

Qualitative Methods and Data Analysis

In this chapter, you will learn from a variety of examples that some of our greatest insights into social processes can result from what appear to be very ordinary activities: observing, participating, and listening.

But you will also learn that qualitative research is much more than just doing what comes naturally in social situations. Qualitative researchers must keenly observe respondents, sensitively plan their participation, systematically take notes, and strategically question respondents. They must also prepare to spend more time and invest more of their whole selves than often occurs with experiments or surveys. Moreover, if we are to have any confidence in the validity of a qualitative study's conclusions, each element of its design must be reviewed as carefully as the elements of an experiment or survey.

▣ What Do We Mean by Qualitative Methods?

I mean, you try to touch on me, I'm gonna check you. If you try to touch on me, you being disrespectful. I'm saying, you engaged in sexual harassment. Some girls just play that. Laughing at it. That's how you know if a girl is a freak or not. That she wants to be touched for real. (Quoted in J. Miller 2008: 146)

This was one young woman's description of her reaction to sexual harassment. The young woman was part of a study examining gendered violence that Jody Miller conducted using intensive interviewing techniques with 75 inner-city high school-aged men and women.



Choosing the Method

Qualitative methods (touched upon in Chapter 1) comprise three distinctive research designs: **participant observation**, **intensive interviewing**, and **focus groups**. Participant observation and intensive interviewing are often used in the same project; focus groups combine some elements of these two approaches into a unique data collection strategy.

Although these three qualitative designs differ in many respects, they share several features that distinguish them from experimental and survey research designs (Denzin & Lincoln 1994; Maxwell 1996; Wolcott 1995):

Collection primarily of qualitative rather than quantitative data. Any research design may collect both qualitative and quantitative data, but qualitative methods emphasize observations about natural behavior and artifacts that capture social life as it is experienced by the participants rather than in categories predetermined by the researcher.

Exploratory research questions, with a commitment to inductive reasoning. Qualitative researchers typically begin their projects seeking not to test preformulated hypotheses but to discover what people think and how and why they act in certain social settings. Only after many observations do qualitative researchers try to develop general principles to account for their observations (recall the research circle in Chapter 2).

A focus on previously unstudied processes and unanticipated phenomena. Previously unstudied attitudes and actions cannot adequately be understood with a structured set of questions or within a highly controlled experiment. Therefore, qualitative methods have their greatest appeal when we need to explore new issues, investigate hard-to-study groups, or determine the meaning people give to their lives and actions.

An orientation to social context, to the interconnections between social phenomena rather than to their discrete features. The context of concern may be a program, an organization, a neighborhood, or a broader social context.

A focus on human subjectivity, on the meanings that participants attach to events and that people give to their lives. “Through life stories, people account for their lives. . . . The themes people create are the means by which they interpret and evaluate their life experiences and attempt to integrate these experiences to form a self-concept” (Kaufman 1986: 24–25).

A focus on the events leading up to a particular event or outcome instead of general causal explanations. With its focus on particular actors and situations and the processes that connect them, qualitative research tends to identify causes of particular events embedded within an unfolding, interconnected action sequence (Maxwell 1996). The language of variables and hypotheses appears only rarely in the qualitative literature.

Reflexive research design. The design develops as the research progresses:

Each component of the design may need to be reconsidered or modified in response to new developments or to changes in some other component. . . . The activities of collecting and analyzing data, developing and modifying theory, elaborating or refocusing the research

Participant observation A

qualitative method for gathering data that involves developing a sustained relationship with people while they go about their normal activities

Intensive interviewing A qualitative method that involves open-ended, relatively unstructured questioning in which the interviewer seeks in-depth information on the interviewee's feelings, experiences, and perceptions (Lofland & Lofland 1984)

Focus groups A qualitative method that involves unstructured group interviews in which the focus group leader actively encourages discussion among participants on the topics of interest

questions, and identifying and eliminating validity threats are usually all going on more or less simultaneously, each influencing all of the others. (Maxwell 1996: 2–3)

Sensitivity to the subjective role of the researcher. Little pretense is made of achieving an objective perspective on social phenomena.

Origins of Qualitative Research

Anthropologists and sociologists laid the foundation for modern qualitative methods while doing **field research** in the early decades of the 20th century. Dissatisfied with studies of native peoples that relied on second-hand accounts and inspection of artifacts, anthropologists Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski went to live in or near the communities they studied. Boas visited Native American villages in the Pacific Northwest; Malinowski lived among New Guinea natives. Neither truly participated in the ongoing social life of those they studied—Boas collected artifacts and original texts, and Malinowski reputedly lived as something of a nobleman among the natives he studied—but both helped to establish the value of intimate familiarity with the community of interest and thus laid the basis for modern anthropology (Emerson 1983).

Many of sociology's field research pioneers were former social workers and reformers. Some brought their missionary concern with the welfare of new immigrants to the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Chicago. Their successors continued to focus on sources of community cohesion and urban strain but came to view the city as a social science laboratory. They adopted the fieldwork methods of anthropology for studying the “natural areas” of the city and the social life of small towns (Vidich & Lyman 1994). By the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, qualitative researchers were emphasizing the value of direct participation in community life and sharing in subjects' perceptions and interpretations of events (Emerson 1983).

Case Study: Life in the Gang

The use of fieldwork techniques to study gangs has a long tradition in a variety of cities, including Thrasher's (1927) classic study of gangs in Chicago, and the work of others such as Hagedorn (1988), Padilla (1992), Sanchez-Jankowski (1991), Vigil (1988), and Whyte (1943). Joan Moore's research (1978, 1991) reflects more than two decades of studying the “homeboys” of Hispanic barrios all over the United States. All these researchers employed a fieldwork approach to the study of gangs rather than the more structured approaches offered by quantitative methods.

You can get a better feel for qualitative methods by reading the following excerpts from Decker and Van Winkle's (1996) book about gangs, *Life in the Gang: Family, Friends, and Violence*, and by reasoning inductively from their observations. See whether you can determine from these particulars some of the general features of field research. Ask yourself, “What were the research questions?” “How were the issues of generalizability, measurement, and causation approached?” “How did social factors influence the research?”

One of the first issues with which Decker and Van Winkle (1996) were challenged was precisely defining a gang (recall Chapter 4). The term *gang* could refer to many groups of youth, including a high school debate society or the Young Republicans. After reviewing the literature, Decker and Van Winkle developed a working definition of a gang as an “age-graded peer group that exhibits some permanence, engages in criminal activity, and has some symbolic representation of membership” (p. 31). To operationalize who was a gang member, they relied on self-identification. “Are you claiming . . . ?” was a key screening question that was also verified, as often as possible, with other gang members.



The Chicago School

There were several questions in which Decker and Van Winkle (1996) were interested:

First, we were interested in motivations to join gangs, the process of joining the gang, the symbols of gang membership, the strength of associational ties, the structure or hierarchy within the gang, motivations to stay (or leave) the gang. . . . The second set of issues concerned the activities gang members engaged in. These included such things as turf protection, drug sales and use, and violence, as well as conventional activities. (pp. 54–55)¹

With these research questions in mind, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) explain why they chose a fieldwork approach: “A single premise guided our study; the best information about gangs and gang activity would come from gang members contacted directly in the field” (p. 27). As stated earlier, Decker and Van Winkle combined two methods of qualitative data collection. With the help of a field ethnographer who spent the majority of each day “on the streets,” direct observation was conducted along with the intensive interviewing conducted by Decker and Van Winkle.

You may wonder what the difference is between the interviews conducted by qualitative researchers and those discussed in the last chapter. The difference is structure. For example, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) did not rely on structured questionnaires with numerically coded, fixed responses; their data are primarily qualitative rather than quantitative.

As for their method, it was inductive. First, they gathered data. Then, as data collection continued, they figured out how to interpret the data and how to make sense of the social situations they were studying. Their analytic categories ultimately came not from social theory but from the categories by which the gang members themselves described one another and their activities and how they made sense of their social world. Instead of quantitatively measuring variables, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) uncovered themes as they emerged. They provided the field of criminology with in-depth descriptions and context-specific connections of sequences of events that could not have been obtained through other methodologies. The goal of much qualitative research is to create a **thick description** of the setting being studied, that is, a description that provides a sense of what it is like to experience that setting or group from the standpoint of the natural actors in that setting (Geertz 1973).

Participant Observation

Other researchers have used a more direct observational strategy for studying gangs. For example, to illuminate the nuances and complexities of the role of a street gang in community social life, Venkatesh (1997) conducted intensive participant observation in Blackstone, a midsize public housing development located in a poor ghetto of a large Midwestern city. In a book about his experiences, Venkatesh describes, “how, having befriended these gang members, I moved into their world, accompanying them into Blackstone and other spaces where they were actively involved in illicit economic activities, member recruitment, and the general expansion of their street-based organization” (p. 4). Participant observation, called fieldwork in anthropology, is a method of studying natural social processes as they happen (in the field rather than in the laboratory), leaving them relatively undisturbed, and minimizing your presence as a researcher. It is the seminal field research method, a means for seeing the social world as the research

¹From *Life in the Gang: Family, Friends, and Violence*, by S. H. Decker, B. van Winkle, pp. 97–98. Copyright © 1996. Reprinted with permission of Cambridge University Press.

subjects see it, in its totality, and for understanding subjects' interpretations of that world (Wolcott 1995: 66). By observing people and interacting with them in the course of their normal activities, participant observers seek to avoid the artificiality of experimental designs and the unnatural structured questioning of survey research (Koegel 1987: 8).

The term *participant observer* actually represents a continuum of roles (see Exhibit 8.1), ranging from being a complete observer who does not participate in group activities and is publicly defined as a researcher, to being a covert participant who acts just like other group members and does not disclose his or her research role. Many field researchers develop a role between these extremes, publicly acknowledging being a researcher but nonetheless participating in group activities. In some settings, it is possible to observe covertly without acknowledging being a researcher or participating.

Choosing a Role

The first concern of all participant observers is to decide what balance to strike between observing and participating and whether to reveal their role as researchers. These decisions must take into account

Exhibit 8.1 The Observational Continuum

To study a political activist group ...

You could take the role of complete observer:



You could take the role of participant and observer:



You could take the role of covert participant:



the specifics of the social situation being studied, the researcher's own background and personality, the larger sociopolitical context, and ethical concerns. The balance of participating and observing that is most appropriate also changes many times during the majority of projects. Ultimately, the researcher's ability to maintain either a covert or an overt role can be challenged many times throughout the research effort.

Complete Observation

In her study of community policing, Susan Miller (1999) adopted the role of a complete observer. Community policing is an approach to policing that emphasizes building closer ties between police and members of the community. Miller was particularly interested in how gender affected the attitudes and behavior of community-police liaisons or neighborhood police officers (NPOs).

