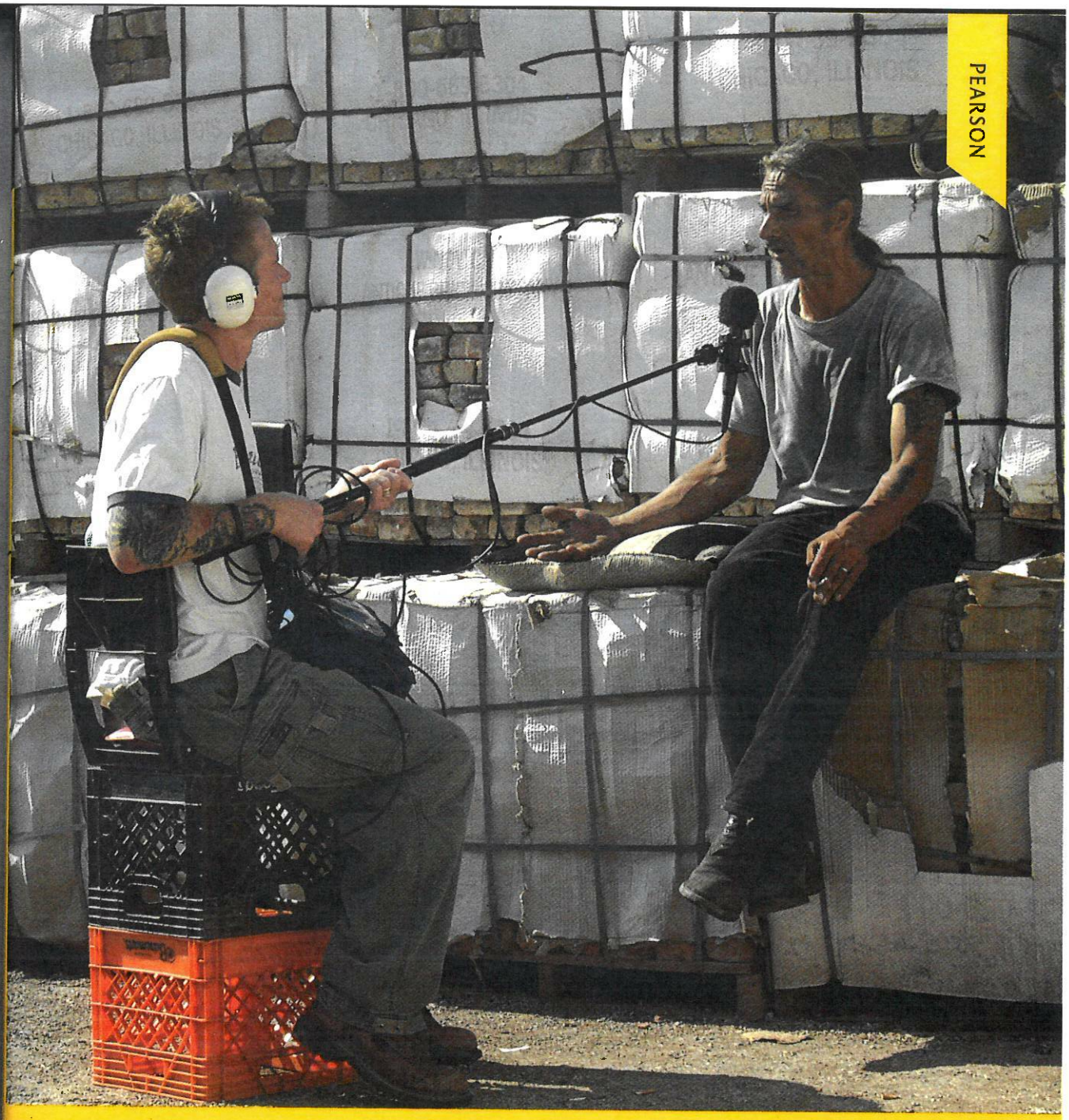

PEARSON

# Doing Qualitative Research
## Designs, Methods, and Techniques

EDITION NO. 01

GREG SCOTT | ROBERTA GARNER

PART I

# Getting Started—Thinking about Research Choices

You've got a research topic. You're really excited about it and have a lot of ideas for exploring it. But how do you start ... The Project?

Doing research is kind of like farming, or more specifically, cultivating a plot of land for the harvest of vegetables. Imagine planting a crop of organic vegetables, tending your field, bringing in the harvest, and getting your vegetables to the folks who want to eat them. First, you learn about the properties of the soil and the characteristics of plants you want to grow. Next, you assemble your tools and seeds and prepare the field. You become familiar with the goals, procedures, and regulations that govern organic farming so that your claim of "organic produce" will be valid, legal, and ethical. You confirm your title to the land and think about the people you will need to help you—the people with whom you will interact, whether they are hired hands or family. Starting your crop requires a vision of the possibilities, an overall plan for the project from the beginning to the harvest, the marketing, and the eating. Learning about other organic farmers' experiences may help you make the right choices for your terrain, resources, and goals.

It's the same process for a research project. In research projects, we *grow* our data in very much the way we grow vegetables. We don't collect stuff that just happens to be lying on the ground, but neither do we have nearly complete control over creating the product (as we do when we build a house or make a painting). Our crop—our harvest of data—is produced in interaction with the "world out there" in which these results grow. You will need to have a vision of what you want to accomplish, a design for doing it, knowledge of available tools and resources, and a sense of the social context—the personal, ethical, and political context in which you work, within which you make your choices of research questions, designs, methods, and the telling of the story. In the doing of research, your plans will depend especially *on your imagination*, but also on your knowledge of concepts and theory, your skills in using the methods tool-kit correctly, your ability to interact with others, and usually an intense physical effort out in the field. And like a newcomer to farming, you can look at others' accomplishments to find designs that inspire you.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the book as a whole and explains the logic of its organization.

We will briefly review the many research traditions that contribute to contemporary qualitative research in Chapter 2. We will discuss the overall design, vision and

purpose—in Chapter 3 and look at the ethics and politics of writing about the lives of others in Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 6 highlights the importance of theory in research.

In Part II, we will look more closely at how to choose a design. Part III examines one type of design: ethnography. Part IV presents a flexible, multipurpose "methods tool kit" that can be used to implement the designs. And Part V is about "telling the story"—to ourselves and others—in other words, about ways of bringing our crop to the table.

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Chapter 1

# Introduction: Logic of Inquiry, Research Designs and Strategies, and the Methods Tool-Kit

## OVERVIEW

In this chapter we welcome you to the book, explain its organization, define basic terms, and explain where qualitative research fits in the research tradition.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Three concepts guided our writing. First, in every study the researcher makes countless conscious *choices*. For example, the researcher must decide what question(s) to answer and how to design a research project to answer the question(s). Our choices of methods should be guided by good practices for producing and analyzing data, but the research is never a matter of just mechanically following specific technical steps; at all stages of a project, we should be asking ourselves why we are doing what we are doing and whether we could or should do it differently. Our intellectual goals and values guide us; we don't operate robotically or in a lock-step manner, obeying technique alone.

The importance of choice is directly related to our second guiding principle: The **research question** determines, to a great extent, the research choices available to us, and it affects how we actually make the choices. The research question (or the set of related research questions) articulates what we want to learn about social reality. We have to be clear on what knowledge we want to create and therefore what

data and information we need to produce—not simply collect in a wily-nily manner. Information and data are not just "out there" lying around like apples fallen from a tree, waiting to be "collected" by the eager researcher; rather, the researcher brings the data into existence through her research choices and activities, which unfold in reference to the research questions. In a word, the qualitative researcher *produces* data; she does not *discover* it as an archaeologist finds artifacts. Throughout the book, we will emphasize this process of matching research designs and methods to research questions.

Our third guiding principle is that research should always be linked logically to **theory**. Research without theory is just a pile of information with a relatively short shelf life. Theory is the "soul" of a research project, giving it a larger meaning and a longer future. Theories influence the statement of the research question, and the knowledge gained in the research project informs and enriches theory. For instance, when Emile Durkheim wrote about the distribution of suicide rates in Europe in the 1890s, he was not just amassing statistics about a particular moment in time—he was trying to understand variation in two fundamental characteristics of society: social integration and normative regulation. He wanted to learn how these characteristics shape people's lives and the choice to go on living. These basic theoretical concepts are just as vital to our understanding of society today as they were in 1898.

## THE BOOK'S ORGANIZATION

The book is divided into five parts: (1) an introductory section that covers the goals and history of qualitative methods, including ethical and political challenges; (2) a discussion of **research designs** or basic strategies for organizing research; (3) a focus on **ethnography**, the qualitative research design *par excellence* and one that poses many complex challenges; (4) a part that introduces the methods "toolbox" and describes **methods** that can be used to implement the designs; and (5) a section that discusses preparing the research report and disengaging from the field—a reflection on how to tell the story of the research to the public, colleagues, participants, and oneself.

### Part I: Getting Started—Thinking about Research Choices

In the first part, we discuss the basics of qualitative research, define key terms, explain why and how to formulate research questions, review the history of qualitative research, challenge the reader to think about ethical and political issues in research, and conclude this part by highlighting the importance of the link between research and theory. Part I gets the reader started on thinking about research.

### Part II: Choosing a Research Design

In the second part, we identify several basic designs or strategies used in qualitative inquiry. These strategies, designs, or logics of research are the overall plans for conducting research. The basic designs differ in the purpose of the research, the types of research questions that are answered, and the way that specific methods are selected from the "methods toolbox" and brought together to implement the design. We will introduce five basic designs or strategies: **ethnography**, **historical-comparative research**, the **social autopsy**, **community-based participatory research** or participatory action research, and **discourse/cultural artifact analysis**. A sixth type of design is the **mixed or multimethod design** that combines major approaches. Each type of design

requires certain tools, which we call "methods," but these tools can be used for more than one design, and each design can use several of these tools. Each design will be illustrated with examples of research. Part II encourages the reader to think about choosing designs and matching them to the larger purposes and questions that guide research.

