). See what emerges, and don't limit yourself in any way. You will end up with a ton of codes, many more than you will end up with, but this is an excellent way to not foreclose an interesting finding too early in the analysis. Note the importance of starting with a sample of your collected data, because otherwise, open coding all your data is, frankly, impossible and counterproductive. You will just get stuck in the weeds.

Third, pare down your coding list. Where you may have begun with fifty (or more!) codes, you probably want no more than twenty remaining. Go back through the weeds and pull out everything that does not have the potential to bloom into a nicely shaped garden. Note that you should do this before tackling *all of your data*. Sometimes, however, you might need to rethink the sample you chose. Let's say that the graduate student interview brought up some interesting gender issues that were pertinent to female-identifying sociologists, but both the junior and the senior faculty members identified as male. In that case, I might read through and open code at least one other interview transcript, perhaps a female-identifying senior faculty member, before paring down my list of codes.

This is also the time to create a **codebook** if you are using one, a master guide to the codes you are using, including examples (see Sample Codebooks 1 and 2). A codebook is simply a document that lists and describes the codes you are using. It is easy to forget what you meant the first time you penciled a coded notation next to a passage, so the codebook allows you to be clear and consistent with the use of your codes. There is not one correct way to create a codebook, but generally speaking, the codebook should include (1) the code (either name or identification number or both), (2) a description of what the code signifies and when and where it should be applied, and (3) an example of the code to help clarify (2). Listing all the codes down somewhere also allows you to organize and reorganize them, which can be part of the analytical process. It is possible that your twenty remaining codes can be neatly organized into five to seven master "themes." Codebooks can and should develop as you recursively read through and code your collected material.[3]

Fourth, using the pared-down list of codes (or codebook), read through and code all the data. I know many qualitative researchers who work without a codebook, but it is still a good practice, especially for beginners. At the very least, read through your list of codes before you begin this "**closed coding**" step so that you can minimize the chance of missing a passage or section that needs to be coded. The final step is…to do it all again. Or, at least, do closed coding (step four) again. All of this takes a great deal of time, and you should plan accordingly.

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3. Codebooks are particularly useful for collaborative research so that codes are applied and interpreted similarly. If you are working with a team of researchers, you will want to take extra care that your codebooks remain in synch and that any refinements or developments are shared with fellow coders. You will also want to conduct an "intercoder reliability" check, testing whether the codes you have developed are clearly identifiable so that multiple coders are using them similarly. Messy, unclear codes that can be interpreted differently by different coders will make it much more difficult to identify patterns across the data.

Researcher Note

People often say that qualitative research takes a lot of time. Some say this because qualitative researchers often collect their own data. This part can be time consuming, but to me, it's the analytical process that takes the most time. I usually read every transcript twice before starting to code, then it usually takes me six rounds of coding until I'm satisfied I've thoroughly coded everything. Even after the coding, it usually takes me a year to figure out how to put the analysis together into a coherent argument and to figure out what language to use. Just deciding what name to use for a particular group or idea can take months. Understanding this going in can be helpful so that you know to be patient with yourself.

—Jessi Streib, author of *The Power of the Past* and *Privilege Lost*

Note that there is no magic in any of this, nor is there any single "right" way to code or any "correct" codes. What you see in the data will be prompted by your position as a researcher and your scholarly interests. Where the above codes on a preschooler solving a puzzle emerged from my own interest in puzzle solving, another researcher might focus on something wholly different. A scholar of linguistics, for example, may focus instead on the verbalizations made by the child during the discovery process, perhaps even noting particular vocalizations (incidence of grrrs and gritting of the teeth, for example). Your recording of the codes you used is the important part, as it allows other researchers to assess the reliability and validity of your analyses based on those codes. Chapter 19 will provide more details about the kinds of codes you might develop.

Saldaña (2014) lists seven "necessary personal attributes" for successful coding. To paraphrase, they are the following:

1. Having (or practicing) good organizational skills
2. Perseverance
3. The ability and willingness to deal with ambiguity
4. Flexibility
5. Creativity, broadly understood, which includes "the ability to think visually, to think symbolically, to think in metaphors, and to think of as many ways as possible to approach a problem" (20)
6. Commitment to being rigorously ethical
7. Having an extensive vocabulary[4]

Writing Analytic Memos during/after Coding

Coding the data you have collected is only one aspect of analyzing it. Too many beginners have coded their data and then wondered what to do next. Coding is meant to help organize your data so that you can see it more clearly, but it is not itself an analysis. Thinking about the data, reviewing the coded data, and bringing in the previous literature (here is where you use your literature review and theory) to help make sense of what you have collected are all important aspects of data analysis. Analytic memos are notes you write to yourself about the data. They can be short (a single page or even a paragraph) or long (several pages). These memos can themselves be the subject of subsequent analytic memoing as part of the recursive process that is qualitative data analysis.

Short analytic memos are written about impressions you have about the data, what is emerging, and what might be of interest later on. You can write a short memo about a particular code, for example, and why this code seems important and where it might connect to previous literature. For example, I might write a paragraph about a "cultural capital" code that I use whenever a working-class sociologist says anything about "not fitting in" with their peers (e.g., not having the right accent or hairstyle or private school background). I could then write a little bit about Bourdieu, who originated the notion of cultural capital, and try to make some connections between his definition and how I am applying it here. I can also use the memo to raise questions or doubts I have about what I am seeing (e.g., Maybe the type of school belongs somewhere else? Is this really the right code?). Later on, I can incorporate some of this writing into the theory section of my final paper or article. Here are some types of things that might form the basis of a short memo: something you want to remember, something you noticed that was new or different, a reaction you had, a suspicion or hunch that you are developing, a pattern you are noticing, any inferences you are starting to draw. Rubin (2021) advises, "Always include some quotation or excerpt from your dataset…that set you off on this idea. It's happened to me so many times—I'll have a really strong reaction to a piece of data, write down some insight without the original quotation or context, and then [later] have no idea what I was talking about and have no way of recreating my insight because I can't remember what piece of data made me think this way" (203).

All CAQDAS programs include spaces for writing, generating, and storing memos. You can link a memo to a particular transcript, for example. But you can just as easily keep a notebook at hand in which you write notes to yourself, if you prefer the more tactile approach. Drawing pictures that illustrate themes and patterns you are beginning to see also works. The point is to write early and write often, as these memos are the building blocks of your eventual final product (chapter 20).

In the next chapter (chapter 19), we will go a little deeper into codes and how to use them to identify

4. Note that this is important for creating/denoting new codes. The vocabulary does not need to be in English or any particular language. You can use whatever words or phrases capture what it is you are seeing in the data.

patterns and themes in your data. This chapter has given you an idea of the process of data analysis, but there is much yet to learn about the elements of that process!

Qualitative Data-Analysis Samples

The following three passages are examples of how qualitative researchers describe their data-analysis practices. The first, by Harvey, is a useful example of how data analysis can shift the original research questions. The second example, by Thai, shows multiple stages of coding and how these stages build upward to conceptual themes and theorization. The third example, by Lamont, shows a masterful use of a variety of techniques to generate theory.

Example 1: "Look Someone in the Eye" by Peter Francis Harvey (2022)

> I entered the field intending to study gender socialization. However, through the iterative process of writing fieldnotes, rereading them, conducting further research, and writing extensive analytic memos, my focus shifted. Abductive analysis encourages the search for unexpected findings in light of existing literature. In my early data collection, fieldnotes, and memoing, classed comportment was unmistakably prominent in both schools. I was surprised by how pervasive this bodily socialization proved to be and further surprised by the discrepancies between the two schools.…I returned to the literature to compare my empirical findings.…To further clarify patterns within my data and to aid the search for disconfirming evidence, I constructed data matrices (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2013). While rereading my fieldnotes, I used ATLAS.ti to code and recode key sections (Miles et al. 2013), punctuating this process with additional analytic memos. (2022:1420)

Example 2:" Policing and Symbolic Control" by Mai Thai (2022)

> Conventional to qualitative research, my analyses iterated between theory development and testing. Analytical memos were written throughout the data collection, and my analyses using MAXQDA software helped me develop, confirm, and challenge specific themes.…My early coding scheme which included descriptive codes (e.g., uniform inspection, college trips) and verbatim codes of the common terms used by field site participants (e.g., "never quit," "ghetto") led me to conceptualize valorization. Later analyses developed into thematic codes (e.g., good citizens, criminality) and process codes (e.g., valorization, criminalization), which helped refine my arguments. (2022:1191–1192)

Example 3: *The Dignity of Working Men* by Michèle Lamont (2000)

> To analyze the interviews, I summarized them in a 13-page document including socio-demographic information as well as information on the boundary work of the interviewees. To facilitate comparisons, I noted some of the respondents' answers on grids and summarized these on matrix displays using techniques suggested by Miles and Huberman for standardizing and processing qualitative data. Interviews were also analyzed one by one, with a focus on the criteria that each respondent mobilized for the evaluation of status. Moreover, I located each interviewee on several five-point scales pertaining to the most significant dimensions they used to evaluate status. I also compared individual interviewees with respondents who were similar to and different from them, both within and across samples. Finally, I classified all the transcripts thematically to perform a systematic analysis of all the important themes that appear in the interviews, approaching the latter as data against which theoretical questions can be explored. (2000:256–257)

Sample Codebook 1

This is an abridged version of the codebook used to analyze qualitative responses to a question about how class affects careers in sociology. Note the use of numbers to organize the flow, supplemented by highlighting techniques (e.g., bolding) and subcoding numbers.

01. CAPS: Any reference to "capitals" in the response, even if the specific words are not used

    01.1: cultural capital
    01.2: social capital
    01.3: economic capital

(can be mixed: "0.12"= both cultural and asocial capital; "0.23"= both social and economic)

01. CAPS: a reference to "capitals" in which the specific words are used [**bold**: thus, **01.23** means that both social capital and economic capital were mentioned specifically

02. DEBT: discussion of debt

    02.1: mentions personal issues around debt
    02.2: discusses debt but in the abstract only (e.g., "people with debt have to worry")

03. FirstP: how the response is positioned

03.1: neutral or abstract response

03.2: discusses self ("I")

03.3: discusses others ("they")

Sample Coded Passage:

"I was really hurt when I didn't get that scholarship. It was going to cost me thousands of dollars to stay in the program, and I was going to have to borrow all of it. My faculty advisor wasn't helpful at all. They told	03.2
me not to worry about it, because it wasn't really that much money! I almost fell over when they said that! Like, do they not understand what it's like to be poor? I just felt so isolated then. I was on my own.	02.1. 01.3
I couldn't talk to anyone about it, because no one else seemed to worry about it. Talk about economic capital!"	**01.3**

Question: What other codes jump out to you here? Shouldn't there be a code for feelings of loneliness or alienation? What about an* ***emotions code**?*

Sample Codebook 2

CODE	DEFINITION	WHEN TO APPLY	IN VIVO EXAMPLE
ALIENATION	Feeling out of place in academia	Any time uses the word alienation or impostor syndrome or feeling out of place	"I was so lonely in graduate school. It was an alienating experience."
CULTURAL CAPITAL	Knowledge or other cultural resources that affect success in academia	When "cultural capital" is used but also when knowledge or lack of knowledge about cultural things are discussed	"We went to a fancy restaurant after my job interview and I was paralyzed with fear because I did not know which fork I was supposed to be using. Yikes!"
SOCIAL CAPITAL	Social networks that advance success in academia	When "social capital" is used but also when social networks are discussed or knowing the right people	"I didn't know who to turn to. It seemed like everyone else had parents who could help them and I didn't know anyone else who had ever even gone to college!"

This is an example that uses "word" categories only, with descriptions and examples for each code

Further Readings

Elliott, Victoria. 2018. “Thinking about the Coding Process in Qualitative Analysis.” *Qualitative Report* 23(11):2850–2861. Address common questions those new to coding ask, including the use of “counting” and how to shore up reliability.

Friese, Susanne. 2019. *Qualitative Data Analysis with ATLAS.ti.* 3rd ed. A good guide to ATLAS.ti, arguably the most used CAQDAS program. Organized around a series of “skills training” to get you up to speed.

Jackson, Kristi, and Pat Bazeley. 2019. *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVIVO.* 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. If you want to use the CAQDAS program NVivo, this is a good affordable guide to doing so. Includes copious examples, figures, and graphic displays.

LeCompte, Margaret D. 2000. “Analyzing Qualitative Data.” *Theory into Practice* 39(3):146–154. A very practical and readable guide to the entire coding process, with particular applicability to educational program evaluation/policy analysis.

Miles, Matthew B., and A. Michael Huberman. 1994. *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. A classic reference on coding. May now be superseded by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2019).

Miles, Matthew B., A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña. 2019. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA; SAGE. A practical methods sourcebook for all qualitative researchers at all levels using visual displays and examples. Highly recommended.

Saldaña, Johnny. 2014. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. The most complete and comprehensive compendium of coding techniques out there. Essential reference.

Silver, Christina. 2014. *Using Software in Qualitative Research: A Step-by-Step Guide.* 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA; SAGE. If you are unsure which CAQDAS program you are interested in using or want to compare the features and usages of each, this guidebook is quite helpful.

Vogt, W. Paul, Elaine R. Vogt, Diane C. Gardner, and Lynne M. Haeffele2014. *Selecting the Right Analyses for Your Data: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods*. New York: The Guilford Press. User-friendly reference guide to all forms of analysis; may be particularly helpful for those engaged in mixed-methods research.

CHAPTER 19. ADVANCED CODES AND CODING

Introduction: Forest and Trees

Chapter 17 introduced you to content analysis, a particular way of analyzing historical artifacts, media, and other such "content" for its communicative aspects. Chapter 18 introduced you to the more general process of data analysis for qualitative research, how you would go about beginning to organize, simplify, and code interview transcripts and fieldnotes. This chapter takes you a bit deeper into the specifics of codes and how to use them, particularly the later stages of coding, in which our codes are refined, simplified, combined, and organized for the purpose of identifying *what it all means*, theoretically. These later rounds of coding are essential to getting the most out of the data we've collected. By the end of the chapter, you should understand how "findings" are actually found.

[Untitled image] by Marita Kavelashvili on Unsplash

I am going to use a particular analogy throughout this chapter, that of the relationship between the forest and trees. You know the saying "You can't see the forest for the trees"? Think about what this actually means. One is so focused on individual trees that one neglects to notice the overall system of which the trees are a part. This is something beginning researchers do all the time, and the laborious process of coding can make this tendency worse. You focus on the details of your codes but forget that they are merely the first step in the analysis process, that after you have tagged your trees, you need to step back and look at the big picture that is the entire forest. Keep this metaphor in mind. We will come back to it a few times.