In **complete observation**, researchers try to see things as they happen, without disrupting the participants. Along with intensive interviews with police officers, Susan Miller (1999) also observed police officers on their daily shifts:

Both neighborhood and patrol officers' shifts were observed, either on foot with neighborhood officers, or in squad cars with patrol officers. This component of the project also permitted gathering some observational information about citizens' reactions to police delivery of services. (pp. 232–233)

Of course, the researcher's presence as an observer alters the social situation being observed. It is not natural in most social situations to have an observer present, who at some point will record his or her observations for research and publication purposes. The observer thus sees what individuals do when they are being observed, which is not necessarily what they would do without an observer. This is called a **reactive effect**, and the extent to which it can be a problem varies with the situation. In Susan Miller's (1999) study, the extended measure of time she spent as an observer made her presence commonplace, thereby serving to decrease the problem of reactive effects. She states,

Since I had spent so many hours over eighteen months with the Jackson City Police Department [fictional name], I had grown to be a familiar face; this, I believe, decreased respondents' tendencies toward social desirability. Officers took my presence for granted in the briefing room, the hallways, the interview rooms, and in the field, including me in jokes and informal conversation in the coffee shop. (p. 235)

Generally, in social settings involving many people, an observer may not attract attention. On the other hand, when the social setting involves few people and observing is apparent rather than camouflaged, or when the observer differs in obvious respects from the participants, the complete observer is more likely to have an impact.

Participation and Observation

Most field researchers adopt a role that involves some active participation in the setting. Usually they inform at least some group members of their research interests, but then they participate in enough group activities to develop trust and rapport with members and to gain a direct sense of what group members experience. This is not an easy balancing act.

In his classic study of corner gangs and other social organizations in the poor Boston community he called Cornerville, Whyte (1943) spent a large part of nearly 4 years trying to be accepted by the community and seen as a good fellow. He describes his efforts:



Complete Observation

My aim was to gain an intimate view of Cornerville life. My first problem, therefore, was to establish myself as a participant in the society so that I would have a position from which to observe. I began by going to live in Cornerville, finding a room with an Italian family. . . . It was not enough simply to make the acquaintance of various groups of people. The sort of information that I sought required that I establish intimate social relations, and that presented special problems. Since illegal activities are prevalent in Cornerville, every newcomer is under suspicion. . . . I put in a great deal of time simply hanging around with them [the men] and participating in their various activities. (pp. v–vii)²



Gang Research

Because of the great deal of time he spent with each gang and social organization he was studying, Whyte (1943) became accepted into each group and the community. Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh's (2000) book about gangs in Chicago, *American Project*, will almost certainly become a classic as well. In it, he describes the evolution of his research methodology from structured interviews to participant observation:

They read my survey instrument, informed me that I was “not going to learn shit by asking these questions,” and said I would need to “hang out with them” if I really wanted to understand the experiences of African-American youth in the city. Over the next few months, I met with many of them informally to play racquetball, drink beer on the shores of Lake Michigan, attend their parties, and eat dinner with their families. . . . Over an eighteen-month period, I logged notes on the activities of their gang, called the Black Kings. (p. xiv)

Disclosing your research to participants has two clear ethical advantages. Because group members know the researcher's real role in the group, they can choose to keep some information or attitudes hidden. By the same token, the researcher can decline to participate in unethical or dangerous activities without fear of exposing his or her identity.

Even when researchers maintain a public identity as researchers, the ethical dilemmas arising from participation in group activities do not go away. In fact, researchers may have to prove themselves to group members by joining in some of their questionable activities. For example, police officers gave Van Maanen (1982) a nonstandard and technically prohibited pistol to carry on police patrols. Pepinsky (1980) witnessed police harassment of a citizen but did not intervene when the citizen was arrested.

Covert Participation

To lessen the potential for reactive effects and to gain entry to otherwise inaccessible settings, some field researchers have adopted the role of covert participant. By doing so, they keep their research secret and do their best to act like other participants in a social setting or group. **Covert participation** is also known as **complete** participation. Laud Humphreys (1970) served as a “watch queen” so that he could learn about men engaging in homosexual acts in a public restroom. Randall Alfred (1976) joined a group of Satanists to investigate group members and their interaction. Goffman (1961) worked as a state hospital assistant while studying the treatment of psychiatric patients.

Although the role of covert participant lessens some of the reactive effects encountered by the complete observer, covert participants confront other problems. The following are a few examples:

- *Covert participants cannot openly take notes or use any obvious recording devices.* They must write up notes based solely on memory and must do so at times when it is natural for them to be away from group members.

²From *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*, pp. v–vii, by W. F. Whyte, copyright © 1943. Reprinted with permission of The University of Chicago Press.

- *Covert participants cannot ask questions that will arouse suspicion.* Thus, they often have trouble clarifying the meaning of other participants' attitudes or actions.
- *The role of covert participation is difficult to play successfully.* Covert participants will not know how regular participants act in every situation in which the researchers find themselves. Suspicion that researchers are not "one of us" may then have reactive effects, obviating the value of complete participation (Erikson 1967).
- *Covert participants must keep up the act at all times while in the setting under study.* Researchers may experience enormous psychological strain, particularly in situations where they are expected to choose sides in intragroup conflict or to participate in criminal or other acts. Of course, some covert observers may become so wrapped up in their role that they adopt not just the mannerisms but also the perspectives and goals of the regular participants—they "go native." At this point, they abandon research goals and cease to critically evaluate their observations.

Ethical issues have been at the forefront of debate over the strategy of covert participation. Erikson (1967) argues that covert participation is by its very nature unethical and should not be allowed except in public settings. Covert researchers cannot anticipate the unintended consequences (e.g., gang violence) of their actions for research subjects, Erikson points out. In addition, other social research is harmed when covert research is disclosed, either during the research or upon its publication, because distrust of social scientists increases and future access to research opportunities may decrease.

But a total ban on covert participation would "kill many a project stone dead" (Punch 1994: 90). Studies of unusual religious or sexual practices and institutional malpractice would rarely be possible. According to Punch (1994), "The crux of the matter is that some deception, passive or active, enables you to get at data not obtainable by other means" (p. 91). Therefore, some field researchers argue that covert participation is legitimate in certain circumstances. If the researcher maintains the confidentiality of others, keeps his or her commitments to them, and does not directly lie to the participants, some degree of deception may be justified in exchange for the knowledge gained (p. 90).

Entering the Field

Entering the field or the setting under investigation is a critical stage in a participant observation project, as the introduction can shape many subsequent experiences. Some background work is necessary before entering the field, at least enough to develop a clear understanding of what the research questions are likely to be and to review one's personal stance toward the people and problems likely to be encountered. With participant observation, researchers must also learn in advance about the participants' dress and their typical activities to avoid being caught completely unprepared.

Developing trust with at least one member of the group being studied is a necessity in qualitative research. Such a person can become a valuable informant throughout the project, and most participant observers make a point of developing trust with at least one informant in a group under study. For example, Susan Miller (1999) gained access to the police department she studied through a chief of police who was extremely open to research. She also had two friends on the police force at the time of her study.

In short, field researchers must be very sensitive to the impression they make and the ties they establish when entering the field. This stage of research lays the groundwork for collecting data from people who have different perspectives and for developing relationships that the researcher can use to overcome the problems that inevitably arise in the field.

Developing and Maintaining Relationships

Researchers must be careful to manage their relationships in the research setting so they can continue to observe and interview diverse members of the social setting throughout the long period typical of participant observation (Maxwell 1996: 66). Every action the researcher takes can develop or undermine this relationship. As Decker and Van Winkle (1996) describe, maintaining trust is the cornerstone to successful research engagement. They elaborate further:

We were able to maintain good field relations with our subjects by strictly observing our own commitment to the confidentiality of their statements. Since we interviewed many individuals from the same gang, it was often the case that one member would want to know what an earlier participant had told us. We refused to honor such inquiries, reminding them that the same confidentiality that applied to their own answers also covered those of their fellow gang members. The strict confidentiality we were committed to was respected by our subjects, and appeared to enhance our own credibility as “solid” in their eyes. (p. 46)

Experienced participant observers (Whyte 1943: 300–306; Wolcott 1995: 91–95) have developed some sound advice for others seeking to maintain relationships in the field:

- Develop a plausible (and honest) explanation for yourself and your study.
- Maintain the support of key individuals in groups or organizations under study.
- Don't be too aggressive in questioning others (e.g., don't violate implicit norms that preclude discussion of illegal activity with outsiders). Being a researcher requires that you do not simultaneously try to be the guardian of law and order.
- Don't fake social similarity with your subjects. Taking a friendly interest in them should be an adequate basis for developing trust.
- Avoid giving and receiving monetary or other tangible gifts, but do not violate norms of reciprocity. Living with other people, taking others' time for conversations, and going out for a social evening all create expectations and incur social obligations. You cannot be an active participant without occasionally helping others. But you will lose your ability to function as a researcher if you are seen as someone who gives away money or other favors. Such small forms of assistance as an occasional ride to the store or advice on applying to college may strike the right balance.
- Be prepared for special difficulties and tensions if multiple groups are involved. It is hard to avoid taking sides or being used in situations of intergroup conflict.

Sampling People and Events

Decisions to study one setting or several settings and to pay attention to specific people and events will shape field researchers' ability to generalize about what they have found as well as the confidence that others can place in the results of their study. Limiting a particular study to a single setting allows a more intensive portrait of actors and activities in that setting but also makes generalization of the findings questionable.

It is easy to be reassured by information indicating that a typical case was selected for study or that the case selected was appropriate in some way for the research question. We also must keep in mind that many of the most insightful participant observation studies were conducted in only one setting and draw their

credibility precisely from the researcher's thorough understanding of that setting. Nonetheless, studying more than one case or setting almost always strengthens the causal conclusions and makes the findings more generalizable (King et al. 1994).

Most qualitative researchers use a purposive sampling technique (see Chapter 5), often adding a snowball aspect by asking respondents to recommend others. For example, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) utilized the technique of snowball sampling. **Theoretical sampling** is a systematic approach to sampling in participant observational research (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Decker and Van Winkle used this technique to ensure that various subgroups based on race, sex, or type of gang were represented within their sample. When field researchers discover in an investigation that particular processes seem to be important, implying that certain comparisons should be made or that similar instances should be checked, the researchers then modify their settings and choose new individuals to study, as shown in Exhibit 8.2 (Ragin 1994).

The resulting sample of gang members in Decker and Van Winkle's (1996) study represents 29 different gangs. Thus, Decker and Van Winkle's ability to draw from different gangs in developing conclusions gives us greater confidence in their study's generalizability.

Exhibit 8.2 Theoretical Sampling

Original cases interviewed in a study of cocaine users:



Realization: Some cocaine users are businesspeople.
Add businesspeople to sample:



Realization: Sample is low on women.
Add women to sample:



Realization: Some female cocaine users are mothers of young children.
Add mothers to sample:



Quota sampling also may be employed to ensure the representation of particular categories of participants. Using some type of intentional sampling strategy within a particular setting can allow tests of some hypotheses that would otherwise have to wait until comparative data could be collected from several settings (King et al. 1994). When field studies do not require ongoing, intensive involvement by researchers in the setting, the **experience sampling method (ESM)** can be used. The experiences, thoughts, and feelings of a number of people are randomly sampled as they go about their daily activities. Participants in an ESM study carry an electronic pager and fill out reports when they are beeped.