Here is a brief summary of the designs we will discuss; later chapters will explain them in more detail.

The word **ethnography** comes from the Greek words for "people" (*ethnos*) and "writing" (*grapho*) and means "writing about a people." It is an effort to present as complete an account of the way of life and culture of a group as possible. It could be any group with a shared culture.

The second design is **historical-comparative research.** This type of research tries to reach conclusions about large-scale social processes that take place in whole societies. It tries to explain differences in institutions among societies (e.g., Why do countries have different types of health care systems?) and the differences in how societies are "put together," how their institutions emerged, and how these institutions are connected to each other. Historical-comparative designs require methods that can "bring up" information from the past. The methods of historians—such as archival research, analysis of documents and artifacts, oral histories, and eyewitness accounts—form the basis of the conclusions that historical-comparative researchers try to formulate. Researchers do not always put together and analyze primary sources themselves, but they have to be able to judge the reliability of the findings that historians develop on the basis of these types of methods and materials.

The third design we will discuss is the **social autopsy**. A social autopsy is research that begins with an adverse event—a disaster such as Hurricane Katrina, an accident, or an intentional act of harm—and then tries to explain how and why this event happened the way it did. The analysis of the causes, consequences, and impact of the event is used to dissect social relationships and practices; it is used to gain an understanding of the society and culture within which this problematic event was possible.

Our fourth design is **community-based participatory research**, also called participatory action research, or PAR. This approach involves the researcher and the "subjects" working together to drastically reduce the distance that separates them in more typical research studies. Instead of the researcher standing "outside" of the research, he or she interacts with the community participants to develop a research project that will answer their questions and address their practical concerns, not just to find answers to the researchers' questions. The research questions, the choice of specific methods, and the strategy of collecting information emerge from interaction and agreement between researcher and participants—it is their study, not a study "owned" by the researcher. This commitment creates a very different set of conditions for making research decisions than the more traditional designs.

Our fifth design is the **analysis of cultural artifacts and discourses.** The object of analysis is a product of human activities—writing texts, creating artwork, making music, or making ordinary utensils and tools, for example. The emphasis in this type of cultural analysis is not the way people live their culture (the focus of ethnographies), but the culture as a total and highly revealing product in its own right, apart from the actions and interactions of the people who construct and live it.

Our sixth design is the **mixed quantitative/qualitative design** that blends any one of the preceding five qualitative designs (or strategies) with the production and analysis of quantitative data. The mixed design uses qualitative methods in combination with quantitative ones, drawing on methods such as surveys and analysis of statistical records from the "quantitative toolbox."

Each of the above designs has a distinct logic. How research questions can be asked, the types of hypotheses that are set forth, the choices of specific methods, the integration of the results in the analysis, and the strategy for reaching conclusions differ depending on which design the researcher has chosen.

### Part III: Focus on Ethnography

This part focuses exclusively on ethnography. We discuss preparing to enter the field, entering the field, producing data, recording observations, and organizing a range of methods into a coherent project to study a culture.

### Part IV: Choices from the Methods Tool-Kit

In Part IV, we review key tools in the methods toolbox. These methods involve **research activities** needed to implement the design or strategy. Many of these methods—such as **observing, interviewing, focus groups**, and **visual methods**—can be used in several or even all of the designs; they are widely used and versatile. In each chapter in this part, we will give a broad overview of the method, suggest ways in which it needs to be modified to fit different types of designs, provide tips for "how to do it," and discuss examples of research.

### Part V: Telling the Story

Part V is about life after the research experience and covers how to write about research and the personal, ethical, and legal complications that we may encounter afterwards. We discuss the challenges of telling the story of the research—not only to colleagues in the research community but also to the participants in the study, the public, and to ourselves. Every research project generates many different stories. In the end, however, the researcher must choose which story (or stories) to tell, and which not to tell. Decisions concerning which stories to tell and how to tell them can be very complicated, involving personal, political, professional, economic, and moral considerations.

## KEY CONCEPTS

In this book, you'll come across dozens of new concepts and terms. Here are the definitions of some of the most important terms that will be useful as you read the book:

Our most fundamental term is **research question**. A research question (RQ) is a question relating to an overarching concern that a researcher wants to address through gathering and analyzing data on a specific phenomenon involving people, groups, organizations, institutions, cultures, situations, societies, and so on. A research question is *not* the same as a question on a survey or questionnaire. Survey questions exist to help you gather the data you need to analyze in order to form an answer to your overarching research question. In short, the RQ is a question about people and anything they do, say, or think. Most important, it must be possible to answer the question with *evidence*, or data that you can create, produce, shape, and assemble through your deliberate (though often serendipitous) interactions with the world.

We need to distinguish **empirical inquiry** from *theory*. The word "empirical" means information or knowledge that we can obtain through our five senses. It is knowledge about the world around us. The empirical world is the "realm of the senses." Theories refer to clusters of ideas and concepts that we form in our minds. They may be influenced by our sense experience but they are not quite the same thing as that experience. When I pet a dog, I may form the word "pit bull" in my mind, but that is not identical to the feeling of touching the dog. The concept "dog" or "pit bull" is in my brain, whereas the feeling of the dog's hair is empirical, an observation that involves direct contact with the outside world in which the dog exists. Of course, "pit bull" is not much of

a theory, but it is one step toward a theory—for instance, one about the causes of ferocious, unpredictable behavior in animals (maybe such behavior is the result of both genetic factors and a dog's brutal experiences in the environment). Or perhaps it's a step toward a theory about how dogs are classified officially and legally as compared with how humans classify dogs in their everyday experience.

In the social sciences, a lot of empirical inquiry is already heavily laced with theory. We are rarely in the situation of petting a dog just to learn the feel of its hair and body. We usually are observing empirically with a rather conceptual research question in mind that guides the empirical observation. But we also remain open to empirical experience that may change our concepts and theories.

**Research design or strategy** (or logic of inquiry) is an overall plan for answering our research questions. It specifies *research methods*, *activities*, and *techniques* that we will need in order to answer our question in a satisfactory way. For example, because Durkheim wanted to understand differences in suicide rates between groups of people, he had to find data that enabled him to see the differences in rates, for instance, government statistics collected in different countries. Looking at a couple of suicide notes would have been heart-rending, but they would not have helped him understand the differences in rates among many groups of people.

Research design is in large part dictated by the question and must bring evidence to bear on the question. For example, if our research question is, "Does Drug Rehab Program X work?" it would not be very smart to confine our research design to interviewing the founders and employees of Program X. Interviewing them might be a good method to include in a design that attempts to answer other questions, such as "What was the history of the program?" or "Do employees feel satisfied with their work?" or "What are the demographic characteristics of the owners and employees of the program?" But if we want to know whether the program works, we have to assemble systematic and uniformly collected information that compares its rate of success (however we define that) to other programs' outcomes or to the situation of being in no program at all.

**Research methods** are recognized ways of collecting empirical information. They are usually clusters of related research activities. For example, we often talk about "survey methods" in the social sciences, and that means a lot of related activities such as writing a questionnaire, identifying a sample of people to fill it out, and analyzing the resulting data. All of these activities are part of "survey methods." In qualitative research, our methods toolbox includes interviewing, observing as an outside viewer, participating at the same time that we are observing, looking at historical records, and analyzing documents or cultural artifacts such as buildings or works of art. We use one or more of these methods to implement a research design. Some of these methods can be used for several different designs. For example, interviewing and observing are versatile methods that can be used to implement many types of designs.

**Research activities** are things we do to carry out the research design and to collect the empirical information that we will need to answer our research questions. The activities have to be linked to the research questions so that they help us to answer them. These activities are actions to make the research happen—some may be part of specific methods/techniques but the activities also include things we do that are preliminary or supplementary to applying the methods. They include actions that set the stage, lay the ground work, or support the actual research methods. For example, we may be working on an ethnography—a broad, multifaceted study of a community. To implement that basic design, we may choose the methods of interviewing. In order to make the interviewing happen, we may have to engage in activities that are

not strictly part of the interview—for example, driving a homeless person to a doctor's appointment or meeting with a media relations staff person of a large corporation in order to arrange an interview with the CEO.

Social scientists distinguish between research *methods* and *methodologies*, although in everyday usage these terms are often confused with each other. The research method is a recognized way of collecting or producing empirical information, such as a survey, an interview, and **content analysis** of documents. **Methodology** refers to a broader and more conceptual way of thinking about research than any one method or even any given research design. It means systematic reflection on the theoretical and philosophical reasons for using specific designs and methods.

**Research techniques** are specific procedures for implementing research methods. For example, if we decide to use a survey method, we need to become familiar with techniques for writing survey questions, sampling a population, and statistical analysis of the results. If we decide to use qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews, we need to learn the techniques for preparing an interview guide (the set of questions that we ask our respondent), for taking notes during the interview, and for transcribing and editing the audiotape that we recorded during the interview. A technique is a practical and specific way of doing things. Techniques often involve step-by-step procedures. Researchers can be trained in techniques, while research design, the logic of inquiry, and the choice of methods require a broader, more reflective way of learning.

### An Example: Studying the Unhoused

In our example, our research question is, "What are the conditions in which precariously housed people live—what is the world of the homeless?"

We could decide that this question as worded must be answered with a research design based on ethnography, on a complete description of the world of the homeless and the precariously housed, one that requires the researcher to be in prolonged contact with a community of homeless people, perhaps to live with them. It would not be enough to simply interview them or have some other type of fleeting and limited contact with them.

Once we have decided that the research design must involve ethnography, we would probably include a variety of methods, such as **participant-observation,** collection of **life narratives**, unstructured interviews, and documentary film.

These methods in turn have their own techniques, such as writing and organizing good field notes, selecting the right kind of camera for making a documentary film, using the camera effectively in the field, and careful coding of themes in the life stories told by homeless people and video recordings of their everyday behavior.