Let's imagine you have interviewed fifty college students about their experiences during the pandemic,

both as students and as workers. Each of these interviews has been transcribed and runs to about 35 pages, double-spaced. That is 1,750 pages of data you will need to code before you can properly begin to make sense of it all. Taking a sample of the interviews for a first round of coding (see chapter 17), you are likely to first note things that are common to the interviews. A general feeling of fear, anxiety, or frustration may jump out at you. There is something about the human brain that is primed to look for "the one common story" at the outset. Often, we are wrong about this. The process of coding and recoding and memoing will often show us that our initial takes on "what the data say" are seriously misleading for a couple of reasons: first, because voices or stories that counter the predominant theme are often ignored in the first round, and, second, because what startles us or surprises us can drive away the more mundane findings that actually are at the heart of what the data are saying. If we have experienced the pandemic with little anxiety, seeing anxiety in the interviews will surprise us and make us overstate its importance in general. If we expect to find something and we see something very different, we tend to overnotice that difference. This is basic psychology, I am sure.

This is where coding comes in to help you verify, amplify, complicate, or delimit your initial first impressions. Coding is a rigorous process because it helps us move away from preconceptions and other judgment errors and pin down what is actually present in the data. It helps you identify the trees, which is actually important before we can properly see the forest. We start with "It's a forest" (not really that helpful), then move to "These are specific trees, with particular roots and branches," and finally move back to a better understanding of the forest ("It's a boreal forest that works like this…"). Coding is the rigorous connecting process between the first (often wrong or incomplete) impression and the final interpretation, the "results" of the study (figure 19.1). If you remember that this is the point of coding, you will be less likely to get lost in the woods. Coding is not about tagging every possible root and branch of every tree to create some kind of master compendium of forest particulars. Coding is about learning how to identify what is important about that forest overall.[1] When you are new to the forest, you won't know which root or branch is of importance, but as you walk through it again and again, you will learn to appreciate its rhythms and know what to pick up as important and what to discard as irrelevant.

1. A small aside here on social science in general and sociology in particular: It is often believed that sociologists are concerned about "people" and what people do and believe. Actually, people are our trees. We are really interested in the forest, or society. We try to understand society by listening to and observing the people who compose it. Behavioral science, in contrast, does take the individual as the object of study.

Figure 19.1. A Walk Through the Forest as Model of Analytical Coding

There is no single correct way to go about coding your data. When I first began teaching qualitative research methods, I resolutely refused to "teach" coding, as I thought it was a little like trying to teach people to write fiction. It's very personal and best developed through practice. But I have come to see the value of providing some guidelines—maps through the forest, if you will. I have drawn heavily here from Johnny Saldaña's extensive and beautiful "coding manual," but the particular suggestions here are what have worked best for me. We are going to walk through the forest many times, first in an open exploratory way and then in a more focused way once we have found our stride. Finally, we will sit down with all of our maps and materials and see what it is we can discover about the world by looking at our data.

First Walks in the Woods: Open Coding

Saldaña (2014) provides dozens of types of codes and coding processes, but we are going to confine our discussion two five. These are the five kinds of codes that I think work best for beginning researchers in your first walks through the woods. Used together, they have the potential to get at the heart of what is important in social science research. They are *descriptive*, i*n vivo*, *process*, *values*, and *emotions*. Select a sample of your data in the first round of coding. If you tried to tag everything in these initial rounds, you will never get out of the woods. Your sample should be broad enough to capture essential aspects of your data corpus but small enough to allow you free rein to pick up as many branches as you think interesting. Set aside a significant amount of time for this. And then double or triple that time allotment. You'll need it.

Descriptive codes are codes used to tag specific activities, places, and things that seem to be important in particular passages. They are identifying tags ("This is a branch from an elm tree"; "This is an acorn"). Be careful here because you can really end up trying to identify everything—every word, every line, every passage. Don't do that! It's helpful to remind yourself what your research is about—what is your research question or focus? Some twigs can stay on the forest floor. Saldaña's (2014) use of the term is narrower. Descriptive codes are meant to summarize the basic topic of a passage in a single word or short phrase, what is also called "topic coding" or "index coding." These descriptive codes will allow you to easily search for and return to passages about a particular topic or feature of the forest; this will allow you to make

better comparisons in later rounds of analysis. The actual word or phrase you come up with will be rather personal to you and dependent on the focus of your research. Here is an exemplary passage from a fictitious interview with a working-class college student: "I had no idea what scholarships were available! No one in my family had ever gone to college before, so there was no one I could ask. And my high school counselor was always too busy. What a joke! Plus, I was a little embarrassed, to be honest. So, yeah, I owe a lot of money. It's really not that fair."

What descriptive codes can be developed here? How would you define the topic or topics of this passage? On the one hand, the subject appears to be scholarships or how this student paid for college. "How Pay" might be a good descriptive code for the entire passage. But there are a lot of other interesting things going on here too. If your focus is on how peer groups work or social networks, you might focus on those aspects of the passage. Perhaps "No Assistance" could work as a descriptive code in this first round of coding. Descriptive codes are pretty straightforward, so they are easy for beginning researchers to use, but "they may not enable more complex and theoretical analyses as the study progresses, particularly with interview transcript data" (137).

In vivo codes are codes that use the actual words people have used to tag an important point or message. In the above passage, "no one I could ask" might be such a code. These *indigenous* terms or phrases are particularly useful when seeking to "honor or prioritize" the voice of the participants (Saldaña 2014:138). They don't require you to impose your own sense on a passage. They are also rather enjoyable to generate, as they encourage you to step into the shoes of those you have interviewed or observed. The terms or phrases should jump out at you as something salient to your research question or focus (or simply jump out at you in surprising ways that you hadn't expected, given your research question).

Process codes are codes that label conceptual actions. This is another way to describe the data, but rather than focus on the topic, we organize it around key actions and activities. For example, we could tag the passage above with "asking for help." By convention, process codes are *gerunds*, those strange verb forms that end in -ing and operate a bit like nouns. Process codes are particularly helpful for studies that focus on change and development over time, as the use of tagged gerunds can really highlight stages, if such exist. Grounded theorists often employ process codes for this reason. I find it useful, as it reminds me to focus not only on what participants say and how they say it but on the activities that they are engaged in.

Values codes are codes that reflect the attitudes, beliefs, or values held by a participant. Values codes capture things such as principles, moral codes and situational norms ("values"), the way we think about ourselves and others ("attitudes"), and all of our personal knowledge, experience, opinions, assumptions, biases, prejudices, morals, and other interpretive perceptions of the world ("beliefs"). They are extremely powerful tags and absolutely essential for phenomenological researchers. We might attach the values code "unfair" to the passage above or even note the "What a joke!" passage as disbelief or disgust.

Values codes are a particular subset of **affective coding**, where codes are developed to "investigate subjective qualities of human experience (e.g., emotions, values, conflicts, judgments) by directly acknowledging and naming those experiences" (Saldaña 2014:159). The fifth suggested code is also

another form of affective coding, *emotions codes*, labels of feelings shared by the participants. “Embarrassment” is an obvious emotion code in the above passage. In the kinds of research I mostly do, phenomenological and interview based, often about sensitive subjects around discrimination, power, and marginalization, coding emotions is incredibly helpful and productive: “Emotion coding is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for those that explore intrapersonal or interpersonal participant experiences and actions, especially in matters of identity, social relationships, reasoning, decision-making, judgment, and risk-taking” (160).

[Untitled image] by Aaron Burden on Unsplash

A Final Purposeful Hike through the Forest: Closed Coding

After initial rounds of coding (several walks through the woods), you should begin to see important themes emerge from your data and have a general idea of what is important enough to look at more closely. Between first-cycle coding and your last hike through the forest, you will have created a list of codes or even a codebook that records these emergent categories and themes (see chapter 18). It is quite possible your research question(s) or focus has shifted based on what you have seen in the first rounds of coding.[2] If you need more data collection based on these shifts, collect more data. Once you feel comfortable that you have reached saturation and know what it is you are looking at and for, you are ready for one final purposeful hike through your forest to tag (code) all your data using a pared-down set of codes.

Building Meaning, Identifying Patterns, Comparing Trees,

2. It might be helpful to read the first example of writings about qualitative data analysis in the "Further Readings" section.

and Seeing Forests

The final cycle of coding is also the time to generate analyses of your data. As with so much qualitative research, this is not a linear process (finish stage A and move to stage B followed by stage C). To some extent, analysis is happening all the time, even when you are in the field. Journaling, reflecting, and writing analytical memos are important in all stages of coding. But it is in the final stages of coding that you truly start to put everything together—that's when you start understanding the nature of the forest you have been walking through. That, after all, is the point. What do all these codes of various people's actions (fieldnotes) or people's words (interviews) tell you about the larger phenomenon of interest? This will require mapping your codes across your data set, comparing and contrasting themes and patterns often relative to demographic factors, and overall trying to "see" the forest instead of the trees.

Different researchers employ various tools and methods to do this. Some draw pictures or concept maps, seeking to understand the connections between the themes that have emerged. Others spend time counting code frequencies or drawing elaborate outlines of codes and reworking these in search of general patterns and structure. Some even use in vivo codes to generate found poems that might provide insight into the deeper meanings and connections of the data. Mapping word clouds is a similar process. As a sociologist who is interested in issues of identity, my go-to method is to look for interactions between the codes, noting demographic elements of comparison. For example, in the very first study I conducted (Hurst 2010a), I used emotion codes. Specifically, I found numerous examples of sadness, anger, shame, embarrassment, pride, resentment, and fear. With the exception of pride, these are not very positive emotions. I could have stopped there, with the finding of overwhelming instances of negative emotions in the stories told by working-class college students. But I played around with these categories, clustering them by incidence and frequency and then comparing these across demographic categories (age, race, gender). I found no race or gender differences and only a hint of a difference between traditional-age college students and older students. What I did find, however, was that the emotions sorted themselves out in clusters relative to other codes. Embarrassment, shame, resentment, and fear were often found together in the same interview, along with a pattern of using "they" to refer to working-class people like the interviewees' families. Conversely, anger, sadness, and pride were often found together, along with a pattern of using "we" to refer to working-class people. This led me to develop a theory about how working-class students manage their class identities in college, with some desirous of becoming middle class ("Renegades") and others wanting very strongly to remain identified as working class ("Loyalists"; Hurst 2010a).

Saldaña (2014) summarizes many of these techniques. He draws a distinction between **"code mapping"** and "**code landscaping**." Code mapping is a systematic and rigorous reordering of all codes into an increasingly simplified hierarchical organization. One can move from fifty or so specific stand-alone codes of various types (e.g., sadness, "I was so alone," socializing, financial aid) and attempt to impose some meaningful order on them by clustering like phenomena with like phenomena. Perhaps sadness (an emotion code), "I was so alone" (an in vivo code), and socializing (an action code) are understood as belonging

together, perhaps under a category of SOCIAL CONNECTIONS or, depending on what has emerged from your data, EXCLUSION. Code mapping is an iterative process, meaning that you can do a second or a third take of simplification and reordering. In the end, you might be left with one or two big conceptual themes or patterns.

Code landscaping "integrates textual and visual methods to see both the forest and trees" (Saldaña 2014:285). Using computer-assisted word cloud mapping (WordItOut.com, wordclouds.com, wordle.net) is one way of doing this, or at least a way to jump-start the process. Word clouds quickly allow you to see what stands out in the interview or fieldnotes and can suggest relationships of importance between codes. Manually, one can also diagram the codes in terms of relationship, stressing the processual elements (what leads to what: "I felt so alone" >> sadness).

Another helpful suggestion is to chart the incidence of codes across your data set. This is particularly helpful with interview data. What (simplified) codes emerge in each interview transcript? Is there a pattern here? The two categories of Loyalist and Renegade would not have emerged had I not made these kinds of code comparisons by person interviewed. You might create a master document or spreadsheet that places each interview subject on its own row, with a brief description of that person's story (what emerges as the focus of the interview or who they are in terms of social location, character, etc.) in a separate column and then a third column listing the key codes found in the interview. This is a good way to "see" the forest in a snapshot.

Whatever method or technique is employed, the general direction is to move from simple tags (codes) to categories to themes/concepts (figure 19.2). Eventually, those identified themes/concepts will help you build a new theory or at a minimum produce relevant theoretically informed findings, as in the second example at the end of this chapter.

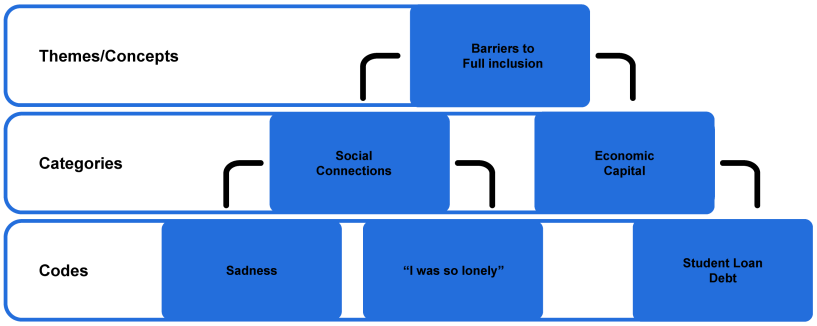

Figure 19.2. Qualitative Data Analysis Model, From Codes to Concepts

Grounded Theory has its own vocabulary when it comes to coding and data analysis, so if you are trying to do a "proper" Grounded Theory study, you might want to read up on this in more detail (Charmaz 2014; Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 2015). A quick summary of the approach follows. First-cycle coding employs the following kinds of codes: **in vivo**, process, and initial. Second-cycle coding employs **focused**, **axial**, and **theoretical** codes. The names of these second-cycle codes are meant to evoke the Grounded Theory approach itself: in the second cycle, the grounded theorists focus the study on axes of importance

to generate theories. **Focused coding** pulls out the most frequent or significant codes from the first round. Axial coding reassembles data around a category, or axis. These categories or axes are meant to be concept generating: "Categories should not be so abstract as to lose their sensitizing aspect, but yet must be abstract enough to make [the emerging] theory a general guide" (Glaser and Strauss 1967:242). Theoretical codes "function like umbrellas that cover and account for all other codes and categories" (Saldaña 2014:314). Key words or key phrases (e.g., "Exclusion" or "Always Crying") capture the emergent theory in the theoretical code.

Describing and Explaining the Forest: Findings and Theories

It is only now, after the laborious process of coding is complete, that you can actually move on to generate and present findings about your data. Many beginning researchers attempt to skip the middle work and get straight to writing, only to find that what they say about the data is pretty thin. The quality of qualitative research comes from the entire analytical process: open and closed coding, writing analytical memos, identifying patterns, making comparisons, and searching for order in the voluminous transcripts and fieldnotes.