Taking Notes

Written **field notes** are the primary means of recording participant observation data (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw 1995). It is almost always a mistake to try to take comprehensive notes while engaged in the field; the process of writing extensively is just too disruptive. The usual procedure is to jot down brief notes about the highlights of the observation period. These brief notes, called **jottings**, then serve as memory joggers when writing the actual field notes at a later time. With the aid of the brief notes and some practice, researchers usually remember a great deal of what happened, as long as the comprehensive field notes are written within the next 24 hours, that night, or upon arising the next day. Many field researchers jot down partial notes while observing and then retreat to their computers to write up more complete notes on a daily basis. The computerized text can then be inspected and organized after it is printed out, or it can be marked up and organized for analysis using one of several computer programs designed especially for the task.

Usually, writing up notes takes as long as making the observations. Field notes must be as complete, detailed, and true to what was observed and heard as possible. Quotes should clearly be distinguished from the researcher's observations and phrased in the local vernacular; pauses and interruptions should be indicated. The surrounding context should receive as much attention as possible, and a map of the setting should always be included, with indications of where individuals were at different times.

Complete field notes must provide more than just a record of what was observed or heard. Notes also should include descriptions of the methodology: where researchers were standing while observing, how they chose people for conversation or observation, and what numerical counts of people or events they made and why. Sprinkled throughout the notes should be a record of the researchers' feelings and thoughts while observing, such as when they were disgusted by some statement or act, when they felt threatened or intimidated, or why their attention shifted from one group to another. Notes like these provide a foundation for later review of the likelihood of bias or inattention to some salient features of the situation.

Managing the Personal Dimensions

Our overview of participant observation is not complete without considering its personal dimensions. Because field researchers become a part of the social situation they are studying, they cannot help but be affected on a personal, emotional level. At the same time, those being studied react to researchers not just as researchers but as personal acquaintances—often as friends, sometimes as personal rivals. Managing and learning from this personal side of field research is an important part of any qualitative project.

The impact of personal issues varies with the depth of researchers' involvement in the setting. The more involved researchers are in multiple aspects of the ongoing social situation, the more important personal issues become and the greater the risk of "going native." Even when researchers acknowledge their role, "increased contact brings sympathy, and sympathy in its turn dulls the edge of criticism" (Fenno 1978: 277).

There is no formula for successfully managing the personal dimension of field research. It is much more art than science and flows more from the researcher's own personality and natural approach to other people than from formal training. Novice field researchers often neglect to consider how they will manage personal relationships when they plan and carry out their projects. Then, suddenly, they find themselves doing something they do not believe they should, just to stay in the good graces of research subjects, or juggling the emotions resulting from conflict within the group. These issues are even more salient when researchers place themselves in potentially dangerous situations. As Decker and Van Winkle (1996) explain,

In part, gang members were of interest to us because of their involvement in violence. Because of this, we took steps to insure our own safety. One of the guiding principles was to limit the number of people being separately interviewed at the same time and location. In addition, we steadfastly avoided interviewing members of rival gangs at the same time. Despite our best efforts, there were occasions when these precautions did not work. The field ethnographer witnessed several drive-by shootings while on the way to pick up interview subjects, and on one occasion, he saw three of our subjects shot while waiting to be picked up for an interview. . . . Not all exposure to risk of physical danger comes through such obvious means, however; during one interview, when asked whether he owned any guns, a gang member reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a .32 caliber pistol. We assured him that we would have taken his word for it. (p. 46)

Systematic Observation

Observations can be made in a more systematic, standardized design that allows systematic comparisons and more confident generalizations. A researcher using **systematic observation** develops a standard form on which to record variation within the observed setting in terms of his or her variables of interest. Such variables might include the frequency of some behavior(s), the particular people observed, the weather or other environmental conditions, and the number and state of repair of physical structures. In some systematic observation studies, records are obtained from a random sample of places or times.

Case Study: Systematic Observation in Chicago Neighborhoods

We discussed Robert Sampson and Stephen Raudenbush's (1999) study of disorder and crime in urban neighborhoods in Chapter 4. In this section, we will elaborate on their use of the method of systematic social observation of public spaces to learn more about Chicago neighborhoods. A systematic observational strategy increases the reliability of observational data by using explicit rules that standardize coding practices across observers (Reiss 1971). Sampson and Raudenbush's study was a multiple-methods investigation that combined observational research, survey research, and archival research. The observational component involved a stratified probability (random) sample of 196 Chicago census tracts. A specially equipped sport utility vehicle was driven down each street in these tracts at the rate of 5 miles per hour. Two video recorders taped the blocks on both sides of the street, while two observers peered out the vehicle's windows and recorded their observations in logs. The result was an observational record of 23,816 *face blocks* (the block on one side of the street is a face block). The observers recorded codes that indicated land use, traffic, physical conditions, and evidence of physical disorder (see Exhibit 8.3). Physical disorder was measured by counting such features as cigarettes or cigars in the street, garbage, empty beer bottles,

graffiti, condoms, and syringes. Indicators of social disorder included adults loitering, drinking alcohol in public, fighting, and selling drugs.

Peter St. Jean (2007) advanced the research of Sampson and Raudenbush by examining the variation in collective efficacy, community disorder, and crime within specific blocks in one high-crime police district in Chicago. After examining official data and combining them with interviews asking residents where crime typically took place in the neighborhood, St. Jean found that “pockets of crime” emerged in which most crimes occurred on particular blocks within a neighborhood, while other blocks remained relatively untouched. The goal of St. Jean’s work was to determine why. He used multiple methods for this project, including resident surveys, participant observation, in-depth interviews with residents and offenders, and systematic social observation. For this last method, video cameras were mounted on each side of a vehicle while it was slowly driven through neighborhood streets so that physical and social appearances could be captured. An example of the video St. Jean captured is available on the Student Study Site for this text. Using the tapes, neighborhood characteristics were then coded for social disorder by using the conditions of the buildings, properties, and vacant lots and the prevalence of behaviors such as loitering, public drinking, and panhandling. A snapshot from one of St. Jean’s videos is displayed in Exhibit 8.4.

Innovatively, St. Jean (2007) not only coded the videos; he also used the footage as a visual cue when interviewing offenders about their reasons for selecting particular locations and victims. He explains:

For instance, drug dealers and robbers were able to use the [Systematic Social Observation] movie to explain in detail how and why certain locations are more attractive than others. It also allowed offenders to identify the specific features of neighbourhoods that they considered distasteful, and to explain associated meanings, especially as such meanings pertain to the crimes they commit . . . it refreshed the subjects’ memories of relevant events that they often claimed they would have forgotten to mention [without the video]. (p. 27)

Among other things, St. Jean discovered that even when offenders faced opposition from neighborhood reformers, they were not deterred from engaging in crime in an area when it offered “ecological advantages” such as retail establishments and bus stops.

These studies illustrate both the value of multiple methods and the technique of recording observations in a systematic form. The systematic observations, when combined with residents’ own perceptions, provide us with much greater confidence in the measurement of relative neighborhood disorder. When these are combined with rich narrative accounts from neighborhood residents and active offenders, both the measurement validity of the constructs and the overall validity of the findings are significantly enhanced.

Intensive Interviewing

Asking questions is part of almost all qualitative research designs (Wolcott 1995). Many qualitative researchers employ intensive interviewing exclusively, without systematic observation of respondents in their natural setting. Unlike the more structured interviewing that may be used in survey research (discussed in Chapter 7), intensive interviewing relies on open-ended questions. Qualitative researchers do not presume to know the range of answers that respondents might give, and they seek to hear these answers in the respondents’ own words. Rather than asking standard questions in a fixed order, intensive interviewers allow the specific content and order of questions to vary from one interviewee to another.



Peter St. Jean



Intensive Interviews

Exhibit 8.3 Neighborhood Disorder Indicators Used in Systematic Observation Log

Variable	Category	Frequency
Physical Disorder		
Cigarettes, cigars on street or gutter	No	6,815
	Yes	16,758
Garbage, litter on street or sidewalk	No	11,680
	Yes	11,925
Empty beer bottles visible in street	No	17,653
	Yes	5,870
Tagging graffiti	No	12,859
	Yes	2,252
Graffiti painted over	No	13,390
	Yes	1,721
Gang graffiti	No	14,138
	Yes	973
Abandoned cars	No	22,782
	Yes	806
Condoms on sidewalk	No	23,331
	Yes	231
Needles or syringes on sidewalk	No	23,392
	Yes	173
Political message graffiti	No	15,097
	Yes	14
Social Disorder		
Adults loitering or congregating	No	14,250
	Yes	861
People drinking alcohol	No	15,075
	Yes	36
Peer group, gang indicators present	No	15,091
	Yes	20
People intoxicated	No	15,093
	Yes	18
Adults fighting or hostilely arguing	No	15,099
	Yes	12
Prostitutes on street	No	15,100
	Yes	11
People selling drugs	No	15,099
	Yes	12

Source: Raudenbush, Stephen W. and Robert J. Sampson. 1999. "Ecometrics: Toward a Science of Assessing Ecological Settings With Application to the Systematic Social Observation of Neighborhoods." *Sociological Methodology* 29: 1–41. Reprinted with permission.

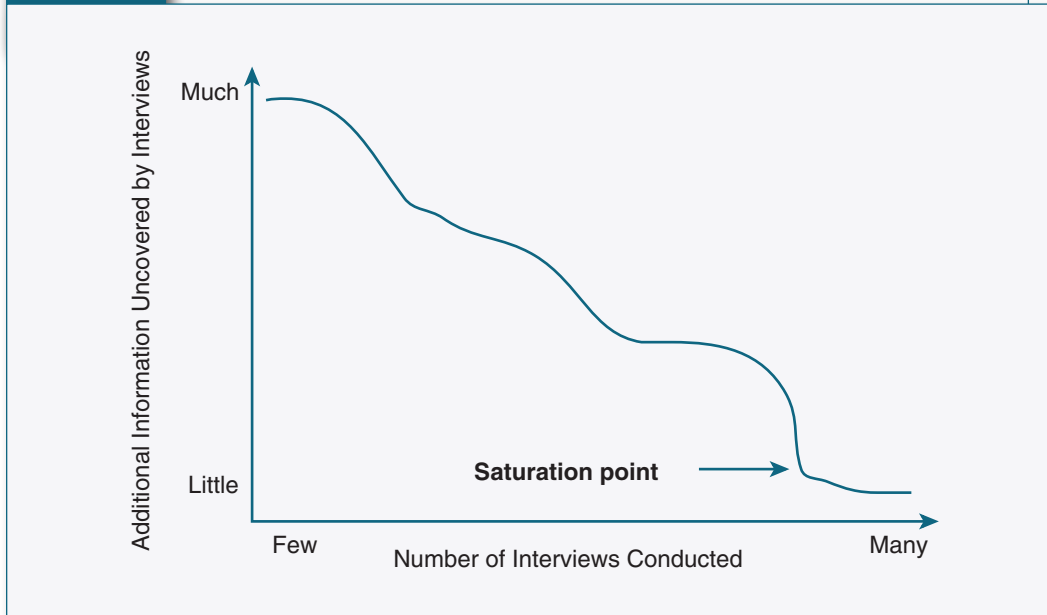
Exhibit 8.4 One Building in St. Jean's (2007) Study

Source: © 2007 Peter K. B. St. Jean. Courtesy of Peter K. B. St. Jean, Quality of Life Solutions. Reprinted with permission.