And the research methods (as well as the larger ethnographic research design) would engender a large number of research activities: Some might be directly related to the methods, such as filming, conducting unstructured interviews, and keeping field notes, but other activities would turn out to be necessary as well, although they are not guided by any specific technique that can be learned from a textbook. These activities might include helping individuals build huts along the railroad tracks, driving them to a food store, obtaining medical care for them, or just hanging out with them. These activities are part of the fieldwork method and ethnographic research design, but because they are not research techniques, textbooks do not usually explain how to do them. Many formal research reports—especially article-length ones—are rather vague about the types of activities in which the researcher actually engaged.

## QUANTITATIVE VERSUS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Research design is often classified into two types: **quantitative and qualitative.** In quantitative research, we are interested in reaching conclusions based on counting or measuring characteristics of the world around us. We formulate research questions that can be answered with numerical and statistically analyzed data, questions that might begin with "How many...?" "How often...?" "Are the rates different among ...?" We strive to collect information that can be analyzed statistically. We follow strict guidelines to ensure that our results can be generalized. And the variables—characteristics of the world in which we are interested—are defined precisely enough to allow counting and measurement.

Examples of quantitative research methods and designs include surveys and secondary data analysis. Secondary data analysis is a design based on the statistical analysis of existing surveys or of statistics collected by governments or large survey organizations. An example of a survey is the General Social Survey (GSS), a regular survey of American adults that asks respondents questions about their demographic characteristics and their feelings on a wide range of topics including their own happiness, frequency of sexual relations, and views of controversial issues such as abortion and gun control. An example of secondary data analysis is provided by Monique Payne's use of a large, nationally representative data set to explore the effect of residential mobility on adolescents' educational achievement—more mobility turned out to be related to diminished achievement, with many other variables controlled. She did not collect the data herself, but rather posed a new research question that could be answered using the information in an existing and publicly available data set (2008).

Finally, one simple way to characterize quantitative research is this: It deals with a large number of **cases** but a small number of **variables.** For instance, in this line of research it's not uncommon for the researcher to be asking a research question regarding the social life of 10,000 or even 10 million people. But when you're working with many cases, you can't be asking a question whose answering will require you to examine a large number of each person's attributes. Instead, the researcher focuses on a relatively small number of attributes/characteristics when answering the question.

Qualitative research is based on observations that can be written, spoken about, filmed, and interpreted, but not so easily measured, counted, "put into numbers," or generalized about on the basis of statistical reasoning. The basic research designs used in qualitative research tend to produce information that is not readily and immediately in quantitative form, although in many cases it can be transformed into numbers later in the research process.

Qualitative research is best suited for answering research questions that lend themselves to the analysis of a relatively small number of **cases** but a large number of attributes/variables. So, in contrast with quantitative research, you're going to be working with a relatively small population, but you're going to learn a great deal about each case in the population. In other words, you're going to be digging deep, as opposed to the very wide but not so deep digging you'll do in a quantitative research project.

Examples of qualitative research include ethnographies in which the researcher lives in a community and describes its way of life. This design might include some counting and measurement, but these activities would not be the primary research activities. An example of qualitative research is Horowitz's *Honor and the American Dream*, in which the author lived in a Mexican American neighborhood in Chicago and tried to understand the appeal of gangs and the reasons young people do or do not join them.

Collection of life narratives is a specific method that is a major component of many ethnographic studies and could also be used as a method for conducting historical-comparative research. For example, in *Nan: The Life of an Irish Traveling Woman*, Sharon Gmelch presents and

discusses the life story of Nan, an Irish "Traveller" (a low-status caste of traditionally nomadic people). The story of one person illuminates the lives of Travellers, their customs, relationships with other Irish and with British, the loss of their traditional nomadic way of life, their economic situation, and—as seen in Nan's perspective—the problem of domestic violence in the community.

Neither Horowitz nor Gmelch reports a lot of statistics. They do not claim to have a statistical basis for their conclusions, and they are careful not to make claims that what they heard and saw is true of all urban Mexican American communities or every Irish Traveller (let alone of every Irish citizen, woman on the planet, or human being). Their interpretation of the observations gives us a different kind of understanding than quantitative data; we feel that we have gained an understanding of the ideas and experiences of the people in the study. We feel that we have "gotten into their heads." We have also learned about a specific place and time and have gained a strongly contextualized understanding.

In later chapters, we will look at how the quantitative/qualitative distinction—which used to be a major and rancorous division in sociology—is now being bridged by many studies. Researchers collect quantitative data in their field research; for example, Greg Scott has filmed over 400 instances of drug injection and converted the video recordings into numeric data, with each case (i.e., "injection episode") comprising dozens of numeric variables relating to the type of activity (cleaning the skin, inserting the needle, etc.) and the level of disease transmission risk associated with the activity. Thus he has taken audio-visual representations and out of them created a statistically analyzable database that allows for (1) the development of a systematic understanding of exactly how heroin and crack injectors perform their injections and (2) the identifying of patterns in risky behavior across injectors. Ultimately, this evidence-based understanding of injection risk will be helpful to those who attempt to help drug injectors improve the hygiene of their injections and thereby reduce their risk of contracting or spreading a viral infection. This is just one of thousands of instances in which a researcher has derived quantitative data from data that were originally qualitative in nature.

Many researchers carry out quantitative analysis of qualitative data such as texts and discourses, which are coded using special software. And many researchers create combined research designs in which both types of methods are used to in order to provide two different perspectives on the research question.

### Unobtrusive and "Obtrusive" (or Interactive) Research

In addition to the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research, many social scientists make a distinction between obtrusive and unobtrusive designs, methods, and research activities. Unobtrusive methods do not require interaction with research subjects or respondents. We can carry out many of them in the privacy of our own home wearing pajamas—and we don't have to talk to anyone!

Table 1.1 shows both of these dimensions, placing research designs and specific methods on two axes.

## FIELDWORK

The terms **fieldwork** and "in the field" refer to a basic way of thinking and feeling that is unique to qualitative research and ethnography. A major difference exists between work that is done in labs, libraries, and offices and work that is done in the open, free, exciting, and unpredictable terrain of "the field." The field can be as distant and remote as a village in the mountains of Tibet or as close as a walk from campus, but it is always territory that the researcher does not control, always "someone else's turf."

**TABLE 1.1** A Comparison of Different Types of Methods and Designs

| | Qualitative | Quantitative |
|---|---|---|
| **Obtrusive** | **Designs**: ethnography and most of its methods; community-based participatory research<br>**Methods**: ethnographic documentary film; participant-observation and carnal sociology; interviewing<br>**Method**: Focus groups | **Designs**: survey research; quantitative data in fieldwork; experimental design |
| **Unobtrusive** | **Designs**: historical-comparative analysis; analysis of art and cultural artifacts; content/discourse analysis of documents. | **Designs**: secondary data analysis; some archival research |

When the researcher is engaged in fieldwork, she is seeing and listening to people engaged in *their* world and not answering to *her* demands and questions. It is true that quantitative researchers can conduct surveys and even experiments "in the field," but when they do so, they make every effort to interact with people in the field in limited, predictable ways. They administer a survey to them or ask them to engage in a scripted series of interactions. The researcher's interaction with the respondents and subjects remains fleeting, impersonal, and carefully structured. But when qualitative and ethnographic researchers enter the field, it is an experience of uncontrolled immersion in a natural setting. "Natural" is a tricky word with a long history, and nothing that humans do is entirely natural; suffice it to say that in the context of qualitative methods, it means that the researcher has not brought about the situation she is studying. She has not assembled individuals for a focus group or a controlled lab experiment. Uncontrolled immersion means that the researcher does not decide who participates in this situation, where it takes place, and when it starts and ends. The interaction moves at its own pace.

The "obtrusiveness" of fieldwork is a two-way street. The researcher is "obtrusive" into the lives and actions of the research subjects (as is also the case when a survey is administered), but the research subjects can also "obtrude" into the researcher's life and actions (which almost never happens in survey or focus group research).

Therefore, whether "the field" is a remote village in a distant country or a neighborhood near campus, it always is unpredictable. Because many qualitative and ethnographic designs and methods call for going into the field, they contrast with the controlled and predictable research activities associated with quantitative and experimental designs in which unpredictable events are much less likely to occur and far more limited in scope.

## UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF OTHERS

A basic principle of qualitative and ethnographic research is the goal of understanding the experiences of others and not merely recording their opinions and behavior. Qualitative researchers want to "get into the heads" of the research subjects. This kind of research often begins with questions such as "What is it like to be, to do, to experience....?" Researchers try to immerse themselves in the world experienced through the senses of other human beings by interviewing, observing, listening, reading documents, looking at artifacts, and sometimes by having the same bodily experiences as their research subjects ( "carnal sociology," discussed in a later chapter).

During and after this immersion in the world of others, qualitative researchers return to their own world and engage in an "analysis of the data," the application of their own concepts and perspectives to the world of the others. This back-and-forth between immersion and extraction often leads to a kind of "split identity" or "dual consciousness" in the researcher. Out of this dialogue of evidence and ideas and from within the crack between the world of the subjects and the world of the researcher comes the analysis, the sociological story. The point of immersion is not mere description, but rather the development of a new, theory-informed perspective on the social phenomena of interest, often framed as the research question.

We may smile at the clichéd question, "How did you feel...?" as the reporter thrusts the microphone in front of the face of the winning pitcher, the losing quarterback, the crime victim, the convicted murderer . . . but this question is not so distant from the impulses that move qualitative researchers. We do want to know what others feel and experience. Some researchers refer to this goal as the phenomenological perspective. Radical psychologist R.D. Laing wrote, "I cannot experience your experience. You cannot experience my experience. We are both invisible men. All men are invisible to one another. Experience is man's invisibility to man." Qualitative researchers are often impelled to try to break through this veil that separates us from one another; and this desire is as strong as the desire to carry out scientific research and expand knowledge about human beings in society. Exciting research emerges from the tensions between immersion in experience and scientific analysis, between objective knowledge and subjective understanding, and between phenomenological awareness and statistical reason.