[Untitled image] by Nick Olejniczak on Flickr

But let's say that you have followed all the steps so far. You have done multiple rounds of coding—refining, simplifying, and ordering your codes. You've looked for patterns. You think you have seen some master concepts emerge, and you have a good idea of what the important themes and stories are in your data. How do you begin to explain and describe those themes and stories and theories to an audience? Chapter 20 will go into further detail on how to present your work (e.g., formats, length, audience, etc.), but before we get to that, we need to talk about the stage after coding but before writing. You will want to be clear in your mind that you have the story right, that you have not missed anything of importance, and that you have

searched for disconfirming evidence and not found it (if you have, you have to go back to the data and start again on a new track).

Begin with your research question(s), either as originally asked or as reformulated. What is your answer to these questions? How have your underlying goals (see chapter 4) been addressed or achieved by these answers? In other words, what is the outcome of your study? Is it about describing a culture, raising awareness of a problem, finding solutions, or delineating strategies employed by participants? Perhaps you have taken a critical approach, and your outcome is all about "giving voice" to those whose voices are often unheard. In that case, your findings will be participant driven, and your challenge will be to present passages (direct quotes) that exemplify the most salient themes found in your data. On the other hand, if you have engaged in an ethnographic study, your findings may be thick, theoretically informed descriptions of the culture under study. Your challenge there will be writing evocatively. Or to take a final example, perhaps you undertook a mixed methods study to find the best way to improve a program or policy. Your findings should be such that suggest particular recommendations. Note that in none of these cases are you presenting your codes as your findings! The coding process merely helps you find what is important to say about the case based on your research questions and underlying aims and goals.

The gold star of qualitative research presentation is the formulation of theory. Even for those not following the Grounded Theory tradition, finding something to say that goes beyond the particulars of your case is an important part of doing social science research. Remember, social science is generally not idiographic. A "theory" need not be earth shattering, as in the case of Freud's theory of Ego, Id, and Superego. A theory is simply an explanation of something general.[3] It is a story we tell about how the world works. Theories are provisional. They can never be proven (although they can be disproven). My description of Loyalists and Renegades is a theory about how college students from the working class manage the problem of class identity when their class backgrounds no longer match their class destinations. While qualitative research is not *statistically generalizable*, it is and should be *theoretically generalizable* in this way. Loyalists and Renegades are strategies that I believe occur generally among those who are experiencing upward social mobility; they are not confined solely to the twenty-one students I interviewed in 2005 in a college in the Pacific Northwest.

What is the story your research results are telling about the world? That is the ultimate question to ask yourself as you conclude your data analysis and begin to think about writing up your results.

3. Saldaña (2014) lists five essential characteristics of a social science theory: "(1) expresses a patterned relationship between two or more concepts; (2) predicts and controls action through if-then logic; (3) accounts for parameters of or variation in the empirical observations; (4) explains how and/or why something happens by stating its cause(s); and (5) provides insights and guidance for improving social life" (349).

Further Readings

Note: Please see chapter 18 for further reading on coding generally.

Charmaz, Kathy 2014. *Constructing Grounded Theory*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. Although this is a general textbook on conducting all stages of Grounded Theory research, a significant portion is directed at the coding process.

Strauss, Anselm. 1987. *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. An essential reading on coding Grounded Theory for advanced students, written by one of the originators of the Grounded Theory approach. Not an easy read.

Strauss, Anselm, and Juliet Corbin. 2015. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. A good basic textbook for those exploring Grounded Theory. Accessible to undergraduates and graduate students

CHAPTER 20. PRESENTATIONS

Introduction

If a tree falls in a forest, and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? If a qualitative study is conducted, but it is not presented (in words or text), did it really happen? Perhaps not. Findings from qualitative research are inextricably tied up with the way those findings are presented. These presentations do not always need to be in writing, but they need to happen. Think of ethnographies, for example, and their thick descriptions of a particular culture. Witnessing a culture, taking fieldnotes, talking to people—none of those things in and of themselves convey the culture. Or think about an interview-based phenomenological study. Boxes of interview transcripts might be interesting to read through, but they are not a completed study without the intervention of hours of analysis and careful selection of exemplary quotes to illustrate key themes and final arguments and theories. And unlike much quantitative research in the social sciences, where the final write-up neatly reports the results of analyses, the way the "write-up" happens is an integral part of the analysis in qualitative research. Once again, we come back to the messiness and stubborn unlinearity of qualitative research. From the very beginning, when designing the study, imagining the form of its ultimate presentation is helpful.

Because qualitative researchers are motivated by understanding and conveying meaning, effective communication is not only an essential skill but a fundamental facet of the entire research project. Ethnographers must be able to convey a certain sense of verisimilitude, the appearance of true reality. Those employing interviews must faithfully depict the key meanings of the people they interviewed in a way that rings true to those people, even if the end result surprises them. And all researchers must strive for clarity in their publications so that various audiences can understand what was found and why it is important. This chapter will address how to organize various kinds of presentations for different audiences so that your results can be appreciated and understood.

In the world of academic science, social or otherwise, the primary audience for a study's results is usually the academic community, and the primary venue for communicating to this audience is the academic journal. Journal articles are typically fifteen to thirty pages in length (8,000 to 12,000 words). Although qualitative researchers often write and publish journal articles—indeed, there are several journals dedicated entirely to qualitative research[1]—the best writing by qualitative researchers often shows up in

1. Some examples: *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Qualitative Research*, *American Journal of Qualitative Research*, *Ethnography*, *Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research*, *Qualitative Report*, *Qualitative Sociology*, and *Qualitative Studies*.

books. This is because books, running from 80,000 to 150,000 words in length, allow the researcher to develop the material fully. You have probably read some of these in various courses you have taken, not realizing what they are. I have used examples of such books throughout this text, beginning with the three profiles in the introductory chapter. In some instances, the chapters in these books began as articles in academic journals (another indication that the journal article format somewhat limits what can be said about the study overall).

While the article and the book are "final" products of qualitative research, there are actually a few other presentation formats that are used along the way. At the very beginning of a research study, it is often important to have a written research proposal not just to clarify to yourself what you will be doing and when but also to justify your research to an outside agency, such as an institutional review board (IRB; see chapter 12), or to a potential funder, which might be your home institution, a government funder (such as the National Science Foundation, or NSF), or a private foundation (such as the Gates Foundation). As you get your research underway, opportunities will arise to present preliminary findings to audiences, usually through presentations at academic conferences. These presentations can provide important feedback as you complete your analyses. Finally, if you are completing a degree and looking to find an academic job, you will be asked to provide a "job talk," usually about your research. These job talks are similar to conference presentations but can run significantly longer.

All the presentations mentioned so far are (mostly) for academic audiences. But qualitative research is also unique in that many of its practitioners don't want to confine their presentation only to other academics. Qualitative researchers who study particular contexts or cultures might want to report back to the people and places they observed. Those working in the critical tradition might want to raise awareness of a particular issue to as large an audience as possible. Many others simply want everyday, nonacademic people to read their work, because they think it is interesting and important. To reach a wide audience, the final product can look like almost anything—it can be a poem, a blog, a podcast, even a science fiction short story. And if you are very lucky, it can even be a national or international bestseller.

In this chapter, we are going to stick with the more basic quotidian presentations—the academic paper / research proposal, the conference slideshow presentation / job talk, and the conference poster. We'll also spend a bit of time on incorporating universal design into your presentations and how to create some especially attractive and impactful visual displays.

Researcher Note

What is the best piece of advice you've ever been given about conducting qualitative research?

> The best advice I've received came from my adviser, Alford Young Jr. He told me to find the "Jessi Streib" answer to my research question, not the "Pierre Bourdieu" answer to my research question. In other words, don't just say how a famous theorist would answer your question; say something original, something coming from you.
>
> —Jessi Streib, author of *The Power of the Past* and *Privilege Lost*

Writing about Your Research

The Journal Article and the Research Proposal

Although the research proposal is written before you have actually done your research and the article is written after all data collection and analysis is complete, there are actually many similarities between the two in terms of organization and purpose. The final article will (probably—depends on how much the research question and focus have shifted during the research itself) incorporate a great deal of what was included in a preliminary research proposal. The average lengths of both a proposal and an article are quite similar, with the "front sections" of the article abbreviated to make space for the findings, discussion of findings, and conclusion.

Figure 20.1 Elements of Proposal/ArticleBased on a 10,000-word article and 5,000-word proposal

—	Proposal	Article
Introduction	20%	10%
Formal abstract with keywords	—	300
Overview	300	300
Topic and purpose	200	200
Significance	200	200
Framework and general questions research questions	100	200
Limitations	100	—
Literature Review	30%	10%
Theory grounding/framing the research question or issue	500	350
Review of relevant literature and prior empirical research in areas	1000	650
Design and Methodology	50%	20%
Overall approach and fit to research question	250	200
Case, site, or population selection and sampling strategies	500	400
Access, role, reciprocity, trust, rapport issues	200	150
Reflective biography/situation of self	200	200
Ethical and political considerations	200	200
Data collection methods	500	400
Data management plan	200	—
Timeline	100	—
Data analysis procedures	250	250
Steps taken to ensure reliability, trustworthiness, and credibility	100	200
Findings/Discussion	0%	45%
Themes and patterns; examples	—	3,000
Discussion of findings (tying to theory and lit review)	—	1,500
Final sections	0%	15%
Limitations	—	500
Conclusion	—	1000
TOTAL WORDS	5,000	10,000

Figure 20.1 shows one model for what to include in an article or research proposal, comparing the elements of each with a default word count for each section. Please note that you will want to follow whatever specific guidelines you have been provided by the venue you are submitting the article/proposal to: the IRB, the NSF, the *Journal of Qualitative Research*. In fact, I encourage you to adapt the default model as needed by swapping out expected word counts for each section and adding or varying the sections to match expectations for your particular publication venue.[2]

You will notice a few things about the default model guidelines. First, while half of the proposal is spent discussing the research design, this section is shortened (but still included) for the article. There are a few elements that only show up in the proposal (e.g., the limitations section is in the introductory section here—it will be more fully developed in the conclusory section in the article). Obviously, you don't have findings in the proposal, so this is an entirely new section for the article. Note that the article does not include a data management plan or a timeline—two aspects that most proposals require.

It might be helpful to find and maintain examples of successfully written sections that you can use as models for your own writing. I have included a few of these throughout the textbook and have included a few more at the end of this chapter.

Make an Argument

Some qualitative researchers, particularly those engaged in deep ethnographic research, focus their attention primarily if not exclusively on describing the data. They might even eschew the notion that they should make an "argument" about the data, preferring instead to use thick descriptions to convey interpretations. Bracketing the contrast between interpretation and argument for the moment, most readers will expect you to provide an argument about your data, and this argument will be in answer to whatever research question you eventually articulate (remember, research questions are allowed to shift as you get further into data collection and analysis). It can be frustrating to read a well-developed study with clear and elegant descriptions and no argument. The argument is the point of the research, and if you do not have one, 99 percent of the time, you are not finished with your analysis. Calarco (2020) suggests you imagine a pyramid, with all of your data forming the basis and all of your findings forming the middle section; the top/point of the pyramid is your argument, "what the patterns in your data tell us about how the world works or ought to work" (181).

The academic community to which you belong will be looking for an argument that relates to or develops

2. This is something I do with every article I write: using Excel, I write each element of the expected article in a separate row, with one column for "expected word count" and another column for "actual word count." I fill in the actual word count as I write. I add a third column for "comments to myself"—how things are progressing, what I still need to do, and so on. I then use the "sum" function below each of the first two columns to keep a running count of my progress relative to the final word count.

theory. This is the theoretical generalizability promise of qualitative research. An academic audience will want to know how your findings relate to previous findings, theories, and concepts (the literature review; see chapter 9). It is thus vitally important that you go back to your literature review (or develop a new one) and draw those connections in your discussion and/or conclusion. When writing to other audiences, you will still want an argument, although it may not be written as a theoretical one. What do I mean by that? Even if you are not referring to previous literature or developing new theories or adapting older ones, a simple description of your findings is like dumping a lot of leaves in the lap of your audience. They still deserve to know about the shape of the forest. Maybe provide them a road map through it. Do this by telling a clear and cogent story about the data. What is the primary theme, and why is it important? What is the *point* of your research?[3]

Researcher Note

A beautifully written piece of research based on participant observation [and/or] interviews brings people to life, and helps the reader understand the challenges people face. You are trying to use vivid, detailed and compelling words to help the reader really understand the lives of the people you studied. And you are trying to connect the lived experiences of these people to a broader conceptual point—so that the reader can understand why it matters. (Lareau 2021:259)

Do not hide your argument. Make it the focal point of your introductory section, and repeat it as often as needed to ensure the reader remembers it. I am always impressed when I see researchers do this well (see, e.g., Zelizer 1996).

Here are a few other suggestions for writing your article: Be brief. Do not overwhelm the reader with too many words; make every word count. Academics are particularly prone to "overwriting" as a way of demonstrating proficiency. Don't. When writing your methods section, think about it as a "recipe for your work" that allows other researchers to replicate if they so wish (Calarco 2020:186). Convey all the necessary information clearly, succinctly, and accurately. No more, no less.[4] Do not try to write from

3. And this is true, I would argue, even when your primary goal is to leave space for the voices of those who don't usually get a chance to be part of the conversation. You will still want to put those voices in some kind of choir, with a clear direction (song) to be sung. The worst thing you can do is overwhelm your audience with random quotes or long passages with no key to understanding them. Yes, a lot of metaphors—qualitative researchers love metaphors!
4. To take Calarco's recipe analogy further, do not write like those food bloggers who spend more time discussing the color of their kitchen or

"beginning to end" in that order. Certain sections, like the introductory section, may be the last ones you write. I find the methods section the easiest, so I often begin there. Calarco (2020) begins with an outline of the analysis and results section and then works backward from there to outline the contribution she is making, then the full introduction that serves as a road map for the writing of all sections. She leaves the abstract for the very end. Find what order best works for you.

Presenting at Conferences and Job Talks

Students and faculty are primarily called upon to publicly present their research in two distinct contexts—the academic conference and the "job talk." By convention, conference presentations usually run about fifteen minutes and, at least in sociology and other social sciences, rely primarily on the use of a slideshow (PowerPoint Presentation or PPT) presentation. You are usually one of three or four presenters scheduled on the same "panel," so it is an important point of etiquette to ensure that your presentation falls within the allotted time and does not crowd into that of the other presenters. Job talks, on the other hand, conventionally require a forty- to forty-five-minute presentation with a fifteen- to twenty-minute question and answer (Q&A) session following it. You are the only person presenting, so if you run over your allotted time, it means less time for the Q&A, which can disturb some audience members who have been waiting for a chance to ask you something. It is sometimes possible to incorporate questions during your presentation, which allows you to take the entire hour, but you might end up shorting your presentation this way if the questions are numerous. It's best for beginners to stick to the "ask me at the end" format (unless there is a simple clarifying question that can easily be addressed and makes the presentation run more smoothly, as in the case where you simply forgot to include information on the number of interviews you conducted).