What distinguishes intensive interviewing from more structured forms of questioning is consistency and thoroughness. The goal is to develop a comprehensive picture of the interviewees' background, attitudes, and actions, in their own terms—to “listen to people as they describe how they understand the worlds in which they live and work” (Rubin & Rubin 1995: 3). For example, even though Decker and Van Winkle (1996) had an interview guide, they encouraged elaboration on the part of their respondents and “went to great lengths to insure that each person we interviewed felt they had received the opportunity to tell their story in their own words” (p. 45).

Random selection is rarely used to select respondents for intensive interviews, but the selection method still must be considered carefully. Researchers should try to select interviewees who are knowledgeable about the subject of the interview, who are open to talking, and who represent the range of perspectives (Rubin & Rubin 1995). Selection of new interviewees should continue, if possible, at least until the **saturation point** is reached, the point when new interviews seem to yield little additional information (see Exhibit 8.5). As new issues are uncovered, additional interviewees may be selected to represent different opinions about these issues.

Research by Fleury-Steiner (2003) that examines the thoughts and emotions of jurors in death penalty cases is an excellent illustration of the tremendous insights that can be uncovered through intensive interviewing. In *Jurors' Stories of Death*, Fleury-Steiner reports on his work with the Capital Jury Project (CJP), which was a national study of the experiences of citizens who served as jurors on death penalty cases. To

Exhibit 8.5 The Saturation Point in Intensive Interviewing

encourage respondents to tell stories about their experiences, the CJP survey explicitly asked jurors to tell interviewers about important moments during the trial and deliberations, as well as their impressions of the defendant. Fleury-Steiner states, “The goal of these questions was to facilitate jurors to construct their responses in their own ways. . . . Given the leeway to answer as they saw fit, in many instances jurors’ stories emerged when I least expected them to” (p. 44).

Establishing and Maintaining a Partnership

Because intensive interviewing does not engage researchers as participants in subjects’ daily affairs, the problems associated with entering the field are greatly reduced. However, the logistics of arranging long periods for personal interviews can still be fairly complicated. It is important to establish rapport with subjects by considering in advance how they will react to the interview arrangement and by developing an approach that does not violate their standards for social behavior. Interviewees should be treated with respect, as knowledgeable partners whose time is valued. (In other words, avoid being late for appointments.) Once again, a commitment to confidentiality should be stated and honored (Rubin & Rubin 1995).

It is important to highlight, however, that the intensive interviewer’s relationship with the interviewee is not an equal partnership, for the researcher seeks to gain certain types of information and strategizes throughout to maintain an appropriate relationship. In the first few minutes of the interview, the goal is to show interest in the interviewee and to clearly explain the purpose of the interview (Kvale 1996). During the interview, the interviewer should maintain an appropriate distance from the interviewee, one that does not violate cultural norms; the interviewer should maintain eye contact and not engage in distracting behavior. An appropriate pace is also important; pause to allow the interviewee to reflect, elaborate, and generally not feel rushed (Gordon 1992). When an interview covers emotional or otherwise stressful topics, at the end the interviewer should give the interviewee an opportunity to unwind (Rubin & Rubin 1995).

Asking Questions and Recording Answers



Interview Methods

Intensive interviewers must plan their main questions around an outline of the interview topic. The questions should generally be short and to the point. More details can then be elicited through nondirective probes (such as “Can you tell me more about that?”), and follow-up questions can be tailored to answers to the main questions. Interviewers should strategize throughout an interview about how best to achieve their objectives while taking into account interviewees’ answers.

Decker and Van Winkle’s (1996) interview narrative illustrates this well:

Nearly half of the gang members identified leaders as persons who could provide material advantage, thus ascribing a functional character to leadership within the gang. Since half of our sample were in their early teens, someone with the ability to procure cars, drugs, guns, or alcohol could play a valuable role in the gang. Consequently, it was no surprise to find that over half of gang members identified leaders as persons who could “deliver.” Because of the situational nature of leadership, persons moved in and out of this role. This was especially true in the case of being able to provide drugs in large quantities for street sales:

- Q: Does someone have more juice in the gang?
 A: Yeah, you always got someone that got more juice.
- Q: What is the type of person who usually has more juice?
 A: The one who got the connection with the drugs.
- Q: Who has the most juice?
 A: Dude named T-Loc.
- Q: Why does he have more juice than everybody else?
 A: 'Cause he travels a lot. Gets the good stuff.
- Q: What’s the good stuff?
 A: Like guns, cocaine, weed.
- Q: What gives him the juice? (pp. 97–98)

Do you see how the interviewer actively encouraged the subject to elaborate on answers? More important, intensive interviews can also uncover true meanings that questions using fixed formats would surely miss. Tape or digital voice recorders commonly are used to record intensive interviews. Most researchers who have recorded interviews feel that they do not inhibit most interviewees and, in fact, are routinely ignored. The occasional respondent who is very concerned with his or her public image may speak “for the recorder,” but such individuals are unlikely to speak frankly in any research interview. In any case, constant note taking during an interview prevents adequate displays of interest and appreciation by the interviewer and hinders the degree of concentration that results in the best interviews.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are groups of individuals that are formed by a researcher and then led in group discussion of a topic. The researcher asks specific questions and guides the discussion to ensure that group members address these questions, but the resulting information is qualitative and relatively unstructured. Unlike

most other survey designs, focus groups do not involve representative samples; instead, a few individuals are recruited for the group who have the time to participate and who share key characteristics with the target population.

Most focus groups involve 7 to 10 people, a size that facilitates discussion by all in attendance. Although participants usually do not know one another, they are chosen so that they are relatively homogeneous, which tends to reduce their inhibitions in discussion. Of course, the characteristics of individuals that determine their inclusion are based on the researcher's conception of the target population for the study. Focus group leaders must begin the discussion by creating the expectation that all will participate and that the researcher will not favor any particular perspective or participant.

Focus groups are interviewed to collect qualitative data using open-ended questions posed by the researcher (or group leader). Thus, a focused discussion mimics the natural process of forming and expressing opinions and may give some sense of validity. The researcher may also want to conduct a more traditional survey, asking a representative sample of the target population to answer closed-ended questions, to weigh the validity of data obtained from the focus group. No formal procedure exists for determining the generalizability of focus group answers, but the careful researcher should conduct at least several focus groups on the same topic and check for consistency in the findings as a partial test of generalizability.

As with other field research techniques, focus group methods emphasize discovering unanticipated findings and exploring hidden meanings. Although they do not provide a means for developing reliable, generalizable results (the traditional strong suits of survey research), focus groups can be an indispensable aid for developing hypotheses and survey questions, for investigating the meaning of survey results, and for quickly identifying the range of opinion about an issue.



Focus Groups

Case Study: Combining Focus Groups With Official Records When Examining Police Searches

Racial profiling has generally been defined as the use of race by police as a key factor in deciding whether to make a traffic stop—that is, to pull over a driver for an infraction (Williams & Stahl 2008). As a response to lawsuits alleging racial profiling, many state and local law enforcement agencies have been mandated or have volunteered to collect traffic stop data to monitor the behavior of officers to determine the extent of such profiling. However, to actually determine if racial minorities like African Americans are stopped for an infraction like speeding more than whites, researchers would first have to determine the percentage of African American drivers relative to whites who were actually driving along a given highway, and then the percentage of these motorists who were actually speeding, to get a true base rate of speeding per population group. This would entail many hours of monitoring a given highway during various times of day. While some researchers have actually collected these data, Williams and Stahl decided to examine whether race was a determining factor in whether a driver was searched, not in the original police stop. The questions they asked were, “Who is being searched, and what are the results of these searches?” Using data collected in 24 local Kentucky law enforcement agencies along with two state agencies, they concluded that of the motorists pulled over on the interstate for compliance and courtesy stops, African American and Hispanic motorists were significantly more likely to be searched compared with white motorists. To test the second question, they examined whether there were differences in positive search results (e.g., finding contraband) across race or ethnic groups. Consistent with other research, there was no statistical difference in the likelihood that white, African American, or Hispanic motorists who were searched actually had illegal material.

To better contextualize these quantitative findings, Williams and Stahl (2008) also conducted focus groups with police officers to determine their perceptions about a number of issues, including whether traffic stops and searches were effective in preventing some of the problems in their communities. A

purposive sample (discussed in Chapter 5) of 24 officers participated in five focus groups. After comparing the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences across groups and individual officers, several themes emerged. The first was that drug use and sales as well as drunk driving were major community problems. The second was that the police perception was that if you wanted to target a particular problem, you had to target a particular group: African Americans were perceived to be associated with crack cocaine, driving under the influence was perceived to be associated with Hispanic motorists, and methamphetamines were perceived to be associated with whites. Moreover, officers were confident that traffic stops helped deter the drug trade and improve the quality of life of their local communities. Williams and Stahl concluded that the officers shared a perception that they were community problem solvers who profile the problems and not a particular group. However, these qualitative data, combined with the quantitative analysis of search data, led the researchers to conclude, “If police want to be efficient and effective in their efforts to stop drugs, it seems that they need to disregard the ‘profile’ as our analysis has found that it is an ineffective tool for turning up illegal substances” (p. 238). This triangulation of methods was extremely helpful in placing the quantitative data within the perceptions shared by police officers.

Analyzing Qualitative Data

The distinctive features of qualitative data collection methods are also reflected in the methods used to analyze the data collected. The focus on text, on qualitative data rather than on numbers, is the most important feature of qualitative data analysis. The “text” that qualitative researchers analyze is most often transcripts of interviews or notes from participant observation sessions, but text can also refer to pictures or other images that the researcher examines.

Good qualitative data analyses are distinguished by their focus on the interrelated aspects of the setting, group, or person under investigation—the entire case—rather than breaking the whole into separate parts. The whole is always understood to be greater than the sum of its parts, and so the social context of events, thoughts, and actions becomes essential for interpretation. Within this framework, it would not make sense to focus on two variables out of an interacting set of influences and test the relationship between just those two.

Qualitative data analysis is a reflexive process that begins as data are being collected rather than after data collection has ceased (Stake 1995). Next to his or her field notes or interview transcripts, the qualitative analyst jots down ideas about the meaning of the text and how it might relate to other issues. This process of reading through the data and interpreting them continues throughout the project. The analyst adjusts the data collection process itself when it begins to appear that additional concepts need to be investigated or new relationships explored. This process is termed **progressive focusing** (Parlett & Hamilton 1976).

Progressive focusing The process by which a qualitative analyst interacts with the data and gradually refines his or her focus

Qualitative Data Analysis as an Art

The process of qualitative data analysis is described by some as involving as much “art” as science, or as a “dance,” in the words of W. L. Miller and Crabtree (1999). In this artful way, analyzing text involves both inductive and deductive processes. The researcher generates concepts and linkages between them based on reading the text and also checks the text to see whether those concepts and interpretations are reflected.

Qualitative Compared With Quantitative Data Analysis

With these points in mind, let us review the ways in which qualitative data analysis differs from quantitative analysis (Denzin & Lincoln 2000; Patton 2002). Qualitative analysis features the following:

- A focus on meanings rather than on quantifiable phenomena
- Collection of many data on a few cases rather than few data on many cases
- In-depth study and attention to detail, without predetermined categories or directions, rather than emphasis on analyses and categories determined in advance
- A conception of the researcher as an “instrument,” rather than as the designer of objective instruments to measure particular variables
- Sensitivity to context rather than a seeking of universal generalizations
- Attention to the impact of the researcher’s and others’ values on the course of the analysis rather than presuming the possibility of value-free inquiry
- A goal of rich descriptions of the world rather than measurement of specific variables

You will also want to keep in mind features of qualitative data analysis that are shared with those of quantitative data analysis. Both qualitative and quantitative data analysis can involve making distinctions about textual data. You also know that textual data can be transposed to quantitative data through a process of categorization and counting. Some qualitative analysts also share with quantitative researchers a positivist goal of describing the world as it “really” is, but others have adopted a postmodern goal of trying to understand how different people see and make sense of the world, without believing that there is any “correct” description.