As qualitative researchers trying to understand the meaning of others' experience, we need to first understand how our own views, interests, and prejudgments were formed and to recognize the influence of our own background and experiences—to gain reflexive understanding of ourselves.

## Exercises

1. Identify five topics that interest you and that you think could be studied using qualitative methods. Explain why you find these topics of interest and what you would like to learn from your research. Are they only suitable for qualitative designs or could they also be studied using quantitative methods such as a survey or analysis of existing statistics (secondary data analysis)? Discuss how the data might be different depending on which type of methods you use.
2. The chapter identifies five designs: ethnography, social autopsy, community-based participatory research, historical-comparative research, and analysis of cultural artifacts. Identify a topic for each one of these designs. Explain why the research design is the best choice for the topic that you've chosen.
3. The next time you go out in public (or maybe you're in public as you're reading this), shift your focus from the things you ordinarily notice to the things that you ordinarily ignore. Make a list of the people, places, things, and occurrences that you ordinarily ignore when out in public doing whatever you're doing. Now, ask yourself why you tend to ignore them. Do these things you ignore have anything in common? Are they similar? Is there a common denominator? This exercise will help you to better understand the kinds of things that make their way into your "social viewfinder" and the kinds of things that you block out. We all are guilty of selective perception . . . it's a necessary skill for getting through the day. But a big part of qualitative research is reflexivity, which in part entails knowing how your perceptual, moral, ethical, and social biases affect the kinds of research questions you ask and also how you go about answering them.
4. From everyday life, identify a phenomenon that seems bizarre, strange, alien, or even totally incomprehensible to you. Maybe it's a group of people, or it could be an activity or event. Whatever the case, you should believe it to be pointless, or even irrational. Now, spend some time figuring out how this activity or group is utterly logical, reasonable, and rational given the circumstances in which it occurs. Step outside of yourself, your own identity, and try to assume the position of those who engage in the phenomenon. What have you learned?

## Key Terms

cases *9*
designs: analysis of cultural artifacts and discourses; community-based participatory research; ethnography; historical-comparative research; mixed quantitative/qualitative; social autopsy *5*
empirical inquiry *6*
fieldwork *10*
methodology *8*
methods: content analysis; focus groups; interviewing; life narratives; participant-observation; visual methods *8*
quantitative and qualitative research *9*
research: activities; design or strategy; methods; question; techniques *6*
theory *4*
unobtrusive research and obtrusive (interactive) research *10*
variables *9*

Chapter 2

# A Brief History of Qualitative Research

## OVERVIEW

As a research tradition in sociology and other social sciences, qualitative methodology springs from diverse origins and does not have a single linear history. In this chapter, we examine these origins and tell our story of how qualitative research has unfolded and matured over time. We emphasize the central ideas, purposes, theories, and designs of pioneering studies, as opposed to overwhelming you with details concerning the development of specific data gathering and data analysis techniques.

## CLASSICAL IDEAS

The notion of employing systematic methods in conducting social science research dates back to the late nineteenth century, the same time as the emergence of classical theories such as those of Weber, Marx and Engels, Simmel, and Durkheim. Up to this point, explorers and natural historians wrote accounts of life in non-Western societies, travelers recorded their impressions, social reformers, partisan pamphleteers, and "muck-raking" professional journalists revealed the experiences and troubles of poor people living in cities. At the same time, scholars affiliated with universities and social movements were planning more systematic surveys of social life (such as Marx's draft of an extremely long questionnaire for working people), and so scientific and popular interest in statistics began to grow rapidly.

Two great classical theorists—Emile Durkheim in France and Max Weber in Germany—not only made major conceptual/theoretical contributions but also were pioneers of research methods. Their methodological choices grew organically from their theoretical views: Emile Durkheim, for instance, was convinced that social behavior was structured into regular patterns that reflected normative regulation in society. It therefore made sense for him to develop an affinity with statistical analysis, which he used as a way to look for evidence of behavioral patterns and their underlying unspoken norms. In his masterpiece *Suicide*, he used quantitative data and statistical analysis to reveal the social conditions that

determine suicide rates. His approach and his findings went against the grain of popular belief that suicide was solely an individualistic, pathological event without any sort of connection to society's "normal" ways of operating.

## MAX WEBER

In contrast to Durkheim, Max Weber gave little attention to quantitative data and was one of the founders of qualitative research. He developed three concepts that are still central to qualitative research.

### *Verstehen*—Understanding

Social researchers must *understand* the ideas, thoughts, and meanings of the people they study. In today's terms, this fundamental tenet might translate into interviewing individuals to learn about their opinions and experiences. Ultimately, though, Weber was interested in the cultures of the past and more specifically how literate elites had formed and expressed these cultures. It therefore made sense for him to study the texts that elites had produced—the words of the Hebrew prophets, sacred Sanskrit texts of Indian sages, the teachings of Confucius, the Protestant ethic revealed in the writings of Calvin and Luther, and the "spirit of capitalism" that animated the writing of Benjamin Franklin. A careful reading of these texts was required for "getting into the heads" of the writers and to begin the task of interpreting their ideas in order to connect their ideas and values to other characteristics of their epoch, such as economic activity and the organization of states.

### The Historical-Comparative Method

In this method, the **units of analysis** (UOA) are not individuals but rather the collective units that individuals comprise—their cultures, societies, and civilizations. The **historical-comparative method** enables the researchers to understand why and how civilizations varied, diverged, and took on specific forms. Why, for instance, did capitalism as a system emerge in the Protestant regions of Northern Europe while Italy and China—places with vibrant cultures and intense commercial activity—did not develop the institutions and ideologies of modern capitalism? Another example of the historical-comparative method was Weber's effort to explain the conditions under which bureaucracies appear as the dominant form of organization in a society, displacing patrimonial organizations in which rulers rely on close personal ties to "friends and family."

### The Construction of "Ideal-Types"

The **ideal type** is not an ideal in the sense of something good, desirable, or valued; one could construct the ideal type of a criminal gang, a concentration camp, or a system of racial dominance. The ideal type is an abstract construct—an idea—that identifies key or essential features of an institution or situation if it were to exist in "pure form." For example, in *Asylums*, Erving Goffman (1961) constructed the ideal type of the "total institution," characterized by confinement, batch processing, staff–inmate hierarchy, and degradation and mortification of inmates in order to break down their resistance and transform their character and actions. Prisons, mental hospitals, boot camps, and cults are real-life instances that share these key defining features of the total institution. Establishing the ideal type of an institution or mode of action allows us to answer questions such as these: In what circumstances do they emerge, what are their effects, when did they first appear historically, and how are they related to other institutions (if indeed they are)?

## THE CHICAGO SCHOOL AND ITS LEGACY

The contributions of Max Weber influenced the **Chicago School of sociology**, noted for its contributions to urban sociology from the 1920s into the 1950s, but his ideas were absorbed and changed almost beyond recognition by the empirical priorities of the Chicago School. Over time, the Chicago School has become an institution in its own right. As Americans, early Chicago School sociologists were less interested than their European colleagues in reading the "great texts" of the "great civilizations," and they gave less attention to the big historical issues such as the rise of capitalism or the influence of the Hebrew prophets on Western values and social organization. Chicago School sociologists focused on what was happening in the neighborhoods of Chicago in the first half of the twentieth century—ethnic turnover, movement out of the inner city to the suburbs, immigration and assimilation, gangs and organized crime, racial tensions, and everyday life in all its myriad forms and experiences.

Chicago School sociologists developed several qualitative methods that are still in use.

### Spatial Mapping and Spatial Analysis

They observed the distribution of activities and people in space and time. Most famously, Ernest Burgess suggested a "concentric zone" hypothesis of urban growth, in which market forces led to deterioration of older areas around the center of the city while more attractive new areas cropped up further away from the center, as seen, for example, in the proliferation of suburbs. Observations were supplemented by quantitative data such as census records and real-estate listings, which were as yet unwieldy and unsophisticated compared to contemporary data. Students of Burgess extended this theoretical device to various issues, most notably juvenile delinquency. Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, for example, found much higher criminal offending rates in the "inner ring" (i.e., "inner city") over time *regardless* of which ethnic group happened to occupy the area, and lower rates of offending in the outer rings of the concentric model (i.e., the suburbs). Out of this they developed a theory of "social disorganization," which traces delinquency/crime to the deterioration of social institutions that ordinarily keep young people "in check," such as schools, churches, and legitimate economic activity.

### The Life History Method

Chicago School sociologists collected the **life histories** of Polish immigrants, jack rollers (a type of mugger), taxi dancers (women working in multiple establishments as paid dance partners), and other denizens of the urban landscape. These narratives enabled them to understand processes of immigration, assimilation, recruitment to crime, and many other "down to earth" experiences of city life. They were able to see how larger social forces affected individuals, a central focus of the **sociological imagination.**

In the 1980s, a contemporary student of the Chicago School, Douglas Harper, took a teaching job at a college in a small upstate New York town. When it came time to get his old Saab repaired, a colleague referred him to "Willie," the local mechanic and jack-of-all-trades. Over the next few years, Harper and Willie became close friends. Throughout the course of their friendship, Harper documented (field notes, maps, photos, drawings) how Willie did his job, what it meant to him and to the folks who employed him, and how his way of work reflected larger issues in the American economy. The net result, *Working Knowledge* (1992)—part ethnography, part biography, and part photo-essay— documents the work life of Willie; it's a remarkable illustration of how sociological imagination can infuse deep meaning into even the most mundane aspects of the world.

### Analysis of Documents

Beginning with W.I. Thomas's accidental discovery of a packet of discarded letters in a Polish neighborhood in Chicago (1918–1920, five volumes), Chicago School sociologists read and interpreted texts produced by ordinary people—letters and local newspapers of the ethnic and immigrant presses such as the African American–oriented *Chicago Defender*. These **documents** showed how ordinary people experienced their world and "defined their situation."