For slideshows, you should allot two or even three minutes for each slide, never less than one minute. And those slides should be clear, concise, and limited. Most of what you say should not be on those slides at all. The slides are simply the main points or a clear image of what you are speaking about. Include bulleted points (words, short phrases), not full sentences. The exception is illustrative quotations from transcripts or fieldnotes. In those cases, keep to one illustrative quote per slide, and if it is long, bold or otherwise, highlight the words or passages that are most important for the audience to notice.[5]

Figure 20.2 provides a possible model for sections to include in either a conference presentation or a job talk, with approximate times and approximate numbers of slides. Note the importance (in amount of

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the experiences they had at the market than they do the actual cooking; similarly, do not write recipes that omit crucial details like the amount of flour or the size of the baking pan used or the temperature of the oven.

5. The exception is the "compare and contrast" of two or more quotes, but use caution here. None of the quotes should be very long at all (a sentence or two each).

time spent) of both the research design and the findings/results sections, both of which have been helpfully starred for you. Although you don't want to short any of the sections, these two sections are the heart of your presentation.

	Conference Presentation		**Job Talk**	
Talk section	**Time**	**#slides**	**Time**	**#slides**
Introduction	5 min	1	1 min	1
Lit Review (background/justification)	1-2 min	1	3-5 min	2
Research goals/questions	1 min	1	1-2 min	1
Research design/data/methods**	2 min**	1	5 min**	2
Overview	1 min	1	3 min	1
Findings/results**	4-8 min**	4-8	20 min**	4-6
Discussion/implications	1 min	1	5 min	1
Thanks/References	1 min	1	1 min	1

Fig 20.2. Suggested Slideshow Times and Number of Slides

Should you write out your script to read along with your presentation? I have seen this work well, as it prevents presenters from straying off topic and keeps them to the time allotted. On the other hand, these presentations can seem stiff and wooden. Personally, although I have a general script in advance, I like to speak a little more informally and engagingly with each slide, sometimes making connections with previous panelists if I am at a conference. This means I have to pay attention to the time, and I sometimes end up breezing through one section more quickly than I would like. Whatever approach you take, practice in advance. Many times. With an audience. Ask for feedback, and pay attention to any presentation issues that arise (e.g., Do you speak too fast? Are you hard to hear? Do you stumble over a particular word or name?).

Even though there are rules and guidelines for what to include, you will still want to make your presentation as engaging as possible in the little amount of time you have. Calarco (2020:274) recommends trying one of three story structures to frame your presentation: (1) *the uncertain explanation*, where you introduce a phenomenon that has not yet been fully explained and then describe how your research is tackling this; (2) *the uncertain outcome*, where you introduce a phenomenon where the consequences have been unclear and then you reveal those consequences with your research; and (3) *the evocative example*, where you start with some interesting example from your research (a quote from the interview transcripts, for example) or the real world and then explain how that example illustrates the larger patterns you found in your research. Notice that each of these is a framing story. Framing stories are essential regardless of format!

A Word on Universal Design

Please consider accessibility issues during your presentation, and incorporate elements of universal design into your slideshow. The basic idea behind universal design in presentations is that to the greatest extent possible, all people should be able to view, hear, or otherwise take in your presentation without needing special individual adaptations. If you can make your presentation accessible to people with visual impairment or hearing loss, why not do so? For example, one in twelve men is color-blind, unable to differentiate between certain colors, red/green being the most common problem. So if you design a graphic that relies on red and green bars, some of your audience members may not be able to properly identify which bar means what. Simple contrasts of black and white are much more likely to be visible to all members of your audience. There are many other elements of good universal design, but the basic foundation of all of them is that you consider how to make your presentation as accessible as possible at the outset. For example, include captions whenever possible, both as descriptions on slides and as images on slides and for any audio or video clips you are including; keep font sizes large enough to read from the back of the room; and face the audience when you are.

Poster Design

Undergraduate students who present at conferences are often encouraged to present at "poster sessions." This usually means setting up a poster version of your research in a large hall or convention space at a set period of time—ninety minutes is common. Your poster will be one of dozens, and conference-goers will wander through the space, stopping intermittently at posters that attract them. Those who stop by might ask you questions about your research, and you are expected to be able to talk intelligently for two or three minutes. It's a fairly easy way to practice presenting at conferences, which is why so many organizations hold these special poster sessions.

[Untitled image] by AnitaB.org on Flickr

A good poster design will be immediately attractive to passersby and clearly and succinctly describe your research methods, findings, and conclusions. Some students have simply shrunk down their research papers to manageable sizes and then pasted them on a poster, all twelve to fifteen pages of them. Don't do that! Here are some better suggestions: State the main conclusion of your research in large bold print at the top of your poster, on brightly colored (contrasting) paper, and paste in a QR code that links to your full paper online (Calarco 2020:280). Use the rest of the poster board to provide a couple of highlights and details of the study. For an interview-based study, for example, you will want to put in some details about your sample (including number of interviews) and setting and then perhaps one or two key quotes, also distinguished by contrasting color background.

Incorporating Visual Design in Your Presentations

In addition to ensuring that your presentation is accessible to as large an audience as possible, you also want to think about how to display your data in general, particularly how to use charts and graphs and figures.[6] The first piece of advice is, use them! As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. If you can cut to the chase with a visually stunning display, do so. But there are visual displays that are stunning, and then there are the tired, hard-to-see visual displays that predominate at conferences. You can do better than most presenters by simply paying attention here and committing yourself to a good design. As with model section passages, keep a file of visual displays that work as models for your own presentations. Find a good guidebook to presenting data effectively (Evergreen 2018, 2019; Schwabisch 2021), and refer to it often.

Let me make a few suggestions here to get you started. First, test every visual display on a friend or colleague to find out how quickly they can understand the point you are trying to convey. As with reading passages aloud to ensure that your writing works, showing someone your display is the quickest way to find out if it works. Second, *put the point in the title of the display!* When writing for an academic journal, there will be specific conventions of what to include in the title (full description including methods of analysis, sample, dates), but in a public presentation, there are no limiting rules. So you are free to write as your title "Working-Class College Students Are Three Times as Likely as Their Peers to Drop Out of College," if that is the point of the graphic display. It certainly helps the communicative aspect. Third, use the themes available to you in Excel for creating graphic displays, but *alter them to better fit your needs*. Consider adding dark borders to bars and columns, for example, so that they appear crisper for your audience. Include data callouts and labels, and enlarge them so they are clearly visible. When duplicative or otherwise unnecessary, drop distracting gridlines and labels on the y-axis (the vertical one). Don't go crazy adding

6. Although this section is geared toward presentations, many of the suggestions could also be useful when writing about your data. Don't be afraid to use charts and graphs and figures when writing your proposal, article, thesis, or dissertation. At the very least, you should incorporate a tabular display of the participants, sites, or documents used.

different fonts, however—keep things simple and clear. Sans serif fonts (those without the little hooks on the ends of letters) read better from a distance. Try to use the same color scheme throughout, even if this means manually changing the colors of bars and columns. For example, when reporting on working-class college students, I use blue bars, while I reserve green bars for wealthy students and yellow bars for students in the middle. I repeat these colors throughout my presentations and incorporate different colors when talking about other items or factors. You can also try using simple grayscale throughout, with pops of color to indicate a bar or column or line that is of the most interest. These are just some suggestions. The point is to take presentation seriously and to pay attention to visual displays you are using to ensure they effectively communicate what you want them to communicate. I've included a **data visualization** checklist from Evergreen (2018) here.

Ethics of Presentation and Reliability

Until now, all the data you have collected have been yours alone. Once you present the data, however, you are sharing sometimes very intimate information about people with a broader public. You will find yourself balancing between protecting the privacy of those you've interviewed and observed and needing to demonstrate the reliability of the study. The more information you provide to your audience, the more they can understand and appreciate what you have found, but this also may pose risks to your participants. There is no one correct way to go about finding the right balance. As always, you have a duty to consider what you are doing and must make some hard decisions.

[Untitled image] by Vitolda Klein on Unsplash

The most obvious place we see this paradox emerge is when you mask your data to protect the privacy of your participants. It is standard practice to provide pseudonyms, for example. It is such standard practice that you should always assume you are being given a pseudonym when reading a book or article based on qualitative research. When I was a graduate student, I tried to find information on how best to construct

pseudonyms but found little guidance. There are some ethical issues here, I think.[7] Do you create a name that has the same kind of resonance as the original name? If the person goes by a nickname, should you use a nickname as a pseudonym? What about names that are ethnically marked (as in, almost all of them)? Is there something unethical about reracializing a person? (Yes!) In her study of adolescent subcultures, Wilkins (2008) noted, "Because many of the goths used creative, alternative names rather than their given names, I did my best to reproduce the spirit of their chosen names" (24).

Your reader or audience will want to know *all the details* about your participants so that they can gauge both your credibility and the reliability of your findings. But how many details are too many? What if you change the name but otherwise retain all the personal pieces of information about where they grew up, and how old they were when they got married, and how many children they have, and whether they made a splash in the news cycle that time they were stalked by their ex-boyfriend? At some point, those details are going to tip over into the zone of potential unmasking. When you are doing research at one particular field site that may be easily ascertained (as when you interview college students, probably at the institution at which you are a student yourself), it is even more important to be wary of providing too many details. You also need to think that your participants might read what you have written, know things about the site or the population from which you drew your interviews, and figure out whom you are talking about. This can all get very messy if you don't do more than simply pseudonymize the people you interviewed or observed.

There are some ways to do this. One, you can design a study with all of these risks in mind. That might mean choosing to conduct interviews or observations at *multiple sites* so that no one person can be easily identified. Another is to *alter some basic details* about your participants to protect their identity or to *refuse to provide all the information when selecting quotes*. Let's say you have an interviewee named "Anna" (a pseudonym), and she is a twenty-four-year-old Latina studying to be an engineer. You want to use a quote from Anna about racial discrimination in her graduate program. Instead of attributing the quote to Anna (whom your reader knows, because you've already told them, is a twenty-four-year-old Latina studying engineering), you might simply attribute the quote to "Latina student in STEM." Taking this a step further, you might leave the quote unattributed, providing a list of quotes about racial discrimination by "various students."

The problem with masking all the identifiers, of course, is that you lose some of the analytical heft of those attributes. If it mattered that Anna was twenty-four (not thirty-four) and that she was a Latina and that she was studying engineering, taking out any of those aspects of her identity might weaken your analysis. This is one of those "hard choices" you will be called on to make! A rather radical and controversial solution to this dilemma is to *create composite characters*, characters based on the reality of the interviews but fully masked because they are not identifiable with any one person. My students are often very queasy about this when I explain it to them. The more positivistic your approach and the more you

7. I was so puzzled by these kinds of questions that I wrote one of my very first articles on it (Hurst 2008).

see *individuals* rather than *social relationships/structure* as the "object" of your study, the more employing composites will seem like a really bad idea. But composites "allow researchers to present complex, situated accounts from individuals" without disclosing personal identities (Willis 2019), and they can be effective ways of presenting theory narratively (Hurst 2019). Ironically, composites permit you more latitude when including "dirty laundry" or stories that could harm individuals if their identities became known. Rather than squeezing out details that could identify a participant, the identities are permanently removed from the details. Great difficulty remains, however, in clearly explaining the theoretical use of composites to your audience and providing sufficient information on the reliability of the underlying data.

There are a host of other ethical issues that emerge as you write and present your data. This is where being reflective throughout the process will help. How and what you share of what you have learned will depend on the social relationships you have built, the audiences you are writing or speaking to, and the underlying animating goals of your study. Be conscious about all of your decisions, and then be able to explain them fully, both to yourself and to those who ask.

Researcher Note

Our research is often close to us. As a Black woman who is a first-generation college student and a professional with a poverty/working-class origin, each of these pieces of my identity creates nuances in how I engage in my research, including how I share it out. Because of this, it's important for us to have people in our lives who we trust who can help us, particularly, when we are trying to share our findings. As researchers, we have been steeped in our work, so we know all the details and nuances. Sometimes we take this for granted, and we might not have shared those nuances in conversation or writing or taken some of this information for granted. As I share my research with trusted friends and colleagues, I pay attention to the questions they ask me or the feedback they give when we talk or when they read drafts.

—Kim McAloney, PhD, College Student Services Administration Ecampus coordinator and instructor

Final Comments: Preparing for Being Challenged

Once you put your work out there, you must be ready to be challenged. Science is a collective enterprise and depends on a healthy give and take among researchers. This can be both novel and difficult as you get started, but the more you understand the importance of these challenges, the easier it will be to develop the kind of thick skin necessary for success in academia. Scientists' authority rests on both the inherent

strength of their findings and their ability to convince other scientists of the reliability and validity and value of those findings. So be prepared to be challenged, and recognize this as simply another important aspect of conducting research!

Considering what challenges might be made as you design and conduct your study will help you when you get to the writing and presentation stage. Address probable challenges in your final article, and have a planned response to probable questions in a conference presentation or job talk. The following is a list of common challenges of qualitative research and how you might best address them:

1. *Questions about generalizability*. Although qualitative research is not statistically generalizable (and be prepared to explain why), qualitative research is theoretically generalizable. Discuss why your findings here might tell us something about related phenomena or contexts.
2. *Questions about reliability*. You probably took steps to ensure the reliability of your findings. Discuss them! This includes explaining the use and value of multiple data sources and defending your sampling and case selections. It also means being transparent about your own position as researcher and explaining steps you took to ensure that what you were seeing was really there.
3. *Questions about replicability.* Although qualitative research cannot strictly be replicated because the circumstances and contexts will necessarily be different (if only because the point in time is different), you should be able to provide as much detail as possible about how the study was conducted so that another researcher could attempt to confirm or disconfirm your findings. Also, be very clear about the limitations of your study, as this allows other researchers insight into what future research might be warranted.

None of this is easy, of course. Writing beautifully and presenting clearly and cogently require skill and practice. If you take anything from this chapter, it is to remember that presentation is an important and essential part of the research process and to allocate time for this as you plan your research.