Techniques of Qualitative Data Analysis

The most typical steps that are shared by most approaches to qualitative data analysis include

- Documentation of the data and the process of data collection
- Organization or categorization of the data into concepts
- Connection of the data to show how one concept may influence another
- Corroboration or legitimization, by evaluating alternative explanations, challenging validity, and searching for negative cases
- Representing the account (reporting the findings)

The analysis of qualitative research notes begins while interviewing or as early as the researcher enters the field; researchers identify problems and concepts that appear likely to help in understanding the situation. Simply reading the notes or transcripts is an important step in the analytic process. Researchers should make frequent notes in the margins to identify important statements and to propose ways of coding the data.

An interim stage may consist of listing the concepts reflected in the notes and diagramming the relationships among concepts (Maxwell 1996). In a large project, weekly team meetings are an important part of this process. Susan Miller (1999) described this process in her study of neighborhood police officers. Miller's research team members met both to go over their field notes and to resolve points of confusion, as well as to dialogue with other skilled researchers who helped to identify emerging concepts.

This process continues throughout the project and should assist in refining concepts during the report-writing phase, long after data collection has ceased. Let us examine each of the stages of qualitative research in more detail.

Documentation



Field Notes

The first formal analytical step is documentation. The various contacts, interviews, written documents, and whatever it is that preserves a record of what happened must all be saved and listed. Documentation is critical to qualitative research for several reasons: It is essential for keeping track of what will become a rapidly growing volume of notes, tapes, and documents; it provides a way of developing an outline for the analytic process; and it encourages ongoing conceptualizing and strategizing about the text.

What to do with all this material? Many field research projects have slowed to a halt because a novice researcher becomes overwhelmed by the quantity of information that has been collected. A 1-hour interview can generate 20 to 25 pages of single-spaced text (Kvale 1996: 169). Analysis is less daunting, however, if the researcher maintains a disciplined transcription schedule.

Making Sense of It: Conceptualization, Coding, and Categorizing

Identifying and refining important concepts is a key part of the iterative process of qualitative research. Sometimes conceptualizing begins with a simple observation that is interpreted directly, "pulled apart," and then put back together more meaningfully. Stake (1995) provides an example: "More often, analytic insights are tested against new observations, the initial statement of problems and concepts is refined, the researcher then collects more data, interacts with the data again, and the process continues" (p. 75).

Jody Miller (2000) provides an excellent illustration of the developmental process of conceptualization in her study of girls in gangs:

I paid close attention to and took seriously respondents' reactions to themes raised in interviews, particularly instances in which they "talked back" by labeling a topic irrelevant, pointing out what they saw as misinterpretations on my part, or offering corrections. In my research, the women talked back the most in response to my efforts to get them to articulate how gender inequality shaped their experiences in the gang. Despite stories they told to the contrary, many maintained a strong belief in their equality within the gang. . . . As the research progressed, I also took emerging themes back to respondents in subsequent interviews to see if they felt I had gotten it right. In addition to conveying that I was interested in their perspectives and experiences, this process also proved useful for further refining my analyses. (p. 30)

The process described in this quote illustrates the reflexive nature of qualitative data collection and analysis. In qualitative research, the collection of data and their analysis are not typically separate activities. This excerpt shows how the researcher first was alerted to a concept by observations in the field and then refined her understanding of this concept by investigating its meaning. By observing the concept's frequency of use, she came to realize its importance.

Examining Relationships and Displaying Data

Examining relationships is the centerpiece of the analytic process, because it allows the researcher to move from simple description of the people and settings to explanations of why things happened as they did with those people in that setting. The process of examining relationships can be captured in a **matrix** that shows how different concepts are connected, or perhaps what causes are linked with what effects.

Exhibit 8.6 provides an excellent example of a causal model developed by Baskin and Sommers (1998) to explain the desistance process for the sample of violent female offenders they interviewed in the state of New York. They described the process for the women who made it out of their lives of crime as follows:

Desistance is a process as complex and lengthy as the process of initial involvement. It was interesting to find that some of the key concepts in initiation of deviance—social bonding, differential association, deterrence, age—were equally important in the process of desistance. We see the aging offender take the threat of punishment seriously, reestablish links with conventional society and sever associations with subcultural street elements. We found, too, that the decision to give up crime was triggered by a shock of some sort that was followed by a period of crisis. They arrived at a point at which the deviant way of life seemed senseless. (p. 139)

Exhibit 8.6 The Desistance Process for Violent Female Offenders

<i>Stage 1: Problems Associated With Criminal Participation</i>	
<i>Socially Disjunctive Experiences</i> Hitting rock bottom Fear of death Tiredness Illness	<i>Delayed Deterrence</i> Increased probability of punishment Increased difficulty in “doing time” Increased severity of sanctions Increasing fear
<i>Assessment</i> Reappraisal of life and goals Psychic change	
<i>Decision</i> Decision to quit or initial attempts at desistance Continuing possibility of criminal participation	
<i>Stage 2: Restructuring of Self</i>	
Public pronouncement of decision to end criminal participation Claim to a new identity	
<i>Stage 3: Maintenance of the Decision to Stop</i>	
Ability to successfully renegotiate identity Support of significant others Integration into new social networks Ties to conventional roles Stabilization of new social identity	

Source: From *Casualties of Community Disorder: Women's Careers in Violent Crime* by Deborah R. Baskin and Ira B. Sommers. Copyright © 1998. Reprinted by permission of Westview Press, a member of Perseus Books Group. Figure 6.1, p. 141.

Authenticating Conclusions

No set standards exist for evaluating the validity or “authenticity” of conclusions in a qualitative study, but the need to consider carefully the evidence and methods on which conclusions are based is just as great as with other types of research. Data can be assessed in terms of at least three criteria (Becker 1958):

- *How credible was the informant?* Were statements made by someone with whom the researcher had a relationship of trust or by someone the researcher had just met? Did the informant have reason to lie? If the statements do not seem to be trustworthy as indicators of actual events, can they at least be used to help understand the informant’s perspective?
- *Were statements made in response to the researcher’s questions, or were they spontaneous?* Spontaneous statements are more likely to indicate what would have been said had the researcher not been present.
- How does the presence or absence of the researcher or the researcher’s informant influence the actions and statements of other group members? Reactivity to being observed can never be ruled out as a possible explanation for some directly observed social phenomena. However, if the researcher carefully compares what the informant says goes on when the researcher is not present, what the researcher observes directly, and what other group members say about their normal practices, the extent of reactivity can be assessed to some extent.

A qualitative researcher’s conclusions should be assessed by their ability to provide a credible explanation for some aspect of social life. That explanation should capture group members’ tacit knowledge of the social processes that were observed, not just their verbal statements about these processes. **Tacit knowledge**, “the largely unarticulated, contextual understanding that is often manifested in nods, silences, humor, and naughty nuances,” is reflected in participants’ actions as well as their words and in what they fail to state but nonetheless feel deeply and even take for granted (Altheide & Johnson 1994: 492–493). These features are evident in Whyte’s (1955) analysis of Cornerville social patterns.

Comparing conclusions from a qualitative research project with those obtained by other researchers conducting similar projects can also increase confidence in their authenticity.

Reflexivity

Confidence in the conclusions from a field research study is also strengthened by an honest and informative account about how the researcher interacted with subjects in the field, what problems he or she encountered, and how these problems were or were not resolved. Such a “natural history” of the development of the evidence, sometimes termed **reflexivity**, enables others to evaluate the findings. Such an account is important primarily because of the evolving nature of field research.

Qualitative data analysts, more often than quantitative researchers, display real sensitivity to how a social situation or process is interpreted from a particular background and set of values and not simply based on the situation itself (Altheide & Johnson 1994). Researchers are only human, after all, and must rely on their own senses to process information through their own minds. By reporting how and why they think they did what they did, they can help others determine whether, or how, the researchers’ perspectives influenced their conclusions. “There should be clear ‘tracks’ indicating the attempt [to show the hand of the ethnographer] has been made” (Altheide & Johnson 1994: 493).

☒ Alternatives in Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data analyst can choose from many interesting alternative approaches. Of course, the research question under investigation should shape the selection of an analytic approach, but the researcher's preferences and experiences will inevitably steer the research method selection. The alternative approaches we present here—ethnography and grounded theory—are two of the most frequently used (Patton 2002).

Ethnography

Ethnography is the study of a culture or cultures that a group of people share (Van Maanen 1995). As a method, it usually is meant to refer to the process of participant observation by a single investigator who immerses himself or herself in the group for a long period of time (often 1 or more years). Ethnographic research can also be called “naturalistic,” because it seeks to describe and understand the natural social world as it really is, in all its richness and detail. There are no particular methodological techniques associated with ethnography, other than just “being there.” The analytic process relies on the thoroughness and insight of the researcher to “tell it like it is” in the setting, as he or she experienced it.

Code of the Street, Elijah Anderson's (1999) award-winning study of Philadelphia's inner city, captures the flavor of this approach:

My primary aim in this work is to render ethnographically the social and cultural dynamics of the interpersonal violence that is currently undermining the quality of life of too many urban neighborhoods. . . . How do the people of the setting perceive their situation? What assumptions do they bring to their decision making? (pp. 10–11)³

Like most traditional ethnographers, Anderson (1999) describes his concern with being “as objective as possible” and using his training as other ethnographers do, “to look for and to recognize underlying assumptions, their own and those of their subjects, and to try to override the former and uncover the latter” (p. 11).

From analysis of the data obtained in these ways, a rich description emerges of life in the inner city. Although we often do not “hear” the residents speak, we feel the community's pain in Anderson's (1999) description of “the aftermath of death”:

When a young life is cut down, almost everyone goes into mourning. The first thing that happens is that a crowd gathers about the site of the shooting or the incident. The police then arrive, drawing more of a crowd. Since such a death often occurs close to the victim's house, his mother or his close relatives and friends may be on the scene of the killing. When they arrive, the women and girls often wail and moan, crying out their grief for all to hear, while the young men simply look on, in studied silence. . . . Soon the ambulance arrives. (p. 138)

³From *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*, by Elijah Anderson. Copyright © 1999 by Elijah Anderson. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.