### Observations and Descriptions of Neighborhood Life

Zorbaugh (1929) observed "the gold coast and the slum"—the area of Chicago where the fabulous homes of the wealthy along the lakefront were in close proximity to communities of poor Italian immigrants and African Americans. In their magisterial study of urban African American life in the 1930s and 1940s, *Black Metropolis*, St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton (1945/1993) described the lives, hopes, dreams, successes, transgressions, and political struggles of the residents of Bronzeville, the core area of the Black Belt and the heart of Chicago's growing ghetto.

One of the more famous of the Chicago School sociologists Robert Park was a "newsman" before getting his PhD in Sociology and joining the University of Chicago faculty. He roundly criticized "armchair theories" of social life—theories disconnected from the nitty-gritty of daily life. Instead, he advocated strenuously for sociologists to get out of their offices, hit the streets, and literally get themselves dirty with research. He once wrote the following passage:

> Go and sit in the lounges of luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of the flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and on the slum shakedowns; sit in the Orchestra Hall and in the Star and Garter Burlesque. In short go and get the seat of your pants dirty in real research. (Blumer 1984: 97)

### Occupational Studies

Chicago School researchers, most notably Everett Hughes, studied the complexities and dilemmas of work, charting the ethical issues people encountered in many jobs (i.e., "when good people do dirty work") and their collective and interactive efforts to solve problems encountered in work-related situations. This approach still influences many qualitative researchers who explore the lives of people in jobs such as the madame of the brothel (Albert 2001), the professional dominatrix (Lindemann, forthcoming), the nightclub bouncer (Rivera 2010), the phone-sex worker (Mattley 2002), the options trader (Widick 2003), and the street vendor (Duneier 1999).

## ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN ANTHROPOLOGY

A very large, powerful stream of qualitative research ran alongside the sociological current: the research tradition of anthropology. Beginning with the work of natural historians such as Alexander Von Humboldt, who explored the Amazon region and wrote about its peoples as well as its flora and fauna, European and North American explorers compiled accounts of the "lives of savages." Initially, many of these studies espoused evolutionary ideas with a racial subtext that the "subjects" represented earlier and more primitive stages in the history of humankind's triumphal march to European civilization. Nevertheless, these early field studies yielded valuable information about the lifeways and material cultures of societies that were being exposed to the destructive effects of colonialism, disease, displacement, and adoption of

Christianity and "modern life." Examples of these studies included the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego at the southern tip of South America, Polynesians, peoples of the Amazon, the Inuit, and the many ethnic groups of Africa.

Meticulous drawings and photographs—and, beginning in the 1920s, motion pictures (film)—supplemented the written accounts of marriage customs, initiation rites, beliefs and rituals honoring gods and spirits, body ornamentation, economic activities, artifacts, and food habits. Many of these early anthropological accounts circulated in mainstream society, in silent movie theaters and museums, in world exposition exhibits and libraries, and so forth.

By the early twentieth century, these accounts were organized more systematically and scientifically (Stocking 1992). The researcher was trained in the theories of the social sciences, systematic observations were made during a long period of fieldwork, and in most cases the voyeuristic and racist subtext was buried more deeply, if not eliminated altogether. The purpose was no longer to use observations to construct an evolutionary model of human progress, but to understand variation and difference in human cultures. At the same time, the general public became keenly interested in anthropological films and, even more so, fictional films based on anthropological-like characterizations of the "noble savage," such as Edward Curtis's *In the Land of the Headhunters* (1914) and Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922).

## Anthropologists of the Early 1900s

In the early twentieth century, key contributions were made by Bronislaw Malinowski's study of the Trobriand Islanders in the Pacific (1922, 1935), Margaret Mead's observations in Samoa, New Guinea (1935/2001), and later (with Gregory Bateson 1942) in Bali, and the "**British School" of anthropology**, especially Evans-Prichard's research among the Nuer of the Upper Nile (1950). The findings were often organized into comprehensive categories such as kinship, economic activities, religion and beliefs, warfare, marriage and the family, and reflected the theoretical position that these various institutions and activities "hang together" in a comprehensible and coherent way. In some instances, the studies addressed research questions that probed variation in human social and cultural arrangements: Mead wondered whether adolescence was as stressful in Samoa as in the United States and whether gender roles in New Guinea were just like those in the United States. Malinowski explored the implications of a matrilineal kinship system and probed the relationship among trading, economic activity, kinship, and spiritual beliefs.

Fieldwork in a remote and physically uncomfortable setting became the rite of passage for the aspiring cultural anthropologist. Ethnography—"writing about a people or ethnic group"—became a holistic and systematic methodology for understanding variation in the human condition (Stocking 1992). A variety of research strategies and techniques were developed that remain important components of ethnography today: learning the language or dialect of the community; spatial mapping of a village and its environs; tracing kinship relations and genealogies; documenting life narratives to understand life cycles, historical change, and individual variation in experiences, dispositions, and character; recording rituals and economic activities; and above all, keeping and organizing field notes.

## Sociology and Anthropology: An Often Uneasy Union

Sociology and anthropology were often placed together in a single department in North American universities, and the boundaries between them were not sharply defined beyond the fact that

up until the last decades of the twentieth century, anthropologists eschewed quantitative methods and sociologists studied modern or industrialized societies while anthropologists studied "the others." In this situation, anthropological research influenced sociologists. For example, Lloyd Warner, an anthropologist by training, studied "Yankee City," a New England town, as if he were conducting an ethnographic study of a tribal community (1963). He compiled a rich record of the life, beliefs, and subjective views of the townspeople. Although we identified Emile Durkheim as the father of quantitative research, his theories influenced the Yankee City study, because Warner was a Durkheimian who sought to identify the symbolic order that underpinned life in Yankee City—the values, norms, tastes, and worldviews that organized behaviors and sustained the stratification system of the community.

Most of the "pioneering" qualitative researchers we've discussed so far were keenly interested in fairly small, often tight-knit "communities"—villages, tribes, towns, neighborhoods, families, or even units as small as the friendship network or the individual person's biography. But there's a whole other tradition of studying culture qualitatively and critically. This tradition's origins can be traced back to the early works of researchers at the "Frankfurt Institute."

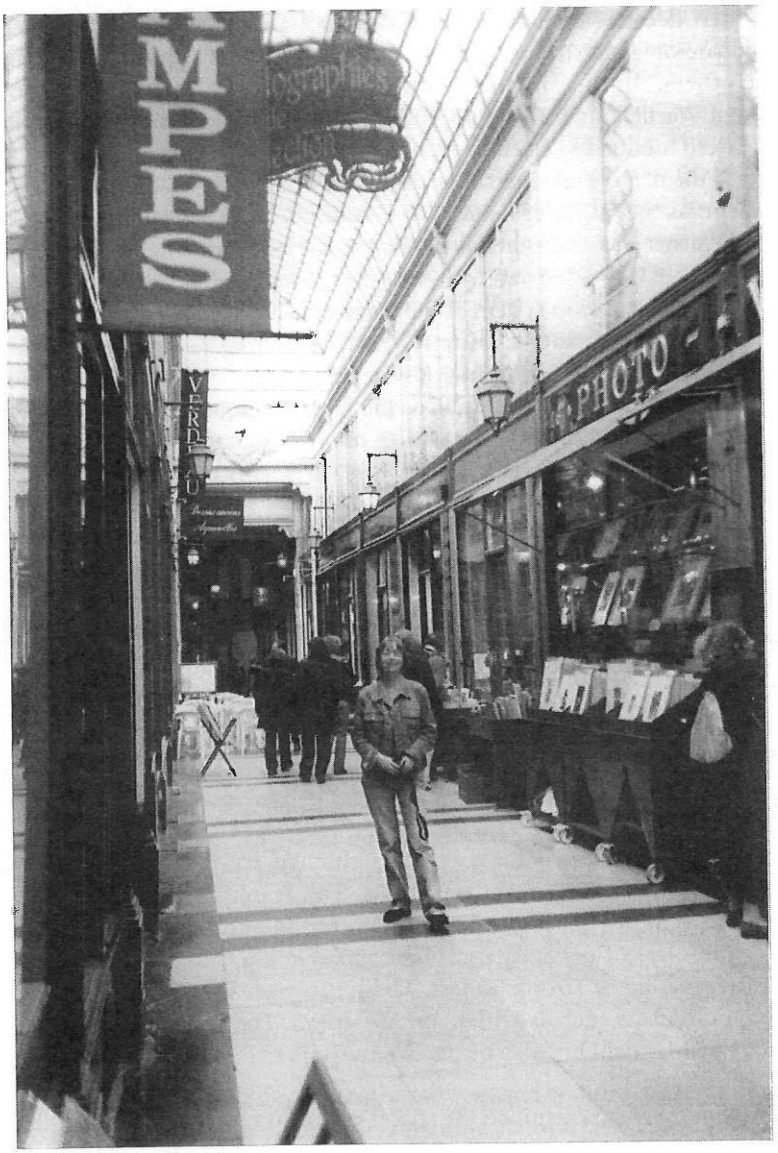
## THE FRANKFURT INSTITUTE

The Frankfurt Institute was comprised of a group of social scientists working in Germany between World War I and World War II (Jay 1996). Two momentous societal changes were underway: On one hand, the researchers observed the emergence of *new media* such as radio, film, the recording industry, the circulation of magazines and pulp fiction, and spectator sports; and on the other hand, they saw the nefarious rise of Fascism and Nazism. To the Frankfurt researchers, these two phenomena were related: that is, the media functioned to distract the masses and to make them passive and uncritical.

The media were channels for carrying seductive, irrational, and emotional messages that inspired support for right-wing extremists. The Frankfurt scholars examined the products of the culture industry, the media and entertainment firms that generated subtle and not-so-subtle messages of passivity, escapism, stupefaction, and emotions such as fear, anger, racism, and the worship of strong leaders. These messages were easily used and manipulated by right-wing politicians such as Hitler and Mussolini. The Frankfurt researchers were influenced not only by Marxism but also by **psychoanalysis** in their analysis of the political impact of the media.