Data Visualization Checklist for Slideshow (PPT) Presentations

Adapted from Evergreen (2018)

Text checklist

☐ Short catchy, descriptive titles (e.g., "Working-class students are three times as likely to drop out

of college") summarize the point of the visual display

- ☐ Subtitled and annotations provide additional information (e.g., "note: male students also more likely to drop out")
- ☐ Text size is hierarchical and readable (titles are largest; axes labels smallest, which should be at least 20points)
- ☐ Text is horizontal. Audience members cannot read vertical text!
- ☐ All data labeled directly and clearly: get rid of those "legends" and embed the data in your graphic display
- ☐ Labels are used sparingly; avoid redundancy (e.g., do not include both a number axis and a number label)

Arrangement checklist

- ☐ Proportions are accurate; bar charts should always start at zero; don't mislead the audience!
- ☐ Data are intentionally ordered (e.g., by frequency counts). Do not leave ragged alphabetized bar graphs!
- ☐ Axis intervals are equidistant: spaces between axis intervals should be the same unit
- ☐ Graph is two-dimensional. Three-dimensional and "bevelled" displays are confusing
- ☐ There is no unwanted decoration (especially the kind that comes automatically through the PPT "theme"). This wastes your space and confuses.

Color checklist

- ☐ There is an *intentional* color scheme (do not use default theme)
- ☐ Color is used to identify key patterns (e.g., highlight one bar in red against six others in greyscale if this is the bar you want the audience to notice)
- ☐ Color is still legible when printed in black and white
- ☐ Color is legible for people with color blindness (do not use red/green or yellow/blue combinations)
- ☐ There is sufficient contrast between text and background (black text on white background works best; be careful of white on dark!)

Lines checklist

- ☐ Be wary of using gridlines; if you do, mute them (grey, not black)
- ☐ Allow graph to bleed into surroundings (don't use border lines)
- ☐ Remove axis lines unless absolutely necessary (better to label directly)

Overall design checklist

- ☐ The display highlights a significant finding or conclusion that your audience can “”see” relatively quickly
- ☐ The type of graph (e.g., bar chart, pie chart, line graph) is appropriate for the data. Avoid pie charts with more than three slices!
- ☐ Graph has appropriate level of precision; if you don’t need decimal places
- ☐ All the chart elements work together to reinforce the main message

Universal Design Checklist for Slideshow (PPT) Presentations

- ☐ Include both verbal and written descriptions (e.g., captions on slides); consider providing a hand-out to accompany the presentation
- ☐ Microphone available (ask audience in back if they can clearly hear)
- ☐ Face audience; allow people to read your lips
- ☐ Turn on captions when presenting audio or video clips
- ☐ Adjust light settings for visibility
- ☐ Speak slowly and clearly; practice articulation; don’t mutter or speak under your breath (even if you have something humorous to say – say it loud!)
- ☐ Use Black/White contrasts for easy visibility; or use color contrasts that are real contrasts (do not rely on people being able to differentiate red from green, for example)
- ☐ Use easy to read font styles and avoid too small font sizes: think about what an audience member in the back row will be able to see and read.
- ☐ Keep your slides simple: do not overclutter them; if you are including quotes from your interviews, take short evocative snippets only, and bold key words and passages. You should also read aloud each passage, preferably with feeling!

Supplement: Models of Written Sections for Future Reference

Data Collection Section Example

Interviews were semi structured, lasted between one and three hours, and took place at a location chosen by the interviewee. Discussions centered on four general topics: (1) knowledge of their parent's immigration experiences; (2) relationship with their parents; (3) understanding of family labor, including language-brokering experiences; and (4) experiences with school and peers, including any future life plans. While conducting interviews, I paid close attention to respondents' nonverbal cues, as well as their use of metaphors and jokes. I conducted interviews until I reached a point of saturation, as indicated by encountering repeated themes in new interviews (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed with each interviewee's permission, and conducted in accordance with IRB protocols. Minors received permission from their parents before participation in the interview. (Kwon 2022:1832)

Justification of Case Selection / Sample Description Section Example

Looking at one profession within one organization and in one geographic area does impose limitations on the generalizability of our findings. However, it also has advantages. We eliminate the problem of interorganizational heterogeneity. If multiple organizations are studied simultaneously, it can make it difficult to discern the mechanisms that contribute to racial inequalities. Even with a single occupation there is considerable heterogeneity, which may make understanding how organizational structure impacts worker outcomes difficult. By using the case of one group of professionals in one religious denomination in one geographic region of the United States, we clarify how individuals' perceptions and experiences of occupational inequality unfold in relation to a variety of observed and unobserved occupational and contextual factors that might be obscured in a larger-scale study. Focusing on a specific group of professionals allows us to explore and identify ways that formal organizational rules combine with informal processes to contribute to the persistence of racial inequality. (Eagle and Mueller 2022:1510–1511)

Ethics Section Example

I asked everyone who was willing to sit for a formal interview to speak only for themselves and offered each of them a prepaid Visa Card worth $25–40. I also offered everyone the opportunity to keep the card and erase the tape completely at any time they were dissatisfied with the interview in any way. No one asked for the tape to be erased; rather, people remarked on the interview being a really good experience because they felt heard. Each interview was professionally transcribed and for the most part the excerpts

> are literal transcriptions. In a few places, the excerpts have been edited to reduce colloquial features of speech (e.g., you know, like, um) and some recursive elements common to spoken language. A few excerpts were placed into standard English for clarity. I made this choice for the benefit of readers who might otherwise find the insights and ideas harder to parse in the original. However, I have to acknowledge this as an act of class-based violence. I tried to keep the original phrasing whenever possible. (Pascale 2021:235)

Further Readings

Calarco, Jessica McCrory. 2020. *A Field Guide to Grad School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Don't let the unassuming title mislead you—there is a wealth of helpful information on writing and presenting data included here in a highly accessible manner. Every graduate student should have a copy of this book.

Edwards, Mark. 2012. *Writing in Sociology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. An excellent guide to writing and presenting sociological research by an Oregon State University professor. Geared toward undergraduates and useful for writing about either quantitative or qualitative research or both.

Evergreen, Stephanie D. H. 2018. *Presenting Data Effectively: Communicating Your Findings for Maximum Impact*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. This is one of my very favorite books, and I recommend it highly for everyone who wants their presentations and publications to communicate more effectively than the boring black-and-white, ragged-edge tables and figures academics are used to seeing.

Evergreen, Stephanie D. H. 2019. *Effective Data Visualization 2*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. This is an advanced primer for presenting clean and clear data using graphs, tables, color, font, and so on. Start with Evergreen (2018), and if you graduate from that text, move on to this one.

Schwabisch, Jonathan. 2021. *Better Data Visualizations: A Guide for Scholars, Researchers, and Wonks*. New York: Columbia University Press. Where Evergreen's (2018, 2019) focus is on how to make the best visual displays possible for effective communication, this book is specifically geared toward visual displays of academic data, both quantitative and qualitative. If you want to know when it is appropriate to use a pie chart instead of a stacked bar chart, this is the reference to use.

CHAPTER 21. CONCLUSION: THE VALUE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research is engaging research, in the best sense of the word.

Definition

A few of the meanings of engage = to attract or hold by influence or power; to hold the attention of; to induce to participate; to enter into contest with; to bring together or interlock; to deal with at length; to pledge oneself; to begin and carry on an enterprise; to take part or participate; to come together; engaged = to be actively involved in or committed; to greatly interest; to be embedded with. (Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary)

There really is no "cookbook" for conducting qualitative research. Each study is unique because the social world is rich and full of wonders, and those of us who are curious about it have our own position in that world and our own understandings and experiences we bring with us when we seek to explore it. And yet even though our reports may be subjective, we can do what we can to make them honest and intelligible to everyone else. Learning how to do that is learning how to be a qualitative researcher rather than simply an amateur observer. Helping you understand that and getting you ready for doing so have been the goal of this book.

[Untitled image] by Heather Mount on Unsplash

According to Lareau (2021:36), excellent qualitative work must include all the following elements: a clear contribution to new knowledge, a succinct assessment of previous literature that shows the holes in the literature, a research question that can be answered with the data in hand, a breadth and depth in the data collection, a clear exposition of the results, a deep analysis that links the evidence to the interpretation, an acknowledgment of disconfirming evidence, a discussion that uses the case as a springboard to reflect on more general concerns, and a full discussion of implications for ideas and practices. The emphasis on rigor, the clear contribution to new knowledge, and the reflection on more general concerns place qualitative research within the "scientific" camp vis-à-vis the "humanistic inquiry" camp of pure description or ideographic approaches. The attention to previous literature and filling the holes in what we know about a phenomenon or case or situation set qualitative research apart from otherwise excellent journalism, which makes no pretensions of writing to or for a larger body of knowledge.

In the magnificently engaging untextbook *Rocking Qualitative Social Science*, Ashley Rubin (2021) notes, "Rigorous research does not have to be rigid" (3). I agree with her claim that there are many ways to get to the top of the mountain, and you can have fun doing so. An ardent rock climber, Rubin calls her approach the *Dirtbagger* approach, a way of climbing the mountain that is creative, flexible, and definitely outside proscribed methods. Here are eleven lessons offered by Rubin in paraphrase form with commentary and direct quotes noted:

1. There is no right way to do qualitative social science, "and people should choose the approach that works for them, for the particular project at hand, given whatever constraints and opportunities are happening in their life at the time. (252)"
2. Disagreements about what is proper qualitative research are distracting and misleading.
3. Even though research questions are very important, they can and most likely will change during data collection or even data analysis—don't worry about this.
4. Your findings will have a bigger impact if you've connected them to previous literature; this shows that you are part of the larger conversation. This "anchor" can be a policy issue or a theoretical

debate in the literature, but it need not be either. Sometimes what we do is really novel (but rarely—so always poke around and check before proceeding as if you are inventing the wheel).

5. Although there are some rules you really must follow when designing your study (e.g., how to obtain informed consent, defining a sample), unexpected things often happen in the course of data collection that make a mockery of your original plans. Be flexible.
6. Sometimes you have chosen a topic for some reason you can't yet articulate to yourself—the subject or site just calls to you in some way. That's fine. But you will still need to justify your choice in some way (hint: see number 4 above).
7. Pay close attention to your sample: "Think about what you are leaving out, what your data allow you to observe, and what you can do to fill in some of those blanks" (252). And when you can't fill them in, be honest about this when writing about the limitations of your study.
8. Even if you are doing interviews, archival research, focus groups, or any other method of data collection that does not actually require "going into the field," you can still approach your work as fieldwork. This means taking fieldnotes or memos about what you are observing and how you are reacting and processing those observations or interviews or interactions or documents. Remember that you yourself are the instrument of data collection, so keep a reflective eye on yourself throughout.
9. Memo, memo, memo. There is no magic about how data become findings. It takes a lot of work, a lot of reflection, a lot of writing. Analytic memos are the helpful bridge between all that raw data and the presented findings.
10. Rubin strongly rejects the idea that qualitative research cannot make causal claims. I would agree, but only to a point. We don't make the kinds of predictive causal claims you see in quantitative research, and it can confuse you and lead you down some unpromising paths if you think you can. That said, qualitative research can help demonstrate the causal mechanisms by which something happens. Qualitative research is also helpful in exploring alternative explanations and counterfactuals. If you want to know more about qualitative research and causality, I encourage you to read chapter 10 of Rubin's text.
11. Some people are still skeptical about the value of qualitative research because they don't understand the rigor required of it and confuse it with journalism or even fiction writing. You are just going to have to deal with this—maybe even people sitting on your committee are going to question your research. So be prepared to defend qualitative research by knowing the common misconceptions and criticisms and how to respond to them. We've talked a bit about these in chapter 20, and I also encourage you to read chapter 10 of Rubin's text for more.

[Untitled image] by Jon Tyson on Unsplash

Hopefully, by the time you have reached the end of this book, you will have done a bit of your own qualitative research—maybe you've conducted an interview or practiced taking fieldnotes. You may have read some examples of excellent qualitative research and have (hopefully!) come to appreciate the value of this approach. This is a good time, then, to take a step back and think about the ways that qualitative research is valuable, distinct and different from both quantitative methods and humanistic (nonscientific) inquiry.

Researcher Note

Why do you employ qualitative research methods in your area of study?

Across all Western countries, we can observe a strong statistical relationship between young people's educational attainment and their parent's level of education. If you have at least one parent who went to university, your own chances of going to and graduating from university are much higher compared to not having university-educated parents. Why this happens is much less clear… This is where qualitative research becomes important: to help us get a clearer understanding of the dynamics that lead to this observed statistical relationship.

In my own research, I go a step further and look at young men and women who have crossed this barrier: they have become the first in their family to go to university. I am interested in finding out why and how first-in-family university students made it to university and how being at university is experienced. In-depth interviews allow me to learn about hopes, aspirations, fears, struggles, resilience and success. Interviews give participants an opportunity to tell their stories in their own words while also validating their experiences.

> I often ask the young people I interview what being in my studies means to them. As one of my participants told me, it is good to know that "people like me are worth studying." I cannot think of a better way to explain why qualitative research is important.
>
> -Wolfgang Lehman, author of *Education and Society: Canadian Perspectives*

For me personally, the real value of the qualitative approach is that it helps me address the concerns I have about the social world—how people make sense of their lives, how they create strategies to deal with unfair circumstances or systems of oppression, and why they are motivated to act in some situations but not others. Surveys and other forms of large impersonal data collection simply do not allow me to get at these concerns. I appreciate other forms of research for other kinds of questions. This ecumenical approach has served me well in my own career as a sociologist—I've used surveys of students to help me describe classed pathways through college and into the workforce, supplemented by interviews and focus groups that help me explain and understand the patterns uncovered by quantitative methods (Hurst 2019). My goal for this book has not been to convince you to become a qualitative researcher exclusively but rather to understand and appreciate its value under the right circumstances (e.g., with the right questions and concerns).

In the same way that we would not use a screwdriver to hammer a nail into the wall, we don't want to misuse the tools we have at hand. Nor should we critique the screwdriver for its failure to do the hammer's job. Qualitative research is not about generating predictions or demonstrating causality. We can never statistically generalize our findings from a small sample of people in a particular context to the world at large. But that doesn't mean we can't generate better understandings of how the world works, despite "small" samples. Excellent qualitative research does a great job describing (whether through "thick description" or illustrative quotes) a phenomenon, case, or setting and generates deeper insight into the social world through the development of new concepts or identification of patterns and relationships that were previously unknown to us. The two components—accurate description and theoretical insight—are generated together through the iterative process of data analysis, which itself is based on a solid foundation of data collection. And along the way, we can have some fun and meet some interesting people!

[Untitled image] by Bill Wegener on Unsplash

Supplement: Twenty Great (engaging, insightful) Books Based on Qualitative Research

Armstrong, Elizabeth A. and Laura T. Hamilton. 2015. *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

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GLOSSARY

Abductive reasoning:

An "interpretivist" form of reasoning in which "most likely" conclusions are drawn, based on inference. This approach is often used by qualitative researchers who stress the recursive nature of qualitative data analysis. Compare with **deductive reasoning** and **inductive reasoning**.

Access:

The means of gaining entry to a research site or research population.

Action research:

Research carried out at a particular organizational or community site with the intention of affecting change; often involves research subjects as participants of the study. See also **participatory action research**.