Ethnographic Research

Anderson (1999) uses these descriptions as a foundation on which he develops the key concepts in his analysis, such as “code of the street”:

The “code of the street” is not the goal or product of any individual’s action but is the fabric of everyday life, a vivid and pressing milieu within which all local residents must shape their personal routines, income strategies, and orientations to schooling, as well as their mating, parenting, and neighbor relations. (p. 326)

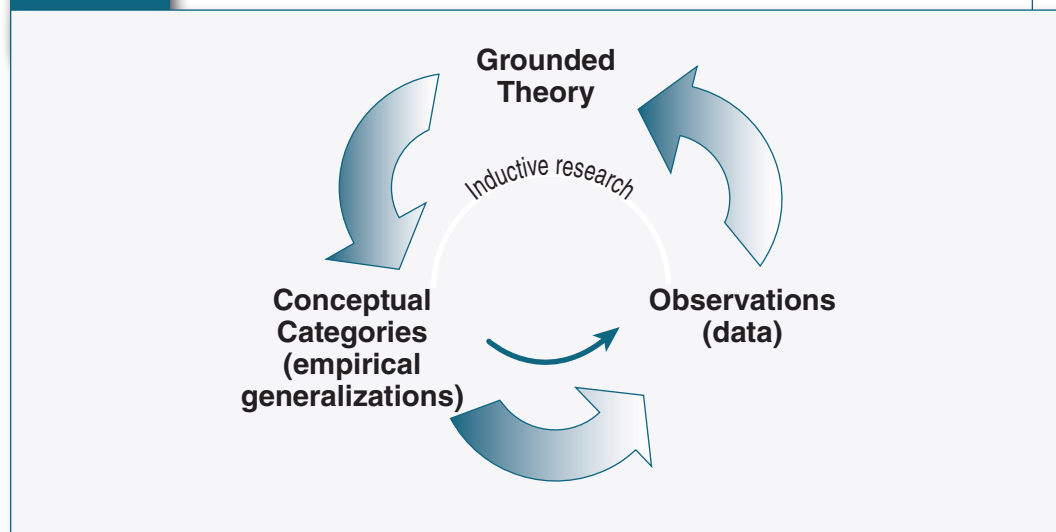
This rich ethnographic tradition is being abandoned by some qualitative data analysts, however. Many have become skeptical of the ability of social scientists to perceive the social world in a way that is not distorted by their own subjective biases or to receive impressions from the actors in that social world that are not altered by the fact of being studied (Van Maanen 2002). As a result, both specific techniques and alternative approaches to qualitative data analysis have proliferated. The next sections introduce several of these alternative approaches.

Grounded Theory

Theory development occurs continually in qualitative data analysis (Coffey & Atkinson 1996). The goal of many qualitative researchers is to create **grounded theory**—that is, to inductively build up a systematic theory that is “grounded” in, or based on, the observations. The observations are summarized into conceptual categories, which are tested directly in the research setting with more observations. Over time, as the conceptual categories are refined and linked, a theory evolves (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Huberman & Miles 1994). Exhibit 8.7 illustrates this process.

As observation, interviewing, and reflection continue, researchers refine their definitions of problems and concepts, and select indicators. They can then check the frequency and distribution of phenomena: How many people made a particular type of comment? Which people assigned similar meaning to the same patterns, behavior, or comparable social events? How often did social interaction lead to arguments?

Exhibit 8.7 The Development of Grounded Theory



Social system models may then be developed, which specify the relationships among different phenomena. These models are modified as researchers gain experience in the setting. For the final analysis, the researchers check their models carefully against their notes and make a concerted attempt to discover negative evidence that might suggest the model is incorrect.

Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis

The analysis process can be enhanced in various ways by using a computer. Programs designed for qualitative data can speed up the analysis process, make it easier for researchers to experiment with different codes, test different hypotheses about relationships, and facilitate diagrams of emerging theories and preparation of research reports (Coffey & Atkinson 1996; Richards & Richards 1994). The steps involved in **computer-assisted qualitative data analysis** parallel those used traditionally to analyze such text as notes, documents, or interview transcripts: preparation, coding, analysis, and reporting. There are several of these programs available that analyze qualitative data, including HyperRESEARCH, ATLAS.ti, and QSR NVivo. In this section, we will focus on QSR NVivo to illustrate the basic steps of qualitative data analysis.

This section is not meant to be a “primer” on learning NVivo. We simply want to show you the things that are possible when examining qualitative data with the aid of a computer program. Importantly, a computer software program like this does *not* think for you but simply helps you work through narrative or pictorial data.

Text preparation using this software program begins with typing or scanning text in a word processor or directly into NVivo’s text editor. NVivo will create or import a rich text file, a Word file, or even videos or other narrative material. The collective term for research material in NVivo is *sources*, and data that are imported directly into NVivo are called *internals*. Data that cannot be imported but can still be used by creating summaries of their content are called *externals*.

Case Study: Addicts’ Narratives of Getting Clean

One of the textbook authors is currently involved in a research project examining the factors related to desistance for a sample of drug-involved offenders (Bachman et al. 2013). One phase of the project involved intensive interviews with more than 300 individuals originally released from prison in the early 1990s. Interviews lasted from 1½ to 2 hours and were primarily open-ended and resembled conversations rather than formal questions and answers. The goal of the interviews was to uncover what Agnew (2006) refers to as “storylines” in understanding criminal offending. A storyline is a “temporally limited, interrelated set of events and conditions that increase the likelihood that individuals will engage in crime” (p. 121). As you can imagine, there were many hundreds of pages of transcripts!

Exhibit 8.8 displays the basic NVivo program with the internals in this screen shot listing the interview ID numbers from respondents.

The first step for our coding team was to categorize particular text segments within these interviews. This is the foundation of much qualitative analysis. You can assign a code to any segment of text. You can make up codes as you go through a document and also assign codes that you have already developed to text segments. You can also have the program “autocode” text by identifying a word or phrase that should always receive the same code. NVivo also lets you examine the coded text “in context,” embedded in its place in the original document.

How did we begin? The coding process began with a list of initial categories developed from the existing literature on desistance, including such key indicators as turning points, indicators of agency and readiness for change, and the psychological indicators of discontent and fear. Before coding began, training sessions ensured that definitions of each category were understood along with the coding guidelines. Next, all researchers coded

Exhibit 8.8 Screenshot of NVivo With Interview Narratives Listed as “Internals”

Name	Nodes	Referen	Create	Created By	Modified O	Modified
1009	38	62	5/31/2	RB	9/13/2011	EMK
1015	30	40	5/31/2	RB	9/13/2011	EMK
1018	42	50	5/31/2	RB	9/13/2011	EMK
1019	45	56	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1022	81	133	7/12/2	EMK	7/6/2012	5 RB
1025	40	60	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1028	71	122	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1032	58	70	7/12/2	EMK	7/6/2012	6 RB
1036	60	110	7/12/2	EMK	7/6/2012	6 RB
1040	52	80	7/12/2	EMK	7/6/2012	6 RB
1046	55	78	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1048	32	44	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1049	41	50	7/12/2	EMK	7/6/2012	6 RB
1057	69	86	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1058	52	65	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1060	52	62	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1061	51	59	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1074	40	49	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1087	48	63	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1092	57	82	9/13/2	RB	7/6/2012	7 RB
1093	36	47	7/12/2	EMK	7/6/2012	7 RB
1096	43	56	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1098	50	70	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1100	28	31	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1101	38	49	7/12/2	EMK	7/6/2012	8 RB
1102	63	75	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1107	29	33	7/12/2	EMK	7/6/2012	9 RB
1111	32	40	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1116	42	61	7/12/2	EMK	7/6/2012	9 RB
1119	45	54	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1123	57	81	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1125	31	47	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1126	49	53	7/12/2	EMK	9/13/2011	EMK
1132	41	50	7/12/2	EMK	7/7/2012	1 RB
1135	49	52	7/12/2	EMK	7/7/2012	1 RB

the same transcripts and discussed their coding strategies in group meetings. In these team meetings, the decision to add new categories was adjudicated and coding discrepancies were illuminated. The coding process continued with weekly “marathon” reliability meetings in which the same interview was coded by all four researchers. Not only did this increase intercoder reliability; these meetings also were forums for the discussion of emerging categories and opportunities to clarify coding strategies for ambiguous narratives.

Codes in our scheme ranged from purely descriptive (e.g., narrative describing first arrest or first incarceration) to more interpretive concepts such as reflections of whether respondents ever perceived themselves as addicts, when they wanted to get clean, and so on. All themes that emerged from the interview transcripts were coded; this resulted in more than 20 main categories (e.g., Discontent, Turning Points, Incarceration) with more than 100 subcategories used in the coding scheme.

After all interviews were coded, NVivo allowed us to perform analyses by viewing all interview narratives that had been coded within a particular domain. For example, some respondents who had gotten clean and stayed out of prison were motivated by fear; they often feared who they would become if they continued to use drugs or engage in crime. Indicators of this phenomenon included statements such as, “I was afraid of dying alone in prison without my family” or “I knew that if I didn’t get clean, I would never be able to get my family back and I would end up on the street alone.” We coded all narratives reflecting these sentiments under the larger domain of “desistance” within a subdomain of “fear.” One example of such a narrative was from a 54-year-old white male:

Interviewer: So I know people say all the time I just got tired. You used the word *crushed*. What does that mean?

Respondent: I'll be honest with you, more than tired, I got scared. The last time I went back I said I can't do this anymore. I told myself over and over again I can't do this anymore. I'm hurting myself, my loved ones, I was afraid that I'd be alone in life. And I didn't know whether I liked myself so I had to work hard to make myself better. . . . It scared the hell out of me. I finally realized I was my own worst enemy.

Another respondent, an African American woman, talked about almost dying from a heroin overdose:

I overdosed and I was in a coma for 9 days. They told my mom that if I was gonna live, I was going to be a complete vegetable, there was a time to start making funeral arrangements. I had no brain waves or anything. It was a complete miracle. They had no explanation why I lived or why I woke up . . . when I woke up, I had to gain back all my muscle strength, I couldn't even walk . . . my mom had to take care of me. That's how I got clean. It scared the shit out of me.

The actual term for a code in NVivo is a *node*, and you can have large domain “nodes” (e.g., drugs) with small subgroup nodes that fall within the larger domain. For example, we had a large domain node labeled “Drugs,” and within this domain there were several subgroup nodes, including “age at first use,” “drug of choice,” “relapse,” and so on.

Once your data are coded, you can begin your analysis. In NVivo, you can examine all interview transcripts that were coded within particular nodes (coding categories). These analyses are called *queries*. For example, Exhibit 8.9 displays narratives that were coded under the node called “relapse.” When a query is performed on a single node, it will display the source number (in this case, internals/1009 stands for interview number 1009) along with the text that was coded within that particular category (node). As can be seen, respondent 1009 talked about getting out of prison the first time and ending up with the same “people, places, and things” that led to his drug use, which eventually led to relapse.

NVivo will also allow you to examine a domain separately based on other variables. For example, we could examine how fear was expressed differently for males and females in the sample, or by race or age. When a multiple query like this is performed, called a *matrix coding query*, NVivo will first present a table displaying how many times each interview was coded within the grouping variable (usually a demographic indicator) and the category (nodes). Exhibit 8.10 displays one of these tables for a matrix coding query grouped by gender (1 = male, 2 = female) and by the nodes called “periods of abstinence” and “relapse.” You can see that within the interviews, 78 of the male interviews had narratives coded for “periods of abstinence” along with 54 females, and so on. When you click directly on a cell within this table, the text narratives that were coded will appear so that narratives can be compared and contrasted.

As you can see, computer software programs like NVivo are an extremely useful way to organize and analyze qualitative data. In fact, when there is a great deal of data to be analyzed, a computer software program is not only a luxury but a necessity!

Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research

Qualitative research can raise some complex ethical issues. No matter how hard the field researcher strives to study the social world naturally, leaving no traces, the very act of research itself imposes something unnatural on the situation. It is up to the researchers to identify and take responsibility

Exhibit 8.9 Result of Query in NVivo for “Relapse”

The screenshot shows the NVivo software interface. On the left, there is a 'Sources' pane with 'Internals' selected. The main window displays a table of 'Internals' nodes and their associated references. Below the table, a 'Coding Query - Results Preview' window shows two references with their respective text and coverage percentages.

Name	Nodes	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
1009	38	62	5/31/2011 6:	RB	9/13/2011 2:06 P	EMK
1015	30	40	5/31/2011 6:	RB	9/13/2011 2:06 P	EMK
1018	42	50	5/31/2011 6:	RB	9/13/2011 2:07 P	EMK
1019	45	56	7/12/2011 5:	EMK	9/13/2011 2:07 P	EMK
1022	81	133	7/12/2011 5:	EMK	7/6/2012 5:28 P	RB
1025	40	60	7/12/2011 5:	EMK	9/13/2011 2:07 P	EMK
1028	71	122	7/12/2011 5:	EMK	9/13/2011 2:07 P	EMK
1032	58	70	7/12/2011 5:	EMK	7/6/2012 6:06 P	RB
1036	60	110	7/12/2011 5:	EMK	7/6/2012 6:06 P	RB
1040	52	80	7/12/2011 5:	EMK	7/6/2012 6:06 P	RB
1046	55	78	7/12/2011 5:	EMK	9/13/2011 2:08 P	EMK

Coding Query - Results Preview

Internals(1386) - \$ 2 references coded [2.05% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.27% Coverage

Alright so you were using through your next incarceration in April, when you got out in July-august did you start using?

Yea

Same pattern?

Same pattern

Reference 2 - 1.77% Coverage

So you were in a residential facility, and then you got locked up? Any impact on your spirituality. What about the 1 time that you shoplifted, any thoughts about the consequences, I mean you just got out of the residential facility, you just wanted to use?

Yea that was basically it, just wanting to use

Is that why you left the facility? It started to get warm, you just wanted to get back to using?

Right



Qualitative Ethics

for the consequences of their involvement. Several ethical issues arise: voluntary participation, subject well-being, identity disclosure, confidentiality, establishing boundaries, and maintaining the safety of researchers in the field.

Voluntary Participation

Ensuring that subjects are participating in a study voluntarily is not often a problem with intensive interviewing and focus group research, but it is often a point of contention in participant observation studies. Few researchers or institutional review boards are willing to condone covert participation because it does not offer a way to ensure that participation by the subjects is voluntary. Even when the researcher's role is more open, interpreting the standard of voluntary participation still can be difficult. Most field research would be impossible if the participant observer were required to request permission of everyone having some contact, no matter how minimal, with a group or setting being observed. For instance, should the requirement of voluntary participation apply equally to every member of an organization being observed? What if the manager consents, the workers are ambivalent, and the union says no? Requiring everyone's consent would limit participant observation research only to settings without serious conflicts of interest.

The issue of voluntary participation is particularly important when interviewing or observing minors. At what age can individuals validly give their voluntary consent to participate in a project? It is customary for human subjects committees to want the consent of parents whose children are participating in research.

Exhibit 8.10 Results of a Matrix Query in NVivo for Gender and “Periods of Abstinence” and “Relapse”

The screenshot shows the NVivo interface with a matrix query titled "gender and relapse". The query is defined as A: gender0 = 1 and B: gender0 = 2. The results are displayed in a table with two rows and two columns.

	A: gender0 = 1	B: gender0 = 2
1. Relapse	57	75
2. Relapse	23	8

The background of the screenshot shows a list of other queries in the software, including "AA and NA by race", "changing people places and things", "childhood abuse by gender", "childhood by race", "gender and relapse", "gender and still using or crime", "grandparenting by gender", "lack of agency by gender and race", "lack of job and still using", "Make Sense? Victimization", and "mothers and race".

This requirement poses a problem for research that may be investigating issues that parents or guardians may not want uncovered, such as abuse or neglect. In other instances, alerting parents or guardians about the nature of the study may compromise the confidentiality of the participants. For example, if Decker and Van Winkle (1996) had been forced to obtain parental approval for their gang member interviews, it would have violated the confidentiality they tried to provide to their respondents. To assure the human subjects committee that their participants understood their rights, Decker and Van Winkle obtained an advocate for each juvenile member of their sample. This advocate was responsible for making sure that each juvenile understood his or her right to refuse or quit the interview at any time without penalty and the confidential nature of the project. Only after these issues were carefully explained did the participant sign a consent form. As noted in Chapter 3, issues of true voluntary participation also arise with other populations such as patients or inmates in a correctional facility.

Subject Well-Being

Before beginning a project, every field researcher should carefully consider how to avoid harm to subjects. It is not possible to avoid every theoretical possibility of harm or to be sure that any project will not cause adverse consequences to any individual. For example, some of the Cornerville men read Whyte's (1955) book and felt embarrassed or unnerved by it (while others found it enlightening). Direct harm to the reputations or feelings of particular individuals is what researchers must carefully avoid. They can do so in part by maintaining the confidentiality of research subjects. They must also avoid adversely affecting the course of events while engaged in a setting.

Jody Miller (2000) encountered a unique ethical dilemma while she was recruiting young women from a residential facility by paying them to refer other girls who were gang members to her research. These referral gratuities are common in snowball samples like this. Unfortunately, in this case, one young woman decided to cash in on the deal by initiating new young women into her gang. Here, the ethical dilemma regarding “subject well-being” was that the initiation ceremony for this particular gang involved recruits to the gang being “beaten into the gang.” Miller decided to stop conducting research at this location and ultimately lost several interviews. She states,

It was a difficult decision to make because I had struggled for so long to locate gang girls in Columbus [Missouri]. Ultimately, I believe it was the right thing to do. My presence had stirred up trouble for the agency, and I had an ethical obligation to back away, regardless of the cost to me. (p. 26)

Identity Disclosure

How much disclosure about the study is necessary, and how hard should researchers try to make sure that their research purposes are understood? Less-educated subjects may not readily comprehend what a researcher does or be able to weigh the possible consequences of the research for themselves. Should researchers inform subjects if the study’s interests and foci change while it is in progress? Current ethical standards require informed consent of research subjects. Can this standard be met in any meaningful way if researchers do not fully disclose their identity in the first place? But isn’t some degree of deception a natural part of social life (Punch 1994)? Can a balance be struck between the disclosure of critical facts and a coherent research strategy?

Confidentiality

Field researchers normally use fictitious names for the people in their reports, but doing so does not always guarantee confidentiality for their research subjects. Individuals in the setting studied may be able to identify those whose actions are described and may thus become privy to some knowledge about their colleagues or neighbors that would otherwise have been kept from them. Researchers should therefore make every effort to expunge possible identifying material from published information and to alter unimportant aspects of a description when necessary to prevent identity disclosure. In any case, no field research project should begin if it is clear that some participants will suffer serious harm by being identified in project publications.

Confidentiality is particularly important if the research is uncovering deviant or illegal behavior. In research such as Decker and Van Winkle’s (1996), it was almost inevitable that their information about illegal activity would be revealed during the course of observing or interviewing. Because they had promised confidentiality to their interviewees, Decker and Van Winkle would only refer to illegal activity in an aggregate form to describe the activities of gang members in general. They state, “Had we violated this promise [of confidentiality], we would have placed the lives of several individuals (including the field worker) in jeopardy.” In addition, Decker and Van Winkle told their subjects that they did not want to know about information concerning future crimes, as this information would not be protected by their pledge of confidentiality.

Appropriate Boundaries

This is an ethical issue that cuts across several of the others, including identity disclosure, subject well-being, and voluntary participation. You probably are familiar with this issue in the context of guidelines for

professional practice: Therapists are cautioned to maintain appropriate boundaries with patients; teachers must maintain appropriate boundaries with students. This is a special issue in qualitative research because it often involves loosening the boundary between the “researcher” and the research “subject.” Qualitative researchers may seek to build rapport with those they plan to interview by expressing an interest in their concerns and conveying empathy for their situation. Is this just “faking friendship” for the purpose of the research? Jean Duncombe and Julie Jessop (2002) posed the dilemma clearly in a book chapter titled “‘Doing Rapport’ and the Ethics of ‘Faking Friendship.’”

With deeper rapport, interviewees become more likely to explore their more intimate experiences and emotions. Yet they also become more likely to discover and disclose experiences and feelings which, upon reflection, they would have preferred to keep private from others . . . or not to acknowledge even to themselves. (p. 112)

Researcher Safety

Research “in the field,” whether researchers are studying gang life or anything else, should not begin until any potential risks to researcher safety have been evaluated. Qualitative methods may provide the only opportunity to learn about organized crime in Russian ports (Belousov et al. 2007), street crime in the Dominican Republic (Gill 2004), or the other topics examined by studies in this chapter, but they should not be used if the risks to the researchers are unacceptably high. Safety needs to be considered at the time of designing the research, not as an afterthought on arriving at the research site. As Hannah Gill learned in the Dominican Republic, such advance planning can require more investigation than just reading the local newspapers: “Due to the community’s marginality, most crimes, including murders, were never reported in newspapers, making it impossible to have known the insecurity of the field site ahead of time” (p. 2).

Being realistic about evaluating risk does not mean simply accepting misleading assumptions about unfamiliar situations or communities. For example, reports of a widespread breakdown in law and order in New Orleans were broadcast repeatedly after Hurricane Katrina, but researchers found that most non-traditional behavior in that period was actually “prosocial” rather than antisocial (Rodríguez, Trainor, & Quarantelli 2006):

One group named itself the “Robin Hood Looters.” The core of this group consisted of eleven friends who, after getting their own families out of the area, decided to remain at some high ground and, after the floodwaters rose, commandeered boats and started to rescue their neighbors. . . . For about two weeks they kept searching in the area. . . . They foraged for food and water from abandoned homes, and hence [acquired] their group name. Among the important norms that developed were that they were going to retrieve only survivors and not bodies and that group members would not carry weapons. The group also developed informal understandings with the police and the National Guard. (p. 91)

These ethical issues cannot be evaluated independently. The final decision to proceed must be made after weighing the relative benefits and risks to participants. Few qualitative research projects will be barred by consideration of these ethical issues, except for those involving covert participation. The more important concern for researchers is to identify the ethically troublesome aspects of their proposed research, resolve them before the project begins, and act on new ethical issues as they come up during the project.

Conclusion



Chapter 8 Quiz

Qualitative research allows the careful investigator to obtain a richer and more intimate view of the social world than can be achieved with more quantitative methods. It is not hard to understand why so many qualitative studies have become classics in the literature. The emphases in qualitative research on inductive reasoning and incremental understanding help to stimulate and inform other research approaches. Research charting the dimensions of previously unstudied social settings and intensive investigations of the subjective meanings that motivate individual action are particularly well served by the techniques of participant observation, intensive interviewing, and focus groups.