Walter Benjamin also examined the spaces of consumption, specifically the Paris Arcades or passageways, shopping areas of the nineteenth century that were forerunners of the shopping mall. In these lavishly ornamented spaces with their shops and restaurants, the rich bought luxury goods and the poor gaped at them longingly, carried away by fantasies of consumption (Buck-Morss 1989; McRobbie 1999; Benjamin 2002). By examining the unthinking consumption of mass media products and the mindless sojourning into fantasy-inspiring spaces ruled by the "look but don't touch" rule, the scholars associated with the Frankfurt Institute used qualitative methods to examine the interrelationship of culture, social stratification, and injustice.

In short, the Frankfurt Institute pioneered the analysis of media and cultural artifacts, organizing their research around politically and theoretically charged critical research questions that linked material objects and products (shop windows, magazines, movies, pulp fiction, radio broadcasts), inner lives of fantasies and fears, and political movements and outcomes.




Passage Jouffroy (1845). Paris, May 2006.

When the Nazis came to power in Germany, the Frankfurt scholars had to flee and many came to the United States where they made crucial contributions in the development of both quantitative and qualitative research. They contributed to the U.S. love affair with Dr. Freud's psychoanalysis, though his gloomy and radical insights were greatly toned down for U.S. popular culture. Psychoanalytic perspectives influenced sociology, anthropology, and political science (more than mainstream psychology) and led to imaginative qualitative methods such as the use of life histories, data collection about child-raising practices and gender roles, interest in sexual

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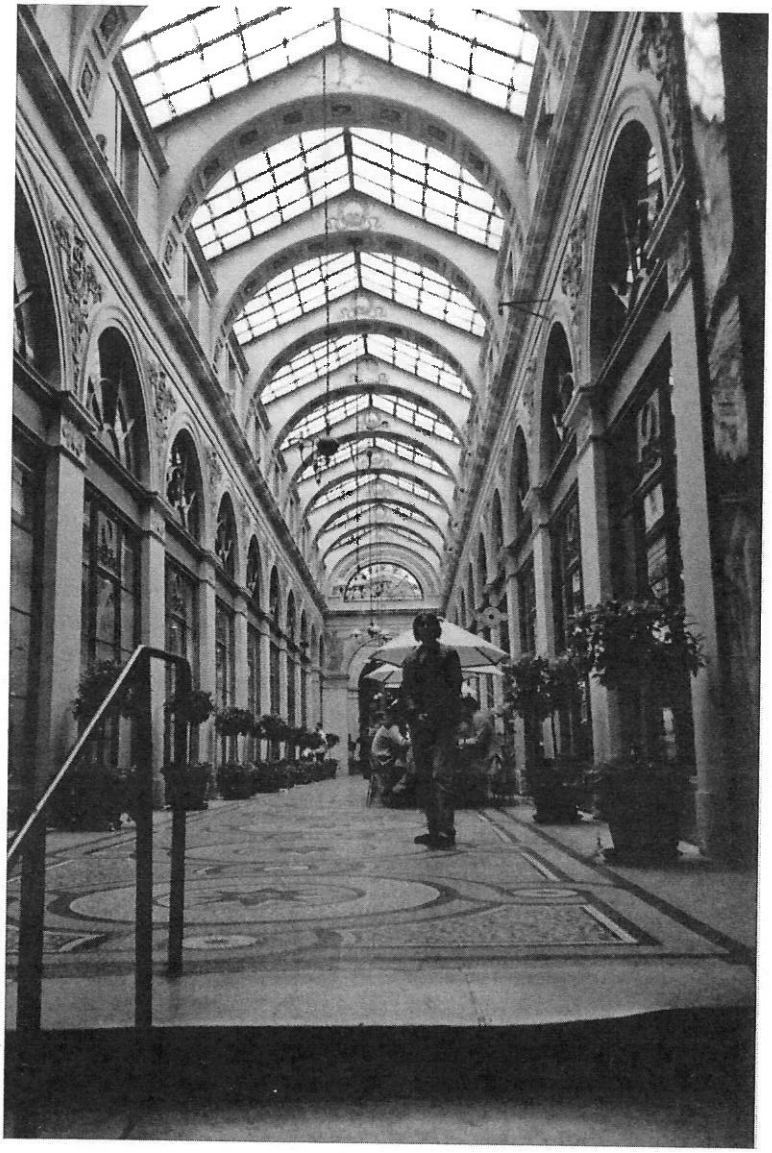
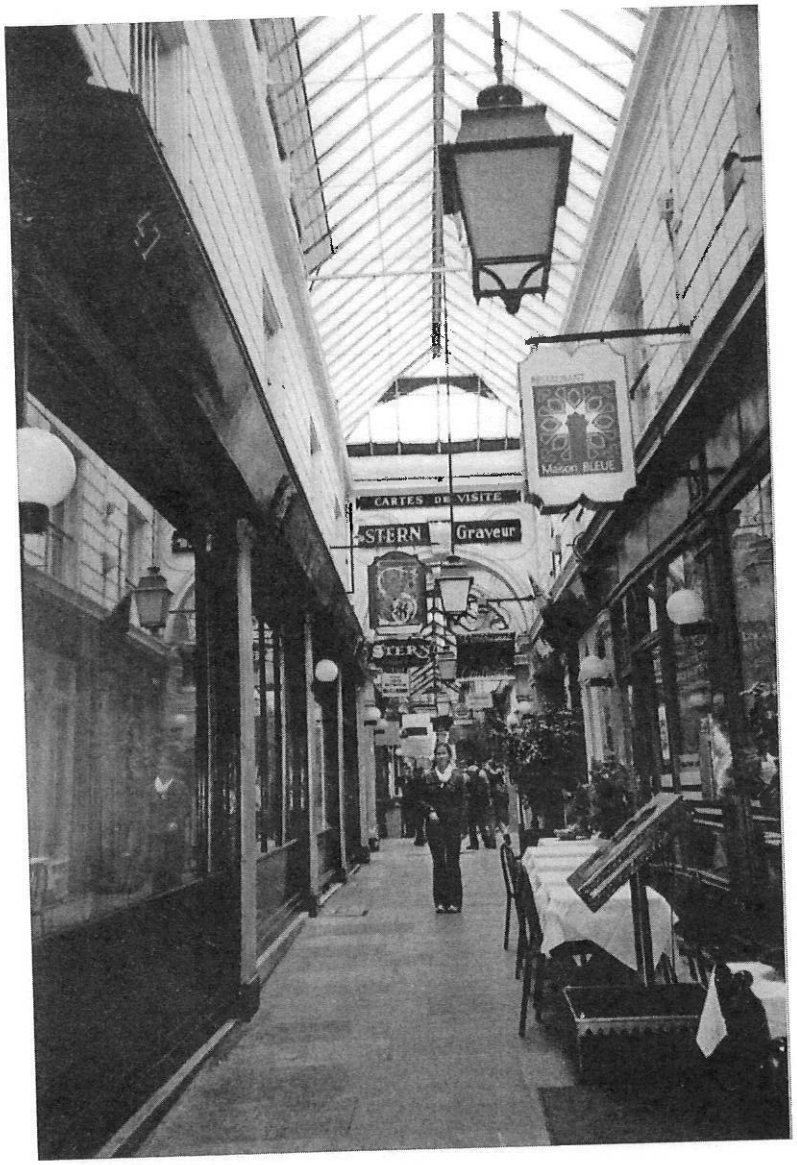


Passage Vivienne (1823). Paris, May 2006.

behavior, the use and interpretation of **projective tests** (such as the Thematic Apperception Test and the Rorschach inkblot test), the interpretation of religious and magical beliefs as projections of sexual and aggressive drives and fears, and psychoanalytic interpretations of art and myths (Adorno et al. 1993). Chicago School sociologists had already been using life history methods, but without reference to psychoanalytic concepts and with little attention to the effects of childrearing on personality.




Passage du Panorama (1800). Paris, May 2006.

The arcades or passages were splendid glass and iron structures of nineteenth-century Paris where new consumer goods were beautifully displayed in shop windows that opened into a public space. They were forerunners of great shopping boulevards such as Fifth Avenue in New York and contemporary shopping malls. They ran through the middle of city blocks and seemed both "inside" and "outside." Many of them were decorated with paintings and dioramas, as well as "Orientalist" ornamentation inspired by French conquests in Egypt and the Middle East.

## STREET CORNER SOCIETY: PARAGON OF EARLY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

We feel compelled to make special mention of William F. Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943/1993). In many respects, this study of a predominantly Italian American community in Boston in the late 1930s was similar to Chicago School studies. It focused on a specific area ("Cornerville"), described the life of the neighborhood primarily through the experiences and actions of its young men, and provided accounts of racketeering and politics. But *Street Corner Society* differed from Chicago School studies in its careful attention to the fieldwork experience and the lessons the researcher had to learn—such as living in an apartment without a bathroom, not dating local women, and carefully and respectfully listening to conversations instead of asking direct questions about murders and police payoffs.

Whyte wrote a long appendix to the 1954 edition, in which he described his entry into the community in great detail—and his frank reliance on a guide, a man named Doc who enabled Whyte to meet many neighborhood people, including the "corner guys" and racketeers. Doc interpreted these experiences for the researcher. Whyte met Doc through a mutual acquaintance who worked in a settlement house in the neighborhood, and without Doc the study would have been vastly different, much less revealing, and perhaps altogether impossible to conduct. Whyte's book broached the issues of entry, reliance on a guide, and the ethics of the guide–researcher relationship, all of which have continued to be key problems in qualitative and ethnographic fieldwork. Methodologically speaking, Whyte's approach was innovative. His trailblazing use of systematic social observation (SSO), geospatial network mapping, and group hierarchy charting laid the foundation upon which thousands of future scholars pursued their own field studies.