Affective coding:

A form of first-cycle coding in which codes are developed to "investigate subjective qualities of human experience (e.g., emotions, values, conflicts, judgments) by directly acknowledging and naming those experiences" (Saldaña 2021:159). See also **emotions coding** and **values coding**.

Analytic memos:

Reflective summaries of findings that emerge during analysis of qualitative data; they can include reminders to oneself for future analyses or considerations, reinterpretations or generations of codes, or brainstorms and concept mapping.

Anonymity:

A condition in which the identity of individual subjects is not known to researchers; although this is not often truly possible, researchers can nevertheless take steps to ensure that the presentation of the data to a general audience remains anonymous through the use of pseudonyms and other forms of identity masking.

Anonymized data:

Data from which all personal identifiers have been removed, as where pseudonyms have replaced all names in an interview transcript and where there is no remaining link or code between the transcript and identifying records. Given the requirements of signed written consent forms, this is not often possible in qualitative research. See also **de-identified data**.

Applied research:

Research that contributes knowledge that will help people to understand the nature of a problem in order to intervene, thereby allowing human beings to more effectively control their environment.

Archive:

A place or collection containing records, documents, or other materials of historical interest; most universities have an archive of material related to the university's history, as well as other "special collections" that may be of interest to members of the community.

Audit trail:

A method of ensuring trustworthiness; researcher-constructed documentary evidence of how data was collected and managed, transparently "accounting for all data and all design decisions made in the field so that anyone can see the data as evidence and trace the logic leading to the representation and interpretation of findings" (Marshall and Rossman 2016:230).

Autoethnography:

A form of research and a methodological tradition of inquiry in which the researcher uses self-reflection and writing to explore personal experiences and connect this autobiographical story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings. "Autoethnography is a research method that uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences" (Adams, Jones, and Ellis 2015).

Axial coding:

A later stage coding process used in **Grounded Theory** in which data is reassembled around a category, or axis.

Axiology:

A branch of philosophy that studies judgments about values; ethical questions in research (as when

one decides to design a participatory action research study for the purpose of engaging the community and offering a more socially just outcome).

Basic research:

Research that is interested in generating and testing hypotheses about how the world works.

Belmont Report, the

The report of the US National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, first published in 1974. It identified the basic ethical principles that should underlie the conduct of research involving human subjects and developed guidelines to ensure that such research is conducted in accordance with those principles.

Beneficence principle:

One of the three principles identified in the ***Belmont Report***: the risks of harm should be minimized and the potential benefits (e.g., knowledge production, increased understanding) should be maximized. In other words, the benefits of the study should outweigh any harm (including discomfort to the participants). Just because one is able to conduct a study does not mean one should or that the study is worth pursuing

CAQDAS:

Computer-assisted qualitative data-analysis software. These are software packages that can serve as a repository for qualitative data and that enable coding, memoing, and other tools of data analysis. See chapter 17 for particular recommendations.

Case study:

A methodological tradition of inquiry and research design that focuses on an individual case (e.g., setting, institution, or sometimes an individual) in order to explore its complexity, history, and interactive parts. As an approach, it is particularly useful for obtaining a deep appreciation of an issue, event, or phenomenon of interest in its particular context.

Cherry picking:

The purposeful selection of some data to prove a preexisting expectation or desired point of the researcher where other data exists that would contradict the interpretation offered. Note that it is *not* cherry picking to select a quote that typifies the main finding of a study, although it would be cherry picking to select a quote that is atypical of a body of interviews and then present it as if it is typical.

Closed coding:

The final stages of coding after the refinement of codes has created a complete list or codebook in which all the data is coded using this refined list or codebook. Compare to **open coding**.

Code landscaping:

A technique of second-cycle coding that “integrates textual and visual methods to see both the forest and trees" (Saldaña 2021:285).

Code mapping:

A technique of second-cycle coding in which codes developed in the first rounds of coding are restructured into an increasingly simplified hierarchical organization, thereby allowing the general patterns and underlying structure of the field data to emerge more clearly.

Code:

A word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data (Saldaña 2021:5).

Codebook:

A set of codes, definitions, and examples used as a guide to help analyze interview data. Codebooks are particularly helpful and necessary when research analysis is shared among members of a research team, as codebooks allow for standardization of shared meanings and code attributions.

Coding frame:

The scheme of data organization employed, featuring various broad headings and more specific sub-headings and the explicit links between all levels. See **coding.**

Coding:

The process of labeling and organizing qualitative data to identify different themes and the relationships between them; a way of simplifying data to allow better management and retrieval of key themes and illustrative passages. See **coding frame** and **codebook.**

Common Rule, the

The section of US federal regulations that establishes the core procedures for human research subject

protections, which include informed consent and review by an institutional review board (IRB). The Common Rule was substantially revised in 2017. See chapter 8 for more details.

Concept mapping:

A tool for identifying relationships among ideas by visually representing them on paper. Most concept maps depict ideas as boxes or circles (also called nodes), which are structured hierarchically and connected with lines or arrows (also called arcs). These lines are labeled with linking words and phrases to help explain the connections between concepts. Also known as mind mapping.

Concurrent triangulation:

A **mixed-methods** design that conceives of both quantitative and qualitative elements happening concurrently. In practice, one may still happen before the other, but one does not *follow* the other. The data then converge and from that convergence interpretations are made. Compare **sequential exploratory design** and **sequential explanatory design**.

Confidentiality:

A condition in which the researcher knows the identity of a research subject but takes steps to protect that identity from being discovered by others; this may require limiting presentation of sensitive data. While the connection between the participants and the results are known, the terms of the confidentiality agreement between the researcher and the participants limit those who will know of this connection. Compare to **anonymity**.

Constructivism:

Epistemological perspective in which people construct meaning from facts, events, and the reality "out there." In contrast to **objectivism**, which embraces the belief that a human can come to know external reality (the reality that exists beyond one's own mind), constructivism holds that the only reality we can know is that which is represented by human thought. In other words, although reality is independent of human thought, meaning or knowledge about that reality is always a human construction. See also **social constructionism.**

Content analysis:

A method of both data collection and data analysis in which a given content (textual, visual, graphic) is examined systematically and rigorously to identify meanings, themes, patterns and assumptions. Qualitative content analysis (QCA) is concerned with gathering and interpreting an existing body of material.

Convenience sample:

The selection of research participants or other data sources based on availability or accessibility, in contrast to **purposive sampling**.

Convergence focus group:

A form of focus group construction in which people with similar perspectives and experiences are included. These are particularly helpful for identifying shared patterns and group consensus. Contrast with a **diversity focus group**.

Conversation analysis:

A methodological tradition of inquiry concerned with illuminating how speakers accomplish a variety of tasks (e.g., jockeying for position, building friendships, constructing reality) through speech. As an analytical approach, it relies on detailed transcripts of spoken exchanges utilizing an agreed-upon set of conventions for coding these exchanges.

Covert methods:

Any variety of data-collection techniques in which the researcher does not disclose the full extent of the research study to participants or those inhabiting a setting or site in which data is collected. Although covert methods would appear to violate the requirement of informed consent, there are many situations in which the potential benefit of a study that includes covert methods outweighs any likely or possible harm, as in the case where an ethnographer observes social interactions in a public setting and records no information that would identify any particular person.

Critical realism:

A philosophical approach pioneered by Roy Bhaskar that attempts to resolve the tension between **objectivism** and **constructivism**. According to this approach, epistemology (how we know) and ontology (what exists) are separate; something previous approaches confused. Reality cannot be observed and exists outside of and independent of any human perceptions or "constructions." According to critical realists, unobservable structures cause observable events and the social world can be understood only if people understand the structures that generate events. In practical terms, critical realism stands apart from *both* **positivist** and **interpretivist** approaches to social science.

Data visualization:

The visual presentation of data or information through graphics such as charts, graphs, plots,

infographics, maps, and animation. Recall the best documentary you ever viewed, and there were probably excellent examples of good data visualization there (for me, this was An *Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore's film about climate change). Good data visualization allows more effective communication of findings of research, particularly in public presentations (e.g., slideshows).

De-identified data:

Data in which personal identifiers have been removed or obscured such that the remaining information does not identify an individual and there is no reasonable basis to believe that the information can be used to identify an individual. Unlike truly anonymized data, a link connecting the de-identified data and personal identifiers may exist, as in the case of a password-protected separate file linking de-identified transcripts with signed informed consent forms.

Deductive reasoning:

A form of reasoning which employs a "top-down" approach to drawing conclusions: it begins with a premise or hypothesis and seeks to verify it (or disconfirm it) with newly collected data. Inferences are made based on widely accepted facts or premises. Deduction is idea-first, followed by observations and a conclusion. This form of reasoning is often used in quantitative research and less often in qualitative research. Compare to **inductive reasoning**. See also **abductive reasoning**.

Descriptive coding:

A first-cycle coding process in which short words or phrases are used to describe a particular passage, especially useful for identifying the general topic of the passage. In the latter case, sometimes referred to as "topic coding."

Deviant case:

A form of case selection or purposeful sampling in which cases that are unusual or special in some way are chosen to highlight processes or to illuminate gaps in our knowledge of a phenomenon. See also **extreme case**.

Disconfirming case:

A form of case selection focusing on examples that do not fit the emerging patterns. This allows the researcher to evaluate rival explanations or to define the limitations of their research findings. While disconfirming cases are found (not sought out), researchers should expand their analysis or rethink their theories to include/explain them.

Discourse analysis:

A methodological tradition of inquiry often associated with Michel Foucault, in which close attention is paid to the structure of talk and the use of various conversational strategies and specific vocabularies for particular effects and considering the influence of power dynamics and the enactment of power through speech.

Diversity focus group:

A form of focus group construction in which people with diverse perspectives and experiences are chosen for inclusion. This helps the researcher identify commonalities across this diversity and/or note interactions across differences. Contrast with a **convergence focus group**

Documentary analysis:

The analysis of pre-existing documents (e.g., archival documents, official records, blogposts, media reports). Often used as a form of **triangulation**.

Emotions coding:

A first-cycle coding process in which emotions and emotionally salient passages are tagged.

Empathetic neutrality:

Although all researchers strive to be professionally neutral (not manipulating data, for example), qualitative researchers often stress the necessity of being *empathetically neutral*, truly open to understanding the opinions, values, beliefs, and actions of others and the meanings that people bring to them. This requires some self-reflectivity and awareness of potential obstacles, such as inherent biases based on one's current social location or past experiences. Empathetically neutral researchers recognize the impossibility and undesirability of full detachment from those they study.

Empathy:

A crucial component and desired outcome for much qualitative research, empathy is the ability to identify with or understand another's situation or feelings. This is also associated with the sociologist Max Weber's notion of *verstehen*, a key methodological practice of interpretivist social research, in which the researcher enters the frame of mind of another as part of the full comprehension of social behavior. "The tradition of *Verstehen* places emphasis on the human capacity to know and understand others through empathic introspection and reflection based on direct observation of and interaction with people" (Patton 2002:52).

Empiricism:

An epistemological perspective that posits the existence of reality through sensory experience. The world is what we see it as. Historically, empiricists stressed the ability and desirability to conduct research about the world rather than claiming knowledge innately or divinely. Empiricists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries championed the controlled experiment for advancing science. In more recent years, empiricism has sometimes been represented exclusively as quantitative research that centers on causality and prediction in contrast to more interpretivist forms of research. In actuality, most qualitative researchers also adhere to empiricism. Compare **positivism**.

Epistemology:

The branch of philosophy concerned with knowledge. For researchers, it is important to recognize and adopt one of the many distinguishing epistemological perspectives as part of our understanding of what questions research can address or fully answer. See, e.g., **constructivism**, **subjectivism,** and **objectivism**.

Ethics:

The science and practice of right conduct; in research, it is also the delineation of moral obligations towards research participants, communities to which we belong, and communities in which we conduct our research.

Ethnography:

One of the primary methodological traditions of inquiry in qualitative research, ethnography is the study of a group or group culture, largely through observational fieldwork supplemented by interviews. It is a form of **fieldwork** that may include **participant-observation** data collection. See chapter 14 for a discussion of *deep ethnography.*

Ethnomethodology:

A methodological tradition of inquiry that focuses on how people use social interaction to maintain an ongoing sense of reality in a situation. Ethnomethodologists employ conversation analysis and a rigorous set of techniques for systematically observing and recording what happens when people interact in natural settings.

Evaluation research:

Research that is designed to evaluate or test the effectiveness of specific solutions and programs addressing specific social problems. There are two kinds: **summative** and **formative**.

Exempt review (IRB):

A specific subset of research involving human subjects that does not require ongoing IRB oversight. Research can qualify for an exemption if it is no more than minimal risk and all of the research procedures fit within one or more of the exemption categories in the federal IRB regulations.

Expedited review (IRB):

A specific subset of research involving human subjects that is no more than "minimal risk" and fits in one of the federally designated expedited review categories. Expedited reviews do not require a convened committee meeting. All expedited studies must adhere to the requirements for informed consent or its waiver or alteration. Expedited studies may or may not be required to undergo annual review.

Extreme case:

A form of case selection or purposeful sampling in which cases that are extreme examples of critical phenomena are chosen to highlight processes or to illuminate gaps in our knowledge of a phenomenon. See also **deviant case**.

Fieldnotes:

The primary form of data for **fieldwork**, **participant observation**, and **ethnography**. These notes, taken by the researcher either during the course of fieldwork or at day's end, should include as many details as possible on what was observed and what was said. They should include clear identifiers of date, time, setting, and names (or identifying characteristics) of participants.

Fieldwork:

Data collection that takes place in real-world settings, referred to as "the field;" a key component of much **Grounded Theory** and ethnographic research. Patton (2002) calls fieldwork "the central activity of qualitative inquiry" where "'going into the field' means having direct and personal contact with people under study in their own environments – getting close to people and situations being studied to personally understand the realities of minutiae of daily life" (48).

Focus group:

A focus group interview is an interview with a small group of people on a specific topic. "The power of focus groups resides in their being focused" (Patton 2002:388). These are sometimes framed as "discussions" rather than interviews, with a discussion "moderator." Alternatively, the focus group is "a form of data collection whereby the researcher convenes a small group of people having similar attributes, experiences, or 'focus' and leads the group in a nondirective manner. The objective is to surface the perspectives of the people in the group with as minimal influence by the researcher as possible" (Yin 2016:336). See also **diversity focus group** and **convergence focus group.**

Focused coding:

A later stage coding process used in **Grounded Theory** that pulls out the most frequent or significant codes from **initial coding**.

Formative evaluation research:

Research designed to improve a program or policy (to help "form" or shape its effectiveness); relies heavily on qualitative research methods. Contrast **summative evaluation research**

Full review (IRB):

A specific subset of research involving human subjects that is deemed more than "minimal risk" or involves one of the definitions of vulnerable population and thus requires review by a formally convened committee (board) meeting. All full-board studies must adhere to the requirements for informed consent or its waiver or alteration. Full-board studies must undergo annual review.