The very characteristics that make qualitative research techniques so appealing restrict their use to a limited set of research problems. It is not possible to draw representative samples for study using participant observation, and for this reason, the generalizability of any particular field study's results cannot really be known. Only the accumulation of findings from numerous qualitative studies permits confident generalization, but here again, the time and effort required to collect and analyze the data make it unlikely that many particular field research studies will be replicated.

Even if qualitative researchers made an effort to replicate key studies, attempting to compare findings would be hampered by their notion of developing and grounding explanations inductively in the observations made in a particular setting. Measurement reliability is thereby hindered, as are systematic tests for the validity of key indicators and formal tests for causal connections. Qualitative researchers do not necessarily seek to achieve the same generalizability standards as quantitative researchers; the agenda here is usually to tell *one* truth in the words of study participants.

In the final analysis, qualitative research involves a mode of thinking and investigating that is different from that used in experimental and survey research. Qualitative research is inductive; experiments and surveys tend to be conducted in a deductive, quantitative framework. Both approaches can help social scientists learn about the social world; the proficient researcher must be ready to use either. Qualitative data are often supplemented with many quantitative characteristics or activities, and quantitative data are often enriched with written comments and observations. The distinction between qualitative and quantitative research techniques is not always clear-cut, and increasingly, researchers are combining methods to advance knowledge.

Key Terms

Complete observation
Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis
Covert (complete) participation
Ethnography
Experience sampling method (ESM)
Field notes
Field research

Focus group
Grounded theory
Intensive interviewing
Jottings
Matrix
Participant observation
Progressive focusing
Reactive effect

Reflexivity
Saturation point
Systematic observation
Tacit knowledge
Theoretical sampling
Thick description

Highlights

- Qualitative researchers tend to develop ideas inductively, try to understand the social context and sequential nature of attitudes and actions, and explore the subjective meanings that participants attach to events. They rely primarily on participant observation, intensive interviewing, and, in recent years, focus groups.
- Participant observers may adopt one of several roles for a particular research project. Each role represents a different balance between observing and participating, which may or may not include public acknowledgment of the researcher's real identity. Many field researchers prefer a moderate role, participating as well as observing in a group but publicly acknowledging the researcher role.
- Field researchers must develop strategies for entering the field, developing and maintaining relations in the field, sampling, and recording and analyzing data.
- Recording and analyzing notes is a crucial step in field research. Detailed notes should be recorded and analyzed daily to refine methods and to develop concepts, indicators, and models of the social system observed.
- Intensive interviews involve open-ended questions and follow-up probes, with the content and order of specific questions varying from one interview to the next.
- Focus groups combine elements of participant observation and intensive interviewing. They can increase the validity of attitude measurement by revealing what people say when presenting their opinions in a group context.
- Case studies use thick description and other qualitative techniques to provide a holistic picture of a setting or group.
- Grounded theory connotes a general explanation that develops in interaction with the data and is continually tested and refined as data collection continues.
- The main ethical issues in field research concern voluntary participation, subject well-being, identity disclosure, confidentiality, appropriate boundaries, and researcher safety.



In the News

Research in the News

PUT TO THE TEST

Concerned with high rates of adolescent substance abuse, hundreds of middle and high schools have begun randomly drug testing their students. The Supreme Court has ruled that the schools may conduct random drug tests among students who wish to participate in school-sponsored extracurricular activities such as sports, marching band, or a foreign language club. To examine community support and reactions to the random drug tests, many school districts perform focus groups with parents and community members before and after the new programs begin.

Source: Roan, Shari. 2007. "Put to the Test." *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, p. A15.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT FROM THE ARTICLE:

1. What type of sampling strategy do you think is needed for drug tests with students to be truly random?
2. Focus groups will provide much valuable information about groups' perceptions of the drug tests, but what would be needed to assess the perceptions of all parents?

Exercises

Discussing Research

1. Review the experiments and surveys described in previous chapters. Choose one, and propose a field research design that would focus on the same research question but with participant observation techniques in a local setting. Propose the role that you would play in the setting, along the participant observation continuum, and explain why you would favor this role. Describe the stages of your field research study, including your plans for entering the field, developing and maintaining relationships, sampling, and recording and analyzing data. Then discuss what you would expect your study to add to the findings resulting from the study described in the book.
2. Develop an interview guide that focuses on a research question addressed in one of the studies in this book. Using this guide, conduct an intensive interview with one person who is involved with the topic in some way. Take only brief notes during the interview, and then write as complete a record of the interview as you can immediately afterward. Turn in an evaluation of your performance as an interviewer and note taker, together with your notes.
3. Find the Qualitative Research lesson in the interactive exercises on the Student Study Site, www.sagepub.com/bachman/frccj3e. Answer the questions in this lesson to review the types of ethical issues that can arise in the course of participant observation research.
4. Read about focus groups in one of the references cited in this chapter and then devise a plan for using a focus group to explore and explain student perspectives about crime on campus. How would you recruit students for the group? What types of students would you try to include? How would you introduce the topic and the method to the group? What questions would you ask? What problems would you anticipate (e.g., discord between focus group members or digressions from the chosen topic)? How would you respond to these problems?

Finding Research on the Web

1. Go to the Annual Review of Sociology's website by following the publication link at <http://soc.AnnualReviews.org>. Search for articles that use field research as the primary method of gathering data on gangs or delinquency. Find at least three articles, and report on the specific method of field research used in each.
2. Search the web for information on focus groups (previous, upcoming, or ongoing) involving victims, offenders, fear of crime, crime prevention, or another criminological topic. List the websites you find, and write a paragraph about the purpose of each focus group and the sample involved. How might these focus groups be used to influence public policy?
3. Go to the Social Science Information Gateway (SOSIG) at www.intute.ac.uk/socialsciences/. Conduct a search for "qualitative methods" and then choose three or four interesting sites to find out more about field research—either professional organizations of field researchers or journals that publish their work. Explore the sites to find out what information they provide regarding field research, what kinds of projects are being done that involve field research, and the purposes that specific field research methods are being used for.
4. *The Qualitative Report* is an online journal about qualitative research. Inspect the table of contents for a recent issue at www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/index.html. Read one of the articles and write a brief article review.

Critiquing Research

1. Read and summarize one of the qualitative studies discussed in this chapter or another classic study recommended by your instructor. Review and critique the study using the article review questions presented in Appendix B. What questions are answered by the study? What questions are raised for further investigation?
2. Read the complete text of one of the qualitative studies presented in this chapter and evaluate its conclusions for authenticity, using the criteria in this chapter. If validity and authenticity are in any way debatable, what suggestions would you offer to improve the researcher's methodology?

3. Review one of the articles on the book's Student Study Site, www.sagepub.com/bachmanfrccj3e, that used qualitative methods. Describe the data that were collected, and identify the steps used in the analysis. What type of qualitative data

analysis was this? If it is not one of the methods presented in this chapter, describe its similarities to and differences from one of these methods. How confident are you in the conclusions, given the methods of analysis used?

Making Research Ethical

1. The April 1992 issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* is devoted to a series of essays reevaluating Whyte's (1943) classic field study, *Street Corner Society*. A social scientist interviewed some of the people described in Whyte's book and concluded that the researcher had made methodological and ethical errors. Whyte and others offer able rejoinders and further commentary. Reading the entire issue of this journal will improve your appreciation of the issues that field researchers confront. Do you agree or disagree with the claims? Why or why not?
2. Covert participation may be the only way for researchers to observe the inner workings of some criminal or other deviant groups, but this strategy is likely to result in the researcher witnessing, and perhaps being asked to participate in, illegal acts. Do you think that covert participation is ever ethical? If so, under what conditions? Can the standards of "no harm to subjects," "identity disclosure," and "voluntary participation" be maintained in covert research? In what circumstances would researcher safety advance to a priority status?
3. A *New York Times* reporter (Wines 2006) talked about the dilemma many reporters have: whether or not to provide monetary or other compensation, like food or medical supplies, to people they interview for a story. In journalism, paying for information is a "cardinal sin" because journalists

are indoctrinated with the notion that they are observers. They are trained to report on situations, but not to influence a situation. This is what many scholars believe a researcher's role should be. Nevertheless, as we learned in this chapter, it is common in research to offer small gratuities for information and interviews. However, does paying for information unduly influence the truthfulness of the information being sought? What are your thoughts on paying for information? What if you were investigating the problems faced by families living below the poverty level, and during an interview you noticed that the family refrigerator and cupboards were empty and the baby was crying from hunger? What is the ethical reaction? If you believe the most ethical response would be to provide food or money for food, is it fair that there is another family next door in the same condition who did not happen to be on your interview list? How should gratuities be handled?

4. Recall our discussion of social norms and interpersonal comfort levels. Should any requirements be imposed on researchers who seek to study other cultures, to ensure that procedures are appropriate and interpretations are culturally sensitive? What practices would you suggest for cross-cultural researchers to ensure that ethical guidelines are followed? (Consider the wording of consent forms and the procedures for gaining voluntary cooperation.)

Developing a Research Proposal

Add a qualitative component to your proposed study. You can choose to do this with a participant observation project or intensive interviewing. Choose the method that seems most likely to help answer the research question for the overall survey project.

1. For a participant observation component, propose an observational plan that would complement the overall survey project. Present in your proposal the following information about your plan:
 - a. Choose a site and justify its selection in terms of its likely value for the research.
 - b. Choose a role along the participation-observation continuum and justify your choice.
 - c. Describe access procedures and note any likely problems.
 - d. Discuss how you will develop and maintain relations in the site.
 - e. Review any sampling issues.
 - f. Present an overview of the way in which you will analyze the data you collect.
2. For an intensive interview component, propose a focus for the intensive interviews that you believe will add the most to findings from the survey project. Present in your proposal the following information about your plan:

- a. Present and justify a method for selecting individuals to interview.
 - b. Write out three introductory biographical questions and five “grand tour” questions for your interview schedule.
 - c. List at least six different probes you may use.
 - d. Present and justify at least two follow-up questions for one of your grand tour questions.
 - e. Explain what you expect this intensive interview component to add to your overall survey project.
3. Which qualitative data analysis alternative is most appropriate for the qualitative data you proposed to collect for your project? Using the approach, develop a strategy for using the techniques of qualitative data analysis to analyze your textual data.

Performing Data Analysis in SPSS or Excel

The YOUTH.POR data set includes some questions on opinions regarding friends’ attitudes toward delinquent acts and the extent to which getting caught for committing a crime would negatively affect the respondent’s life.

1. Describe the opinions about friends’ attitudes and personal misfortune based on the frequencies for these variables (V77, V79, V109, V119).
2. What explanation can you develop (inductively) for these attitudes? Do you believe that friends’ attitudes toward delinquent acts or getting caught for committing a crime would influence behavior? Explain.
3. Propose a participant observation, a focus group, or an intensive interview study to explore these attitudes further. Identify the sample for the study, and describe how you would carry out your observations, focus groups, or interviews.

STUDENT STUDY SITE

The companion Student Study Site for *Fundamentals of Research in Criminology and Criminal Justice* can be found at www.sagepub.com/bachmanfrccj3e.

Visit the Student Study Site to enhance your understanding of the chapter content and to discover additional resources that will take your learning one step further. You can enhance your understanding of the chapters by using the comprehensive study material, which includes interactive exercises, eFlashcards, web exercises, web quizzes, and more. You will also find special features, such as Learning From Journal Articles, which incorporates SAGE’s online journal collection.