Whyte tapped into and inspired the further development of several new "subfields" of social science, including "participatory action research" and **critical community studies.** We now turn to a brief explanation of the latter.

## CRITICAL COMMUNITY STUDIES

Throughout the period from the 1930s to the last decades of the twentieth century, critical community studies were a major area of qualitative research. They provided an unflinching look at the harshness of American community life. Although superficially similar in research techniques to ethnographies and Chicago School research, the critical community studies were driven by theoretical concerns based on conflict theories. They had a much sharper political edge than the ethnographies and Chicago School observations, and their research questions focused on inequalities in the communities, power structures, and the myths and ideologies that legitimated the status quo. The researchers showed how townspeople clung to the myth of their community as a friendly, self-reliant place when it was really deeply class-divided and at the mercy of larger economic and political forces.

Among the first of these studies were the two volumes written by the Lynds about Middletown, a community in Indiana that passed from 1920s prosperity to an unsettled economic condition during the depression of the 1930s (Lynd and Lynd 1959). The Lynds focused on stratification and economic inequalities in the community, the dominance of the business class and its allies, and the conservative ideology espoused not only by the elite but by many folks further down the economic ladder.

After World War II, Vidich and Bensman (1969) offered a devastating and sarcastically toned picture of small town life in upstate New York—*Small Town in Mass Society.* Not only did

they analyze the town's class structure, emphasizing its deep divisions and contending interests; they also highlighted the townspeople's *misrecognition* of their condition. Despite self-congratulatory boosterism about small town independence, self-reliance, and traditional values, the town was economically and politically dependent on larger forces—the regional and national economy and political decisions made beyond the local level.

In a similar but more topically focused study, Hollingshead (1975) examined the interplay between class inequality and high school experiences in a small town in Northern Illinois. He showed how both the formal education system and the informal student culture favored and nurtured the children of local business owners and managers, while children of the poor were marginalized and induced to drop out of school.

These studies were driven by theoretical projects of showing the mismatch between the realities of stratification, class and power inequalities, and economic dependency on the one hand and on the other hand, the subjective (mis-)understandings (whether intentional and therefore known, or unknown) held by the townspeople as they celebrated their independence, friendliness, and virtues of small town life.

Up to this point in the development of qualitative research, scholars were mostly interested in "the collective"—they conceived "the community" or "the neighborhood," the village or the tribe, as the main unit of analysis. Certainly they interviewed and observed individuals, but their ultimate goal was to account for phenomena that occurred at a level higher than the individual . . . they were attuned to the superordinate dynamics of human life. Around midcentury, though, things began to change a bit.

## THE RISE OF MICROSOCIOLOGIES AND THE GREAT SURGE IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The later 1950s and the 1960s marked a key turning point in qualitative research which now became the strategy *par excellence* of a host of new microtheories, including **symbolic interactionism** and Goffman's **dramaturgical model**. These sociologists' actual, day-to-day research activities were not very different from those of the Chicago School—in fact, this wave is sometimes referred to as the "second Chicago School." But the rationale for participant-observation and fieldwork became much more elaborated and self-conscious. All the microtheorists agreed that "society" was a meaningless abstraction, a **reification** (a nonmaterial phenomenon treated as though it's a tangible "thing"); "society" does not exist, and all that exists are human beings in interaction and in **situated actions**, actions in specific contexts.

### Foundational Concepts of Early Qualitative Research

"Society" is constituted by innumerable actions and interactions, which are not always rational and which may have unintended and unanticipated consequences. "Structure" does not exist as a "thing." So researchers can really only study the constant flux of interaction between and among individuals. The "flagship" research method is observation, and actions and interactions (as opposed to individual persons or organizations, much less "society," whatever that word means) must be the units of study in sociological research (Lindesmith and Strauss 1958; Goffman 1959, 1961, 1963; Becker 1963, 1998; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Blumer 1968).

This position had various theoretical ancestors: For the ***symbolic interactionists***, the roots took hold in Weber's concept of ***verstehen*** and his interest in action, Simmel's observations of interaction and social forms, and the influence of social behaviorism based on Cooley's looking-glass

self, the writing of George Herbert Mead, and pragmatic philosophy with its celebration of a competent, coping self. Goffman on the other hand was a "micro-Durkheimian"; like Durkheim he was interested in the normative order and normative regulation, and unlike other readers of Durkheim, he looked for evidence of this order in the high degree of patterning of interactions and the presentation of self.

Regulation takes place not only in the "big" institutions such as religion, law, and criminal justice but also at the microlevel where it is exercised through the unspoken rules of interaction, impression management, presentation of self, management of stigma, and behavior in public places. These rules regulate performance; the norms are transmuted into aesthetic criteria—Is the performance of sanity, sincerity, love, respect, integrity, respectability, competence, and so on convincing or not? The moral and normative order is embedded in aesthetic judgments of role performance. Norms are monitored and enforced by deciding whether or not people's performances are credible and convincing. When we find others' role performances to be acceptable (i.e., credible, convincing, and appropriate), we reward them through how we treat them. When we find them inappropriate, we "punish" them. Think about ordinary places you frequent in daily life. How do you reward and punish your friends, your classmates, and members of your family? Everyone "polices" everyone else; this is what keeps society running. To understand this microregulation, it is essential to observe interaction (Goffman 1959, 1961, 1963).

## The Common Denominator: Get Out of the Office and into the Mix of Real Life!

Whatever the theoretical ancestors of the new microtheorists were, they agreed that sociological method had to involve observation in social contexts. Researchers have to watch, listen, and record. They have to enter the messiness of real life and get their proverbial hands (and seat of the pants) dirty. The microsociologists had little interest in surveys and experiments, which they saw as decontextualized ways of collecting information that missed process, natural settings, duration in time, and the play of interaction.

This explicit new orientation was developed in a host of exciting field-based studies in mental hospitals, nursing homes, gynecologists' offices, jazz clubs, and medical schools. Observations focused on the use of space and time, the manipulation of power and inequality in interaction, judgment of performances, management of stigma (both visible stigma such as a scarred face or the "wrong" skin-tone and hidden ones such as a criminal record or history of mental illness). **Labeling processes** were observed not only in interactions but also in documents that expressed power, categorized people, and revealed unequal resources, such as school disciplinary files, case reports on patients and social work clients, and police records. As you might imagine, students delighted in these opportunities for fieldwork and "hands-on" research experiences in real-life contexts. In contrast to the enormous resources, large teams, and tedious data analysis (in the age of punched cards) required by survey research, students and young scholars found it was easy to start the adventure of sociological inquiry using participant-observation. All they had to do was grab a notebook and pencil and venture out into the world, eyes wide open and ears calibrated to the nuances of life.

## Principles of the New Qualitative Methodology

By the early 1970s, qualitative research had reached maturity. Researchers understandably grew increasingly concerned about *refining* the systematic use of techniques for collecting data. They were more conscious of theoretical frameworks. And they were committed to elucidating the conceptual and technical features of their data collection while also reflecting critically on the

data production enterprise. In a word, they had become methodologists, for **methodology** is *the reflexive and recursive application of concept/theory-informed techniques for producing and analyzing information to tell a sociological story* about a given phenomenon. A core set of principles comprised the foundation on which many researchers conceived and conducted qualitative research.

**SITUATED ACTION** "Situated" means that observers must look at what people are doing and saying *in situ*, or in their normal settings, in contrast to bringing them into the stale environment of a university office and asking them questions in a survey (which means the respondents are never seen in action) or subjecting them to an experiment (which is an "unnatural" condition set up by the researcher and detached from real contexts).

**ACTION AND INTERACTION** Symbolic interactionists avoided the term "behavior" because it implies that all the researcher needs to accomplish is to observe what people do and then analyze these data "objectively" regardless of the words, ideas, meanings, and intentions of the subjects. In contrast, symbolic interactionists held to Weber's emphasis on "social action," which refers to behavior that is infused with and shaped by meaning, understanding, and interpretation; in this approach, they honored his insistence that human beings generally act with a purpose and attempt to express their will. Human beings are not rats or pigeons, but symbol-using animals.

**NATURAL SETTINGS** As noted above, microsociologists believed that social context was crucial to the understanding and interpretation of actions and interactions, so that most of their research was carried out in the settings of everyday life—nursing homes, street corners, medical school classrooms, jazz clubs, and every other "real place" to be found.

**GROUNDED THEORY** While Goffman's dramaturgical model was rooted in Durkheim's theories of normative regulation and social order, the symbolic interactionists claimed to be developing theories inductively. The term **grounded theory** implied that the researcher should not go into fieldwork with a definite set of theories in mind, but should let concepts and explanations emerge from careful observation. This position was a bit disingenuous—the symbolic interactionists did have theoretical perspectives of their own, and in fact these very theories often motivated their choice of research topics; in addition, it was extremely unlikely that their fieldwork methods would ever lead to theoretical formulations that were far removed from the premises of symbolic interactionism.

The practice of grounded theory tended to reinforce the idea that social institutions are not structures nor the product of individual characteristics but processes embedded in clusters of oft-repeated interactions and symbolic usage. For example, residential segregation in the United States was not "a structure" nor simply the result of individual prejudice, but rather the outcome of myriad constantly repeated situated actions, interactions, and use of words and symbols among real-estate agents, home buyers, mortgage lenders, elected officials, and so on.

## Ethnomethodologists and "Breaching" Experiments

A daring extension of the microtheorists' position was developed by **ethnomethodologists** and examined through **breaching experiments**. Ethnomethodologists shared Goffman's view that interaction is highly regulated by shared, unspoken norms and they went even further, emphasizing the way shared meanings are embedded in our use of language. Every conversation operates on the basis of these unspoken shared understandings that underlie our interpretation of others'

words and gestures. Garfinkel (1967) believed that a way of "finding" these shared hidden rules of interaction was to breach the rules and see what happens. For example, he had his students "act like boarders" (i.e., tenants) in their parents' homes, speaking formally and politely asking whether they could help themselves to food in the fridge. The students recorded the way their parents became confused, disoriented, and angry by this violation of the unspoken norms of family interaction. Garfinkel was also interested in an unintentional breaching of gender norms, resulting from a botched circumcision and the consequent effort of the child's parent to reorient their former little boy to a feminine gender identity.