Generalizability:

The accuracy with which results or findings can be transferred to situations or people other than those originally studied. Qualitative studies generally are unable to use (and are uninterested in) statistical generalizability where the sample population is said to be able to predict or stand in for a larger population of interest. Instead, qualitative researchers often discuss "theoretical generalizability," in which the findings of a particular study can shed light on processes and mechanisms that may be at play in other settings. See also **statistical generalization** and **theoretical generalization**.

Grounded theory:

A methodological tradition of inquiry and approach to analyzing qualitative data in which theories emerge from a rigorous and systematic process of induction. This approach was pioneered by the

sociologists Glaser and Strauss (1967). The elements of theory generated from comparative analysis of data are, first, conceptual categories and their properties and, second, hypotheses or generalized relations among the categories and their properties – "The constant comparing of many groups draws the [researcher's] attention to their many similarities and differences. Considering these leads [the researcher] to generate abstract categories and their properties, which, since they emerge from the data, will clearly be important to a theory explaining the kind of behavior under observation." (36).

Hermeneutics:

Both the theory and the method of interpretation; originally associated with the close reading of texts (e.g., "a hermeneutic study of the Bible" would take a deep look at particular passages and make comparisons and inferences based on those passages). The term can be more widely applied to qualitative interpretivist data analyses in general.

Human Subjects Research:

Research, according to US federal guidelines, that involves "a living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research: (1) Obtains information or biospecimens through intervention or interaction with the individual, and uses, studies, or analyzes the information or biospecimens; or (2) Obtains, uses, studies, analyzes, or generates identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens."

Hypothesis:

A proposed explanation for an observation, phenomenon, or scientific problem that can be tested by further investigation. The positing of a hypothesis is often the first step in quantitative research but not in qualitative research. Even when qualitative researchers offer possible explanations in advance of conducting research, they will tend to not use the word "hypothesis" as it conjures up the kind of **positivist** research they are not conducting.

Idiographic research:

An approach to research that eschews several hallmarks of the scientific method (e.g., experimentation, generalizability, the identification of "laws") in favor of focus on *sui generis* data. Here, the individual particulars of a case or person or research focus are considered so great that any attempts to generalize from that data or make causal predictions based on a particular case or series of events are considered impossible. Most social science research is rather **nomothetic**, although some qualitative researchers do fall into the ideographic paradigm.

In vivo coding:

A first-cycle coding process in which terms or phrases used by the participants become the code applied to a particular passage. It is also known as "verbatim coding," "indigenous coding," "natural coding," "emic coding," and "inductive coding," depending on the tradition of inquiry of the researcher. It is common in **Grounded Theory** approaches and has even given its name to one of the primary CAQDAS programs ("NVivo").

In-depth interview:

A form of interview that generally follows a standard guide of questions asked, although the order of the questions may change to match the particular needs of each individual interview subject, and probing "follow-up" questions are often added during the course of the interview. Also known as a **semi-structured interview**. Compare to **unstructured interview.**

Inductive reasoning:

A form of reasoning that employs a "bottom-up" approach to drawing conclusions: it begins with the collection of data relevant to a particular question and then seeks to build an argument or theory based on an analysis of that data. **Induction is observation first, followed by an idea that could explain what has been observed.** This form of reasoning is often used in qualitative research and seldom used in qualitative research. Compare to **deductive reasoning**. See also **abductive reasoning**.

Informant:

A person who introduces the researcher to a field site's culture and population. Also referred to as guides. Used in **ethnography**.

Informed consent form (IRB):

A requirement for research involving human participants; the documentation of informed consent. In some cases, oral consent or assent may be sufficient, but the default standard is a single-page easy-to-understand form that both the researcher and the participant sign and date. Under federal guidelines, all researchers "shall seek such consent only under circumstances that provide the prospective subject or the representative sufficient opportunity to consider whether or not to participate and that minimize the possibility of coercion or undue influence. The information that is given to the subject or the representative shall be in language understandable to the subject or the representative. No informed consent, whether oral or written, may include any exculpatory language through which the subject or the representative is made to waive or appear to waive any of the subject's rights or releases or appears

to release the investigator, the sponsor, the institution, or its agents from liability for negligence" (21 CFR 50.20). Your IRB office will be able to provide a template for use in your study.

Informed consent:

An ethical and legal requirement for research involving human participants; the process whereby a participant is informed about all aspects of the research so they can make an informed decision to participate. The concept of informed consent is embedded in the principles of the ***Belmont Report***. Obtaining consent involves informing the subject about his or her rights, the purpose of the study, procedures to be undertaken, potential risks and benefits of participation, expected duration of study, and the extent of confidentiality of personal identification and demographic data.

Initial coding:

The term for first-cycle open coding used by grounded theorists.

Insider research:

Research conducted by researchers who have some privileged connection to the research site or people being studied. Common in ethnographic research, the insider would belong to the community (ethnos) being studied. In reality, most researchers fall somewhere on a continuum between being a complete insider and complete outsider. Contrast **outsider research**.

Institutional ethnography:

A particular qualitative ethnographic approach developed by Dorothy E Smith, where the ethnographic lens is directed toward institutionalized interactions so as to better understand social organization at the macro-level. Originally developed by Smith as a critical way of understanding how work processes and social organizations affected women in particular and people without power in general

Institutional Review Board (IRB):

An administrative body established to protect the rights and welfare of human research subjects recruited to participate in research activities conducted under the auspices of the institution with which it is affiliated. The IRB is charged with the responsibility of reviewing all research involving human participants. The IRB is concerned with protecting the welfare, rights, and privacy of human subjects. The IRB has the authority to approve, disapprove, monitor, and require modifications in all research activities that fall within its jurisdiction as specified by both the federal regulations and institutional policy.

Intercoder reliability:

A method of ensuring trustworthiness in which two or more researchers code a passage or document or data set using a pre-established coding schema (e.g., codebook) and then compare (and sometimes measure) concordance. If multiple coders are applying the same codes to the same data, we have established intercoder reliability. Measured intercoder reliability is often a feature of quantitative coding processes. In qualitative research, the process is a bit looser and works best as part of the process of identification and clarification of codes (rather than a statistical test of reliability).

Interpretivism:

An approach that refutes the possibility of neutrality in social science research. All research is "guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied" (Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 13). In contrast to **positivism**, interpretivism recognizes the social constructedness of reality, and researchers adopting this approach focus on capturing interpretations and understandings people have about the world rather than "the world" as it is (which is a chimera).

Interview guide:

A document listing key questions and question areas for use during an interview. It is used most often for semi-structured interviews. A good interview guide may have no more than ten primary questions for two hours of interviewing, but these ten questions will be supplemented by probes and relevant follow-ups throughout the interview. Most IRBs require the inclusion of the interview guide in applications for review. See also **interview** and **semi-structured interview**.

Interview:

A method of data collection in which the researcher asks the participant questions; the answers to these questions are often recorded and transcribed verbatim. There are many different kinds of interviews - see also **semistructured interview**, **structured interview**, and **unstructured interview**.

Justice principle:

One of the three principles identified in the ***Belmont Report***: the human subjects involved in the research should be equitably chosen (i.e., not excluding a group out of bias or mere convenience), and the researcher should avoid exploiting vulnerable populations or populations of convenience.

Life history:

An interview variant in which a person's life story is elicited in a narrative form. Turning points and key themes are established by the researcher and used as data points for further analysis.

Literature review:

The process of systematically searching through pre-existing studies ("literature") on the subject of research; also, the section of a presentation in which the pre-existing literature is discussed.

Member checking:

A method of ensuring trustworthiness where the researcher shares aspects of written analysis (codes, summaries, drafts) with participants before the final write-up of the study to elicit reactions and/or corrections. Note that the researcher has the final authority on the interpretation of the data collected; this is not a way of substituting the researcher's analytical responsibilities. See also **peer debriefing**.

Methodology:

The philosophical framework in which research is conducted; the approach to "research" (what practices this entails, etc.). Inevitably, one's **epistemological perspective** will also guide one's methodological choices, as in the case of a **constructivist** who employs a **Grounded Theory** approach to observations and interviews, or an **objectivist** who surveys key figures in an organization to find out how that organization is run. One of the key methodological distinctions in social science research is that between **quantitative** and **qualitative** research.

Methods:

In contrast to methodology, methods are more simply the practices and tools used to collect and analyze data. Examples of common methods in qualitative research are **interviews**, **observations**, and **documentary analysis**. One's methodology should connect to one's choice of methods, of course, but they are distinguishable terms. See also **methodology**.

Mixed methods:

A research design that employs both quantitative and qualitative methods, as in the case of a survey supplemented by interviews.

Narrative inquiry:

An approach that focuses attention on the potential of stories to give meaning to people's lives and

that treats data as stories. In practice, this often means eliciting life stories or lived experiences from participants in semi-structured interview sessions. There has been a tendency to use this approach to bring in marginalized voices.

Nested design:

A form of **mixed-methods** design in which a subsample of an original randomized sample is used for further interviews or observation.

Neutrality:

The position taken by any researcher regarding the object of study, not to prove a particular perspective or manipulate data to arrive at a desirable conclusion. Among qualitative researchers, neutrality does not mean detachment. See also **empathetic neutrality**.

Nomothetic research:

A form of social science research that generally follows the scientific method as established in the natural sciences. In contrast to **idiographic research**, the nomothetic researcher looks for general patterns and "laws" of human behavior and social relationships. Once discovered, these patterns and laws will be expected to be widely applicable. Quantitative social science research is nomothetic because it seeks to generalize findings from samples to larger populations. Most qualitative social science research is also nomothetic, although **generalizability** is here understood to be **theoretical** in nature rather than **statistical**. Some qualitative researchers, however, espouse the **idiographic research** paradigm instead.

Objectivism:

An epistemological perspective where meaning and reality exist independently (outside) of any particular consciousness. It is similar to positivism and empiricism. In all three approaches, the researcher is detached from the object of knowledge; they are a "neutral" observer outside the object of study. Objectivism is the default epistemological perspective of most **quantitative** research. Contrast **subjectivism** and **constructivism**

Observational methods:

The cluster of data-collection tools and techniques that involve observing interactions between people, the behaviors, and practices of individuals (sometimes in contrast to what they say about how they act and behave), and cultures in context. Observational methods are the key tools employed by **ethnographers** and **Grounded Theory**.

Ontology:

The branch of philosophy that explores and seeks to understand being, existence, and reality itself rather than how one knows that reality (which is the subject of **epistemology**).

Open coding:

A preliminary stage of coding in which the researcher notes particular aspects of interest in the data set and begins creating codes. Later stages of coding refine these preliminary codes. Note: in **Grounded Theory**, open coding has a more specific meaning and is often called **initial coding**: data are broken down into *substantive codes* in a line-by-line manner, and incidents are compared with one another for similarities and differences until the core category is found. See also **closed coding**.

Oral history:

A field of study (in history) and a method of gathering, preserving, and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events: "Oral History collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews. An oral history interview generally consists of a well-prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee and recording their exchange in audio or video format. Recordings of the interview are transcribed, summarized, or indexed and then placed in a library or archives" (Ritchie 2003). The aims and purposes of oral history research are often distinct from more social science-focused interviewing, but oral histories themselves can be an important (and overlooked) source of data for qualitative analyses.

Original research:

Research based on data collected and analyzed by the research (in contrast to secondary "library" research).

Outsider research:

Research conducted by researchers who are strangers to the field site or persons being studied. Common in ethnographic research, the outsider would be deemed a true stranger to the community. In reality, most researchers fall somewhere on a continuum between being a complete insider and being a complete outsider. Contrast **insider research**.

Participant observation:

A method of observational data collection taking place in a natural setting; a form of **fieldwork**. The term encompasses a continuum of relative participation by the researcher (from full participant to

"fly-on-the-wall" observer). This is also sometimes referred to as **ethnography**, although the latter is characterized by a greater focus on the culture under observation.

Participants:

The people who are the subjects of a qualitative study. In interview-based studies, they may be the **respondents** to the interviewer; for purposes of IRBs, they are often referred to as the **human subjects** of the research.

Participatory action research (PAR):

Research in which both researchers and participants work together to understand a problematic situation and change it for the better.

Peer debriefing:

A method of ensuring trustworthiness where the researcher shares her codes, analytic memos, and other analytical data with colleagues who weigh in on any inconsistencies, things missing, or things not quite right. Compare to **member checking**.

Phenomenology:

A methodological tradition of inquiry that focuses on the meanings held by individuals and/or groups about a particular phenomenon (e.g., a "phenomenology of whiteness" or a "phenomenology of first-generation college students"). Sometimes this is referred to as understanding "the lived experience" of a particular group or culture. **Interviews** form the primary tool of data collection for phenomenological studies. Derived from the German philosophy of phenomenology (Husserl 1913; 2017).

Population:

The large group of interest to the researcher. Although it will likely be impossible to design a study that incorporates or reaches all members of the population of interest, this should be clearly defined at the outset of a study so that a reasonable sample of the population can be taken. For example, if one is studying working-class college students, the sample may include twenty such students attending a particular college, while the population is "working-class college students." In quantitative research, clearly defining the general population of interest is a necessary step in generalizing results from a sample. In qualitative research, defining the population is conceptually important for clarity.

Positionality statement:

A statement created by the researcher declaring their own social position (often in terms of race, class, gender) and social location (e.g., junior scholar or tenured professor) vis-à-vis the research subjects or focus of study, with the goal of explaining and thereby limiting any potential biases or impacts of such position on data analyses, findings, or other research results. See also **reflexivity**.

Positivism:

An epistemological perspective that posits the existence of reality through sensory experience similar to empiricism but goes further in denying any non-sensory basis of thought or consciousness. In the social sciences, the term has roots in the proto-sociologist August Comte, who believed he could discern "laws" of society similar to the laws of natural science (e.g., gravity). The term has come to mean the kinds of measurable and verifiable science conducted by quantitative researchers and is thus used pejoratively by some qualitative researchers interested in interpretation, consciousness, and human understanding. Calling someone a "positivist" is often intended as an insult. See also **empiricism** and **objectivism.**

Pragmatism:

Here, an approach to social science research that allows for the use of mixed methods or any methods of data collection and analysis that are best suited to address the research question(s). Qualitative researchers are often pragmatic in that they can pull out a host of techniques and tools from their methodological toolkit to use as necessary.

Presentation devices:

The general term for the often creative ways that qualitative research is presented to particular audiences so that the inherent qualities and rich value of the findings can be properly communicated. This might include visual displays, the use of well-considered pseudonyms, the inclusion of direct quotes from interviews and fieldnotes, and even story-telling, poetry, and various forms of visual artwork.