### The Birth of a Contentious Divide

This era of sociology—from the 1960s to the last decade of the twentieth century—was marked by divergence between the ever-more-sophisticated qualitative, observational, and interpretive methods of the microsociologists and the increasingly rarefied quantitative analysis that was often identified as the mainstream approach to research. The two camps tended to be hostile to each other. Quantitative researchers relied heavily on identifying and operationalizing variables prior to entering the field and they conceived of the field as a vast aggregate of cases best selected by probability sampling. **Microsociology**, the interpretive paradigm, and grounded theory were based on the observation of situated actions, quite a different object of analysis than the decontextualized and predefined variables of quantitative research.

Microresearchers believed that only qualitative methods of observations in contexts, analysis of the flow and process of interaction, and attention to situated action were adequate for understanding the human condition. Neither large historical change (studied by historical-comparative methods and often linked to Weberian or Marxian conflict theories) nor the search for statistically discernible patterns (linked to Durkheimian quantitative analysis) can fully capture human life.

To this day, the qualitative–quantitative rift persists, though the passage of time has ushered in multimethodological approaches to research and new perspectives on the many conceptual and logical similarities between the two "camps" of research. We intend for this book to present this type of perspective.

## FEMINIST AND POSTMODERNIST APPROACHES: NEW DIRECTIONS AT THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

### Feminist Research Strategies

Many **feminist theorists** writing in the last decades of the twentieth century supported and expanded the perspectives of the microsociologists; they agreed that interpretations of people's words and actions were crucial to understanding their experiences. Dorothy Smith (1990, 1992) and other feminists linked these perspectives to a criticism of what they considered a masculinist way of doing sociology. In their view, "masculinist sociology" meant the stance of being objective, keeping a distance from the research subjects (who are treated as objects of research, not real participants in it), and being indifferent to the experiences, ideas, and knowledge of the people who were being researched.

Masculinist researchers had little interest in the labor and knowledge of women and other people in subaltern positions in society, such as poor people and ethnic minorities. In the view of the feminists, the masculinist researcher claimed to have a practically omniscient position and imposed his (*sic*) own categories and variables on the data. Behavior was recorded, findings stated, and conclusions formulated and published as if the researchers were studying insects or lab animals, not human beings. Feminists believed that this detached and objectifying approach

was a typically masculine way of understanding the world and relating to people. In contrast, feminist scholars claimed that they invite people they studied to become research participants (rather than research subjects or objects of scientific scrutiny), actively involve them in defining the goals of the study and interpreting their own life situations to the researcher (Reinharz and Davidman 1992). The local knowledge of the researched community is valued, and the dominant–subordinate relationship of researcher to researched is made markedly more equal.

The portrayal of "masculinist research" was often a caricature, and not all male researchers were indifferent objectifiers nor were all women researchers sensitive egalitarian research partners. Nevertheless, the feminist critique and the effort to develop specifically feminist research orientations reflected researchers' discomfort with aspects of qualitative research and ethnographic writing, such as objectification and the feeling that communities and individuals—often the most disadvantaged ones—are vulnerable to exploitation by researchers who obtain a PhD, a tenured professorship, or a book from the relationship and give little in return.

## Postmodernism in Qualitative Research

Another way in which Lingering doubts about qualitative research also found expression in the subjectivist and **postmodern** turn in ethnography. This current was strongly influenced by the intellectual trend of "deconstruction"—the position that texts and categories of thought are socially constructed and that the process of construction needs to be revealed and made transparent. A somewhat simplified version of the complex philosophical work of Jacques Derrida had a profound effect on sociological theory and cultural studies. The impact on qualitative methods was twofold.

A first step in the process was the critical reading of famous ethnographies, especially anthropological studies. For example, Bronislaw Malinowski's observations of the Trobriand Islanders in the South Pacific were revisited in light of his links to the colonial administration and unseemly and racist comments he made in his diaries (Malinowski 1967; Stocking 1992). So postmodernists observed the observers and drew attention to their political and personal positions. The formation of the researchers' own points of view became the focus of a new wave of analyzing ethnographies and other types of fieldwork.

The second critical step was to emphasize the textual nature of all ethnographic writing. It is never a faithful and perfect mirror of a community's reality but always a product created by the choices of the individual observer/writer. The reader can see the community's world only "through a glass darkly"—through the ethnographer's writing. It is usually filtered through the preconceptions of Western culture (most ethnographers, until very recently, were Westerners and generally of European heritage), organized according to the norms of academic writing, and above all, composed according to the code that generates an illusion of objectivity and truth. For example, the ethnographer (like all social science researchers) rarely uses the pronoun "I" in the writing and keeps up the illusion that "facts" and "findings" are being presented, that we are reading the truth, rather than a story.

These reflections made postmodern ethnographers decide to dispel this illusion by focusing on themselves—the ethnographers—showing how the researchers experience the life of the community, revealing prejudices and ethnocentrism, and making transparent their observation and writing choices (Adler and Adler 2008). Of course, some of this reflexive writing had appeared in earlier and more traditional ethnographies, as we noted in our discussion of William F. Whyte's *Street Corner Society*; the unusual aspect of the postmodern ethnography was its extreme degree of self-contemplation. One critic says that postmodern ethnographies "threw themselves into the well of subjectivity" (Wacquant 2009). Postmodern ethnographies were no

longer about a community but about the act and experience of doing ethnography and about the inner life of the ethnographer.

It is worth noting that a similar trend appeared in journalism after a long twentieth-century romance with objectivity, which was defined by careful attention to "balance" and "getting both sides of the story." In the era of the war in Vietnam, many journalists and writers such as Norman Mailer and Hunter Thompson were dismayed that the consequence of the cult of objectivity was to lose the truth of the story; and they decided that the only course of action was to focus the story on their own presence in the unfolding events and to write about their writing (Schudson 1978). Their basic premise was that objectivity is chimerical—it's a ruse, "necessary illusion" (Chomsky 1989) that we, the media-consuming public, uphold in order to achieve a stability vis-à-vis information flows in society. But true objectivity cannot be achieved; hence, it must be abandoned and replaced by "reports" that explain events and also expose the inner workings of the writer's various perceptual filters, which affords readers the opportunity to assess the truthfulness and/or accuracy of the report.

### Toward More Comprehensive Orientations

Not all qualitative researchers believe that feminist, deconstructionist, and postmodern ethnography are the best antidotes to the ethical and intellectual problems of classical ethnography and participant-observation. They agree that these ethical and intellectual problems need to be resolved but believe that can be accomplished without taking a position as extreme as the postmodernists' renunciation of all claims to objectivity, accuracy, and truthful representation.

In the next chapters, we will explore contemporary approaches to resolving these problems, such as:

- Combining quantitative and qualitative methods
- Community-based participatory research which addresses the concerns expressed in the feminist critique
- Reflexive sociology and theory construction, especially as influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has introduced the reader to the diverse traditions of qualitative research that influence contemporary qualitative research, and it has broached several issues which we will explore in this book:

1. What is the purpose of the research? Is it to obtain a broad understanding of the way of life of a community or is it more theoretically focused and driven by specific research questions?
2. What is the relationship between theories and research? Are theories believed to emerge from the research (inductively and as "grounded theory") or does a theory inform the research project from the very start, shaping the research questions and influencing the choice of research strategies ("foundational theory")?
3. What is the researcher's relationship to the research subjects/participants? Are the research subjects treated distantly, with their lives and views held up to objective scrutiny, or are they partners in the research with their subjective understandings incorporated not only into data but also into the research process itself? Are researchers intent on enabling their subjects to send a message to a larger audience or intent on exposing the subjects' "misrecognitions"?

4. Do researchers rely on the people they are studying to be their guides, and if so, what are the intellectual, political, and ethical implications of this relationship? And if not, how can researchers ever hope to enter the field and interact with the community?
5. What are the appropriate research techniques—the research tools and strategies—in view of research questions, purposes, and ethical and political commitments?
6. How are researchers to write about research experience? Will they write a broad, multimethod ethnography, a discussion of theoretical constructs focused on theoretically oriented research questions, a brief on behalf of the community as its advocates, or a "postmodern" personal account about their own experiences and feelings (Adler and Adler 2008)?

## Exercises

1. Read one of the studies discussed in this chapter and write a response paper. Is the topic still of interest? Did the author explain the choice of methods? Were the conclusions convincing? Do you think this study could be replicated today—what might be different?
2. Think about the origins of qualitative research and how the tradition has changed over time. Which of the early studies interests you most? Why do you find it so interesting?
3. Spend some time talking with someone whose life is "interesting" to you in some way. Write up your notes. Then write a brief analysis of what this person's life, as you have come to understand it, says about the larger society in which we all live. In other words, through your interactions with the other person produce data on which you can apply your sociological imagination.
4. Conduct your own "norm breaching" experiment and document what the experiment reveals about the regulatory norms of the situation whose unwritten rules (protocol) you have broken. For instance, enter an elevator occupied by several other people, and when the doors close, turn around and face the direction opposite that which all others are facing. What is their response? Alternatively, visit a space in which people work to accomplish non-interaction (e.g., a doctor's office waiting room, a public bus, or even bus stop). Rather than abide by the tacit "don't talk" rule, just start blabbing to the nearest person about personal issues (nothing too revealing, though!). Then start to include others in the conversation. Talk to as many people as possible. In your analysis, try to discern the various norms that people ordinarily enact in order to regulate their own and others' behaviors in the situation. Also reflect on the various "punishments" ( scolding glances, the "shush" sound, averted eyes, etc.) you received as you broke protocol.

## Key Terms

breaching experiments *26*
"British School" of anthropology *18*
Chicago School of sociology *16*
critical community studies *23*
documents *17*
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