Probability sampling:

A sampling strategy in which the sample is chosen to represent (numerically) the larger population from which it is drawn by random selection. Each person in the population has an *equal chance* of making it into the sample. This is often done through a lottery or other chance mechanisms (e.g., a random selection of every twelfth name on an alphabetical list of voters). Also known as **random sampling**.

Process coding:

A first-cycle coding process in which gerunds are used to identify conceptual actions, often for the purpose of tracing change and development over time. Widely used in the **Grounded Theory** approach.

Prompts:

Follow-up questions used in a **semi-structured interview** to elicit further elaboration. Suggested prompts can be included in the **interview guide** to be used/deployed depending on how the initial question was answered or if the topic of the prompt does not emerge spontaneously.

Protocol (IRB):

A detailed description of any proposed research that involves human subjects for review by IRB. The protocol serves as the recipe for the conduct of the research activity. It includes the scientific rationale to justify the conduct of the study, the information necessary to conduct the study, the plan for managing and analyzing the data, and a discussion of the research ethical issues relevant to the research. Protocols for qualitative research often include interview guides, all documents related to recruitment, informed consent forms, very clear guidelines on the safekeeping of materials collected, and plans for de-identifying transcripts or other data that include personal identifying information.

Pseudonym:

A fictional name assigned to give anonymity to a person, group, or place. Pseudonyms are important ways of protecting the identity of research participants while still providing a "human element" in the presentation of qualitative data. There are ethical considerations to be made in selecting pseudonyms; some researchers allow research participants to choose their own.

Purpose:

The controlling force in research; can be understood as lying on a continuum from basic research (knowledge production) to action research (effecting change).

Purposive sample:

A sample in which a certain number of participants are included based on particular characteristics and attributes that are the subject of study. It is not probability based (randomly drawn).

Qualitative research:

An approach to research that is "multimethod in focus, involving an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives." (Denzin and Lincoln 2005:2). Contrast with **quantitative research**.

Quantitative research:

An approach to research that collects and analyzes numerical data for the purpose of finding patterns and averages, making predictions, testing causal relationships, and generalizing results to wider populations. Contrast with **qualitative research**.

Random sample:

The result of **probability sampling,** in which a sample is chosen to represent (numerically) the larger population from which it is drawn by random selection. Each person in the population has an *equal chance* of making it into the random sample. This is often done through a lottery or other chance mechanisms (e.g., the random selection of every twelfth name on an alphabetical list of voters). This is typically *not required* in qualitative research but rather essential for the generalizability of quantitative research.

Recruitment material:

A term used by IRBs to denote all materials aimed at recruiting participants into a research study (including printed advertisements, scripts, audio or video tapes, or websites). Copies of this material are required in research protocols submitted to IRB.

Reflexivity/reflectivity:

The practice of being conscious of and reflective upon one's own social location and presence when conducting research. Because qualitative research often requires interaction with live humans, failing to take into account how one's presence and prior expectations and social location affect the data collected and how analyzed may limit the reliability of the findings. This remains true even when dealing with historical archives and other content. Who we are matters when asking questions about how people experience the world because we, too, are a part of that world.

Reliability:

Reliability is most often explained as consistency and stability in a research instrument, as in a weight scale, deemed reliable if predictable and accurate (e.g., when you put a five-pound bag of rice on the scale on Tuesday, it shows the same weight as when you put the same unopened bag on the scale Wednesday). Qualitative researchers don't measure things in the same way, but we still must ensure that our research is reliable, meaning that if others were to conduct the same interview using our interview guide, they would get similar answers. This is one reason that reflexivity is so important to the reliability of qualitative research – we have to take steps to ensure that our own presence does not "tip the scales" in one direction or another or that, when it does, we can recognize that and make corrections. Qualitative researchers use a variety of tools to help ensure reliability, from **intercoder reliability** to **triangulation** to **reflexivity.**

Research ethics board:

The term used in Canada for entities reviewing human subjects research, parallel to IRB in the US.

Research question:

The foundational question to be addressed by the research study. This will form the anchor of the research design, collection, and analysis. Note that in qualitative research, the research question may, and probably will, alter or develop during the course of the research.

Respect for Persons principle:

One of the key principles found in the ***Belmont Report*** and a foundational ethical requirement for all research involving **human subjects.** "Respect for persons incorporates at least two ethical convictions: first, that individuals should be treated as autonomous agents, and second, that persons with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection. The principle of respect for persons thus divides into two separate moral requirements: the requirement to acknowledge autonomy and the requirement to protect those with diminished autonomy"- Belmont Report.

Respondents:

The people who are the subjects of an interview-based qualitative study. In general, they are also known as the **participants,** and for purposes of IRBs they are often referred to as the **human subjects** of the research.

Sample size:

The number of individuals (or units) included in your **sample**

Sample:

The specific group of individuals that you will collect data from. Contrast **population.**

Sampling frame:

The actual list of individuals that the sample will be drawn from. Ideally, it should include the entire target population (and nobody who is not part of that population). Sampling frames can differ from the larger population when specific exclusions are inherent, as in the case of pulling names randomly from voter registration rolls where not everyone is a registered voter. This difference in frame and population can undercut the generalizability of quantitative results.

Sampling:

The process of selecting people or other units of analysis to represent a larger population. In quantitative research, this representation is taken quite literally, as statistically representative. In qualitative research, in contrast, sample selection is often made based on potential to generate insight about a particular topic or phenomenon.

Saturation:

The point at which you can conclude data collection because every person you are interviewing, the interaction you are observing, or content you are analyzing merely confirms what you have already noted. Achieving saturation is often used as the justification for the final sample size.

Semistructured interview:

A form of interview that follows a standard guide of questions asked, although the order of the questions may change to match the particular needs of each individual interview subject, and probing "follow-up" questions are often added during the course of the interview. The semi-structured interview is the primary form of interviewing used by qualitative researchers in the social sciences. It is sometimes referred to as an "in-depth" interview. See also **interview** and **interview guide**.

Sensitizing concepts:

Key ideas that inform a research study; sometimes these organically emerge in the first stages of data analysis and are then used as the foundation for further coding and theorization. They have a special

use in **Grounded Theory**, studies, in which there is a continual interplay between data collection and analysis. Sensitizing concepts can also be used to frame research questions or to create interview guides, derived in those cases from previous literature or theory.

Sequential explanatory design:

A **mixed-methods** design that begins with quantitative data collection followed by qualitative data collection, which helps "explain" the initial quantitative findings. Compare **sequential exploratory design** and **concurrent triangulation**.

Sequential exploratory design:

A **mixed-methods** design that begins with qualitative data collection followed by quantitative data collection. In this case, the qualitative data suggests factors and variables to include in the quantitative design. Compare **sequential explanatory design** and **concurrent triangulation**.

Snowball sample:

A sample generated non-randomly by asking participants to help recruit more participants the idea being that a person who fits your sampling criteria probably knows other people with similar criteria.

Social constructionism:

A variation of the epistemological perspective of constructivism: a theory of knowledge developed by sociologists that considers how meanings and understandings about reality develop in particular social contexts. Can be traced back to Berger and Luckmann (1966), in which they argue that all knowledge, including the most basic, taken-for-granted common-sense knowledge of everyday reality is derived from and maintained by social interactions.

Standpoint theory:

A feminist theoretical perspective that argues that knowledge stems from social position. The perspective denies that traditional science is objective and suggests that research and theory have ignored and marginalized women and feminist ways of thinking. Note that this is an **epistemological** perspective.

Statistical generalization:

The ability to extend the results of the sample to the population of interest as a whole. Given the

nature of qualitative research questions as well as the small sample sizes involved, qualitative research does not attempt statistical generalization. But see **theoretical generalization**.

Structured interview:

A form of interview that follows a strict set of questions, asked in a particular order, for all interview subjects. The questions are also the kind that elicits short answers, and the data is more "informative" than probing. This is often used in **mixed-methods** studies, accompanying a survey instrument. Because there is no room for nuance or the exploration of meaning in structured interviews, qualitative researchers tend to employ semi-structured interviews instead. See also **interview.**

Subjectivism:

Epistemological perspective where there is no meaning or knowable reality independent of the meaning or reality constructed by particular consciousnesses.

Summative evaluation research:

Research in which an overall judgment about the effectiveness of a program or policy is made, often for the purpose of generalizing to other cases or programs. Generally uses qualitative research as a supplement to primary quantitative data analyses. Contrast **formative evaluation research**.

Symbolic interactionism:

Methodological tradition of inquiry that holds the view that all social interaction is dependent on shared views of the world and each other, characterized through people's use of language and non-verbal communication. Through interactions, society comes to be. The goal of the researcher in this tradition is to trace that construction, as in the case of documenting how gender is "done" or performed, demonstrating the fluidity of the concept (and how it is constantly being made and remade through daily interactions).

Themes:

Broad codes that are assigned to the main issues emerging in the data; identifying themes is often part of initial **coding.**

Theoretical coding:

A later stage-coding process used in Grounded Theory in which key words or key phrases capture the emergent theory.

Theory:

In its most basic sense, a theory is a story we tell about how the world works that can be tested with empirical evidence. In qualitative research, we use the term in a variety of ways, many of which are different from how they are used by quantitative researchers. Although some qualitative research can be described as "testing theory," it is more common to "build theory" from the data using **inductive reasoning**, as done in **Grounded Theory**. There are so-called "grand theories" that seek to integrate a whole series of findings and stories into an overarching paradigm about how the world works, and much smaller theories or concepts about particular processes and relationships. Theory can even be used to explain particular methodological perspectives or approaches, as in **Institutional Ethnography**, which is both a way of doing research and a theory about how the world works.

Thick description:

Used primarily in **ethnography**, as in the goal of **fieldnotes** is to produce a *thick description* of what is both observed directly (actions, actors, setting, etc.) and the meanings and interpretations being made by those actors at the time. In this way, the observed cultural and social relationships are contextualized for future interpretation. The opposite of a thick description is a thin description, in which observations are recorded without any social context or cues to help explain them. The term was coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (see *chapter 14).*

Transcript:

Usually a verbatim written record of an interview or focus group discussion.

Triangulation:

The process of strengthening a study by employing *multiple methods* (most often, used in combining various qualitative methods of data collection and analysis). This is sometimes referred to as data triangulation or methodological triangulation (in contrast to investigator triangulation or theory triangulation). Contrast **mixed methods**.

Unit of analysis:

The level of the focus of analysis (e.g., individual people, organizations, programs, neighborhoods).

Unstructured interview:

A data-collection method that relies on casual, conversational, and informal interviewing. Despite its apparent conversational nature, the researcher usually has a set of particular questions or question

areas in mind but allows the interview to unfold spontaneously. This is a common data-collection technique among ethnographers. Compare to the **semi-structured or in-depth interview**.

Validity:

In mostly quantitative research, validity refers to "the extent to which an empirical measure adequately reflects the real meaning of the concept under consideration" (Babbie 1990). For qualitative research purposes, practically speaking, a study or finding is valid when we are measuring or addressing what we think we are measuring or addressing. We want our representations to be accurate, as they really are, and not an artifact of our imaginations or a result of unreflected bias in our thinking.

Values coding:

A first-cycle coding process in which attitudes, beliefs, and values are expressed in a simple word or phrase.

Vulnerable populations:

A discrete set of population groups for which heightened (**IRB**) review is triggered when included as participants of **human subjects research**. These typically include children, pregnant persons, and prisoners but may also include ethnic or racial minorities, non-English speakers, the economically disadvantaged, and adults with diminished capacity. According to the Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS), "Vulnerable persons are those who are relatively (or absolutely) incapable of protecting their own interests. More formally, they may have insufficient power, intelligence, education, resources, strength, or other needed attributes to protect their own interests."

A NOTE TO INSTRUCTORS USING THIS COURSEBOOK

First, thank you! It is a pleasure to know that students will be able to learn about qualitative research methods at no cost. College is difficult enough without worrying about buying expensive textbooks.

You have probably already noticed that this book does not have many in-text citations. This is purposeful, as I aimed to write chapters that were easy to access and engaging, while still covering the basics of what needs to be known about particular topics. It was also hard to do, as I had to constantly remind myself of that purpose! When I could not bear to move on without a reference, I often put this in a footnote. Each chapter (or almost each) has a "for further reading" section, and I've indicated wherever I thought necessary the level at which the readings would be useful (e.g., undergraduates, graduate students, advanced students). It is quite possible to fill out the course with articles pulled from these reading lists – not all in the list but a couple of examples from each that fit the level of your students. Most of these readings tackle methodological issues but examples of qualitative research are included and indicated with ***. When I teach undergraduates, I often pull two or three juicy articles for them to read throughout the course. When I teach graduate students, I always use three book-length examples. We read these alongside the textbook and my students learn a lot more that way. There is only so much you can learn from a textbook, even one that is meant to be read engagingly!

I've organized the book roughly in the order I would teach graduate students completely new to the subject, but the chapters can be read in a different order. Each makes reference to other chapters to allow some back and forth throughout the course. There is thus a certain in-built recursivity (like qualitative research!). Some chapters may be skipped by undergraduates – I like the epistemology chapter myself but if you don't think your students need that one, that makes sense to me. Graduate students always want more on research design and coding but these may also be chapters that undergraduates skip or skim over. I've included a pretty comprehensive glossary that should help students orient themselves if they get lost.

In sum, I hope you find this book useful as a practical toolkit for teaching qualitative research methods!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allison L. Hurst is a Professor of Sociology in the School of Public Policy at Oregon State University, where she teaches courses on theory, qualitative research methods, and class and inequality to both undergraduate and graduate students. Trained in interviewing methods first and foremost, she has also dabbled in survey construction, mixed methods, and archival research. This is her second OER textbook – her first is *Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology* (2019). Other publications include *The Burden of Academic Success: Loyalists, Renegades and Double Agents* (2010), *College and the Working Class* (2012), *Working in Class: Recognizing How Social Class Shapes Our Academic Work* (2016, co-editor with Sandi Nenga), and *Amplified Advantage: Going to a "Good" School in an Era of Inequality* (2018).

Her current research focuses on the post-grad trajectories of sociologists from the working class and how class background has affected career outcomes. She is also exploring the social and economic changes of the postwar period and how our collective experience of that affluent and relatively egalitarian period colors our understanding of how the world works. She was one of the founders of the Association of Working-Class Academics, an organization composed of college faculty and staff who were the first in their families to graduate from college, for which she also served as president from 2008 to 2014. She serves on the American Sociological Association (ASA) Taskforce on First-Generation and Working-Class Persons in Sociology, is an original member of the WCSA Class Cultures Caucus, is the past president of the Working-Class Studies Association, and sits on the Board of the Pacific Sociological Association.

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